
A Step into The Past

Book 18

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Chapter 01

The Empress Moves Out of the Palace

Xiang Shaolong has just passed the city gates when he received Xiao Pan's imperial edict to enter the palace at once.

Xiao Pan is in the inner court discussing matters with Lu Buwei, Lord Changping and other high ranking officials. After waiting in the Imperial Study for an hour, Xiang Shaolong managed to see Xiao Pan.

After they got seated, Xiao Pan smiled: "Does Master know this man named Feng Qie? He is our law minister."

Xiang Shaolong replied with a smile: "What is it regarding that Crown Prince specially mentioned this person?"

Xiao Pan plainly replied: "This man has some backbone and is not fearful of authority. He even dared to rebut me in court. He may be influenced by the Spring-Autumn Annals of Lu. He has been criticising our Qin laws, saying that they are too harsh and we paid too little heed to the teachings of the sages."

Xiang Shaolong mused: "In this case, Crown Prince should be upset instead. Why did you sound pleased when talking about this person?"

Xiao Pan laughed heartily: "Master knows me best. Some of his arguments do make sense. For example, he pointed out that the Kings of every state will

issue new laws according to changes in society. The changes are often abrupt and take place instantly, causing confusion among the officials and the people, creating unnecessary legal issues. This is very true. We need a uniform legislative process to make our country stronger.”

Gazing at this soon-to-be-eighteen future Qin Shi Huang, Xiang Shaolong is filled with respect. It is not because he has grasped the importance of uniform law making, but that he is open to alternative views and criticism.

Xiao Pan whispered: “Initially, I thought he is Lu Buwei’s man but he speaks with the same fearless aura as Master. After that, using the farm invasion report, he censured Lu Buwei strongly. As a result, I am confident that he is unafraid of death like Master. Ha! This man may not be good with administration but I am sure he will make a good Administrative Premier.”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned. Isn’t Li Si’s dream going to end up in smoke? He frantically interrupted: “The Crown Prince must reconsider. I think Official Li is a better choice.”

Xiao Pan shook his head: “Talking about choices, I think Master is the best choice. Have you ever heard Li Si rebutting anyone? In terms of knowledge, Li Si is ten times better than Feng Qie. He is wise and may have even surpassed Shang Yang. From his Three Premiers Nine Ministers organization, he is most suited to be the Law minister and handle our great laws of Qin. I can also use his talent to build a lawful country in preparation of uniting the world one day.”

Xiang Shaolong is dumbfounded. In terms of ruling a country, he would not

dare to debate with the man who will unite China.

At the end of the day, the Law Minister is still considered a high ranking post and Li Si should be contented.

At the same time, he can see his own influence over Xiao Pan. Because Feng Qie speaks like himself, Xiao Pan immediately has a high opinion of him.

Success is no coincidence. It is because Xiao Pan is capable of putting talent to good use which gives him the opportunity to conquer the world.

Turning happy, Xiao Pan continued in a low voice: "Little Jun has told me everything about the farm battle. I cannot believe it is so exciting. Master could be even better than Bai Qi. If Master fields an army in the future, I am sure you will be undefeated."

Xiang Shaolong smiled to himself; this is his worst fear. Since Xiao Pan has this idea already, he will have to act accordingly sooner or later. Luckily, it is not an immediate concern. Changing the topic, he asked: "How did Lu Buwei shift the blame off himself?"

A cold murderous look flashed past Xiao Pan's eyes. He detailed: "He released them unconditionally and find a few scapegoats to be executed, saying they are the masterminds. Thus, there is no way we can verify anything. If not for the Black Dragon scheme, I would have summoned him privately and kill him personally. Hng! Meng Ao deserves to be killed too. Fortunately, he has two capable sons."

He faced Xiang Shaolong and implored: “Has the Black Dragon been completed?”

Xiang Shaolong explained the details.

Xiao Pan sighed: “Thank Heavens that Master has come up with this miraculous solution or I would not know how to counter Lu Buwei. Hei! My success today is all owed...”

Xiang Shaolong interrupted: “Don’t say such things. Crown Prince has been chosen by Heaven to unite the world. As your subordinate, I am just doing my best!”

Deeply moved, Xiao Pan could not say anything for a while. Finally, he sighed: “Yesterday, Empress moved to Oasis Palace!”

Oasis Palace is situated north of the city among other royal buildings. It is considered to be a position that opposes the main palace. Since Zhu Ji has moved there without her son, their relationship must be in dire straits.

Xiang Shaolong frowned: “Did you have a big fight with her?”

With a wronged expression, Xiao Pan shook his head: “On the contrary. I have listened to Master’s instructions and did my best to repair my relationship with her. When she brought up the topic of moving to Oasis Palace, I did my best to make her stay but she was completely oblivious to my pleas. I smell a rat too. Hei! Actually, it is better that she moved out. I need not witness her scandalous acts.”

Xiang Shaolong understands that he is referring to Zhu Ji and Lao Ai's illicit affair. He felt funny too. By right, Zhu Ji should stay in the palace to maintain her influence over politics and power. Why did she choose to leave Xianyang Palace? He had a brainwave and recalled Qin Qing. Based on her information network, she is the best person to investigate this strange behaviour.

Xiang Shaolong questioned: "Does she partake in the morning court sessions and official meetings?"

Xiao Pan smiled: "Of course she will not give up her power. She may not always be present but insists that every edict must be approved by her regardless of importance. Now, dealing with her is even more difficult than before. The most annoying issue is the rise of Lao Ai. Acting like her spokesman, he has been quite vocal and is always sowing discord between Empress and others. I wish I can kill him with one stroke."

After a short contemplation, Xiang Shaolong laughed: "Since this is the case, we should support him and make him the official representative of Empress. With his insatiable ambition, he will clash with Lu Buwei sooner or later. When that happens, we can sit by the side and enjoy a good show."

Xiao Pan is incensed: "But every time I see him, I am so irritated..."

Xiang Shaolong smilingly cut him off: "To achieve big things, we must have tolerance and real skills, doing what others cannot do. Ultimately, Lao Ai is only a clown who is only good at ganging up with other crooks. The damage he can cause can never match up to Lu Buwei. He is only good with the Empress backing him. In other's opinion, he is still Lu Buwei's man but if we

can make him more powerful, it is as good as creating more trouble for Lu Buwei. Crown Prince, I think we should tolerate him for a few more years!”

Xiao Pan realised: “Master is right. As long as I am not coroneted, I have to give face to Empress. Hei! Before she moved, she insisted that I make Lao Ao a marquis. I declined immediately. From that day onwards, she refused to co sign my edicts, making it hard for the officials to begin their work. Ai! I guess I have to comply with her.”

Xiang Shaolong commented: “A wise man act according to circumstances. Crown Prince can let Empress know that after the Spring Festival, when it is time to make new changes, you will promote Lao Ai to be a marquis.”

Xiao Pan was perplexed: “It is not so easy. Empress even wanted me to promote a few of his cronies. For example, Lao Ai wants his own clansman Lao Si to be the Interior Minister. There is also Ling Qi and Han Jie who are his new recruits. Empress wants them to be promoted too and I can feel a headache coming.”

Xiang Shaolong already saw this coming. Without these implementations, Lao Ai will not dare to rebel in the future.

He comforted: “No matter how powerful they grow, they cannot accomplish much. To gain Empress’s support, Crown Prince has to bear with this. Don’t fret. Lu Buwei’s headache is worse than yours!”

Xiao Pan thought about it and laughed: “Somehow, everything is easily solved when they come to you. I will follow Master’s advice.”

After further discussion, Xiang Shaolong left the palace and went to find Qin Qing.

They had only parted shortly but Xiang Shaolong is already here to see her. Qin Qing is especially delighted and received him in the inner hall.

Since they mated, Xiang Shaolong has to focus on his training so they did not have any more close contact. Meeting her in the inner hall, they both felt intimacy and some awkwardness at the same time. It was simply refreshing and yet they felt lost too.

In the end, Xiang Shaolong held her hand and asked: "Have you heard that Empress is moving to Oasis Palace?"

Qin Qing's eye brows tightened and she whispered: "I knew it the moment I came back. The attendants she brought to the Oasis Palace are all her own people so I am afraid I cannot conduct any investigation for you."

Pulling her to the rear garden, Xiang Shaolong and Qin Qing came to a bridge and sat down on the railings. With one hand hugging her slender waist, Xiang Shaolong pondered; "There must be a reason for her moving. I wonder what it is."

With his arm around her, Qin Qing's body turned soft instantly and leaned onto him, pressing her own leg against his. Despite the cold winter, her face is burning hot like the summer sun. She joyfully whined: "Can Official Xiang watch his behaviour? The servants may see us!"

Xiang Shaolong let out a loud laugh and lifted her to sit on his lap.

Qin Qing cried out in panic and lost her balance. When she straightened herself, her lips are already locked onto his.

After a round of kissing and teasing, a satisfied Xiang Shaolong exclaimed: “This is to punish you for calling me Official Xiang. Do you plead guilty?”

Qin Qing was feeling sweet in her heart. Shooting him a charming look, she wailed; “So domineering!”

Xiang Shaolong is intoxicated by her charm. He hates himself for losing his ability to conceive after coming to this era. If he can impregnate Qin Qing or Ji Yanran, it will be really blissful. Thinking about this, his body shook uncontrollably.

Seeing his changed expression, Qin Qing was shocked: “What is it?”

Looking at the far distance, Xiang Shaolong whispered: “This is bad. Empress must be pregnant.”

Stepping into the Wu Residence, he heard that Zou Yan is back. Xiang Shaolong is overjoyed and inquired on his whereabouts. Zou Yan is chatting with Ji Yanran in the inner chamber and he hurriedly joined them.

Looking great as normal, Zou Yan is also glad to see Xiang Shaolong.

Ji Yanran has already told him the reason for inviting him back. After dinner,

Zou Yan dragged Xiang Shaolong to the garden pavilion for a chat. Ji Yanran naturally tagged along. Snowflakes are flying through the sky and illuminated by their lamps, making it a pleasant sight.

Xiang Shaolong embarrassedly began: "Because of us, we have to bother godfather to come all the way here. We are really..."

Zou Yan chuckled and interrupted: "Since when did Shaolong become so polite? You need not feel bad as I am also thinking of travelling back to Qi and see my old friends."

Xiang Shaolong remembered Shan Rou and was about to say something when Ji Yanran indicated: "You need not say it. I have already told godfather to help us search for Sister Rou. Based on his contacts in Qi, this should be an easy task."

He was beginning to get worried about Shan Rou. Thus, Xiang Shaolong is comforted to know this news. Shan Rou's swordsmanship is outstanding so it should be easy to locate her.

Sitting down beside a stone table, Zou Yan's eyes twinkled and he state in a deep voice: "To think that in my senior years, I, Zou Yan, is able to help cultivate a New Saint. There are many miracles in this world but none are as amazing as this."

Ji Yanran gently informed Xiang Shaolong: "Godfather has completed his masterpiece <<The Five Virtues Theory>> and has ordered me to safe keep it for him!"

Xiang Shaolong was feeling strange about this. In a way, he understood that Zou Yan can foresee the future and know that Xiao Pan will unite the world. Therefore, he decided to leave his masterpiece in Qin. Otherwise, it may be destroyed or lost during wars. He was inspired: “Godfather, feel free to tell us what to do with your <<Five Virtues Theory>>.”

His eyes shining with pleasure, Zou Yan smiled: “When the Black Dragon appears, Shaolong will be responsible for presenting it to Crown Prince Zheng. This is a hundred times better than me propagating it.”

Ji Yanran was blown away: “Godfather is leaving us before the Black Dragon event?”

Zou Yan shook his head, sighing: “Heaven has its plans and I don’t think I can wait so long. Even if you two did not look for me, I would have looked for you to settle my last wishes.”

Ji Yanran’s face lost colour at once. Taking a panic look at Xiang Shaolong, she wailed: “Godfather!”

Zou Yan gave a carefree laugh: “Spring leaves and Summer comes. This is nature and humans are the same. Yanran, do you not understand?”

Ji Yanran is not ordinary person. Forcing a smile, she agreed; “Godfather is right! Thanks for the advice.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded in agreement. Feeling melancholic, he recited the words of the famous Song Dynasty philosopher Su Shi: “Humans meet and

part, undergo joy and sorrow. The moon becomes full and crescent dependently. Godfather is right.”

Zou Yan is astounded and stared at him along with Ji Yanran for a while before praising: “Shaolong is very better than me in seeing past life and death.” Pausing, he added: “Lu Buwei still has some luck on his side. Before the Crown Prince coronation, Shaolong must bear with him. Do not confront him directly and I can rest in peace.”

Xiang Shaolong could not help but sincerely respect him from the bottom of his heart. Zou Yan is surely the most intelligent man during this ancient period. Only he, Xiang Shaolong, can truly appreciate his deep wisdom. No wonder his five virtues theory is able to spread far and wide, applying to politics, science and even the arts.

Zou Yan continued to stare at the falling snow in silence.

Ji Yanran softly asked: “Godfather! When we create a Black Dragon like this, are we deceiving the gods?”

Zou Yan laughed: “It is something really creative! But Heaven has decreed that the new Saint will be Crown Prince Zheng whose rise will be due to Shaolong’s efforts. Although the six states have some might now, they are fools who plot against one another. In the future when the Crown Prince has received full authority, the end of the six states will be in sight.”

Xiang Shaolong was astonished: “After all, Godfather is a Qi native. Why are you not worried about your own country’s fate?”

Zou Yan calmly replied: “Qi just happens to be my birth place. My mission is to help unite the world. Moreover, the present King is an idiot. Thinking about this, I could not help but feel angry.”

Ji Yanran added: “Godfather and I have the same view. Only when the world is united can the people enjoy real peace and harmony. But when I thought of Shaolong’s ‘Absolute power corrupts absolutely’, I am concerned that Crown Prince Zheng may change and is no longer the wise and responsible person he is now. That is a system flaw.”

Xiang Shaolong unwittingly let out Heaven’s Secret: “This will only change when the people become democratic and rule the country as a representative group of people rather than a single monarch. But that will only take place around two thousand years later.”

Zou Yan and Ji Yanran are totally swept away. After exchanging looks with each other, Ji Yanran curiously asked: “How can there be such a system? How does hubby know for sure that this will take place two thousand years later?”

Kicking himself, Xiang Shaolong shook his head and awkwardly replied: “I am just making a wild guess!”

Zou Yan smiled: “Shaolong often speaks with great wisdom, proving that you are no ordinary man. Otherwise, my dear daughter will not love you wholeheartedly.”

He looked up to the sky again. The moon and stars are absent and the sky is filled with countless snowflakes. He bleakly concluded: “It is late! I need to

rest early. Tomorrow, I will head back to Qi.”

Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran exchanged a glance, understanding that this great philosopher has consulted astrology and predicted that his death is near.

This is their last reunion.

Chapter 02

A Grand Scheme

The next morning, Xiang Shaolong, Ji Yanran and the others sent Zou Yan out of the City. After accompanying him for ten over miles on foot did they finally bade farewell.

Zou Yan left with a laugh and took off with about a hundred family warriors. Wu Guo led a thousand Cavalry soldiers to continue escorting him.

By the time Xiang Shaolong is back at Xianyang City, it is already evening time.

The snowstorm that ended last night started once again.

Thinking about this final departure, he was filled with extreme grief!

He was experiencing mixed emotions after interacting with this great philosopher who also happens to be one of China's foremost mathematician.

If not for this great man, he may not gain Talented Lady Ji's love or may have even lost his life back at Daliang.

Stepping into the residence, Tao Fang welcomed: "Ying Ying has been waiting for you for almost an hour in the eastern chamber."

Xiang Shaolong frowned upon hearing this. Excusing himself from his wives, he headed to the eastern chamber.

Ying Ying is reaching the end of her patience. The moment she saw him, she snarled: “Where the hell have you been?”

Xiang Shaolong had a sudden revelation. Even if Ying Ying changes her mind, he will never accept her love.

This is not because she is Guan Zhongxie’s woman. For a modern man like him, a woman’s virginity is unimportant.

In the past, he has been wooing her because he is doing it as a favour to the Lord Changping brothers and he is lecherous too. But after knowing her better, all his feelings for her have been eradicated by her fickle-mindedness and her lack of priorities. Even if someone holds a knife to his neck, he will not be willing to pursue her anymore.

After this enlightening revelation, Xiang Shaolong politely invited her to take a seat, asking: “What can I do for Miss Ying?”

Sensing the cold and unfriendly tone in his voice, Ying Ying was momentarily stunned. Lowering her head, she protested: “I know that you are feeling troubled. Ai! I don’t know what to say. You will be fighting Zhongxie in three days and I am really worried for you!”

Seeing that she is not here to dissuade him from fighting, Xiang Shaolong’s impression of her improved slightly. Recollecting his new secret weapon:

Hundred Battle Sabre and his new set of sabre skills, he smiled: "Thanks for your kindness. Life is full of battles, isn't it? Only from battles can life becoming more exciting."

Frankly speaking, if not for Guan Zhongxie's challenge, he may not have created this wonderful sabre skill.

Ying Ying raised her head slightly and panic is written all over her face. She advised: "I don't know why I come to find you. Zhongxie has been practising his swordplay every day and has analyzed every move to counter spear attacks. Ai! Everyone knows that you are not good with spear fighting. Even with the Flying Dragon Spear, I am afraid... Ai! I am very worried!"

Xiang Shaolong plainly checked: "Aren't you worried about Guan Zhongxie?"

Ying Ying nodded her head slightly and softly remarked: "It is best not to fight but I know no one can make both of you change your minds."

Lowering her head again, she slowly thanked: "Thanks for your advice that day. I have given deep thought over your words and have agreed to marry Yang Duanhe. I haven't informed my brothers yet. After the duel, Duanhe will seek my hand in marriage."

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback but at the same time, he set his mind at ease.

He has met Yang Duanhe before and he is the most outstanding military leader under Wang Ci's command. In the past, Lu Gong and Xu Xian thought

highly of him too. However, he has no idea that Duanhe is also wooing Ying Ying.

Based on the current circumstances, whoever that marries Ying Ying will gain plenty of favours with the military and royal family. Only Guan Zhongxie is an exception.

Slightly fearful, Ying Ying peeped at his expression and tested: “Are you unhappy?”

Xiang Shaolong naturally would not show his strong feelings to her. He is certain that she really loves Guan Zhongxie so even if she does not marry him (GZH), she cannot marry himself (XSL) too. He solemnly state: “This is a wise decision. Yang Duanhe is an excellent man.”

Ying Ying stared at him angrily in silence.

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “Since Miss has decided on her future, she should not waver again.”

Ying Ying intimately asked: “Don’t you blame me at all?”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “What do you want me to say?”

There couldn’t be a better answer than this. Ying Ying calmed down and thought for some time. Finally, she concluded: “Be careful!”

She stood up.

Xiang Shaolong sent her to the door. Just before she left, Ying Ying whispered: "If I can choose, I want you to win. This is not only because of me but also for Qin. I have finally understood the big picture."

Before she finished speaking, hot tears are already gushing out of her eyes. Helplessly looking at him intimately for one last time, she turned around and leapt up her horse, galloping away.

In a daze, Xiang Shaolong stared at the snow clad Xianyang City, thinking about the end of this relationship. He swore never to get involved with any more beauties for as long as he lives.

But thinking back, it is hard to know what fate has in store for him.

Madam Zhuang and Li Yanyan are two good examples.

Back at the inner hall, just as he is enjoying some playtime with Xiang Bao'er, Teng Yi and Jing Jun came back from work. Teng Yi has a stern expression on his face while Jing Jun has an apologetic look.

Ji Yanran knew that something is amiss and asked for an explanation.

Sitting down, Teng Yi slapped the table and scolded: "I have told this kid umpteen times not to mess with Guoxin. How was I to know that he could not hold back when he saw him?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "Second Brother, calm down first. Little Jun, tell me what this is all about."

Everyone was shocked at Xiang Shaolong's indifferent attitude. Even Jing Jun was stunned. He explained: "Third Brother knows me best. Ai. I am not saying Second Brother does not know me but it is two different kinds of knowing."

Teng Yi was amused and Wu Tingfang cannot help but laughed: "Don't beat around the bush. What is it?"

Putting on a helpless and innocent expression, Jing Jun shrugged his shoulders: "I am not the chief troublemaker this time. I was just touring Drunken Wind Brothel and ran into those b@sterds from Weinan Martial Arts School. Naturally, Scarface Guoxin is among them. I intended to ignore them but they made some sarcastic remarks and even insulted Third Brother. I won't repeat what they said but they are very arrogant because they have Lao Ai supporting them. I can bear with personal insults but I cannot take it when they slander Third Brother."

Zhao Zhi frowned: "What did they actually say?"

Teng Yi replied in a deep voice: "They did go too far with their comments. They mentioned that Third Brother is Lu Buwei's gay partner. Hei. To think they even dare to spread such rumours."

Her eyes shining with agitation, Ji Yanran coldly hissed: "If I hear it personally, I will kill them all on the spot."

Wu Tingfang was furious: "Little Jun, what did you do to them?"

Jing Jun bitterly smiled: "There are only eight of us but there are ten over of

them. Moreover, Guoxin is highly skilled so we did not gain much advantage and two of our men are injured. Incidentally, Lao Ai showed up and got them to back off and apologise. As Second Brother has instructed, I avoided any confrontation with Lao Ai. Holding my anger, I left immediately but Second Brother still holds it against me.”

Teng Yi chided: “What did I tell you? I have told you many times not to patronise the brothels but you keep disobeying me.”

Xiang Shaolong was still as composed as ever because he had long anticipated Lao Ai to become more and more insolent.

After a short contemplation, he questioned: “What are the kinds of people in Weinan Martial Arts School?”

Jing Jun took the chance to redeem himself: “The best fighter is naturally the School Founder and Master Qui Risheng. There are quite a significant number of military leaders who are graduates of this school. After him are the three key instructors which includes Guoxin. The other two are Changjie and Jinliang. All of them are first rate swordsmen who are now working together with Lao Ai. In a way, Lao Ai has more than a hundred family warriors after they joined him. These men hoped to be promoted based on Lao Ai’s close relationship with Empress. I heard that Lu Buwei is very dissatisfied with the school’s reopening but cannot say anything because of Empress’s support!”

Teng Yi added: “The fighters in Weinan Martial Arts School are made up of swordsmen from different states. Not everyone is a top fighter but there are some experts among them too. Every one of them is using you as an

inspiration and hope to defeat you. By defeating you, that person will be crowned the number one swordsman of Qin and his value will increase by many folds. Ai! Everyone thought that you are the Crown Prince's favourite subject because of your sword skill!"

Xiang Shaolong fantasized that this is always the worry of being the number one swordsman as always read in wuxia novels. If not for his high official post and his Guardians protecting him, he would have been waylaid on the streets every now and then.

Nodding, he swore: "Let them say whatever they like! My conscience is clear. If they go overboard, we shall not hesitate to act too but everything must come after my duel with Guan Zhongxie. We will lay low for the time being. If we are forced to act, we will go all the way and send Qiu Risheng to meet his maker."

His eyes shining icily, he stared right at Jing Jun and commanded: "You have Lu Dan'er already. Take care of your health and improve your skills. Otherwise, when we face off with the Weinan Martial Arts School, you will not be able to take your revenge. Understand?"

It is not often Xiang Shaolong speaks so harshly to Jing Jun, making him sweat profusely and nodding his head non-stop in agreement.

Scanning the crowd, Xiang Shaolong laughed vociferously: "One fine day, we shall confront them and let them have a taste of Second Brother's Mozi Sword, Yanran's Flying Dragon Spear and my Hundred Battle Sabre!"

It was early next morning.

Xiang Shaolong began practising the Hundred Battle Sabre Play. The area surrounding him became enveloped with cold flashes of sabre energy. It was powerful beyond measure.

His sparring partner is Teng Yi. Even with Teng Yi's ability, he cannot attack with the Mozi Sword. However, Mozi Swordplay focuses on defence. With his stronger arm strength and heavier wooden sword, he can still defend himself against the numerous attacks from all different directions.

Seeing the Hundred Battle Sabre in action for the first time, Jing Jun and Tao Fang's jaws dropped, as they can never envision such a fearsome weapon and such ruthless and swift attacks.

Every time the two weapons clash, a loud sound is produced, adding to the excitement of the fight.

Since they started fighting, both men have exchanged over a hundred strokes but Teng Yi is still unable to find a loophole in the Hundred Battle Sabre Play to counter attack.

Xiang Shaolong is having the time of his life. Using his knowledge of many schools of martial arts and the use of science and body momentum, he applied it to the chopping attack nature of the Hundred Battle Sabre. Adding to the heavy sabre weight and intricate footsteps, the power of the sabre attacks is maximised. Like an endless torrent of earth crushing attacks, any enemy would be hard pressed to defend. Even with Teng Yi's ability, he is at a

losing end.

Out of a sudden, Wu Tingfang screamed: “Stop!”

Puzzled, Xiang Shaolong retreated and retrieved his sabre.

Everyone stared at her in amazement.

Her face turning pink, Wu Tingfang awkwardly explained: “Don’t look at me this way. I am afraid that hubby will really fight Second Brother like he will fight Guan Zhongxie!”

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi exchanged a look and burst out laughing.

Looking at his own right hand that was shaking because of over exertion, Teng Yi panted: “Tingfang is right to call for a stop, otherwise; I may be disgraced in public. The Hundred Battle Sabre may be powerful but the real might comes from Third Brother’s sabre play. Although it may be straight chopping styles, the changes are unlimited and the angles are precise as if it was directed by the immortals themselves. It is definitely worthy of its name.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled at Jing Jun: “Does Little Jun want to give it a try?”

Jing Jun bitterly smiled: “Can we do it tomorrow? I am already terrified to death and cannot find the courage to fight you.”

Everyone saw that Jing Jun is so intimidated and burst out into laughter.

Tao Fang remarked: “After witnessing Shaolong’s prowess, I can’t wait for your duel with Guan Zhongxie!”

At this moment, Wu Guang came to Xiang Shaolong’s side and whispered a few words. Xiang Shaolong handed the Hundred Battle Sabre to Zhao Zhi before gesturing to Teng Yi, Jing Jun and his wives to follow him towards the main hall.

Teng Yi caught up to him and inquired: “What is it?”

Xiang Shaolong whispered: “Meng Wu and Meng Tian have come secretly to see us.”

After paying their respects and getting seated, Meng Wu sincerely praised: “Official Xiang is truly a military genius. Tang Yi is the best general under my father’s wings but was soundly defeated despite having numerous advantages.”

Meng Tian added: “Father was infuriated but was powerless too. But we know him too well; he will never let the matter rest.”

The three ladies exchanged looks, finally aware that Meng Ao did not take the risk of leading the attack personally.

Meng Wu was frustrated: “We still do not understand why Father is so loyal towards Lu Buwei that heartless traitor.”

Meng Tian surmised: “It must be that beauty that Lu Buwei sent to seduce

Father. Now, Father no longer listens to Mother. Mother has reminded us many times that Lu Buwei is a ruthless man and will die a horrible death. Father may be muddle-headed but we will not follow in his footsteps. Ai!”

Xiang Shaolong and the rest finally understood why they are willing to switch loyalty. Except for the strong relationship they built while escaping Lu Buwei’s assassination, it also involves their family conflict.

Their best buddy Jing Jun puffed his chest: “Relax! The Crown Prince knows that the both of you are loyal subjects. No matter what your father does, both of you will not be implicated.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded: “Little Jun is right. I have told Crown Prince everything and he will assign important tasks for both of you. Now, the most important thing is you must not let your father know that both of you have switch allegiance. In the future, you can inherit your father’s family warriors.”

Both men were overwhelmed and excited. Meng Wu intimately asked: “Is Crown Prince going to do something against Father?”

Xiang Shaolong acknowledges that the main source of Lu Buwei’s power arises from Meng Ao which allows him to last until Xiao Pan’s coronation. Based on this, Meng Ao should be fine these years. He predicted: “You can set your mind at ease. Your father will be fine before the Crown Prince coronation. Use these five years to learn, grow and do your best. When the Crown Prince is crowned King, all these problems will be solved. I will ask the Crown Prince to be lenient on your Father based on your merits.”

Both men were very touched and immediately kowtowed.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly helped them up. Recalling that Meng Tian will be Qin's best general after Wang Jian, he could not help but feel a sense of pride and wonder at the same time.

He instructed them further before allowing them to leave.

At the main door, Meng Wu worriedly advised: "Official Xiang must be diligent when fighting Guan Zhongxie the day after tomorrow. Yesterday, he came to our residence to look for sparring partners. Both of us fought against him too but we barely lasted a minute. He is much more formidable compared to the hunting fair duel."

Meng Tian interrupted: "Can Official Xiang defeat him? This will make that traitor Lu vomit blood."

Jing Jun smiled: "Don't worry. My Third Brother is like a general from Heaven. Even if Guan Zhongxie has three heads and six arms, he will be defeated for sure."

Both brothers stared at Xiang Shaolong with suspicion.

Teng Yi accosted them and smiled: "Little Jun is not bullshitting this time. Your uncle Xiang has even defeated me soundly. Just wait and enjoy the show."

Both men knew of Teng Yi's skill and his truthful disposition so they managed

to put aside their worries for the time being.

Meng Tian's eyes suddenly reddened. Lowering his head, he swore: "This time, we are against our father not only because Lu Buwei tried to kill us and Mother. We must also take revenge for Princess Qian and the maids. When it is time to attack him in the future, you must include us in your plans."

Xiang Shaolong was reminded of their close relationship with the girls. His heart swelled up with pain and he shook his head, sighing.

Teng Yi and Jing Jun knows that he is feeling despondent over the past and quickly led the brothers away.

The three men headed back to the Command Centre and were having lunch when an attendant reported that Wang Ci is here to see him. Xiang Shaolong put down his chopsticks and went to see him in the main hall.

Xiang Shaolong got Wang Ci to be seated in the higher ranked seat, remarking: "Great General need not come all the way here. As long as you send the order, I will report at your General Residence."

Wang Ci smiled: "Aren't you afraid that I may change my mind and try to assassinate you again?"

Xiang Shaolong jested: "If Great General wants my life, it is as easy as killing an ant!"

Wang Ci shook his head: "Your life is not so easy to take. Even Lu Buwei and

Meng Ao have been defeated soundly by you and are at their wit's end.”

Pausing, his brows furrowed deeper and he solemnly revealed: “Lu Buwei does have the intention to rebel. Using the excuse of needing men to build the Zhengguo Canal, he got the military seal from Crown Prince and Empress and began redeploying the troops. If not for my strong insistence that my army remains untouched, Xianyang City will be in his hands by now. But sooner or later, I may have to field a campaign and I will be too far to protect Xianyang City. The Crown Prince will be in serious danger. Does Shaolong have any solution?”

Xiang Shaolong wanted to tell him that everything will change after the Black Dragon sighting but he felt that it is better that less people know about this secret. He turned the question around: “Does Great General have any suggestion?”

Wang Ci thought for some time and sighed: “Because I refused to kill you, my relationship with Lu Buwei is strained. You should know that if Tian Dan attacks Yan, Lu Buwei will force Meng Ao and me to attack the Three Allied States. That will also be the best time for him to create chaos. If all of Xianyang City’s standby army is made up of soldiers loyal to him, then Empress and Crown Prince are as good as dead.”

Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh of relief: “That should happen in Spring next year. Yan is in the extreme north and winter is very harsh there. Tian Dan needs some time to prepare too so we still have some time to plan.”

Wang Ci is displeased: “Since Guan Zhong took over as the Premier of Qi, the

nation should enjoy progress. Unfortunately, the people of Qi are only good at bragging and lack military preparedness. Once, they were nearly annihilated by Yan which is much smaller than them. Although Tian Dan appeared, they are only good at surviving and nothing else. If not for Zhao between us and them, we would have conquered their lands a long time ago.”

Taking this chance, Xiang Shaolong clarified: “Zhao has lost Lian Po so can they still be considered a threat to us?”

With a suspicious expression, Wang Ci sighed: “The best armies and generals are from Zhao. If not for the muddle-headed King Xiaocheng using Zhao Gua instead of Lian Po, Bai Qi may not necessary win the Battle of Changping. Lian Po may be gone but Li Mu is still around. This man is unfathomable in terms of fighting a war. In fact, he is better than Zhao’s King Wuling. His tactics are unpredictable and he attacks when he is least expected to. If you ever meet him on the battlefield, you must never let your guard down or be prepared to take a heavy loss.”

In his heart, Xiang Shaolong prayed that it will never happen too. Concurrently, he was filled with respect at this famous general who has achieved such a godly reputation.

Recollecting the day when Li Mu heroically gave him Bloodwave and even advised him to come to Qin, telling him that should they ever meet on the battlefield, they should fight each other to death. Not many men can match up to his depth.

Wang Ci groaned: “As long as Li Mu is around, we can forget about attacking Zhao.”

Each in his own thoughts, both men are sighing and momentarily forgotten their present danger.

Wang Ci suddenly brought up: “Does Shaolong know that after Chongqiao has been promoted to be Marquis Changan, he has been in secret contact with Zhao General Pang Nuan. With Du Bi’s support, he has been recruiting men and buying horses. If Xianyang City is in chaos, he will surely come back to vie for the throne. He still has many supporters and you must guard against this.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel a big headache coming. So it is really not easy to help Xiao Pan become Qin Shi Huang after all. Nodding his head to acknowledge this, he sighed: “Lu Buwei should be more worried than me. He is the first person Du Bi and Chongqiao want to kill. My turn will come much later and Lu Buwei will not take this lying down.”

Wang Ci stifled his laughter: “Talking about scheming, we are not Lu Buwei’s match. These few nights, I have been drinking with Wang He. Whenever we spoke about this, Wang He says that Lu Buwei is purposely allowing Du Bi and Chongqiao to run amok. With this threat hanging over their heads, Empress and Crown Prince will still have to rely on him.”

Xiang Shaolong had seen this coming. He asked: “What is the relationship between Du Bi and Lady Xiuli?”

Lady Xiuli is the other concubine of King Zhuangxiang and Chongqiao's mother.

Wang Ci replied: "They are cousins but we all know that there is something going on between them."

Pausing, Wang Ci realised that they have drifted too far off the original topic. He officially suggested: "I have a plan. I heard that you are quite close to the people of Chu. Can you persuade Li Yuan that if Qi annihilates Yan, then Chu will be his next target? Get him to deploy soldiers near the Qi-Chu border so that Tian Dan will not attack Yan recklessly."

Xiang Shaolong slapped the table and praised this wonderful tactic. At the end of the day, Wang Ci is still more experienced than him. This is akin to surrounding Wei to save Zhao. Moreover, Li Yuan hates Tian Dan to the core and Chu is safe from Qin because of the buffer of the Three Allied States. He nodded in agreement: "This is easy; I will get someone to write a letter to Li Yuan immediately. Consider it done."

Wang Ci officially state: "This is crucial. Shaolong must do his best to persuade Li Yuan!"

Xiang Shaolong respectfully consented: "I know!"

Wang Ci is pleased: "If we can delay Qi's attack of Yan, when Wang Jian is back and Huan Yi, Wang Ben has the new army ready, I can set off with a peace of mind."

Xiang Shaolong knows that he has secured at least one quarter of the Qin military support and was comforted. Recalling Jing Jun's marriage proposal, he sincerely explained it to Wang Ci.

Wang Ci laughed loudly: "No problem. I will get Wang He later to visit the Lu Residence later. Wait for my good news!"

In a second, his expression darkened as he was reminded of Lu Gong and Xu Xian.

After some time, he reminiscence: "Does Shaolong know that Lu Gong is not originally surnamed Lu? During the hunting fair, his hunting catch of deer is unmatched so the late King conferred him the title of Deer King (Lu Wang). Thus, he changed his surname to Lu and as he grows older, people called him Lu Gong (Deer Senior)!"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "Does Great General know that I am no longer called Xiang Shaolong but Long Shaoxiang? I did swear to write my name backwards if Tian Dan manages to return back to Qi safely."

Wang Ci was stunned for a while before he left, laughing.

Chapter 03

Irreconcilable

After Wang Ci left, Xiang Shaolong summoned Jing Jun and informed him that Wang Ci has agreed to propose marriage for him and will even bring Wang He along. With a joyful cry, Jing Jun somersaulted several times on the spot and skipped away happily.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi watched in amusement.

Teng Yi's eyes are glittering with tears and signs of memory recall.

Xiang Shaolong knew that he is thinking of his first wife and several kinsmen who have died a tragic death and felt sad too.

Teng Yi sighed: "If not for that tragedy, Little Jun will not enjoy today's fortune. Heaven's Will is truly unfathomable. No matter what, our brotherhood will stand the test of time."

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that it is not Heaven's Will that is unfathomable but that there is no way to change the Will of Heaven! He himself is living in history and it seems like there is no way he can change anything too.

Teng Yi suggested: "Third Brother can go home to take a rest. I can handle the workload. Except for the occasional disturbance by people of the Premier

Mentor Residence, the city is generally peaceful.”

Remembering the incident where the Zhou siblings were being beaten up in public, he shook his head, sighing: “Guan Zhongxie is not an upright man so his men are rotten too. When I kill him the day after tomorrow, either you or Little Jun will take charge of the Imperial Infantry. Only till then can the citizens of Xianyang City enjoy real peace.”

Teng Yi laughed: “If you let those people who think you will lose hear these words, they will be bewildered and assume that you are just bragging. Only for those like me who have fought against your Hundred Battle Sabre will understand that you are in fact very humble.”

Xiang Shaolong did not expect Teng Yi to have a humorous side of him and laughed too: “To be happy, we must work hard for happiness. From my experience of fighting Lian Jin and Wang Jian, every duel I fought has changed my life. I wonder how will my life change after the duel with Guan Zhongxie?”

Teng Yi stood up and escorted him out of the Command Centre main gate. As they walked side by side, Teng Yi remarked: “It is not all hard work but wisdom too. I really cannot comprehend how you can design such a fearsome weapon and a deadly skill to match it. When you went out alone to practice at the farms, Yanran, Qin Qing and I were talking about you. We all agreed that you are deeply mysterious and seems to have the ability to foretell the future. Do you remember that night at Qin Qing’s residence? All she said was Lu Buwei wanted to punish Lao Ai for harassing her and you can predict the rest of Lu Buwei’s actions. That is something impossible.”

Guilt-ridden, Xiang Shaolong smiled: “That is just a moment of inspiration! Second Brother need not think too much.”

At the gate, Xiang Shaolong patted Teng Yi on the shoulder and joked: “Thanks for Second Brother’s reminder. I will make a detour to Qin Qing’s place. In this cold and snowy weather, there is no warmer place than a beauty’s bosom.”

Amidst their laughter, Jing Shan came up to them with Jifeng. Xiang Shaolong somersaulted onto the horse and rode towards the Qin Residence. The northern wind is blowing hard and large amount of snow is accumulated everywhere. There is hardly any passer bys.

As Teng Yi watched Xiang Shaolong galloped off, he could not help by feel a sense of wonder.

This steadfast brother of his is not only changing the fates of everyone around him but is even changing the fate of everything under the sky.

At Qin Qing’s residence, the beauty reported with suspicion: “Your guess that Empress is pregnant with Lao Ai’s child is not without basis. Yesterday, the Empress sent some men to Yong Du. It is speculated that she intends to move to the Dazheng Palace there. Needless to say, she is afraid of being exposed.”

A guess is a guess and facts are facts. Now that this guess has been proven to be a fact, Xiang Shaolong’s mind is in turmoil and he had to sit down for a while.

The women in this era will use herbs to prevent pregnancy if they wanted to make love without bearing offspring of their partner. That is why Zhu Ji can service Zhao Mu, Guo Kai and many others in Handan City without being impregnated. Now, she willingly got herself pregnant for Lao Ai. This proves that she is completely under his control.

One can say she no longer view Xiao Pan as her child. In the future, she will whole heartedly support Lao Ai and hope that he can replace Xiao Pan.

Qin Qing can tell that he is troubled and quietly sat down beside him.

Xiang Shaolong inquired in a deep voice: “Where is Yong Du?”

Qin Qing answered: “Yong Du is our old capital. Like Xianyang City, it is north of River Wei and is about a hundred miles upriver. You can reach there by boat within three days. It is a huge place with Dazheng Palace and Zhannian Palace. It is also the city with the most temples and religious activities.”

Xiang Shaolong fell into Qin Qing’s bosom and laid down, using her laps as a pillow. Gazing at her unrivalled beautiful face and features, he sighed: “I think Lao Ai will become another Lu Buwei in no time.”

Qin Qing was annoyed: “Isn’t this part of your grand plan?”

Xiang Shaolong did not know how to reply.

How is he supposed to tell Qin Qing that he knows the future and can only act accordingly? Even he has to tolerate the rise of Lao Ai so that one day,

Lao Ai will contend with Lu Buwei according to the historical records.

He was indeed the mastermind behind this scheme and in fact, everything is proceeding very smoothly. But due to his deep feelings and guilt for Zhu Ji, he felt terrible inside.

He remained silent.

Instead, Qin Qing comforted: "I am sorry! My words are too harsh. At the end of the day, it is not your fault entirely. You are also acting to circumstances! If Lao Ai listened to every command of Lu Buwei, many people including you would have lost their lives already!"

Xiang Shaolong hooked his hand around Qin Qing's neck and forced her to bend down, enjoying a fulfilling kiss together. He stretched himself and decided: "I am staying here tonight!"

Qin Qing was embarrassed and shocked at the same time. "How can we do this?" she cried.

Xiang Shaolong knew long ago she will not be so daring and is just teasing her. Sitting up, he hugged her and softly asked: "Didn't you say I can do whatever I want?"

Qin Qing solemnly state: "At least you must finish your duel first! Otherwise, Yanran and the others will blame me!"

Xiang Shaolong was delighted: "It is decided then! If Grand Tutor Qin breaks

her promise, don't blame me for forcing myself on you."

Qin Qing was stunned: "Forcing yourself on me! Ai! You are terrible! Ai! Get lost! I am not speaking to you anymore."

Looking at her angry yet delighted expression, Xiang Shaolong can feel all his troubles disappearing. After taking advantage of her again, he left with a happy heart.

Leaving her residence, he saw that it is still early so he entered the palace to look for Li Si. He also took the chance to tell Li Si about Xiao Pan's intention to make him the Law Minister.

Initially, he thought that Li Si will be disappointed. Unexpectedly, Li Si was overjoyed: "Actually, I am eyeing this post but was concerned that Feng Qie may beat me to it. This is better than I imagined."

Xiang Shaolong can never understand all the politics and power grabbing. But he is certain that Li Si will be a powerful official supporting the future Qin Shi Huang so he will definitely enjoy official promotions.

Li Si gratefully thanked: "I owe all my success to Brother Xiang. I do not know what to say to express my heartfelt gratitude."

Xiang Shaolong humbly replied: "A pearl will shine wherever it is. I am only taking away the cloth that is covering the pearl and Brother Li is such a pearl. It is with your contributions that the Crown Prince will unite the world one day."

Li Si smiled: “Brother Xiang thinks too highly of me. Since Jiangong started governance, Xiangong started administration, Xiaogong implemented Shang Yang’s reforms and King Huiwen consolidated everything, our Qin state has made significant progress in terms of politics, economy and military. In these turbulent times, we are in the best position to unite the world. The only obstacle is the Crown Prince lack of genuine authority and everything has to be approved by the Empress. When the Crown Prince is coroneted, based on his talents, he will accomplish this impossible task. I am only worthy of carrying his shoes or buttoning up his sleeves! Brother Xiang need not give me too much credit.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Brother Li has done so much and yet do not seek credit for them. No wonder the Crown Prince has a good opinion of you.”

Finishing his words, he sensed something and turned his head towards the door, discovering Lord Changping and Xiao Pan standing there. Xiao Pan’s eyes were shining and he seems to have overheard Li Si’s words.

Both men were taken aback and frantically kneeled down and paid their respects.

Xiao Pan strode over in large steps, helping Li Si up. Moved, he swore: “Subject Li must not be offended that I came without announcing. Otherwise, I may not have overheard your innermost thoughts. Subject Li only needs to do your best and I will not mistreat you.”

On the other hand, Li Si is sweating profusely. If he had made some negative comments earlier, his future will be ruined.

Leaving the palace with Lord Changping in tow, they were celebrating Li Si's stroke of good luck. With only a few sentences, he has managed to gain Xiao Pan's complete confidence. With his knowledge of history, Xiang Shaolong went as far to predict that Xiao Pan the future Qin Shi Huang's unwavering trust of Li Si may have arisen from these few lines.

Both men rode out of the palace gates and turned into the main road of Xianyang City. After crossing the moat. On both sides of the roads are the huge residences of various important high ranking officials, members of the Royal Family and top generals. It was a grand and imposing environment.

He could not help but sigh.

Lord Changping commented: "Shaolong has just come back from Chu and should know about their latest developments. The land in the south is rich and fertile, surpassing our Qin farmlands. If not for our conquering of Bashu, there is no way we can compete with them. However, it is also due to their wealth that will be the cause of their downfall."

Xiang Shaolong was interested in this topic and slowed down the horse speed. He was curious: "Wealth is better than poverty. Why would it be the cause of their downfall?"

Lord Changping lamented: "The abundant lands of Chu provides its people with sea salt, bronze, leather, abalone, bamboo, gold, gemstones, rhinoceros, fruits and cloth. The country is big and the population is limited. There is excess land for farming and excess rivers for fishing. There is no lack of firewood, fresh water or seafood. One can earn a good living with little work

as the land is extremely fertile so every crop grows easily. Without any natural calamities, everyone is comfortable and relaxed so they indulge in merry making all day. During war, the soldiers have no will to fight. Their armies may be big but without genuine capabilities. Otherwise, they would have conquered the world long ago.”

Xiang Shaolong agreed with everything Lord Changping mentioned. Li Yuan is indeed a flamboyant character but he is hard-working too. He took the chance to ask about Zhao whom he is the most familiar with. When he was masquerading as Dong Horse Fanatic, he had used the analogy of Northern Horses and Southern Horses to differentiate between Zhao and Chu.

For some reason, Lord Changping is in a great mood and started chatting: “Zhao has a big territory too but most of the land is mountainous. The northern part is near Ling Hu where the people are strong and fierce. Smaller kingdoms like Ding Xiang, Yun Zhong and Wu Yuan are all conquered by Rongdi. The people are good hunters but are weak at farming and business. Regarding the areas near Yuanjing such as Han Xin, Tai Yuan and Shang Dang, there are all occupied by the descendents of many ex-ministers and officials. They spend all their time scheming against one another and seek fame for themselves, leading an extravagant life. For example, the concubines of the Zhao King numbered more than a hundred and they are all dressed in expensive clothes. The aristocrats indulge in wine, meat and women. They may produce the best soldiers on land but they are not able to utilise talented men. In fact, they are jealous of talent; otherwise, Zhao Gua will not replace Lian Po and directly resulted in the loss of the Battle of Changping.”

Xiang Shaolong did not expect Lord Changping to have such insight and his

opinion of him improved. He praised: “These words described the essence of Zhao. What about the other states?”

After being praised by Xiang Shaolong, Lord Changping is even more spirited: “Yan is situated in the north east and it will mostly made up of poor mountain folks. Only the capital looks decent. We can disregard them. Han is in dire straits and most of the population live in the hills, making it hard to grow crops. If not for Zhao and Wei supporting them, we would have conquered Han a long time ago.”

Xiang Shaolong has yet to visit Yan and Han so he does not know the details. But remembering the incident when Han Fei came to Daliang to borrow grain, he was sure that Lord Changping is telling the truth.

Lord Changping continued: “Wei has always been our arch enemy. Once, that year, General Wu Qi fortified themselves west of the river and we lost incalculable battles there. They allied themselves with everyone and limited our eastern expansion plans. From the border to their capital Daliang, the distance is over ten thousand miles and protected by three hundred thousand soldiers. Fortunately, Wei has grown arrogant and incurred the wrath of Handan City and the people of Zhao, inciting widespread anger against them, resulting in the loss of the Battle of Guiling. Even their top general Pang Juan was captured by the enemy. Since that mistake, Wei has declined over the years, resulting in their present circumstances.”

Xiang Shaolong remembered the sayings of Zhao: The people of Wei cannot be trusted. That year, King Anli of Wei sent men into Zhao to attack him while disguised as horse thieves. Wei deserves the retribution of being annihilated

in the future.

He nodded: "Lord has analyzed every state in the east except for Qi."

Lord Changping thought for some time and mysteriously asked: "Does Shaolong know what is the favourite pastime of Qi people besides making empty talk?"

Xiang Shaolong responded: "How will I know? Tell me quick!"

Lord Changping laughed: "I may have been promoted to be the Left Premier but lack the bearing so everyone is treating me like a normal friend. Ha! But I like it this way."

Xiang Shaolong knows that he is easy to get along and broke out into a wide grin.

Lord Changping divulged: "Currently, the most popular trade in Linzi is loan sharking. The richest loan shark is a shady merchant named Zhong Sunlong. He is even richer than Lu Buwei in the past. I don't think anyone can match his wealth. From this, you can tell how shallow the people of Qi are. The rich spent all their time in singing, dancing, making music or cock-fighting, dog racing. The poor are generally homeless and live from hand to mouth, making up a large portion of the population. Otherwise, based on their seafood trade, salt resources as well as their capable business strategies, how come they were nearly conquered by Yan? If not for the rise of Tian Dan, Qi will be in trouble."

Xiang Shaolong sincerely professed; “This is called: Talking to a wise man is better than ten years of reading. It is a nice coincidence that we have promoted a talented man like you to be the Left Premier.”

Lord Changping burst out laughing: “Shaolong need not tease me. I don’t know how you did it but sister has been convinced to marry Yang Duanhe instead of Guan Zhongxie. Even if you land a few punches on me, I would accept it gladly.”

Xiang Shaolong finally understood the reason for his joyfulness. He was about to say something when chaos broke out. On the roadside, everyone was trying to run away from a commotion. It turns out that there are two groups of swordsmen engaged in a fight.

Lord Changping bellowed: “Surround them!”

The Eighteen Guardians and Lord Changping’s personal escorts hurriedly got down their horses and advanced forward.

The two groups of swordsmen have a huge gap in their strength. One group has thirty odd men while the other group only has five men. What was surprising is that the winning group was the group of five men.

Their might comes from one of the swordsmen whose skill is alarmingly high.

This man is around twenty five years old and is tall and handsome. When he moves, his footwork is like the wind and his attacks are ruthless. Every time he strikes, either an opposing weapon will be struck away or an injury will be

inflicted. There is no way to resist his attacks. Even the larger group of swordsmen were heavily defeated and were trying to run for their lives.

But the group of five swordsmen refused to let them off and were hot behind their heels.

However, they showed mercy in their attacks. No one was killed and only injuries were sustained, causing many fighters to fall down and being unable to climb back up.

As they fought along the street, a line of injured men can be seen as they were struck down.

When Jing Shan and the others arrived in front of them, the five swordsmen angrily sheathe their swords. Although they were confronted by official soldiers, the five men remained defiant.

From the other group of men, there were only several of them left standing. Clustered in a group, their eyes are flaming with hatred as they stared hard at the five swordsmen.

Xiang Shaolong and Lord Changping exchanged a glance. Both of them were aghast at what they saw.

Noticing the uniform colour of the larger group, they can be identified as family warriors of Premier Mentor. Who are the five swordsmen who have the audacity to attack the subordinates of the Premier Mentor?

Assessing the expert swordsman, Lord Changping coldly breathed: “This man’s sword skill is almost as good as Guan Zhongxie’s.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded once and brought his horse forward, barking: “How dare you people fight on the streets? Is there no regard for the law? Report your names!”

The handsome expert swordsman stood as erect as an immovable mountain and had an imposing aura. He bowed slightly towards Xiang Shaolong, showing his disregard for him. Acting as if nothing has happened, he simply replied: “I am Han Jie from the Inner Custodian Residence. Using their status as Premier Mentor’s followers, these men tried to force the restaurant singer to drink wine with them. I could not take it lying down so I take it upon myself to teach them a lesson.”

Jing Shan and the rest could not bear with his arrogance and wanted to force him to kneel down but after hearing that he is with Lao Ai, they hurriedly swallowed their words.

Lord Changping came up to Xiang Shaolong’s side and whispered: “Han Jie is from Han and Lao Ai got to know him when he was in Han. He is the number one swordsman of Han and it seems like he deserved this reputation.”

Xiang Shaolong recalled that Xiao Pan did mention his name before. The other man is Ling Qi who is Lao Ai’s advisor. Zhu Ji had wanted to promote both of them.

A spokesperson came out from the group of men belonging to the Premier

Mentor's Residence. His eyes glowing with poisonous anger; he did not even paid his respects and proudly denied: "Official Xiang and Left Premier, please do not listen to one side of the story. Han Jie is lying. We brothers are just drinking and having fun but these men from the Inner Custodian Residence tried to interfere with our private affairs. We will report this matter to Official Guan and let him judge for us."

Han Jie coldly snorted: "Losers! What audacity! Let's see what you've got!"

He bowed slightly again to Xiang Shaolong and Lord Changping before turning around to leave.

Like a bunch of sore losers, the other group proceeded to assist their injured comrades and left with their heads lowered and their fighting spirit gone.

The Guardians and the escorts glanced at one another by the side as neither Xiang Shaolong nor Lord Changping has issued any order.

For the first time, Xiang Shaolong has tasted the arrogance and defiant attitude of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai's family warriors. He was powerless though, and can only wait patiently for the day of the Black Dragon sighting.

On the other hand, he was secretly happy. Now, Lu Buwei and Lao Ai's disagreement has escalated to a level of irreconcilability. Finally, he can enjoy some days of peace!

Chapter 04

Undercover Agents

The moon is big and round tonight. Together with his wives, Xiang Shaolong went to the garden to enjoy viewing the moon. Jing Shan and the others set up a campfire and began barbequing good food. They felt like they are in the wilderness.

Xiang Bao'er has already learnt how to walk. His steps are not steady and whenever he falls, everyone is tickled and cheered for him, adding to the lively atmosphere.

Shan Lan, Teng Yi and their son were present too and the two kids are having a good time.

Sitting in a pavilion, Teng Yi and Xiang Shaolong watched the kids playing and were filled with joy and satisfaction. At the same time, they realised that their peaceful gathering was the result of their hard work. It is the same in the past, the same in the present and will also be the same in the future.

Moved, Teng Yi remarked: "Another two nights later will be the duel between you and Guan Zhongxie. That fellow hasn't left his house at all and naturally did not show his face around Drunken Wind Brothel. You can say that he is doing his best to prepare for the fight."

Xiang Shaolong thought of Han Jie and asked: "Second Brother is a Han native

and has participated in the military before. Have you heard of this man named Han Jie?”

Teng Yi’s eyes flashed with surprise: “How did Third Brother know of such a person?”

Xiang Shaolong told him what happened today. His expression turning serious, Teng Yi explained: “Today, in terms of swordsmanship, there is no one better than Ji Xia (place in Qi) Sword Saint, Mister Wang You (Forget Worries) Grandmaster Cao Quidao. Legend says that his sword skills has reached a godly level and can win without fighting. One of the main reasons Mister Zou is going back to Qi is to see him. Shan Rou is his closed door disciple.”

Xiang Shaolong had heard from Zhao Zhi about this legendary man and was curious: “What is his relationship with Han Jie? Is Han Jie also his disciple? Does that make him Shan Rou’s martial brother?”

Teng Yi revealed: “Cao Quidao may have set up a school in Ji Xia but he is extremely strict when accepting disciples. As a result, his students do not exceed a hundred. He once told the King of Qi that among his disciples; only three of them learnt the essence of his skills. Han Jie is one of them and from this; we can conclude that this man is not easy to deal with.”

Recalling Han Jie’s snobbish attitude and marvellous sword skill, he enquired: “How old is Cao Quidao now?”

Teng Yi responded: “It is rumoured that he does Qi (energy) meditation so he

looks much younger than his real age. By the time he becomes famous, I am just a child. By calculating this way, he should be at least sixty years old.”

Thinking about the number one swordsman in wuxia novels, Xiang Shaolong’s interest is piqued: “How I wish to visit him someday; but Tian Dan will not welcome me.”

Teng Yi was humoured: “Seems like you are more interested in Cao Quidao than Han Jie. Cao Quidao is not concerned about the character of his disciples, only their martial arts potential. In Han, Han Jie is a tyrant who terrorizes the streets and kills anyone he fancies just because he is a member of the royal family. Like his buddy Lao Ai, he is a serial rapist too and that is probably why they can click so well. Now that he has come to Qin to depend on Lao Ai, it is likely that he has run out of options and has to leave Han to escape punishment.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “The more evil expert swordsmen there are, my Hundred Battle Sabre will be less lonely. Second Brother, your hands must be itching too.”

Teng Yi laughed: “Even if you do not get rid of Guan Zhongxie, these two men will fight it out sooner or later. Guan Zhongxie and Lian Jin’s master is Zhao Jianzhai. He once challenged Cao Quidao and lost his little finger in the duel. Since then, both schools are arch enemies.”

Xiang Shaolong joked: “Why did he name himself Zhao Jianzhai (abstaining from using the sword)? Isn’t it a name that provokes comments?”

Talented Lady Ji's voice sang out: "He is not the first one to use Abstain in his name. Hubby must not underestimate him. After Cao Quidao, he is considered the next best swordsman under the sky. Otherwise, he would not have produced a disciple like Guan Zhongxie."

Xiang Shaolong joked: "There is also someone named Lian Wenzhuo (Drinking mosquito) who has just come to Xianyang City looking for trouble."

Ji Yanran came up to the back of the two men and leaned on Xiang Shaolong's back. Looking up at the bright moon, she softly said: "I am the one whose hands are really itchy. Ever since I married you, you fought all my fights for me. It is so unfair."

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi exchanged a look upon hearing her words. Ji Yanran imagined: "Two nights later and it will be a three way clash between Lu Buwei, Lao Ai and our hubby. The people of Qin values courage and whoever is the winner shall benefit tremendously. At least this is what the common folks will perceive."

Teng Yi had an inspiration: "It may not be likely but will Lu Buwei take the risk to eliminate everyone who is opposing him? With Meng Ao holding the military seal, they can hold the Crown Prince and Empress hostage. It may cause chaos but it is still a possibility."

Xiang Shaolong frowned hard and thought for a while, commenting: "Unless they have Wang Ci's support, otherwise, Lu Buwei will not dare to do it alone. Since the Shang Yang reforms, no one is allowed to have more family warriors than the Imperial Army. As long as the Palace Guards and Imperial

Cavalry work hand in hand, Lu Buwei dare not try any tricks. But it is better to play safe. Tomorrow, I will speak to Lord Changping and Wang Ci just in case.”

Ji Yanran insisted: “Hubby must let us come to the banquet too and see how you fight!”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “How would I dare to leave you behind?”

He sighed: “How I wish to make a trip to Qi. I can pay a visit to Shan Rou and can also pit my skills against the best under the sky.”

Teng Yi advised: “You can think all you like but if you really leave Qin, Lu Buwei will surely know. He may even guess that you are going to Qi to assassinate Tian Dan. Qi will be waiting for you with all sorts of traps and ambushes!”

Xiang Shaolong knows that he is not joking and shook his head with a smile.

Ji Yanran suddenly recalled: “Lady Qingxiu is here in Qin!”

For a while, Xiang Shaolong had no recollection of her and stared at Ji Yanran with a puzzled expression.

Teng Yi is even more perplexed and asked: “Who is Lady Qingxiu?”

Ji Yanran explained: “Lady Qingxiu is Chu’s Great General Dou Jie’s wife. As Dou Jie wanted to marry Chen Suning as a concubine, she left in anger and

even swore to commit suicide if Dou Jie steps into her residence. Do you remember now?”

Xiang Shaolong was finally enlightened. Lady Qingxiu is Lady Hua Yang’s niece. That year, Lady Hua Yang had wanted him to pass something to her but he had failed in his mission.

Teng Yi pondered: “What is she doing here?”

Ji Yanran answered: “It is Li Yanyan who sent her here, hoping to use her close relationship with Lady Hua Yang to resolve the issue over Premier Xu’s assassination. At the same time, she can bring Chu’s Princess home.”

Teng Yi wondered: “Times have changed. Does Lady Hua Yang still have a strong influence over the Qin court?”

Stifling her laughter, Ji Yanran shot Xiang Shaolong a look and smiled: “How can there be no influence? Don’t forget that our Grand Tutor Qin is Lady Hua Yang’s confidante and she can definitely influence our Commander Xiang. Lady Qingxiu is now staying at Sister Qin’s residence. Just now, Sister Qin sent someone to invite her Grand Tutor Xiang to see Lady Qingxiu tomorrow at her place! Hubby, you must not decline!”

Xiang Shaolong was annoyed: “Didn’t your Sister Qin tell her that I have tried my best? Crown Prince will not attack Chu.”

Teng Yi laughed: “Why are all the names coming up? Your Grand Tutor Qin; your Sister Qin? What is going on?”

Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran looked at each other and burst out laughing too.

Before Ji Yanran took her leave, she reminded: “I am not paying any more attention to both of you. If you dare, go ahead and disregard Sister Qin’s invitation!”

The next morning, Xiang Shaolong attended morning court.

As usual, Zhu Ji is present and there is nothing abnormal about her. She must have gotten pregnant recently and with the clothes covering up her figure, she is not afraid of being exposed over the next few months.

The officials are busy discussing and analyzing different issues related to the Zhengguo Canal, such as the finances, manpower deployment and the relocation of the affected residents.

Xiang Shaolong had no idea what they were talking about and was completely bewildered. Naturally, he remained silent throughout.

After he endured the entire session, court finally ended and he was dragged to one side by Wang Ci and Wang He. Wang Ci began: “The timing is perfect. After the mourning deadline tomorrow, Xiang Shaolong can bring Little Jun to the Lu Residence and pay your respects to Mister and Missus Lu. You can discuss with them the details regarding the dowry and the wedding ceremonies.”

Wang He shuddered: “It is really too coincidental. Lu Gong’s mourning period

ended exactly on Lu Buwei's birthday."

Xiang Shaolong can feel his own goose pimples rising too.

Wang Ci questioned: "Lord Changping told me that both of you encountered a street brawl between men from the Premier Mentor residence and the Inner Custodian residence. Is it true?"

Xiang Shaolong nodded: "Both groups of men regard us as nothing. How I wish I can slaughter them on the spot."

Wang He swore: "No matter what, we must grab the Imperial Infantry Commander post back to our side. But it won't be easy though."

Wang Ci frowned: "We can talk about this later. Has Shaolong sent out the letter?"

Xiang Shaolong affirmed: "I already sent it out to Chu yesterday."

Wang He cursed: "Lao Ai is now recruiting men and buying horses. He has also sent head hunters to the eastern states to recruit top swordsmen. With the Empress backing him, we do not dare to interfere. This fake eunuch is even more irritating than Lu Buwei. Recently, in order to expand his residence, he forcefully took over the surrounding parcels of land. So infuriating!"

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "The Crown Prince needs the support of Empress so we all have to bear with it for the time being."

He happened to see Li Si gesturing to him from afar that Xiao Pan wants to see him. After telling the two men about Teng Yi's guess that Lu Buwei may create some trouble during his birthday celebration, he thanked them and hurriedly went to see Xian Pan.

Besides Xiao Pan, Lord Changping is in the Imperial study too. After Xiang Shaolong and Li Si paid their respects and got seated, Xiao Pan cheerfully started: "I want to introduce someone to you."

All the three men were stunned.

Xiao Pan sent his order and someone came into the study almost immediately. He paid his respects to Xiao Pan.

After he stood up again, Xiang Shaolong took a closer look at him. This man is around forty years old with a long body and a thick beard. He looks intelligent and scholarly.

Xiao Pan politely invited: "Mister, please have a seat."

While everyone is still kept in the dark, Xiao Pan began introducing everyone and explained: "This is the famous advisor Mister Mao Jiao from Qi, Jia Xia. Lao Ai sent someone to invite him to Xianyang City. I shall let Mister Mao explain to you the reason why he came all the way here."

Mao Jiao plainly smiled: "I came here without any ill intentions. I wanted to check out the might of Qin personally and want to know why the Eastern States are so fearful of it."

Li Si grew excited: “What does Mister think?”

Mao Jiao coldly state: “The Crown Prince and I chatted for half a day. Our common conclusion is this: Without eliminating Lu Buwei and Lao Ai, Qin can never unite the World.”

Xiao Pan laughed: “I had wanted to give Mister an official post but after thinking further, I thought that it would be better if Mister can work under Lao Ai and be my spy. I have to thank Mister for agreeing so readily.”

Xiang Shaolong is full of praise. At Lu Buwei’s side, he has Tu Xian spying for him. If they have this cunning and intelligent Mao Jiao undercover too, Lao Ai will be doomed for sure.

At the same time, he can see that Xiao Pan is maturing as the days go by. Now, he knows how to use spies to his advantage.

Li Si and Lord Changping slapped their armrests in praise.

After discussing their plans and future communication methods, Mao Jiao left.

Xiang Shaolong remembered Meng Wu and Meng Tian’s issue and brought it up, swearing their loyalty to the Crown Prince.

Since young, Xiao Pan has been sparring with them and knows them well. With Xiang Shaolong’s guarantee, he fully trusts them. But after thinking for some time, he still cannot come up with suitable posts for them.

Xiang Shaolong had a realization: “When I kill Guan Zhongxie tomorrow night, the Imperial Infantry Commander post will be vacant. No matter whom we propose, Lu Buwei will object and even Lao Ai would not want all three armies to fall under our jurisdiction. Only by choosing Meng Wu or Meng Tian will there be no objection. The other brother can follow his father to battle and keep us informed of any updates. This way, we are invincible.”

This time, it is Xiao Pan’s turn to slap the armrest in praise. To Lord Changping, he ordered: “Left Premier, try to arrange the two brothers to see me. Let me encourage them personally and assure their conviction.”

Just as he was leaving the palace, Xiang Shaolong recalled Lady Qingxiu’s appointment and quickly rushed towards Qin Residence.

Qin Qing and Lady Qingxiu were chatting in the hall. Seeing that he appeared as summoned, Qin Qing joyfully introduced them to each other.

Lady Qingxiu is wearing Xiang Shaolong’s favourite Chu dress with wide sleeves and intricate embroidery. The most attractive ornament is her jewelled belt that is shimmering with numerous precious gemstones.

It may be due to Xiang Shaolong abrupt appearance that Lady Qingxiu did not have her veil on, letting Xiang Shaolong view her fine features.

Probably due to her marital woes, she looks slightly unhealthy. However, it did not affect her graceful disposition which separates her from other women.

Her eyes are shining with intelligence and self-respect, making others respects her too.

After he got seated, using her melodious voice, Lady Qingxiu uttered some polite words of courtesy before gratefully thanking: “Grand Tutor Qin has told me everything. Luckily, we have Official Xiang helping us to put in a good word in front of Crown Prince and prevented a war between Qin and Chu. On behalf of my country, I sincere express my thanks to Official Xiang for treasuring our friendship.”

Xiang Shaolong was feeling funny inside. He thought that since this is the case, why did you still want to see me? Of course he put on a normal expression.

Lady Qingxiu plainly asked: “In actual fact, we have met before, right?”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that this is a top secret. Is it Li Yanyan or Li Yuan who told her this big secret? He was shocked: “What makes Lady say this?”

As unassuming and unmoved as ever, Lady Qingxiu replied: “Besides expressing my thanks personally, I asked to see Official Xiang because I have to give you two presents. They are from Empress Dowager Li Yanyan and Lady Xiu’er (Guo Xiu’er). I heard from Grand Tutor Qin that you came back from Shouchun recently. Now that I have seen you personally, I can recognize you.”

Feeling extremely awkward, Xiang Shaolong stole a peep at Qin Qing. Fortunately, she only batted an eye at him and did not blame him for flirting

with other women. Composed, he admitted: "Since Lady has recognised me, how can I deny any further. Hei! Lady has sharp observation skills. That day, you did not even look at me in the eye but yet you still manage to recognize me."

Lady Qingxiu smiled slightly and gestured to her attendant. Two exquisite boxes were presented and she explained: "Before I left, Empress Dowager summoned me to the palace and specially instructed that no one else must know about this. I hope Official Xiang understands."

Due to Li Yanyan and Guo Xiu'er special status, they can only conceal their feelings for him deep inside their hearts, making him feel even more melancholic. Discovering that the two girls in front of him are scrutinizing his reaction, he frantically changed the topic: "How is Chancellor Li doing?"

Lady Qingxiu seems to be unwilling to talk about Li Yuan. She simply brushed off: "He is well. If you have the time, feel free to visit him in Shouchun. He will treat you with utmost sincerity."

Xiang Shaolong cannot find any more conversation topics with this nonchalant and icy beauty. He tried ending the interview: "When is Lady leaving for Chu?"

Lady Qingxiu replied: "After meeting Empress Zhu Ji tonight, I will leave for Chu tomorrow. I am not used to the climate here. I know that Official Xiang has important things to see to and will not hold you back any longer."

Xiang Shaolong is won over by her diplomacy and tact. After winking secretly at Qin Qing, he turned around and left.

Chapter 05

The Day before the Fight

Carrying the two boxes, Xiang Shaolong returned to the Command Centre. In his own room, he opened them up and discovered two well-embroidered gowns inside. His heart is filled with warmth.

In this male dominant society, it is not easy for woman to achieve true happiness. Guo Xiu'er and Li Yanyan are two good examples. Despite their regal status, they cannot pursue what their hearts truly desire.

Their fates are still in the hands of men.

Filled with immeasurable emotions, he was distracted by an attendant sent by Teng Yi to summon him.

Xiang Shaolong composed himself and went to the main hall.

Teng Yi reported: "Another conflict has occurred. Some men from the Weinan Martial Arts School are shipping some weapons into the City and were stopped at the gates by the guards. A dispute broke out and the head guard was injured. The men were detained by Guan Zhongxie but Lao Ai showed up personally and Guan Zhongxie had to release the men. Seems like Lu Buwei is also tolerating Lao Ai's antics."

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "I want to see how far he can tolerate. Right! Help me

inform Little Jun that his marriage to Lu Dan'er shouldn't be much of an issue. After my duel, we can officially seek her hand in marriage."

Teng Yi was overjoyed and hurriedly sent someone to inform Jing Jun.

Xiang Shaolong advised: "With Lu Dan'er as his wife, he should be satisfied. Second Brother must watch him carefully and not let him visit the brothels anymore. Presently, Xianyang City is a dangerous place with Lu Buwei and Lao Ai fighting it out. We better not get involved."

Teng Yi bitterly laughed: "I have spoken to him countless times but this kid loves to flirt, socialize and entertain. If you really want him to stay in the house, we have to resort to breaking both his legs."

Xiang Shaolong sighed.

Jing Jun will get into trouble later but as long as he is not injured or killed, Xiang Shaolong can still bear with him. He nodded: "Since this is the case, let's get more men to escort him. If he runs into a fight, at least he is not outnumbered."

Teng Yi reasoned: "If he becomes the son-in-law of the Lu family, his status will be greatly elevated. Lu Gong has tremendous influence over many civil officials and military leaders. Everyone will have to give him face. After his marriage, anyone would have to think twice before provoking him."

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that if Lu Gong is still alive, he may oppose this marriage as Jing Jun is not a Qin native.

Teng Yi continued: “As long as Jing Jun doesn’t step into Drunken Wind Brothel, everything should be fine. Currently, Lao Ai and Lu Buwei are indirectly using Drunken Wind Brothel as their contending ground. Poor Wu Fu.”

Xiang Shaolong thought of the complicated relationship between Dan Meimei and Lao Ai.

After Qin Qing and Ji Yanran, Dan Meimei is next in terms of beauty. She is prettier than Ying Ying, Lu Dan’er, Wu Tingfang and Zhao Zhi. Even if Lu Buwei and Lao Ai are absent, other men will try their best to secure her for their private pleasure.

Somehow, he did not have the least bit of affection for her. It may be due to his experience with Zhao Ya, Lady Pingyuan and Empress Jing that he has a fear of beauties who lie with their eyes wide open.

Teng Yi slapped his forehead: “I nearly forgot to tell you something. Housekeeper Tu wanted to meet you at the old place at the ‘jia’ hour. I am sure he has something important to tell you.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded: “I think Lu Buwei is really going to rebel.”

Two hours later, Xiang Shaolong and Tu Xian met up again at their secret spot. Tu Xian’s hair is turning grey since they met two months ago. He must have been working under high amounts of stress.

After both men got seated, Tu Xian raised his thumb: “Shaolong is a genius to

make Meng Ao and Lu Buwei suffer a tragic loss. Meng Ao is especially embarrassed but Lu Buwei dare not blame him. With this defeat, their plans are in disarray.”

Xiang Shaolong knew that his guess is correct. Lu Buwei is a temperamental person and patience is not one of his virtues. He would not stand by and watch Xiao Pan grow in power each day. He joked: “Is he ready to rebel?”

Tu Xian coldly smiled: “He is not capable of rebelling yet but he knows how to wrest power from others. Originally, he has two parts (Meng Ao & Wang Ci) of the military supporting him. With your death, Lao Ai the fake eunuch can only do so much and Wang Jian cum An Gu are too far away to be of assistance. But he just cannot get rid of you and now, Wang Ci has deflected to your side. Last night, he blew his top and cursed you and Wang Ci nonstop in front of Guan Zhongxie and Meng Ao. This man is without a conscience and has never reflected on all the horrendous crimes that he has committed.”

Xiang Shaolong thought of something and questioned: “Did Wang Ci tell Lu Buwei about the blood test Lu Gong did on Crown Prince? The one that proved Crown Prince is not related to Lu Buwei?”

This is the first time Tu Xian heard about the blood test. After hearing the details, his face changed colour: “Shaolong, you are mad. Even I dare not gamble that Crown Prince is the son of Lu Buwei or not. If he is indeed Lu Buwei’s son, wouldn’t all the hard work go down the drain?”

Of course Xiang Shaolong will not tell him the truth. He sighed: “If I appear

hesitant, Lu Gong and the rest will begin to suspect that Crown Prince is that traitor's bastard child, right? I am also glad we placed a right bet this time."

Still fearful, Tu Xian took some time to compose himself before commenting: "I am sure Wang Ci did not tell Lu Buwei about this matter. Every time he got into trouble, he will curse Zhu Ji. He hates Zhu Ji for not telling Crown Prince the truth about him being his real father. It is really strange. With Lu Buwei's intelligence, how can he make such a mistake? When he gave Zhu Ji away, he had the intention to make his own son the King of Qin... How can there be a mistake? In the past, he did tell me once that the Crown Prince is his own flesh and blood."

Xiang Shaolong cannot help but asked: "But Zhu Ji told me personally that even she cannot be sure whether the Crown Prince is Lu Buwei's son or King Zhuangxiang's son."

Tu Xian lamented: "Even if she knew, this ambitious woman will not tell the truth. If the Crown Prince is still close to her, she will not rely on Lao Ai. At the end of the day, it is just a fight for power."

Xiang Shaolong was shaken as he had never thought of Zhu Ji this way.

If someone else said these words, he would not pay any attention but Tu Xian knew her all the way back when she is still a courtesan in Lu Buwei's residence.

The 'Ji' is Zhu Ji refers to her profession, which is courtesan.

When King Zhuangxiang is in power, she behaved herself well, knowing that she can enjoy wealth and power. Moreover, her own son is the future King of Qin so she has nothing more to ask for.

When Lu Buwei murdered King Zhuangxiang, she saw through him and did not want to depend on him alone. She tried to win Xiang Shaolong to her side but discovered that he is loyal to Xiao Pan and the late King so she got together with Lao Ai. First, she can satisfy her sexual needs and second, she can cultivate her authority through him.

Recently, she found out that her son is really holding different views so she hardened her heart and submitted wholeheartedly to Lao Ai and even become pregnant for him. Ultimately, she refuses to give up her authority.

After analyzing things from this angle, Xiang Shaolong can feel his burden lightening and his guilt towards Zhu Ji lessened greatly.

His mood improving, he enquired: “What does Lu Buwei plan to do now?”

Tu Xian revealed: “As long as you are around, Lu Buwei dare not let his guard down. With Wang Ci supporting you and Crown Prince, Meng Ao does not have the confidence to do anything too. If there comes a day when both Wang Ci and Meng Ao are out at war, we should be extra careful. Meng Ao possesses the military seal and can come back anytime. With Lu Buwei’s eight thousand family warriors, they can find any excuse and kill whoever that opposes them. I think Shaolong knows this better than me.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded with a smile.

Tu Xian continued; “At the present moment, Lu Buwei and Meng Ao are pinning all their hopes on the duel tomorrow night. If Guan Zhongxie manages to win, you will be killed for sure. Shaolong must think twice before you act.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed loudly: “The bigger the hopes, the bigger the disappointment.”

Still worried for him, Tu Xian sighed: “Excuse me for being frank. For the past six months, Guan Zhongxie has been practising nonstop. He is at his peak regardless of sword skills or fitness. Shaolong need not gamble your life with him. The impact of this duel is bigger than you imagine.”

Xiang Shaolong is aware of his true concern for him. Grabbing his shoulders, he promised: “Please have confidence in me. You will enjoy a good show tomorrow.”

He took the chance to ask: “How is Third Mistress doing?”

Tu Xian sighed: “Within the Premier Mentor Residence, she is the only person I care for. She treats me better than the others. Unfortunately, she is the daughter of that traitor. These few days, she has been worrying a lot. I can see that she prefers Guan Zhongxie over you. Initially, I thought that she had really wanted both of you to fight again but recently, I learnt that it is Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie’s conspiracy. During the hunting fair, you may seemed to have gain the upper hand but privately, Guan Zhongxie insisted that he did not wish to kill you so he let you off that night. Otherwise, you would have lost for sure. Hei! That is why I have tried many times to persuade you not to fight if you can help it.”

Xiang Shaolong whispered: “Honestly speaking, that day, I did not show my true prowess so Guan Zhongxie managed to survive. Tomorrow, I will give it my best shot.”

Tu Xian was astonished; “Really?”

To comfort him, Xiang Shaolong sprouted nonsense: “Of course! Otherwise, why did I only defend and not attack during the second round?”

Tu Xian eyed him suspiciously before adding: “Lu Buwei and Lao Ai are in an arms race now. Both of them are recruiting talented men all over the states to be added to their army of family warriors. Besides absorbing the Weinan Martial Arts School, Lao Ai managed to recruit this man named Han Jie. This man is rumoured to have learnt the essence of Ji Xia Sword Saint Cao Quidao’s sword skills and even Guan Zhongxie considers him to be a significant threat. Shaolong must be careful when dealing with this man. He is a top assassin and several high ranking officials of Qi have fallen under his sword.”

Xiang Shaolong has seen how Han Jie fights and admits that he is capable of contending with Guan Zhongxie.

Tu Xian revealed: “Among Lu Buwei’s latest recruits, the most outstanding ones are Xu Shang, Lian Jiao and Zhao Pu. Xu Shang is the best swordsman among them and is now Guan Zhongxie’s sparring partner. His skill is not far from Guan Zhongxie’s level, only losing to him in terms of arm strength. However, his sword skill is very creative and agile which covers up this weakness. Lu Buwei has the intention to make him the Assistant Imperial

Infantry Commander.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “Lu Buwei can plan all he wants but let’s see if they can come into fruit. Right! Any news from Xiao Yuetan?”

Tu Xian cheerfully divulged: “A talent is a talent wherever he goes. Yuetan is now named Biantan and is recognized for his abilities. At present, he is serving the Chancellor of Han. I am happy for him.”

After further discussion, they parted.

That night, Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and Jing Jun the three brothers are having dinner at the Command Centre. Knowing that his marriage is secured, Jing Jun is especially happy and proud.

Xiang Shaolong took this chance to advise: “If there is nothing important, do not go to Drunken Wind Brothel. Lu Buwei and Lao Ai are fighting over Dan Meimei and we should not get involved in their fight.”

Jing Jun was stunned and awkwardly confessed: “Coincidentally, Lord Changwen has an appointment with me to go there for drinks tonight. Yang Duanhe and Bai Chong will be accompanying us. Ai! I will tolerate everything and I guarantee I will not get into trouble.”

Teng Yi scolded: “You can refrain from provoking others but won’t others provoke you? Don’t forget that you defeated Zhou Zihen during the hunting fair. Because of this, every follower of Lu Buwei bore grudges against you and will do their best to make things difficult for you. With Guoxin and the rest

also against you and with Lao Ai supporting them, you must understand that you are still alive because of your Assistant Imperial Cavalry Commander Post. Otherwise, you would have been mincemeat long ago. Up till now you still have no idea how foolish you are.”

Jing Jun dare not speak back to Teng Yi and looked pleadingly at Xiang Shaolong.

Seeing that he is still young and immature, Xiang Shaolong’s heart softened. He suggested: “Since we are quite free, why don’t we all join in the fun and see what is really going on?”

Teng Yi was petrified: “Third Brother must not forget your duel tomorrow night. If you went out merry making tonight; will Yanran and the rest forgive you?”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “I want to intentionally let Guan Zhongxie know that I am not bothered by the duel tomorrow. This will make him complacent and think that he will win for sure. As long as we bring Little Jun back home early, there shouldn’t be any problem. Otherwise, I cannot get to sleep worrying about this br@t.”

Jing Jun was touched: “Third Brother treats me the best. No! Second Brother treats me well too.”

Following that, he jumped up and exclaimed: “I must look for Lord Changping. If all of us are going but we leave him out, he will hold it against me.”

Looking at Jing Jun sprinting away, both men can only smile bitterly.

After talking for some time, Xiang Shaolong sent someone to inform his wives that he will be back home late. Just as they were about to leave, Huan Yi showed up.

This young and capable general has tiredness written all over his face but looks more cheerful than before. It must be due to the fact that he can finally put his talents to good use.

Seeing the two men, Huan Yi kneeled down immediately.

Both men hurriedly helped him up.

Teng Yi was surprised: "Little Yi, why are you not busy training the new army? Did you travel throughout the night to Xianyang City?"

Huan Yi replied: "With Wang Ben managing them, there is nothing to worry about. It is my top priority to come back and cheer for Official Xiang's duel tomorrow. Ai! I spent many hours before finally convincing Wang Ben to stay behind. I came back with Left Premier's permission so I did not break any rules.'

Teng Yi laughed: "I see. I heard that there are many people like you who have come a long way from where they are in order to take part in the birthday celebration tomorrow."

Huan Yi informed: "On my way, I ran into Po Hu from Tunliu. His entourage is

amazing, with over five hundred family warriors and a large group of courtesans. But I do not like this man at all.”

Lord Changping’s voice sounded out: “I do not like this man too. Great minds do think alike.”

The three men are talking at the main gate. Turning around, they saw Lord Changping and Li Si coming towards them. The number of their armed escorts is three times larger than usual.

Huan Yi dared not be as friendly towards Lord Changping compared to Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi. He quickly paid his respects and kept quiet.

After the usual pleasantries, Li Si sighed: “Thinking about your duel tomorrow, the Crown Prince and I are not in the mood to work. Suddenly, Little Jun came to look for Lord Changping, saying that all of you are going to Drunken Wind Brothel to have a pre-celebration for tomorrow’s victory. I am bored to death so I thought I come along too.”

He whispered: “The Crown Prince is here too!”

Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and Huan Yi were blown away. Looking towards the group of riders, they finally spotted Xiao Pan between Jing Jun and Lord Changping. This future Qin Shi Huang has put on a fake moustache and dressed in a normal warrior clothes, nodding and smiling at them.

Before Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi can react, Huan Yi had already kneeled down and tried to kowtow. Lord Changping dragged him up and hissed:

“Crown Prince has strict orders that no one must pay respects to him. This is to hide his identity. Violators will be severely punished.”

Huan Yi frantically stood up.

Reining his horse, Xiao Pan laughed: “It is getting late. Let’s make a move.”

Xiang Shaolong and the rest quickly mounted their horses and accompanied Xiao Pan towards the lighted streets and Drunken Wind Brothel.

Only Xiang Shaolong dared to ride side by side Xiao Pan.

In a great mood, Xiao Pan joked: “Will Master blame me for fooling around despite being the Crown Prince?”

Not wanting to spoil his mood, Xiang Shaolong laughed: “Even if you are King, you should also find time to relax.”

Xiao Pan is only afraid of him. Since he has given the green light, he teased: “When I heard that Master is going merry making on the day before the duel, I have nothing but admiration for you. That is the sign of a true hero. Empress summoned me earlier and wanted me to stop this fight, saying that your chances of winning are not high. Hng! In this world, only I know that Master is invincible.”

Xiang Shaolong acknowledged that Xiao Pan has hero-worshipped himself since young. His invincible image has been deeply imprinted in his mind and nobody can alter this. Luckily, he created the Hundred Battle Sabre and the

Hundred Battle Sabre Play. Otherwise, he will be feeling very stressed now. He simply replied: “Looks like Crown... Hei... What should I call you instead? Otherwise, your identity may be leaked.”

Enthusiastically looking at the normal houses and passersby, Xiao Pan easily replied: “Call me Qin Shi! Qin is my country and Master mentioned that I will be the Qin Shi Huang who will unite the world. All right. Call me Qin Shi. This is such a nice name.”

While Xiang Shaolong was stunned at this development, Xiao Pan summoned Lord Changping and got him to notify everyone of his new name.

Turning back to him, Xiao Pan asked: “What did Master want to say?”

Xiang Shaolong suppressed the incredulous feeling he had upon hearing the two words: Qin Shi. He thought for a while and remembered his earlier question: “I wanted to ask if you will be going to Lu Buwei’s banquet tomorrow.”

Xiao Pan was puzzled: “Do you need to ask this question? How I wish tonight is tomorrow night! Empress will be there too. Nobody in Xianyang City will give this fight a miss. I heard that there are many people who are gambling on the results of the duel. Hng! According to Lord Changwen’s report, most people believe that Guan Zhongxie is well prepared and has a higher chance of winning but I know that the resulting victor will be Master.”

Xiang Shaolong was tickled, thinking that gambling is already so widespread now. Perhaps it is just a basic human nature to try their luck.

With the large signboard of Drunken Wind Brothel in sight, Xiao Pan became even more excited and updated: “The Po Hu fellow whom Huan Yi mentioned is Tunliu’s richest man. It is often said that he is the second richest man in Qin after your Wu Family. He specializes in salt and iron business and his business is very successful. This man is very ambitious and used to work with Lord Yangquan. Now, he is quite intimate with Du Bi. We must be careful of this man.”

Lord Changping rode forward and enquired: “Crown... Hei! No! Brother Qin, are we going to a quiet spot of our own or are we going to the main hall to participate in the rowdiness?”

Xiao Pan naturally replied: “Of course we are going to the main hall. I even wanted to see the four top beauties. I want to personally see how beautiful they are that so many men have fallen head over heels over them. ”

With these words, Xiang Shaolong and Lord Changping exchanged a look, thinking that there is no way to stay low profile tonight.

Chapter 06

Assembly of Talents

Drunken Wind Brothel is especially crowded tonight. At the front door, the line of carriages stretches for some distance and people need to queue to enter it.

After discussing with Xiao Pan, Xiang Shaolong decided to bring only the Eighteen Guardians and another eighteen of the best Palace Guards inside the brothel. This is to prevent others from seeing their true strength and guessing that something is amiss.

After passing through the high wall surrounding the brothel, this future Qin Shi Huang was elated at seeing the well lit main building, isolated halls and pavilions. He pointed everywhere excitedly and was in a great mood.

Incidentally, on the other side of a pavilion, there are courtesans and their clients lighting fireworks, making the night sky bright and beautiful. It was a scenic and lively atmosphere.

Brothel Owner Wu Fu is at the main door welcoming the guests. When he caught sight of Lord Changping and Xiang Shaolong's group, however occupied he is, he still excruciate himself from his position and went forward, welcoming: "Successful people don't bear small grudges. I may have been dishonest in the past but I don't have a choice too. Will Left Premier, Official Xiang and other officials please forgive me."

Xiang Shaolong can only swallow his grudge bitterly. Wu Fu has made such an honest and upfront confession; how can he continue to make things difficult for him?

Ten over maids came up to them and amidst their joyful laughter; they helped everyone take off their winter cloaks and presented hot towels for refreshing themselves. The service here is one of the best.

Since he is temporary free, Wu Fu paid his respects to everyone.

He is amazingly knowledgeable about the influential people of Qin. When he heard Li Si and Huan Yi's names, he bowed respectfully and even managed to bring up some related conversational topics.

When Xiang Shaolong introduced 'Qin Shi', Wu Fu was stunned and could not recollect such a person. But since this person can hang around Xiang Shaolong and Lord Changping plus the fact that everyone is very polite to him, he must be someone important too. Moreover, this person looks neither young nor old. With a square face and large ears, he may not be handsome but carries an air of dominance. When this person stares at himself, Wu Fu can feel the urge to kneel down and pay his respects. He dared not be rude and respectfully greeted: "Official Qin looks imposing and is a rare breed among men. In the future, you must treat me well."

It was a timely flatter. Xiao Pan initially did not have a good opinion of him but after hearing these praises, he laughed: "Brothel Owner Wu is too polite. Ha! I travelled a long way here to visit Drunken Wind Brothel and see the four beauties. Please make the necessary arrangements."

They were speaking at the reception area. As Xiang Shaolong is here with a big group and with the eighteen Guardians and eighteen palace guards fanning out in a bodyguard formation, they have occupied half of the reception area.

Other incoming guests noticed Xiang Shaolong, Lord Changping and other influential officials so they automatically took a detour around them. Only a group of sturdy warriors was irritated at Wu Fu's attention at Xiang Shaolong's group. They stopped where they are with an ugly expression on their faces.

The Guardians are quite sensible and stayed immobile. However, the palace guards are used to serving the Crown Prince and could not take it lying down. They stared back at the warriors with hostility.

Wu Fu heard Xiao Pan's request and his face changed colour. But Xiao Pan has an aura of dominance that makes it impossible for anyone to reject him. Wu Fu hurriedly replied: "This is a little challenging. Let me try my best to arrange for them to spend some time with you."

Jing Jun glanced once at the warriors and was overjoyed. Leaning towards Xiang Shaolong, he whispered: "Scarface Guoxin is here and so is Chang Jie. Ha! They must be tired of living. How dare they compete with the Crown Prince for Wu Fu's attention."

Xiang Shaolong turned around and recognized Guoxin first. Of course, he is the easiest to recognize because of the scars over his face and forehead. Guoxin is more well-built than the ordinary person and has an air of

seriousness. With one look, one can tell that he is not a common person. He may not be considered good looking but he reeks of manly charm.

Guoxin and the rest appeared to have recognized Xiang Shaolong too. They were surprised to see him but stared back at him without fear.

Xiao Pan can sense them staring at himself too. Turning around, he saw Guoxin and his fellow warriors staring arrogantly at him. He coldly hissed: "Who are these men?"

Lord Changping quickly and respectfully reported: "They are from Weinan Martial Arts School. The group there is headed by Head Instructors Guoxin and Chang Jie."

Wu Fu has never seen Lord Changping speaking at anyone so respectfully before. His eyes lit up with fear.

Xiao Pan is about to arrest them when Xiang Shaolong gently reminded: "We are here to have fun!"

Xiao Pan acknowledged his reminder and laughed: "Right! Right! Let's have fun tonight!"

Before he can take a step, someone at the door announced: "Tunliu Master Po is here!"

Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan and everyone stopped moving and turned around, looking towards the door.

Twelve imposing warriors dressed in a uniform warrior suit first paved the way and behind them is a middle aged man with a tall hat. He is taller than most individuals by a head and is almost as tall as Xiang Shaolong. With his wide and exquisite gown, he exudes an aristocratic aura.

His eyes are the most striking. After he scanned the entire area, he looks confident and assured.

He did not resemble a merchant at all but more like a scholar. He is slightly arrogant and could not be bothered with Chunhua and the maids who are attending to him.

Besides him are two warriors dressed in elaborate warrior suits. From one glance, one can tell that both are expert swordsmen.

Wu Fu was in a dilemma. Po Hu is a famous tycoon from eastern Qin. He did not know who to attend to. Moreover, Guoxin and his group are showing signs of impatience.

Xiang Shaolong can see his dilemma and smiled: "Brothel Owner Wu can attend to your guests. We can go upstairs on our own."

Under the sky, only Xiang Shaolong dares to say these words. If it was Lord Changping, he will never have the guts to tell Wu Fu to abandon the Crown Prince and serve other guests.

Wu Fu was extremely grateful and bowed as he retreated. Meanwhile, he gestured for another helper to lead Xiang Shaolong's group upstairs.

Xiang Shaolong and the rest walked towards the inner part of the main building. Just as they were about to climb the stairs, Guoxin stepped out and chased after them. He hollered: "Please hold your step!"

Xiao Pan's eyes flashed with a killing glint and halted. Xiang Shaolong patted him lightly, hinting to him to control his anger before turning around with the rest and faced Guoxin who is approaching them.

The bodyguards fanned out to prevent him from getting too close.

Away from them, Wu Fu is attending to Po Hu.

Guoxin greeted: "I hereby wishes Official Xiang a victorious fight tomorrow night."

Xiang Shaolong knows that he is just being polite before saying his true intention. He coldly questioned: "What can I do for you?"

Eyeing the guards in front of him, Guoxin's anger subsided before it shows on his face. He invited: "Everyone in our martial arts school admires your sword skills. If you are free, please make a trip to our school and give us some pointers."

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that this is as good as challenging him to a duel. He wonders if this is Lao Ai's idea or Weinan Martial Arts School founder Qiu Risheng's idea.

Lord Changping and the rest snorted coldly, expressing their displeasure.

Scarface Guoxin did not exhibit the least fear and did not frown the least bit. He stood there firmly, awaiting Xiang Shaolong's reply.

Xiang Shaolong simply smiled: "Your School has always been very concerned about my affairs. I have always wanted to see how good you are. Let's see! Over the next few days, when I happen to be in a bad mood, I will definitely make a trip to exchange pointers!"

Guoxin was incensed to hear Xiang Shaolong's merciless words. Just as his eyes shone with cold murderous energy, Xiao Pan clapped: "Well said! When that happens, Official Xiang must bring me along."

Guoxin stared at Xiao Pan with shock. Not knowing his real identity, he barked: "Who are you?"

JIANG!

The eighteen Palace Guards drew their swords simultaneously but only one sound is heard. These men protecting the Crown Prince are not only highly-skilled but well trained too.

One of the guards coldly ordered: "How are you be rude to Master. Kneel down at once!"

The martial arts school warriors saw that something is wrong and hurriedly dashed forward, protecting Guoxin. They understood that almost every person in Xiang Shaolong's group is not to be trifled with and for some time, there is a stalemate.

Po Hu and Wu Fu looked over in astonishment.

Xiang Shaolong laughed heartily: "Brother Qin, we need not waste our time with these clowns. Let's have fun instead."

Ignoring Guoxin and his warriors whose faces have completely darkened, he led Xiao Pan upstairs.

Concurrently, he was laughing inside. In a way, he has saved Guoxin's life. Otherwise, even if Lao Ai or Zhu Ji is here personally, Guoxin and his group will still be executed.

As they stepped into the wide hall on the second floor, it seems like everyone present has already known that Xiang Shaolong is here and the entire hall is very solemn. Everyone is looking at this man who will be duelling with Guan Zhongxie tomorrow night.

Xiao Pan is afraid to be recognized and walked behind the others. Teng Yi and Huan Yi walked in front of him, preventing others from taking a close look at him.

Yang Duanhe and Bai Chong are waiting for them already. Before they saw Xiao Pan, they welcomed: "Rare guest."

If it was anyone else who is about to fight a formidable opponent like Guan Zhongxie tomorrow, he will be at home practising instead of coming to a brothel.

Jing Jun rushed forward and whispered to them that the Crown Prince is here. He warned them not to kneel or pay respects. Both men have uncontrollable fear and shock written all over their faces. Lost, they fumbled on the spot.

Their table is situated on one side of the hall besides the window. There are ten seats altogether. Xiao Pan smilingly greeted the two generals and sat down with his back to the hall so as to prevent others from seeing his face.

Everyone got seated too.

Tonight is especially crowded and there are no empty seats. Moreover, no one anticipated Xiao Pan will come along too. The thirty six guards have to remain standing. Fortunately, the hall is quite spacious. As instructed by Wu Fu earlier, Chunhua and the other staff quickly set up another two tables by the side. After some disruption, the lively atmosphere resumed.

Maids dressed in beautiful costumes approached their table and begin filling up their wine cups.

After he ordered some dishes, Xiao Pan smiled: "Fellow brothers, please chat and joke as per normal."

Despite his words, nobody dared to even breathe loudly. It was slightly awkward.

Xiang Shaolong broke the ice by smiling: "General Yang and General Bai have been here for some time. Why didn't you get some girls to accompany you?"

Yang Duanhe gave a dry cough and replied with discomfort: "Before Official Xiang came up, everyone here was talking about the big fight tomorrow. There was a huge debate and we were so absorbed we forgot all about the girls."

Bai Chong lowered his head and dared not face Xiao Pan. He replied in a low voice: "When someone reported that you are at the reception area, there was an uproar. Some said that you are confident of victory while some said that you have no self... Hei... No self... Ai! I shall not say anymore. Anyway, no one dares to say anything now."

Teng Yi laughed: "No self respect?"

Bai Chong nodded embarrassedly.

Xiang Shaolong is scanning the hall and noticed several familiar figures. At one table are the expert swordsmen from Premier Mentor Residence. Except for Zhou Zihen and Lu Chan, the newcomers Xu Shang, Lian Jiao and Zhao Pu are all present. Amazingly, Tu Xian is accompanying them.

Xu Shang, Zhao Pu and Tu Xian saw Xiang Shaolong looking at them and gestured back with a smile. However, Zhou Zihen, Lu Chan the two old birds as well as Lian Jian's martial brother Lian Jiao are showing signs of displeasure.

They each have a lady companion but none of them are as top notched as the four beauties Dan Meimei, Yang Yu, Guiyan and Bailei.

Three tables away is a table belonging to Lao Ai's men. Except for the handsome but arrogant Han Jie, there are another two men. Jing Jun pointed out that they are Lao Si, Lao Ai's clansman and Ling Qi, Lao Ai's advisor.

Lao Si's appearance differs greatly from Lao Ai. He is short and fat but his eyes are moving energetically, betraying his cunningness and intelligence.

Ling Qi is smart looking with an elegant and graceful disposition. He looks like a typical advisor.

Guoxin and his men came up to the second floor and joined their table.

Xiao Pan secretly looked around the hall and chanced upon a table of high ranking officials. Normally, they put on a serious demeanour with plenty of self-respect and integrity but now, they are hugging courtesans and cracking silly jokes. Amused, he proclaimed: "Gentlemen, please feel free to pick any girls and drink to your heart's content. Do not let me affect your mood."

Even the playboy Jing Jun can only smile in return. With Xiao Pan around, even breathing normally is a challenge; how could he summon a female companion? Worse still, a foolish girl may unwittingly expose his flirting secrets and create a big headache for him.

Wu Fu came upstairs too at this point in time and he is personally escorting Po Hu to one of the isolated halls. Along the way, he greeted everyone. Passing by Xiang Shaolong's table, he respectfully reported: "Miss Yang Yu will come after finishing her song. When she heard that Official Xiang is here, she forgot all her other engagements."

Spending his energy in hating such a despicable cad is a waste of his time and effort. Forgiving his past mistake, Xiang Shaolong smiled: "Our main guest tonight is this Mister Qin who has come from afar. Yang Yu will accompany him, not me."

Having gone too far in his flattery, Wu Fu laughed: "Official can put your mind at ease. I have already informed Meimei, Little Lei (Bailei) and Yanyan (Guiyan, not Li Yanyan). They will come as soon as they can afford the time. By then, you can punish them by asking them to sing or drink."

Wu Fu lives up to his reputation of handling difficult clients and questions. No one can hold it against him after his eloquent answer.

A cold snort was heard from Guoxin's table and someone coldly remarked: "It is really different if you are holding an official appointment. No matter how busy the beauties are, they will still make time for you."

These words are meant for Xiang Shaolong's table and everyone's countenance changed upon hearing it. It seems like Lao Ai's men are really much more arrogant and detestable compared to Lu Buwei's men.

Everyone in Xiang Shaolong's table is someone of considerable influence. Moreover, Lord Changping is the powerful Left Premier and is many ranks higher than Lao Ai. They must be relying heavily on Zhu Ji's backing to pass such insolent remarks.

Their hands on their sword hilts, the Palace Guards are waiting for Xiao Pan's command before they started killing.

For the first time, Xiao Pan is experiencing the arrogance of Lao Ai's men. His expression turned grave and his eyes are glowing with anger, causing the blood of everyone and Wu Fu to turn cold.

In this intense and fragile moment where swords can be drawn in an instance, Li Si stood up with a smile and walked towards Han Jie and Guoxin's table.

The entire hall quietened down and watched with tense breaths.

Everyone from Guoxin to Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Pan are puzzled at Li Si's behaviour.

Li Si whispered some words to Guoxin's table. At that table, everyone's face lost colour and kept quiet while Li Si walked back nonchalantly.

Every table began to whisper nonstop among themselves and were wondering what did Li Si say to make Lao Ai's men behave themselves obediently.

Under the enquiring gaze of everyone, Li Si sat down and simply explained: "I only told them that Crown Prince has strict orders to kill anyone who dares to annoy Official Xiang before the duel. Thus, the Palace Guards are protecting him and will execute Crown Prince's orders if necessary."

Everyone was full of praise for his quick wit. Overhearing his words, Wu Fu secretly praised Li Si for his intelligence and he thought that Li Si is making it all up.

Xiao Pan was delighted. First, Li Si is clever and resolved the situation and second, Guoxin and his men are afraid of his authority and dared not create any more trouble.

At this moment, someone chortled: “I thought I was mistaken but it is really Shaolong. We did not come here for nothing!”

Everyone glanced over and saw that it was Wang Ci and Wang He. They seemed to be based at another hall but were just passing through.

Just as everyone was panicking inside, the two Generals walked even closer and saw Xiao Pan. Stunned, they exclaimed at the same time: “Crown Prince!”

Chapter 07

Peak Condition

Everyone heard the words “Crown Prince” and looked towards their table. Before half a second passed, Huan Yi stood up and bellowed: “Generals are right. It is indeed Crown Prince who asked us to accompany Official Xiang tonight. Will Generals please take a seat?”

When everyone heard his comment, they realised it was just a careless remark and resumed their activities.

Wang Ci and Wang He noticed Xiao Pan’s fake moustache and ordinary warrior suit dressing and could guess what is going on. They sat down without another word.

Suddenly they heard sounds of teeth chattering. It is Wu Fu whose face has turned entirely green and his lips completely white. He appears to have seen through their cover and identified this Qin Shi as the Crown Prince. He looks as if he wanted to kneel down and pay his respects.

Just as everyone was panicking a second time tonight, Wu Fu’s legs softened and he kneeled down.

Teng Yi was quicker than the rest. His hand quickly shot out and supported him, preventing Wu Fu from completely kneeling down and pulling him towards himself. From afar, it looks as if Wu Fu is sitting down besides Teng

Yi.

Lord Changping leaned forward and whispered to him: “If Brothel Owner Wu lets anyone know that Crown Prince is here, I will close down your Drunken Wind Brothel and sentence your whole family to death. Are you clear? Hng! You are not allowed to kowtow.”

Wu Fu was frightened beyond words. His whole body became limp and he did not even have the energy to nod in agreement.

Xiao Pan lightly praised: “Seeing that everyone acted with wisdom and creativity, I am certain that our country is in good hands and the days of prosperity is near.”

With Wu Fu around, Xiang Shaolong cannot say what he truly wants. He warmly warned: “As long as Brothel Owner Wu acts accordingly, I will guarantee your safety. Get moving and you must not warn the four beauties that Crown Prince is here.”

Wu Fu clumsily got up and paid his respects before slipping away.

Wang Ci raised his cup and wanted to toast Xiao Pan when he recalled something. “Has the wine been tested for poison?” he questioned.

Behind him, a Palace Guard reported: “Great General, all the wine has been tested and they are safe.”

Wang Ci toasted Xiao Pan.

Everyone does not dare to raise their cups yet until Xiao Pan gave the indication. After Xiao Pan's approval, they drank to their heart's content.

After the two close encounters, the atmosphere began to return to normal.

Xiao Pan started to speak to Wang Ci and Wang He and learnt that they are here on Po Hu's invitation.

Wang He coldly state: "This Po Hu is unpredictable. The moment we met, he passed negative comments about Lu Buwei and hinted at Empress's misbehaviour. It was a waste of time talking to him. We spotted Wu Fu and overheard him telling an attendant to inform Yang Yu and Bailei that Official Xiang is here. Using this opportunity, we excused ourselves."

Xiao Pan gave a cold snort but did not reply.

Wang Ci laughed: "Shaolong is really charming. When the two ladies heard that you are here, they both wanted to come immediately but were stopped by Wu Fu. Due to the busy crowd, they can only take turns to come. Yang Yu is presently getting a change of clothes and should be here in a while."

Xiao Pan was amazed: "Are generals mistaken? I thought they are Lu Buwei's followers?"

Wang Ci explained: "At the end of the day, they do not have a real owner. They will belong to whoever that is more powerful. Besides, women adore heroes and Shaolong is our foremost hero of Qin and even Talented Lady Ji has submitted to him. Under the sky, who would not want to be close to

him?”

Pleased, Xiao Pan toasted Xiang Shaolong for his success and Xiang Shaolong hurriedly accepted the toast.

Everyone is full of respect for Xiao Pan’s magnanimity.

The twinkling sounds of accessories can be heard. With Wu Fu guiding the way, Yang Yu appeared and she is accompanied by two maids. Her steps were delicate and her figure is alluring, captivating the attention of everyone.

Xiao Pan was thrilled: “She truly lives up to her reputation!”

Out of the blue, someone called out: “Miss Yang, please hold your step!”

As everyone turned to look at the speaker with surprise, he turned out to be Shangcai number one swordsman, the young and handsome new recruit of Lu Buwei, Xu Shang.

With a look of displeasure, he walked over.

Yang Yu stopped walking and frowned heavily. She stole a glance at Xiang Shaolong and looked back at Xu Shang who is striding towards her. She was in a difficult position.

Wu Fu is the most anxious and signalled to the two maids to bring Yang Yu to Xiao Pan’s table but Yang Yu waved the two maids away.

Instead, Xiao Pan finds it interesting and smiled: “No wonder this place has such good business. Everyone is here to fight over these beauties.”

Xu Shang has the coldest expression on his face. He icily interrogated Wu Fu: “Brothel Owner Wu told me earlier that Miss Yang has been reserved by General Du. Why is she able to come out and serve another table now?”

Yang Yu seems to have good intentions towards Xu Shang. Leaning towards him, she mentioned some words and pointed at Xiang Shaolong’s table.

Wang Ci is currently the most important military leader in Qin. He coldly dismissed: “Who is this kid? Is he tired of living? Even if Guan Zhongxie is here, he will still have to give me face.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “Great General need not bother yourself with these men. Lu Buwei’s men are known to be insolent and arrogant. I will make sure they suffer in the future.”

Wang Ci sighed with boredom and did not reply.

Wu Fu quickly came up to their table to seek forgiveness. Before he can say a single word, Xiao Pan stated upfront: “This is not your fault and Brothel Owner Wu need not feel bad about it. If Miss Yang wants to come over, so be it. If not, it is ok too.”

Not expecting the Crown Prince to be so accommodating, Wu Fu is momentarily stunned.

Lord Changping pulled him over and whispered something to him. Wu Fu left quickly after hearing his words.

Xu Shang looks as if he is going to come to their table but was detained by Yang Yu. She seems to have mentioned Wang Ci's name while talking to Xu Shang.

Yang Duanhe is Wang Ci's most capable general. His expression turning very ugly; he stood up and was about to scold Xu Shang when Li Si dragged him down to his seat. Seated beside him, Li Si smiled: "Why waste your energy over such a man like him?"

Xu Shang stared fiercely once at Xiang Shaolong before returning to his seat. Yang Yu maintained a cheerful expression and the aura of anger in the air quickly dissipated.

As pointed out by Xiang Shaolong, a mystified Yang Yu sat down besides Xiao Pan. She only knew that Xiao Pan is named Qin Shi but does not know his background. But since this person can hang around with Lord Changping, Wang Ci and Xiang Shaolong, he must be someone important. Wu Fu also reminded her many times to offer her best service so she naturally dare not be negligent. She did her best to toast wine, make jokes and flatter everyone. Xiao Pan is delighted with her services and the atmosphere became livelier as if nothing has happened before.

After a while, Guiyan came to their table too. None of the other guests felt uncomfortable. Based on Wang Ci's standing in Qin, he alone is qualified to ask for the company of these two top beauties.

Guiyan intimately sat down besides Xiang Shaolong and toasted everyone first. Toasting Xiang Shaolong last, she whispered: "Official Xiang is powerful and successful. Please do not bear grudges with a weak woman like me."

After their previous encounter, there is no way Xiang Shaolong can ever trust her again but on the surface, he naturally accepted her apology.

Yang Yu took her leave and she looked once at Xiang Shaolong with deep emotions before turning around. Soon after, Bailei showed up and only the top beauty Dan Meimei has yet to appear.

Among the four beauties, Bailei is the only one who hasn't interacted with Xiang Shaolong before. She treated Xiao Pan well and their communication is quite amiable.

Guiyan whispered into Xiang Shaolong's ears: "Will you stay back tonight? I will do my best to service you." And batted her eyes at him seductively.

Xiang Shaolong wanted to say: "Others say that wild flowers smell better than home grown flowers but my feelings are the exact opposite. How would I know you will not try to kill me again?"

He rejected her on the spot.

With a look of disappointment, Guiyan is about to say something when Wu Fu turned up with a heavy expression: "I am afraid Meimei cannot come."

Lord Changping frowned: "Meimei is not giving us any face?"

Wu Fu was frightened and he shook his head and hands: “No! She has been taken to Premier Mentor Residence. I have tried sending for her three times but was declined. Ai! I cannot say... Hei! It is nothing!”

Everyone’s curiosity is aroused.

His eyes flashing with coldness, Xiao Pan concluded: “So it is. Let’s finish up. Ha! What an exciting night!”

Wu Fu calmed down but Guiyan and Bailei were unwilling to leave and whined incessantly.

Their persuasion skills are top-notch and effective but it absolutely has no effect on Xiao Pan. This future Qin Shi Huang smiled plainly and stood up, turning around to take his leave. Everyone hurriedly scrambled after him.

With his arm around Guiyan’s neck, Xiang Shaolong kissed her cheek and gently advised: “If you want to lead a happy and fulfilling life, you better know what is good for you.”

Guiyan’s expression darkened. Lowering her head, she promised: “Yanyan will heed your advice. As long as Official Xiang thinks about me once in a while, I will be more than grateful.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled and bade farewell to Bailei before taking his leave.

Back home, Jing Jun is still full of energy. In the main hall, he prevented Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi from returning back to their rooms and scolded: “Wu

Fu that b@sterd sure knows how to change according to the circumstances. When he saw Wang Ci and Wang He supporting Crown Prince, he told me secretly before we left that he will come personally to pay his respects to Third Brother. Ha! What an *****.”

Teng Yi interjected: “But I believe that he is caught in between Lu Buwei and Lao Ai. He cannot afford to offend either side and is in serious dilemma. Bai Chong told me earlier that Lu Buwei is keen to marry Dan Meimei as a concubine. Wu Fu is naturally troubled.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “Tonight may be quite a mess but I can derive deep meanings from it. Firstly, the Crown Prince understood the invisible fight between Lu Buwei and Lao Ai. He also learnt about Po Hu and Du Bi’s ulterior motives. There are also three men who benefitted a lot. Second Brother does not hanker after fame and riches so we can dismiss your case. Li Si and Huan Yi displayed intelligence and courage, gaining the favour of Crown Prince. They should enjoy plenty of promotions in the days to come.”

After a short discussion, Xiang Shaolong can feel the effects of alcohol and had to go back to his bedroom to sleep.

His wives reprimanded him slightly. In his drowsy state, he slept till late morning.

Tian Zheng and Tian Feng helped him to get up and get dressed. Retrieving his Hundred Battle Sabre, he got Teng Yi to spar with him and felt even more rejuvenated than before. He is brimming with energy and vigour.

Ji Yanran was puzzled: “Hubby was out partying last night and came home drunk but now, you look so fresh and energetic. This doesn’t make sense.”

Putting the Hundred Battle Sabre aside, Xiang Shaolong smiled: “I will be lying if I say I am not concerned about Guan Zhongxie’s challenge. But last night was a good time to get drunk, allowing me forget everything. Therefore, I am very relaxed today and with a good night’s sleep, I am in my peak condition.”

Teng Yi mumbled: “I can vouch for that. I nearly lost hold of the Mozi Sword fighting him.”

The girls burst out laughing and it was a joyful sight.

Among their laughter, Wu Yingyuan came up to them with Tao Fang and Jing Jun in tow.

Everyone sat down for breakfast happily and no one is nervous about the imminent battle.

Jing Jun and Teng Yi left for the Command Centre while Xiang Shaolong engaged his father-in-law in conversation. They spoke about Wu Zhuo setting up a giant farm at the northern lands and Xiang Shaolong was filled with a strong yearning. How he wished it is Xiao Pan’s coronation tomorrow and he can begin his new life after that.

While talking, Xiang Shaolong unconsciously fell asleep on the floor rug.

He had a strange dream and saw Zhao Ya, Zhao Qian, Chunying and the other three maids. They are toasting him for finally defeating Guan Zhongxie. Intoxicated, he somehow can sense that he is creating his own fantasy dream. He was stirred by Wu Tingfang patting him.

As he sat up in shock, Wu Tingfang commented: “The Crown Prince has sent someone to summon you into the palace. I wonder what it is. He should give you more time to rest.”

Since the death of Zhao Qian, Wu Tingfang is the only person other than Teng Yi who knows about Xiao Pan’s real identity. Thus, she is not very respectful when she is speaking about him.

Xiang Shaolong stretched his limbs and can feel that he is at the peak of his mental and physical strength. He himself was surprised that he can sleep so peacefully before the duel. He dared not waste any more time and hurriedly showered, got changed and left towards the palace.

As usual, Xiao Pan received him in his Imperial Study. Lord Changping and Li Si were present as well.

Xiao Pan began: “The Spring Festival is five days later. I will pray at the Wei River that day. Grand Tutor Xiang’s Black Dragon should be ready by then!”

Xiang Shaolong confirmed: “Everything is prepared. All we need to know is the exact prayer location and we can act accordingly.”

Xiao Pan’s eyes lit up followed by a sigh: “It is indeed hard to work without

the Empress's support. Looks like I have to mend fences with her."

Li Si advised: "Military control should be our top priority. The rest can come later."

Xiao Pan was furious: "I am unhappy every time I thought of making that fake eunuch a Marquis. Now that Empress has moved to Oasis Palace, I have utterly no idea what the two of them are planning."

Lord Changping comforted: "Mao Jiao will notify us about Lao Ai's activities. Crown Prince please set your mind at ease."

Xiao Pan was angered: "How can I set my mind at ease? There are spies all over and everyone is only thinking for themselves. If not for the Black Dragon, I will summon everyone and conduct a massacre. After that, we will then try to salvage the situation."

Lord Changping knows that he is very mad and dared not comment.

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "Crown Prince must look at the bright side. Don't forget about the exciting performance tonight. After Guan Zhongxie is killed, we can assign a new Imperial Infantry Commander."

Xiao Pan finally calmed down and everyone discussed further about the Black Dragon after which everyone parted.

Leaving alongside Lord Changping, Xiang Shaolong can feel the dominance of the Crown Prince increasing day by day. If he is not angry, his dominance can

be heavily felt already. When he is angry, the dominance can be considered stifling. Even Xiang Shaolong who has seen him grow up can feel this effect. The others must be having a worse experience.

Stepping out of the study, a palace maid detained Xiang Shaolong, reporting that Qin Qing wanted to see him.

With an envious look on his face, Lord Changping took his leave.

While he is being led by the palace maid through the winding corridors of the huge palace, Xiang Shaolong thought that with Zhu Ji away in Oasis Palace and Xiao Pan yet to be coroneted, the most influential person in Xianyang Palace now is probably Qin Qing.

Coming to a large and plain building in the rear palace, the palace maid kneeled down: "Grand Tutor Xiang, please enter."

Pleased, Xiang Shaolong entered and noticed Qin Qing waiting at the door for him. He could not be bothered with manners and hugged her in his embrace. Qin Qing struggled for a while and leaned back, scrutinizing him for a while. Comforted, she surrendered: "You win! You looked great! You idiOt. Why did you go merry making at Drunken Wind Brothel last night? Now, the whole city knows about your terrible deed."

Xiang Shaolong already knew that nothing escapes her attention and sat down on one side, still hugging her slender waist. Qin Qing helped him to take off his coat and massaged his shoulder muscles.

Xiang Shaolong is so comfortable he is flying among the clouds. It is truly different after they have made love. In the past, it is difficult for him to even hold her hand but now, she offered to massage him willingly.

Qin Qing gently reminded: “Do not underestimate your enemy! I have word that Guan Zhongxie is even better than before. Ordinary fighters will lose the spirit to fight and surrender after seeing his attacking pose. You may have the Hundred Battle Sabre and Sabre Play but if you are too complacent, you may still lose.”

Xiang Shaolong agreed that he has been underestimating his opponent but it was also because he wasn't bothered about the duel and thus, was very calm, relaxed and focused. He nodded: “Thanks for Grand Tutor Qin's reminder. I will not be so reckless anymore.”

Seeing that he is willing to listen to her advice, Qin Qing was thrilled: “I did not choose the wrong lover. Most men will find us women nagging too much or that our advice is impractical. Only Hubby is the real gentleman.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “Grand Tutor Qin seems to be very experienced!”

Qin Qing protested: “You think too much. I have only heard about it from others.”

Xiang Shaolong quickly apologised and Qin Qing turned happy again: “Tonight's fight is something that everyone has been anxiously waiting for. From the Crown Prince to the common man, no one is spared. Originally, most people are betting that you will win but after knowing about your

drinking and trysts last night, they switched their bets to Guan Zhongxie instead.”

Xiang Shaolong clarified: “I did drink but we only asked for the beauties because of the Crown Prince. We only enjoyed their company at the table and did nothing else.”

Qin Qing laughed: “But others do not think the same. Moreover, such gossips are bound to be exaggerated. Everyone on the street is saying that you slept with the four beauties. Let’s see if you will behave yourself in the future.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed so hard he cried.

Qin Qing added: “The latest odds are Guan Zhongxie three to one against you. This shows that he is the people’s favourite choice to win.”

“What!” Xiang Shaolong exclaimed.

Qin Qing laughed so hard she leaned on him and whined: “If I am a greedy woman, I will lay huge bets on you and make a fortune.”

Xiang Shaolong pondered: “Who is hosting this gamble? Without money and a good reputation, it is hard to convince people.”

Qin Qing replied: “Have you heard of this man named Po Hu? He operates a few large casinos in Tunliu. If not for the gambling ban in Xianyang City, he would have set up casinos here too. Now, he is the mastermind behind the gamble between you and Guan Zhongxie.”

Xiang Shaolong was astounded: “Didn’t he just arrive in Xianyang City yesterday?”

Qin Qing answered: “He did only arrive yesterday but his men already set up the gamble thirty days ago. He is the king of money making.”

Xiang Shaolong was curious: “Who is this Po Hu exactly?”

Qin Qing responded: “I am not too sure myself. He wields great influence in the three new eastern provinces and is on intimate relations with Du Bi and Zhao General Pang Nuan. During his trip here, he has been busy socializing and giving presents. I am sure he is trying to win friends and open connections to assist Lord Changan Chongqiao in the future.”

After a short contemplation, Xiang Shaolong joked: “Shall we make some money from him? In terms of wealth, my Wu Family is second to none. If he refuses to accept, it will be a loss of face for him. Hng! With three to one, I want to see his face after I win.”

Moved, Qin Qing gave him a tight hug and lamented: “Xiang Shaolong ah! Is your confidence born naturally with you? You seemed to be undefeated in terms of words and actions.”

Embracing her tightly in return, they shared a passionate kiss before he left reluctantly.

Back home, he told Wu Yingyuan about the gamble and odds. Wu Yingyuan was highly interested and quickly went to find Tao Fang for a discussion.

Xiang Shaolong returned to the back hall and took this time to rest while being entertained by his wives and son. Soon, it was evening time.

Despite the lack of prior arrangements, Huan Yi, Lord Changping, Jing Jun, Teng Yi, Li Si, Yang Duanhe and Bai Chong arrived at the Wu residence. They all planned to set off with him and showcase their might.

Xiang Shaolong took a shower and put on the warrior suit Qin Qing sewed for him. Beneath, he wore the plated armour. He definitely looks majestic and imposing.

He placed the Hundred Battle Sabre and the Flying Dragon Spear in a black bag and got Jing Shan to carry them, preventing anyone from knowing his true intentions.

After all his preparations, he led his three wives and for the first time, Tian Zhen and Tian Feng, along towards the Premier Mentor Residence. Under the cheering of his household, he left. Wu Yingyuan and Tao Fang also went along.

Travelling along the well lit path of the Xianyang City main street, he was filled with many emotions.

When he first came to this era, he never would have imagined his present success.

At the same time, he can see the ugliness behind all the beautiful things in front of him. In the future, Xiao Pan will use his absolute authority to create

the absolute legacy.

Fighting for one's dream is the noblest aspiration.

But after success has been achieved, emotions will have no room in the never ending quest to preserve one's power and wealth.

In the future, Li Si will be a different person too and he is most unwilling to witness this heart-breaking transformation.

In this very moment, he swore to leave immediately after eliminating Lao Ai and Lu Buwei.

The Premier Mentor Residence is appearing in his sight and diagonally opposite it is Lao Ai's Inner Custodian Residence. These two will represent the two pillars of influence before Xiao Pan's coronation.

And he is the fish swimming between these two powers.

Thinking about this, he was filled with heroism. He nearly wanted to face the sky and shout out loud, expressing his righteous pride.

Chapter 08

The Birthday Banquet

The newly built Premier Mentor Residence is the most imposing architecture besides Xianyang Palace. It is even more outstanding than Zhu Ji's Oasis Palace.

The residence faces the Palace exactly and is surrounded by high walls. After passing through the main gate, there is a large courtyard that can serve as a training ground for one thousand men. There are three main buildings and they are connected by extensive corridors. From south to north, everything is made of the best wood or clay. The four sides are surrounded by slopes and all the buildings have elaborate roofs and are supported by double pillars. It is as imposing as can be.

A room in the main hall is dedicated to be the ancestral hall. Besides the main halls, there are nearly thirty separate blocks of buildings which are used for housing, storage, cooking and other purposes. The buildings are divided neatly according to left and right side of the halls.

Lush greenery can be found around the main halls and it was an inviting environment. The residence must have been designed by a famous architect, highlighting Lu Buwei's enormous wealth.

Anyone of importance in Xianyang City was all present. With the additional excitement of witnessing Xiang Shaolong and Guan Zhongxie's duel,

everyone was highly enthusiastic and the atmosphere has reached a feverish pitch.

Over ten thousand lanterns were lighted for the celebrations and congratulatory messages on auspicious red cloth can be found hanging on the main gate and all over the gardens, adding to the celebratory mood.

Scores of family warriors are dressed in neat warrior uniforms and were guarding the main gate, preventing people from coming in uninvited.

After entering the door, there are counters for guests to register themselves and present their gifts. It was a well prepared arrangement. Despite the numerous guests streaming in incessantly, everything was well laid out and there were no signs of chaos.

All the three main halls are open to accommodate the guests and the hall in the centre is naturally the largest, with the ability to seat a thousand guests. The other two halls can only seat about five hundred guests each.

Those who were assigned to the sub halls can only accept their fate helplessly as they are not as influential as those in the main centre hall. They can only pray to squeeze into the main hall to watch the fight later on.

When Xiang Shaolong arrived, none of the guests have been seated yet and were dispersed around the hall exteriors and gardens, chatting among themselves. The air is filled by their voices.

It is a beautiful night with a new moon and the absence of snow. There is still

five days before the beginning of spring so the weather is warming up, adding flavour to the birthday event.

For those who lack the awareness, this boisterous celebration is just a cover for the intense power struggle of the Qin empire. Xiang Shaolong is confident that tonight's victory or loss will directly impact the future of the seven states during the Warring Period and decide the history of China.

He is the pivotal point in this struggle.

When his large entourage arrived at the main gate of the Premier Mentor Residence, there was a mad rush as everyone wanted to see their hero.

Riding besides Xiang Shaolong, Lord Changping joked: "Those people who bet on your loss must be very disappointed to see you so energetic and refreshed despite the brothel visit last night."

Xiang Shaolong joked back: "If I really lose, I need not go back to the Wu Residence. My father in law has placed a huge bet on me. If I caused him to lose money, what do you think will happen?"

Lord Changping was stunned: "I did not know your father in law is a gambler."

Xiang Shaolong whispered: "He is not a gambler but he will love to see Po Hu going bankrupt when honouring his loss. After that, let's see what he can use to bribe the officials and royal family members."

Lord Changping burst out laughing and leapt down his horse.

Tu Xian who is in charge of welcoming the guests advanced towards them. Ordering his men to rein in the horses, he whispered to Xiang Shaolong: “That man is secretly wearing a soft armour that is specially made by Yue Blacksmiths. You better attack his head. Otherwise, he can allow himself to be pierced by your spear without suffering any harm and take this chance to kill you.”

Xiang Shaolong whispered back: “Did you see me bring a spear tonight?”

Tu Xian was taken aback and seemed to understand but doesn't seem to understand too. Someone came up to them and he can only swallow his question and spoke about some other unimportant stuff.

Sounds of music can be heard playing from the main hall, indicating that some important guest has just entered.

As Tao Fang is busy presenting their gifts, Xiang Shaolong glanced around and noticed most of the guests are unwilling to enter the halls to see Lu Buwei but are loitering around the courtyard engaging in idle chatter while enjoying the decorations and landscaping. Qin Qing just arrived too and joined Ji Yanran and the girls. With other female members of the royal family, they were joking and giggling, attracting plenty of attention from other guests. On one hand, they were attracted by their beauty and other the other hand, they were puzzled that they can still joke and laugh in a relaxed mood despite knowing that their hubby is going to fight a strong opponent later on.

The people of Qin are open-minded and loved this kind of environment. Those who have the most fun are the young beauties from prestigious families like Ying Ying and Lu Dan'er. It is also a good time for the young men to showcase their literacy talents. The scenic settings make it even better for them.

While Xiang Shaolong and the others are talking about Po Hu's gambling racket; Lu Dan'er appeared out of nowhere and wriggled her finger, signalling Jing Jun to go over to her.

It so happens that a group of young children walked between Jing Jun and Lu Dan'er so Jing Jun did not see her signal. Xiang Shaolong saw her first and feeling cheeky, he walked over and pretended to lecture in a strict tone: "You are going to get married soon and do not even know how to greet your elders. What is the world coming too?"

With her hands on her waist, Lu Dan'er wailed: "Hng! Whose elder are you? Do you even care if I am getting married? Yi!" She recalled that Xiang Shaolong is Jing Jun's Third Brother and her face turned red instantly. Stomping her foot, she cried: "You are so irritating, you big bully."

Xiang Shaolong burst out laughing and pushed Jing Jun who has just came up to them towards her. He proudly smiled: "Dear Dan'er, I will wait for the day you kneel down and offer me your wedding toast!"

At a disadvantage, Lu Dan'er dared not berate him. Holding Jing Jun's hand, she slipped away into the crowd with him.

Shaking his head and sighing, Ying Ying's voice suddenly rang out beside him: "Official Xiang!"

Turning around, Xiang Shaolong got a big fright: "What is your expression so pale?"

Ying Ying bitterly smiled: "I did not sleep well for many nights. Ai! Since things have come to such a stage, what more can I say?"

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: "No matter what happens tonight, it can be considered a closure for you. In the future, dedicate all your love to Brother Duanhe and be a good wife and mother!"

Ying Ying moved closer and softly asked: "Tell me, if Guan Zhongxie never appeared, would you have married me?"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "By now, I think there is no need for such kinds of questions or answers!"

Ying Ying insisted: "No! If I do not find out the truth, I will never be satisfied."

Xiang Shaolong helplessly confessed: "Once, I did have feelings for you."

Ying Ying lowered her head and whispered: "If anything happens to you tonight, I will not marry... Ai! I will not say anymore. Ah!"

Looking at her crestfallen face, Xiang Shaolong can only shake his head with a bitter smile. Ying Ying seems to think that he will certainly lose.

Xiang Shaolong naturally wasn't bothered by her thoughts and went back to Lord Changping and Teng Yi's side. Lord Changping inquired: "What did my sister say?"

Xiang Shaolong replied: "Nothing interesting."

Lord Changping coldly snorted: "How can there be nothing interesting? She may have decided to marry Duanhe but is still pining for Guan Zhongxie. She kept saying you are not his match. How infuriating."

The other guests are beginning to enter the banquet halls. Wu Yingyuan felt embarrassed to stay outside for too long and waved to everyone to enter together.

Since he is their senior, everyone obeyed without question.

Lu Buwei, Lu Niang Rong and his sons are at the main door welcoming the guests. The air is filled with congratulatory messages.

Lord Changping is probably the most unassuming and easy going Left Premier of Qin. Despite his exalted status, he entered the hall alongside Xiang Shaolong and Wu Yingyuan, offering his congratulations to Lu Buwei.

Wu Yingyuan is an experienced man when it comes to socializing. He comfortably wished Lu Buwei a long list of auspicious congratulatory phrases.

Xiang Shaolong could not help but think about the close relationship between Lu Buwei and the Wu Family in the past compared to all the present

hostility. His heart is troubled with mixed emotions.

In his mind, Lu Buwei must have condemned Xiang Shaolong to lose the fight and his life. With a delighted and welcoming expression, his face is glowing with pleasure and was chatting and joking without a care in the world. When he spotted Xiang Shaolong, his eyes lit up. Abandoning his other guests, he personally welcomed: "Tonight is my lucky night. I celebrate my birthday and will gain a fine son in law. With my success, life has no more regrets."

Xiang Shaolong was thinking that his biggest regret is his inability to be the King of Qin. On the surface, he acted normal and offered his congratulations like everybody else.

Before Lu Buwei can say anything else, Xiang Shaolong gestured to the people behind him. Everyone breezed through the door and do not have to offer any hypocritical wishes.

After a few steps, a silhouette flashed by. Lu Niang Rong appeared in front of Xiang Shaolong and with a cold expression, she state: "Official Xiang, I need to speak to you privately."

Huan Yi, Teng Yi and the rest moved on and followed the ushers to their seats.

Lu Niang Rong plainly remarked: "Official Xiang, please come with me!"

Xiang Shaolong is certain that she has nothing good to say and can feel a grudge for her. Following her through the banquet tables, they came to an

external door leading towards the central garden. Xiang Shaolong stopped and insisted: "Can we just say it here? Otherwise, others may start to gossip about us."

The Guardians are initially behind him. Hearing his words, they fanned out in all four directions and prevent people from getting close to them.

Lu Niang Rong turned around and icily commented: "Since when did you become so timid and afraid of gossip? Moreover, if you win, I will be your woman. What is there to be frightened of?"

Xiang Shaolong can detect the sarcasm in her voice. Though angered, he would not hold it against her. He simply smiled: "I am sure Third Mistress asked me here for a better reason than just ridiculing me."

Lu Niang Rong's eyes shone sharply and she replied in a deep voice: "Of course! I am not in the mood to chat with you and only want to ask you a question: Since you do not love me, why did you accept Zhongxie's challenge?"

Unable to hold it any longer, Xiang Shaolong coldly smiled: "All Third Mistress needs to do later is to publicly announce that you are only willing to marry Official Guan. Then, even if I want to fight him, there is no reason to."

Her pretty face turning grave cold, Lu Niang Rong stared fiercely at him for some time before slowly nodding: "Fine! I shall see how you end up tonight."

With a vicious stomp, she returned to the main hall.

After her fragrance has dissipated from the air, Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself.

Lu Niang Rong may be an evil woman but she has his interests at heart. She wanted to dissuade him from fighting because like Ying Ying, she thinks he will surely lose the fight.

But in order to kill Guan Zhongxie, he had to ignore her good intentions.

Back at the main hall, most of the guests have already been seated. Everyone is turning their heads, looking and pointing at him. It seems like the duel between him and Guan Zhongxie is a recurring topic in their conversations.

Due to the large number of guests, besides the three hosting tables at the south, the rest of the tables are divided into two sides, the left and right side. Each side has four layers of tables and each table can seat four persons. They are all facing the spacious stage in the middle of the hall which will soon be the centre of attraction for song and dance performances and the duel as well.

As it is time to be seated, an usher came up to them and led them towards their seats.

Xiang Shaolong is seated in the first row of the right side, eight tables away from the hosting tables.

The other people in the first rows are naturally Lord Changping, Wang He, Wang Ci and other prominent generals. Opposite them in the first rows are

Wang Wan, Cai Ze, Lao Ai and the influential people in the Premier Mentor Residence. Guan Zhongxie, however, cannot be found.

Sitting down besides Teng Yi, Jing Jun and Wu Yingyuan, Xiang Shaolong discovered his three wives and Qin Qing seated on the same row ahead of them and are sending him sweet looks and smiles, adding to his joy. Looking behind them, he saw the same sweet looks and smiles from the pretty and attractive Tian sisters. Incidentally, Tao Fang is sharing their table.

The Guardians are sitting behind Xiang Shaolong's table.

After some idle chat with Wu Yingyuan, Xiang Shaolong looked towards the main door. The group of thirty odd musicians on both sides of the door have stopped playing while Lu Buwei, Lu Niang Rong and the others have disappeared. Only Tu Xian is left welcoming the guests.

Out of the blue, Wu Yingyuan poked Xiang Shaolong under the table. Xiang Shaolong broke out of his trance and scanned around. He finally noticed Du Bi and Po Hu seated opposite them and were leaving their seats and walking towards them. Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and Jing Jun can only follow Wu Yingyuan' example by standing up to greet them.

Po Hu is looking straight ahead while Du Bi stared viciously at Ji Yanran and Qin Qing with jealousy. Although he pretended to be looking around aimlessly, his behaviour did not escape the sharp observation skills of Xiang Shaolong.

In between the adjoining tables, everyone introduced themselves and

mentioned the usual courtesies. Po Hu's sharp eyes assessed Xiang Shaolong for a while and he chuckled: "Official Xiang is truly an outstanding talent which is rare among men. No wonder Master Wu placed a huge bet on you. As a friend, I wish you victory but as a businessman, I wish for the opposite. My heart is in a dilemma!"

Xiang Shaolong is beginning to understand Huan Yi's dislike for this man. Based on his demeanour and attitude, he seems to regard everyone and everything as a business transaction. It is even more obvious just by looking at his eyes.

Wu Yingyuan is an experienced socialite. He laughed: "Master Po is too serious. My little bet in nothing in your eyes and of course, will hardly affect your wealth and harming our friendship."

Xiang Shaolong and his wives overheard his words and were full of admiration.

Du Bi smiled: "Master Wu's answer is really great. If Official Xiang's sword skill is as great, he will definitely win tonight. When that happens, I am afraid Master Po will have to sell his properties in order to honour his loss."

Xiang Shaolong joked: "Today, I finally learnt that Great General knows how to tell jokes too. Master Po's wealth is immeasurable; just by taking any banknote from his wallet is more than enough for all of us to be VIP clients in Drunken Wind Brothel night after night."

Hearing his exaggerated words, everyone is highly amused and even Ji

Yanran and the girls are smiling like flowers in full blossom, attracting the attention of those who are interested in them.

The door attendant announced: “The Empress and Crown Prince arrives!”

The music began to start playing.

All the elegantly dressed maids who are serving wine and food are the first to kneel down.

Po Hu and Du Bi bade their farewells and returned to their table.

The rest of the guests kneeled down and prepare to welcome the Empress and Crown Prince.

Jing Jun reminded: “The man seated between Lao Ai and Han Jie is Headmaster Qiu Risheng of the Weinan Martial Arts School.”

Xiang Shaolong slanted his face to one side, facing Lao Ai’s table and promptly identified Qiu Risheng.

It so happens that Qiu Risheng and Han Jie are looking over at him too. When their eyes met, all three men felt slightly awkward.

This is the second time Xiang Shaolong has seen Qiu Risheng. He first saw him during his duel with Wang Jian. Due to the distance between them during that time, he did not have a clear impression of this man. This expert swordsman has fine features and his limbs are longer than the ordinary man,

giving the impression that they are very sensitive and agile. Around the age of thirty five, his eyes are brimming with energy and he has the air of an extraordinary man. Looking at his appearance alone, one can already feel that he is an extremely fearsome opponent. No wonder Lao Ai is so keen to recruit him.

He also noticed Xiao Pan's spy, Mao Jiao seated behind their table with Ling Qi and Guoxin. His status is below that of Qiu Risheng, Han Jie and Lao Si who are sharing Lao Ai's table.

The door attendant made another announcement and the music played even louder. Sixteen palace guards first paved the way before Zhu Ji, Xiao Pan and Lu Buwei strode into the hall.

Behind them are Lord Changwen and another sixteen palace guards. They are followed by the key people of Lu Buwei's household including Lu Niang Rong and the newly arrived Guan Zhongxie.

Despite the short interval, Guan Zhongxie is certainly more powerful than before. He walked with strong, confident steps and his eyes are shining as if they are electrified. In an intimidating manner, he walked ahead of a group of family warriors. Except for his near equal swordsman Xu Shang, everyone else seems to be despised by him.

When Xiang Shaolong caught sight of him, Guan Zhongxie happened to see him too. Exchanging a long stare, it was like two lightning bolts striking from each other's eyes.

As tonight is Lu Buwei's grand birthday celebration and given his special status as the Premier Mentor, Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan displayed their respect and insisted that he take the main seat.

After some tussling, Lu Buwei finally sat down.

Guan Zhongxie and his men took their seats.

After everyone got seated too, their attention subconsciously turned towards Guan Zhongxie.

The most annoying thing is Lu Niang Rong sitting right besides Guan Zhongxie, highlighting Lu Buwei's dissatisfaction with Xiang Shaolong and hinting that Guan Zhongxie will win the duel without question.

In the front row too, Guan Zhongxie is seated one table lower than Lao Ai. Sharing his table are Lian Jiao and Zhao Pu the two expert swordsmen. The old birds Lu Chan and Zhou Zihen are seated behind them. They must have lost favour with Lu Buwei after failing to live up to expectations during the hunting fair. They have been replaced by the new swordsmen.

This is typical of Lu Buwei's ingratitude character.

After Xiao Pan mentioned some hypocritical words commending Lu Buwei's achievements, the long awaited birthday banquet finally began.

Chapter 09

Appetizers

After a teasing performance by the song courtesans of Premier Mentor Residence, Meng Ao, Wang Wan and Cai Ze led the entire hall in toasting Lu Buwei for his birthday, adding to the lively atmosphere.

Following that, Guan Zhongxie, Lu Niang Rong and the other clansmen led Lu Buwei to the other two halls to toast the other guests.

As Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji are still around, the thousand strong banquet is still quite noisy and were chatting about the imminent duel between Xiang Shaolong and Guan Zhongxie, speculating who the winner will be.

Opposite him, Lao Ai faced Xiang Shaolong and raised his cup, wishing him success in his fight. Xiang Shaolong smiled back knowingly and put his own cup to his lips. He did not drink at all but is just putting on a show. Out of a sudden, Wu Tingfang gestured to him to come over. Puzzled, Xiang Shaolong shifted nearer to them and asked in a low voice: "What is it?"

Ji Yanran inched closer to him and replied in a deep voice: "Lu Buwei is really despicable. Earlier, Meng Tian walked past us and secretly whispered: Qi ambush in front of Wu Residence. Lu Buwei is going all out to kill you tonight. If Guan Zhongxie failed to kill you, others will. But even I cannot understand why the assassins from Qi?"

It is not unusual for people to ambush him but given Lu Buwei's risk-taking style, even Xiang Shaolong is baffled over Lu Buwei's choice to use Qi assassins.

He had wanted to tease Qin Qing who is sitting on the other side but noticed Zhu Ji staring at them. Frightened out of his senses, Xiang Shaolong swallowed all his words and returned to his seat, taking the chance to update Teng Yi and Jing Jun about the ambush.

Teng Yi coldly snorted and turned around to speak to Jing Shan sitting behind him. Within a few minutes, Wu Yan Zhu left to make the necessary arrangements.

The sound of music was being played once again. Before Lu Buwei can be seen, his delightful laughter can already be heard. With Guan Zhongxie and his family escorting him, he entered the main hall a second time in his best ever mood. Everyone stood up and gave him a standing ovation.

Extremely flattered, Lu Buwei strode right to the centre of the hall. When his cup is filled again, he raised his cup towards Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan, bellowing: "Let's toast Empress and Crown Prince first."

Besides Xiang Shaolong, Wu Yingyuan coldly cursed: "I want to see how long this heartless man can continue like this."

Looking at Xiao Pan, Zhu Ji and Lu Buwei toasting each other, Xiang Shaolong cannot help but feel emotional.

This can be considered the peak of Lu Buwei's glory. Later, he will fail to kill himself and shortly after, the Black Dragon will be sighted. Significant changes will be made to the Qin Court and his authority will be vastly limited. Another reason for his decline in influence is the rise of Lao Ai.

By now, Lu Buwei's toasting party has arrived in front of their table. Holding a full cup of wine, Guan Zhongxie walked closer and facing Xiang Shaolong, he toasted: "No matter who wins tonight, I am full of admiration for Official Xiang."

Glancing at his formidable opponent, Xiang Shaolong returned the courtesies with a smile.

Both men only made a show of drinking the wine.

When everyone has returned to their seats, Lu Buwei stood up again and announced: "The Chancellor of Qi, Tian Dan, has sent me a troupe of circus performers. Every person in the circus has an amazing talent to perform and I guarantee everyone will be blown away."

The guests were expecting him to announce the duel between Xiang Shaolong and Guan Zhongxie instead. Slightly disappointed, their thoughts were interrupted by a circus of over a hundred performers. The performers are elaborately dressed and agile, earning loud praises and applause from the crowd.

Xiang Shaolong and his men were alarmed.

The Qi assassins must be referring to these circus performers.

Everyone is captivated by their first impression of the circus. On the outer circle, there were ten odd strongmen somersaulting on the spot. In the centre, there is a cheerleader stacking formation of thirty over people. Under the leadership of a midget dressed as a clown, it was a highly entertaining show. The most enthralling part is the formation. Except for the eight hunks forming the base, the next three layers are all 5sexy women. The Qi lady at the top of the pyramid is as beautiful as a goddess from heaven. She may not be as pretty as Ji Yanran and the others but can be considered the top of her league.

The other performers are gathered around the formation and are performing different kinds of difficult stunts.

With the accompanying music and cheering of the crowd, the formation spread open like a flower blossoming. Four of the hunks rolled out in four different directions while the ladies slide down like cascading water. Some of them are seated on the floor and some are lying down, performing 'soft bone' twisting of their bodies. Most of their poses are highly seductive and teasing.

The prettiest Qi lady somersaulted down and continued to somersault till the front of Lu Buwei, presenting him with a longevity peach made of solid gold.

In charge of Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji's safety, Lord Changwen and his Palace Guards are very anxious, eyeing the performers with utmost suspicion. They cannot allow anyone with ulterior motives to come too close to the rulers.

Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and his men watched the performance with rapt attention. Witnessing the abilities of these men and women, they know they mustn't take them lightly during the ambush later.

If not for Meng Tian's warning, they may be caught with their pants down and suffer a severe setback.

The beauties continued to perform their 'soft bone' techniques and dance, attracting thunderous applause.

After the circus group has left, the various guests are still talking among themselves and could not seem to forget the lasting impression of the 'soft bone' beauties.

Lu Buwei stood up again and everyone quietened down in anticipation of a good show.

Nearly a thousand pairs of eyes are staring at this huge risk-taker.

Lu Buwei dryly cough and was about to speak when Lao Ai stood up with a grin. Paying his respects to Lu Buwei, Lao Ai smiled at the bewildered guests: "If I did not guess incorrectly, Premier Mentor is going to announce the duel between Official Xiang and Official Guan."

Lu Buwei chuckled: "Official Lao truly know me well. You are absolutely correct. May I know if you have anything important to say?"

Lu Buwei's tone is very sarcastic, secretly warning Lao Ai that he is what he is

because of Zhu Ji's support. If not, he'll be a dead man by now.

Even if Lao Ai is unhappy, it did not show on his face. He plainly suggested: "Good things come in pairs. We should have some appetizers before the main dish. Why don't we have a duel between your family warriors and mine? It can add to the excitement of the main duel. What does Premier Mentor think?"

None of the guests expected Lao Ai to abruptly stand out and challenge Lu Buwei. The people of Qin love fights and duelling is common during banquets. Most of them began to cheer loudly in support.

Xiao Pan saw that Lao Ai spoke up without consulting his opinion first. He knows that with Zhu Ji's support, Lao Ai does not hold himself in high regard and is even more arrogant than Lu Buwei. His mind began to detest this man even more.

Wu Yingyuan whispered to Xiang Shaolong: "Lao Ai wants a piece of the action."

Xiang Shaolong smiled knowingly.

He naturally understood what Wu Yingyuan meant.

Since the rise of the warlords in the Zhou Dynasty, it became popular to recruit and house family warriors as a show of might. Besides having talented men to assist oneself, it is also a status symbol.

It is also common for the family warriors of different warlords to engage each other in friendly competitions.

With Zhu Ji's support, Lao Ai's influence has been growing exponentially. He wanted to use this platform as an opportunity for himself to showcase his might and gain recognition and fame. If his own warrior can defeat Lu Buwei's warrior, the value of the warrior will go up and it will also look good on him, killing two birds with one stone.

To a certain extent, Lao Ai believes that Guan Zhongxie has a higher chance of winning the duel. If he can clock his own victory, even if Guan Zhongxie really defeated Xiang Shaolong, Guan Zhongxie is not the sole winner tonight. Lao Ai himself will have a winner too and ruin the perfect winning dream of Lu Buwei.

Xiang Shaolong scanned the expressions of Lao Ai's followers and noticed that Ling Qi's expression is slightly abnormal. He immediately knew that this scheme is hatched from his brain and reminded himself to be extra cautious of this man.

Lu Buwei chuckled again and seems to have seen through Lao Ai's intention. He turned around and bowed to Xiao Pan: "Friendly competitions can add to the excitement and liveliness of the banquet. It can also showcase our talents of Qin. Will the Crown Prince please approve."

Lao Ai and Zhu Ji's face lost some colour, knowing that Lu Buwei intentionally asked Xiao Pan for permission because of ill intentions. He wanted to increase the discontentment between Zhu Ji, Lao Ai and Xiao Pan. He

behaves as if he is the only one who respects Xiao Pan.

The whole hall quietened down and the thousand pairs of eyes are now staring at this future Qin Shi Huang.

Xiao Pan was smart enough to ignore Lu Buwei's intrinsic meaning. Grinning, he faced Lao Ai and asked: "Who is Subject Lao sending out to show his expert sword skills?"

Han Jie stood up and strode towards the centre of the hall. Kneeling down, he reported: "I am Han Jie from Inner Custodian Residence. Will Empress and Crown Prince grant me the permission to fight."

His words hint of arrogance and he emphasized Zhu Ji's title, openly opposing Lu Buwei lack of consideration for Zhu Ji earlier.

For the past month, Han Jie is gaining some reputation in Xianyang City and he is almost as famous as Xiang Shaolong and Guan Zhongxie. Every guest is thrilled to see him stepping out to fight and cheered even louder.

Lu Buwei smiled slightly and sat down.

Xiao Pan faced Zhu Ji and proposed: "Will Empress please decide."

With his words, everyone became even more excited. This 'appetizer' fight is definitely taking place. After all, Zhu Ji will not go against the wishes of her favourite subject Lao Ai.

As anticipated, Zhu Ji softly consented: “Han Jie is one of the best students of Ji Xia Sword Saint Mister Wang You, Cao Quidao. Your swordsmanship must be unparalleled. However, Premier Mentor Residence has no lack of talent. Please send your best man and make Mister Han exhibit his top skills, giving us the chance to marvel at his proficiency.”

Teng Yi saw that Zhu Ji is obviously supporting Lao Ai and putting Lu Buwei down. Even though he has no good feelings for Lu Buwei, he could not help but whispered to Xiang Shaolong: “How I wish I can go up there myself and kick Han Jie that d@mn turtle’s sorry @ss.”

Amused, Xiang Shaolong replied: “Second Brother will have your chance. Why not use this chance to see what wondrous skill this d@mn turtle has?”

Jing Jun affirmed: “I am confident Traitor Lu will send Xu Shang out. Except for him and Guan Zhongxie, there is no one who can match the d@mn turtle’s skills.”

Besides the three of them, all the other guests are also speculating who will be the representative from Lu Buwei’s side.

The outcome of this fight will affect Lu Buwei’s standing and prestige. Lu Buwei will have to make a careful choice.

True enough, Lu Buwei’s eyes rested on Xu Shang. Without prior notice, Xu Shang’s martial brother Lian Jiao coldly snorted and stood up, bowing: “Will Premier Mentor please allow me to fight on your behalf.”

Lian Jiao is also considered a hot favourite among the expert swordsmen in Qin. He displayed his skills on many occasions and has helped Lu Buwei won many battles. Seeing him volunteering to fight, everyone cheered loudly for him.

Apparently, Lu Buwei has confidence in him too. He approved with a nod: "All right. Remember, this is a friendly match."

Guan Zhongxie and Xu Shang frowned at the same time, showing their lack of confidence in Lian Jiao.

Drumbeats are being sounded.

Everyone knows that a good fight is about to happen.

Both men stood several feet away from each other and are lined up so that Zhu Ji, Xiao Pan and Lu Buwei can see both of the equally well from the hosting tables. Both men paid their respects to the hosts before quickly turning around and facing each other. The four eyes met one another.

Normally, Han Jie maintains a proud look but presently, he is like a completely different person. He looks extremely serious and focused all his energy in assessing his opponent. He did not show the least sign of underestimating his opponent.

His right hand is holding onto his sword hilt in a firm but relaxed manner. His legs are apart and he looked as steady as a mountain. He did not strike any fighting pose but his simple standing there has already given everyone the

impression of a terrifying expert swordsman.

Even Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi are secretly rooting for him.

His eyes became as sharp as a sword and he showed no signs of emotion, making him appear to be a deeply mysterious and unfathomable character.

The hall is so quiet one can hear a pin drop. Everyone held their breaths in silence and did not show any signs of impatience. It is not that everyone is patient tonight but somehow, the immobile Han Jie's fighting aura has already filled the hall and stifled everyone.

The stifling aura conveys one clear message: He will not attack unnecessarily but if he attacks, it will be an earth shattering attack with ultimate strength and precision.

Across Wu Yingyuan's back, Teng Yi wondered: "This kid is Shan Rou's martial disciple. Why are their sword styles so different?"

Xiang Shaolong had just exchanged a knowing look with Ji Yanran. Hearing his words, he explained: "Since Cao Quidao can train two completely different students according to their abilities, we have to accept that he is already at Grandmaster level."

Teng Yi nodded in agreement.

An ordinary Sword Master will only know how to impart his own skills to his disciples and create copies of himself.

Only someone who has transcended all sword skills can teach according to the aptitudes, strengths and shortcomings of his students.

Shan Rou's strength lies in speed and her sword styles focused on agility.

Han Jie's forte is his steadiness so his sword attacks are ruthless.

From these two person's accomplishments, one can know the unparalleled level of swordsmanship Cao Quidao has attained.

Opposite him, the usually insolent Lian Jiao is equally serious in this life-and-death situation. He waits patiently for Han Jie's first move.

On the surface, there is no sign of him losing out in terms of fighting spirit. His long sword has been drawn and held horizontally in front of his chest. However, everyone can feel that he is inferior compared to Han Jie who hasn't even drawn his sword.

After some time, both men are still waiting for each other to move first. Out of a sudden, Han Jie moved slightly forward, like a hunter who is looking for the weakness of his prey. His eyes grew even sharper and he stared unblinkingly at Lian Jiao.

Although the distance between the two men is still about the same as before, it felt like Han Jie had already made the first move. It is a feeling that cannot be put into words.

Finally, Lian Jiao can no longer withstand Han Jie's pressure and reacted.

With a loud roar, the sword in his hand began to move. Matching it with precise footwork, he closed the distance between him and Han Jie.

After a few fake moves, the sword eventually cumulated in a strike at Han Jie's right hand that is holding onto the sword hilt.

In the eyes of the experienced swordsmen, Lian Jiao's every move can be used to deceive the enemy and increase his own ferocity. His sword moves have reached the peak in terms of attacking strength management.

He is also wise in attacking his opponent's hand directly. This way, it is more difficult for Han Jie to pull out his sword to counter attack.

Even if Han Jie does not suffer any heavy injury, a small mistake during a duel of expert swordsmen can be the cause for failure. In conclusion, Lian Jiao is worthy of being classified as a top expert swordsman based on his sword skill and attacking strategy.

Even Xiang Shaolong felt that Han Jie has underestimated his opponent and is feeling sorry for him.

JIANG!

Using his right foot, Han Jie stepped forward by one step and his body is in an odd position. His sword slid out in a bright shimmering flash. In the split second that was too close for comfort, he managed to use his half-drawn sword to block Lian Jiao devastating blow.

Never in his wildest dreams did Lian Jiao expect such a bizarre move from Han Jie. He could not change his attack as he had put in all his effort.

Han Jie actually took another step forward and hit out with his right shoulder, knocking squarely into Lian Jiao's chest. Using his right hand, he forcefully pushed his sword back into the sheath. The tip of Lian Jiao's sword is locked in a grip between the sheath and Han Jie's sword.

Everyone present is thoroughly shaken. This kind of swordplay is indeed rare and unique.

Of course Lian Jiao's sword can still be retrieved but his attacking aura has completely dissipated. After receiving the blow on his chest, it is even more embarrassing for Lian Jiao. Pulling back his sword, Lian Jiao hurriedly retreated.

An overwhelming attack has been totally negated and Lian Jiao has lost his first-mover advantage.

JIANG!

Han Jie's smooth and sharp blade finally left its sheath.

As long as one is not blind, anyone can tell that this is a priceless and exquisite weapon.

Xiang Shaolong had to admit that Han Jie's sword is even better than Bloodwave which is given to him by Li Mu.

Teng Yi sighed: “Lian Jiao is finished!”

“Stop!”

Everyone was stunned.

Originally, Han Jie’s sword is about to press on with an attack but after hearing this command, he sheathe his sword.

Lian Jiao is still heavily pressured by Han Jie’s aura and took seven consecutive steps back. Although he has yet to lose officially, anyone can tell that he is at a serious disadvantage.

After everyone collected themselves and look for the speaker, they discovered that it is Guan Zhongxie.

Guan Zhongxie heartily laughed: “Brother Han, may I know who is the blacksmith who forged your sword is and what is its name?”

If it was anyone else, the crowd would have jeered and protested, saying that Guan Zhongxie is trying to help Lian Jiao as they belong to the same gang. But Guan Zhongxie has an unassuming air around him so no one will hold it against him for having ulterior motives.

So happens that Han Jie is facing Guan Zhongxie anyway. He smiled once and drew his sword again. He unexpectedly threw his sword towards Guan Zhongxie. Due to his special throwing method, by the time the sword is about three feet away from Guan Zhongxie, the sword hilt is facing towards Guan

Zhongxie.

Under the dazed expression of the crowd, Guan Zhongxie comfortably stretched out his hand and formed a tiger claw with his thumb facing down. He caught the sword precisely without any hesitation.

Time seems to have stop in its tracks.

The conceited aura of the sword has been dissolved as it lay obediently in Guan Zhongxie's hands.

Holding the sword horizontally in front of his eyes, Guan Zhongxie could not help but praise.

Witnessing Guan Zhongxie's skill in catching his flying sword, Han Jie is slightly agitated like everyone else. He smiled: "The sword is named Breaking Armies and is one of the ten swords in my Master's collection. It is forged by Ouyezi."

The crowd began to mumble among themselves.

Ouyezi is a master forger and he is only second to Gan Jiang Mo Xie couple in terms of sword forgery. The sword is worth a king's ransom.

Lian Jiao is in an awkward position. Standing there, he can neither retreat nor attack.

After admiring the sword for some time, Guan Zhongxie threw the sword

back at Han Jie, smiling: “The sword is good but the swordsman is great. My martial brother has lost this round. In the future, I will definitely seek your advice.”

Everyone began to clap loudly. The applause are not for Han Jie’s unassailable sword skills but for Guan Zhongxie’s magnanimous handling of the situation

Lao Ai and his men naturally felt uncomfortable.

Xiang Shaolong and his men are full of admiration. In one move, Guan Zhongxie pacified the crowd, saved Lian Jiao’s life and put down Han Jie’s arrogance, killing three birds in one stone. Only he has this kind of ability.

All the guests unconsciously looked at Guan Zhongxie, followed by Xiang Shaolong. In a way, Guan Zhongxie has gain an edge over Xiang Shaolong and Xiang Shaolong is temporarily a forgotten hero.

Lu Buwei is extremely pleased with the turn of events; from a potential loss of life and face to a neutral conclusion. Raising his cup, he toasted: “Come! Let’s drink to this extraordinary fight!”

Amidst the loud cheering, everyone toasted in return.

Without saying another word, Lian Jiao returned to his seat.

Han Jie received a cup of wine from an attendant and drank it like the victor before returning to his seat. He continued to put on the airs of someone who

has won the fight.

Lu Buwei is about to say something else when Guoxin abruptly stood up from his seat behind Lao Ai. After paying his respects to the hosts, he loudly declared: “The earlier battle was thrilling but not thrilling enough. I am interested to fight as well and would like to challenge someone to add to the liveliness. Will Empress, Crown Prince and Premier Mentor please give me your consent.”

Hearing his words, the crowd turned silent and everyone has the same question on his mind: Who does he want to challenge?

Even Lao Ai frowned, indicating that the matter has not been approved by him.

Only Qiu Risheng and the other members of Weinan Martial Arts School have a look of preparedness on their faces. Needless to say, they have planned for this a long time ago and wanted to use this golden opportunity to bring fame and glory to the school.

Xiang Shaolong has a sudden realization and knows the identity of the person Guoxin wanted to challenge.

Chapter 10

Repaying Enmity with Kindness

Within Lao Ai's faction, there are some differences between those personally recruited by Lao Ai and those who are under the banner of the Weinan Martial Arts School.

They had existed before Lao Ai and have been a reputable organization within Qin.

Qiu Risheng has to work with Lao Ai because he had offended Lu Buwei. With the downfall of Lord Yangquan, they have to close down and stay hidden for some time. In actual fact, they are a force worth reckoning with and they maintain close ties with the Qin military.

In an agreement with mutual benefits, they relied on Lao Ai's backing to reopen their martial arts school and Lao Ai's influence grew tremendously because of their connections.

This is only a win-win partnership without a dominant party.

They have long planned for Guoxin to come out and fight to regain the former glory of the martial arts school but even Lao Ai has been kept in the dark until the last moment.

Xiang Shaolong managed to deduce all these just by observing the different

expressions of Lao Ai and Qiu Risheng.

Lu Buwei saw that Guoxin is so insistent on fighting somebody and assumed that it will be against another member of his family warriors. He was secretly glad and no matter what, he will send out Xu Shang whose sword skill is almost as good as Guan Zhongxie. Xu Shang will definitely emerge victorious and at the same time, put down the arrogance of Lao Ai and Qiu Risheng.

Full of enthusiasm, he forgot to seek Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan's advice. Lu Buwei laughed: "Mister Guo is a worthy hero indeed. May I know who do you want to challenge?" Guoxin bowed again and his eyes swept over the different faces of the guests. His gaze finally resting on Jing Jun's face, he coldly mentioned: "I wish to seek pointers from Assistant Commander Jing."

The moment he said these words, the crowd erupted into an uproar.

Jing Jun was initially surprised followed by extreme delight. He was about to answer the challenge when an angelic voice called out: "No way, this fight is mine!" Everyone including Guoxin looked at the speaker and was swept off their feet.

The speaker is none other Ji Yanran who beauty is mentioned in the same breath as Qin Qing.

All the guests acknowledged that Ji Yanran is highly skilled but knowledge is just knowledge. It is hard to imagine such a fine and delicate lady can match up to a man in terms of rough fighting.

Guoxin is one of the most prominent swordsmen under Headmaster Qiu Risheng and his fame is quite widespread too. But regardless of Talented Lady's ability, her stamina and strength would be inferior to Guoxin, causing everyone to be concerned for her.

Jing Jun naturally cannot let his sister in law take this risk. Just as he was about to protest, Teng Yi restrained him.

Guoxin is feeling awkward too and stared blankly at Ji Yanran for some time before commenting with some difficulty: "Ai, Talented Lady Ji is of royal birth and status. I dared not offend you. Hei!"

Xiang Shaolong is not surprised at all with Ji Yanran's intervention. Two days ago, she had learnt about Guoxin slandering Xiang Shaolong and blew her top, promising to teach Guoxin a lesson. She will definitely not let such an opportunity slip by.

Concurrently, he noticed Zhu Ji staring at Ji Yanran with hatred and jealousy.

All the guests kept quiet and awaited further developments.

Still maintaining her charming and leisurely appearance unlike someone who is preparing for a fight; Ji Yanran smiled sweetly at Xiang Shaolong first and slowly stood up from her seat, taking her time to walk to the centre of the hall.

Under normal circumstances, people will try to avoid looking straight at her because it is considered rude. Now, everyone is spending every second

scrutinizing her and relishing her peerless beauty.

Ji Yanran first paid her respects to the hosts Xiao Pan, Zhu Ji and Lu Buwei and took off her exquisite outer robe and discarded it on the floor. Beneath her robe is her ultimate voluptuous figure in a body-hugging white warrior suit.

The crowd went wild.

Xiang Shaolong recalled the time when they were pursued by Du Bi. Du Bi had given strict orders for the live capture of Ji Yanran and Xiang Shaolong took this chance to peep at him. Like all others, Du Bi is totally fixated on Ji Yanran. Beside him, Po Hu is looking so hard that his eyeballs are nearly dropping out of their sockets. In fact, he was salivating.

Xiang Shaolong had a revelation. Regardless of their gender, everyone present is absolutely overwhelmed by Ji Yanran's grandeur.

In her melodious voice, Ji Yanran warned: "Mister Guo should not underestimate me because of my gender or you will live to regret it. Don't say I didn't warn you beforehand. Bring me my spear."

Wu Guang who is in charge of safeguarding the Flying Dragon Spear hurriedly untied the bundle holding the spear.

After his eyes feasted on Ji Yanran's beauty, Guoxin is mesmerized too and his body became soft. He sighed: "Consider this match to be my loss. There is no way I can bring myself to attack you."

Catching the Flying Dragon Spear thrown to her by Wu Guang, Ji Yanran ignored Guoxin's remark and began twirling the spear around, creating a trail of spear shadows. She followed up with a series of spear strokes that sent spear flashes everywhere around her ever moving body. After her demonstration, she finally stopped in an attacking pose with the spear horizontally across her chest.

Thunderous cheers erupted from the crowd and even Xiao Pan and Lu Buwei are clapping hard for her.

Guoxin's face instantly turned serious.

Seeing is believing.

He finally acknowledged that Ji Yanran's reputation is not undeserved.

The members of the Weinan Martial Arts School including Qiu Risheng exchanged looks of amazement. They had to admit that they would be in a difficult position if they are in the shoes of Guoxin. None of them has any idea on how to overcome such a potent spear skill.

Letting out a long laugh and gaining everyone's attention in the process, Po Hu addressed: "No matter who is fighting against her, this person will lose for sure. Who in this room will harden his heart to attack Talented Lady Ji with all his might!?" Many people clapped in response, supporting Po Hu's reasoning.

Without even looking at the conceited Po Hu, Ji Yanran smiled lightly: "If this is the case, I will invite Mister Guo to block ten spear attacks from me. If I

failed to defeat you by then, then you are considered the winner.”

No one among the guests would want to see her injured but at the same time, everyone wanted to see her formidable skills. The hall began to cheer upon hearing her suggestion.

Teng Yi softly laughed: “Guoxin is in trouble!” Xiang Shaolong nodded in agreement. If he was Guoxin and can only defend without attacking, he will be easily defeated in three strokes.

Before Guoxin has the chance to reply, Xiao Pan icily indicated: “Mister Guo is the one who ask to fight, now that a challenger has appeared, Mister Guo should not shy away. If Mister Guo cannot block the ten spear attacks, you shall be banned for life from holding any official appointments. Mister Guo should know what to do.”

Hearing this, Qiu Risheng and his men’s faces changed colour.

People join the Weinan Martial Arts School to be trained and eventually hope to be talent-spotted and promoted to a military post. If Guoxin is banned for life, his future is as good as gone.

Everyone immediately understood that Xiao Pan is angry over Guoxin’s challenge towards Xiang Shaolong’s men. At the same time, they can feel the insufferable dominance of this future Qin Shi Huang.

Lao Ai and Zhu Ji exchanged a look and detect each other’s shock and resentment.

Because of Lao Ai, Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan are drifting further and further apart.

This time round, Lao Ai has suffered a big setback. His biggest issue now is neither Lu Buwei nor Xiang Shaolong. If he says he is not bothered by Qiu Risheng and his men, he is lying with his eyes wide open.

All these information and analysis are secretly observed and assimilated by Xiang Shaolong who is eyeing them all these time. In the future, he can use this data to create a wedge between Weinan Martial Arts School and Lao Ai.

Guoxin bowed and drew his sword with a loud JIANG! Facing Ji Yanran, he respectfully invited: “Miss Yanran, please give me some pointers.”

Ji Yanran plainly state: “My ten spear attacks will only attack your sword and not any part of your body. Mister can do your best to defend without any reservations.”

Everyone including Guoxin was initially shocked and the feeling is soon replaced by respect. Everyone can feel Ji Yanran’s compassion.

Anyone with eyes can tell that Ji Yanran’s spear skill is something out of this world. Moreover, the spear is a long weapon that can be used to attack the enemy from a distance. Due to the strong attacking nature of a spear, a purely-defending swordsman is at a serious disadvantage.

Guoxin may be Ji Yanran’s sworn enemy because he slandered Xiang Shaolong but because this fight concerns Guoxin’s future, Ji Yanran intentionally gave him some leeway. Guoxin can do his best to defend

without guarding the vital areas of his body. Guoxin's rate of success has greatly increased without this restriction.

From another point of view, Ji Yanran is going against Xiao Pan's wishes and will not use this fight to make Guoxin lose his reputation and lifelong career. From this, one can conclude the independent mindset of this beauty. She will not allow anyone to violate her life principles.

At the end of the day, Guoxin and his men are not like Lu Buwei who has irreconcilable hatred with Xiang Shaolong.

Seated among the guests, Qiu Risheng's face darkened. He gave a cold snort and does not appreciate Ji Yanran's kindness.

On the other hand, Guoxin's face is filled with appreciation. Bowing deeply to Ji Yanran, he struck a pose and invited: "I await Miss's pointers." The crowd turned silent in anticipation of Talented Lady Ji's first move.

Guests from the other two halls are all squeezing into the main hall to catch a glimpse of the fight. The main hall is fully crowded to the brim.

Tonight has been a night of many unexpected surprises and no one can predict what will happen next.

Ji Yanran may have 'disobeyed' Xiao Pan's wishes but she is Xiang Shaolong's wife and is one of the ladies Xiao Pan admired the most so this Crown Prince of Qin is not bothered by her leniency but is eagerly waiting for the battle to start too.

The jealousy in Zhu Ji's eyes became more significant.

Birds of a feather flock together. After Zhu Ji got together with a despicable man like Lao Ai, she is beginning to turn to the dark side.

Lu Buwei's hatred for Guoxin deepened.

Earlier, Guan Zhongxie had brilliantly salvaged the situation and put down Lao Ai's arrogance and things are proceeding smoothly. After Guan Zhongxie kills Xiang Shaolong, tonight will be his best night ever.

With Guoxin appearing out of nowhere and instigating Talented Lady Ji into a fight, Xiang Shaolong and his men are now looking good whereas he and Lao Ai have disappeared into the shadows.

Sitting besides Guan Zhongxie, Lu Niang Rong is looking blankly at Ji Yanran and she felt an unexplained sense of loss. Under the table, Guan Zhongxie's hand snaked over undetected and held onto her tender hand.

Lu Niang Rong was shaken. In her mind, she imagined that this will probably be the hand that will kill Xiang Shaolong and could not help but turned her head towards Xiang Shaolong. She could tell that he is staring at his attractive wife with deep love and is totally unconcerned about herself. Feeling even more despair, she wretched her hand from Guan Zhongxie's grasp.

DANG! The sound of the sword and spear clashing resonated throughout the hall.

Talented Lady Ji had finally attacked.

Like a lightning bolt, the long spear shot out from Ji Yanran's hand and it is flying in the direction of Guoxin's face, albeit higher. The spearhead flew past Guoxin's hair bun, indicating the beginning of the fight.

If Guoxin can make a guess about Ji Yanran's first attack, he will think that based on her agile spear play, she will try to trick him with some false moves, forcing him to be unable to defend himself properly and retreat accordingly. When he retreats backwards, he will lose the strong support of his feet to meet the spear attack head on.

As a matter of fact, Ji Yanran's earlier demonstration has left a strong impression in Guoxin's mind, teaching him that a simple and straight spear can have many attacking variations.

Ji Yanran's Flying Dragon Spear is different from other spears mainly because it is entirely made of best quality steel and does not have the spring effect of normal wooden spears. The spear is also heavier and cannot be easily cut into two. During a piercing attack, the speed can be incredibly fast with the support of its heavy weight. Since Guoxin is defending, he expected a devastating first attack. He did his best to defend himself and when he discovered that the blow wasn't as strong as he expected, he was filled with fear and panic. In the split second, he steadied his horse stance and swung his sword up, clashing with the spear.

Guan Zhongxie is secretly overjoyed and he focused all his attention on this special spear skill.

It is well known that Xiang Shaolong is not well versed with the spear. If he is using the spear to fight Guan Zhongxie, it is natural that he will have to learn his spear skills from Talented Lady Ji. This is a rare opportunity for Guan Zhongxie to witness and understand her spear skill and it is as good as watching Xiang Shaolong in battle. When he finds a weakness in the spear skill, he can make use of it to gain victory.

Although Guoxin's sword has flown up and made contact with the spear, he continued to feel helpless about his situation.

This is something totally illogical but logical too.

The long spear was deflected and it flew up a little.

Under such a situation, Guoxin should make use of Ji Yanran's proximity to attack since the close distance between them has eroded the advantage of the long weapon. However, Guoxin can only defend so he can only let this opportunity slip by.

Under the gaze of over a thousand pairs of eyes, Ji Yanran employed a special footwork and twisted her waist, quickly retrieving the Flying Dragon Spear. When she held onto the spear again with both hands, she sent the spear flying out again using the strength from her horse stance.

Due to his wrong estimation of the earlier attack, Guoxin's long sword is still suspended in mid air from the strong momentum. He became the slower person to fully control his weapon while the Flying Dragon Spear is shooting towards him like a poisonous snake, aiming for his sword sheath.

Finally comprehending the might of Ji Yanran's spear skill, Guoxin was forced to step back and sideways to avoid losing.

The crowd went mad with cheers except for Lao Ai's men and Weinan Martial Arts students who are sitting there in silence. All the guests are rooting for Ji Yanran. Jing Jun, Wu Yan Zhu, Lord Changping, Xiang Shaolong and all their followers are shouting themselves hoarse.

Gazing at this attractive and enticing beauty, Xiang Shaolong felt exceedingly proud and satisfied to be her husband and he was utterly inebriated.

Even he did not expect Guoxin to falter as early as the second spear attack.

There was a lovely smile on Ji Yanran's face which makes others feel at ease but the spear in her hands is certainly unfriendly. Under her quick steps, the piercing spear changed directions and is now attacking an empty spot on Guoxin's right.

Everyone including Guoxin was taken aback, not understanding the reason behind such a bizarre attack.

Beyond comprehension, Ji Yanran took another two steps forward and placed the body of the spear tightly against her waist. Her body begin to spin around speedily and using the power of rotation, the piercing spear attack became a sweeping attack. Again, the target is Guoxin's sword sheath.

If Guoxin is hit by the sweeping attack, he will surely fall flat on his face but there will be no major injuries so Ji Yanran is not breaking her promise.

The crowd is simply mesmerized.

Every one of Ji Yanran's spear attack is unpredicted yet pleasing to the eye.

The fluid movements of her body and her relentless energy captivated everyone.

Guoxin had lost out on the first two strokes and had wanted to fight Ji Yanran face on, relying on his manly strength to counter her feminine blow. This is the best way for him to match her ever-powerful spear attacks.

But faced with the overpowering rotation strength of her sweeping attack, Guoxin can only abandon this idea and react accordingly. His long sword sliced down from the top towards the Flying Dragon Spear. At the same time, he had to take another step back.

When the two weapons are about to make contact, the Flying Dragon spear abruptly bounced up and transformed into a multitude of several agile spear images. Like a tsunami, the spear images crushed down towards Guoxin's face.

Even an expert like Guan Zhongxie has to concede that this spear skill is truly awesome. The others are cheering even louder for Ji Yanran. The whole hall is reverberating with the mad shouts and wild cheering of her supporters and the atmosphere has reached a feverish pitch.

DANG! Guoxin is considered skilful enough to pick out the real spear among all the spear images and flashes. However, he had to change his sword

movement to block the spear and his strength is limited. After the clash, he was forced to take another step back and his arm is numb with pain.

By now, Ji Yanran has attacked four times and Guoxin has been at a disadvantage every time. Strictly speaking, he has failed to appropriately defend himself. He may have yet to lose the fight but all his reputation has gone down the drain.

Guoxin secretly thought that if this carries on, he will surely lose hold of his sword after another two blows. Gritting his teeth, he hurriedly retreated to a spacious corner of the open area.

The crowd jeered noisily at his cowardice.

But this is the best way out for him.

Ji Yanran has the fight completely under her control and is toying around with Guoxin. The last resort for him is to retreat away from the attacking range of the spear and consolidate his strength and maintain his horse stance. Simultaneously, he can let his numb and tortured hand get a quick rest.

Letting out a shrill cry, Ji Yanran rolled forward and with her left hand holding tightly to the end of the Flying Dragon Spear, she used the force generated by the spear head against the floor to spring up, following the retreating Guoxin like a shadow and aiming for his sword sheath.

The top experts like Guan Zhongxie, Han Jie and Xu Shang were full of

admiration. It was noteworthy that by using the strength of the spear against the floor, Ji Yanran managed to make the impossible possible.

This attack will not hurt Guoxin but once the sword sheath is hit, he is considered to have lost the fight.

Guoxin is completely bowled over. At his wits' end, he desperately made a back flip.

Everyone knew that he has already lost the fight. When Ji Yanran sprang up from the floor, the fumbling Guoxin can only hatefully await the next spear attack to end his livelihood.

Qiu Risheng and his men could not bear to watch any further.

The reputation of Weinan Martial Arts School has been eradicated. In the future, no one will trust them as the premier swordsmen training institute of Qin. Just when Guoxin has given up resisting, Ji Yanran stood still with the spear behind her back, her aura changing from a strong attacker to a silent onlooker. Coupled with her calm and laid-back disposition, she had everyone infatuated.

After landing on the floor, Guoxin took another three steps back and held his sword at chest level. His chest is rising and falling very quickly as he stared at his gorgeous opponent with astonishment.

This unparallel beauty is still going strong and steady. She smiled: "I have attacked five times and Mister has defended five times. I have been gaining

the upper hand as Mister has kept his word and did not counterattack at all. Why don't we end our fight here and declare it a draw?"

Xiao Pan stood up clapping and laughed: "Talented Lady Ji indeed. I am fully convinced by your capabilities and from this day onwards, you will be my Grand Tutor."

Turning to Guoxin, he proclaimed: "Mister Guo has followed my orders and defended himself well without attacking. This is not something easy to achieve. I hereby promote you to be the third Assistant Imperial Cavalry Commander under Commander Xiang."

A delighted Ji Yanran and a guilty-looking Guoxin kneeled down to give their thanks.

Xiang Shaolong is filled with wonder and comfort at the same time.

Xiao Pan has finally grown up. Not only has he been able to see through the gains-seeking partnership of Weinan Martial Arts School and Lao Ai, he can control his emotions and employ such a unique method to pull Guoxin to his side. This is not something any man can easily accomplish.

Nobody expected the fight to have such a happy ending. Loud cheers are heard from all four corners of the hall and everyone is cheering for Ji Yanran.

The people were chanting "Talented Lady" without any rest.

Only Qiu Risheng still has an ugly expression on his face and ferociousness in

his eyes. He remained silent.

Also full of hatred, Lu Buwei secretly thought that as long as Xiang Shaolong is killed, the rest don't really matter. Standing up again, he loudly laughed: "I think it is time for the main dish." The thousand over guests quietened down at once and turned their attention to this powerful Qin official.

Chapter 11

Clash of the Titans 2

Lu Buwei was slightly hesitant to announce the commencement of the duel between Xiang Shaolong and Guan Zhongxie. To him, it is as good as announcing the death of Xiang Shaolong. Like a bolt from the blue, Lu Niang Rong jumped up from her seat and firmly declared: “There is no need to compete any more. I have decided to disappoint Official Xiang and marry Zhongxie.”

The moment she finished her words, Lu Buwei’s smile was erased from his face.

Guan Zhongxie was thoroughly shaken and his eyes were shining brightly, looking at Xiang Shaolong who is staring at Lu Niang Rong with shock. This normally composed man has evidently lost his bearings.

All the guests are exchanging looks of surprises with one another.

In this case, the widely anticipated battle is as good as cancelled.

Disappointment is written all over the faces of Du Bi and Lao Ai because they will only stand to gain regardless of the duel result.

Ying Ying, Lord Changping, Wang Ci and the others can feel a huge burden off their chests as they sighed with relief.

Qin has strict laws prohibiting private duels between military commanders and both Xiang Shaolong and Guan Zhongxie are military commanders. Even Xiao Pan who wanted Xiang Shaolong to kill Guan Zhongxie had to stick to this rule and suffer the disappointment. If he insisted on their duel, it will be impossible to enforce this law in the future. The banquet hall is momentarily silent.

Lu Niang Rong sat down in her seat with her head lowered. Her chest is rising up and down very quickly, betraying her emotional state.

After staring at Lu Niang Rong for some time, Xiang Shaolong did not know whether to be angry or amused. He acknowledged that he had offended her earlier so she is now retaliating by making him lose face in front of everyone by using her marriage as an excuse.

At the end of the day, just like Ying Ying, she favours Guan Zhongxie.

Lu Buwei is so incensed his face has turned completely red. Staring viciously at Lu Niang Rong briefly, he rolled his eyeballs and sat down with a chuckle. To Xiao Pan sitting on his right, he sighed: "Kids can never make up their mind but since I had given my word, I think I should decide or I would be deceiving the world. What does Crown Prince think?" Lu Niang Rong trembled strongly and raised her head. Just as she was about to say something, Guan Zhongxie grabbed her hand below the table and whispered into her ear: "Niang Rong should stop making things difficult for Premier Mentor."

Lu Niang Rong was stunned and secretly peeped at Xiang Shaolong before

lowering her head again.

Xiao Pan calmly replied: “Premier Mentor’s words cannot be taken lightly indeed. Moreover, it is common for people to choose a spouse by holding a martial arts competition. If Premier Mentor believes that the fight should not be cancelled and Empress has no objections; I will fully support your decision.”

Everyone’s gaze fell onto Zhu Ji, awaiting her reply. The tension in the air is like a drawn bow.

The every-powerful Empress of Qin has complicated emotions shining from her eyes. She took a good look at Lao Ai before shifting her gaze to Xiang Shaolong. Her face suddenly losing colour rapidly, she lowered her head and proclaimed: “As Premier Mentor has recommended, the duel between Subject Guan and Subject Xiang shall proceed as normal.”

The air is filled with loud cheering as the atmosphere began to resume the earlier enthusiasm.

On the other hand, Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart being sliced into two, knowing that between him and Lao Ai, Zhu Ji has unreservedly dedicated her entire future to Lao Ai.

Whoever that understands Guan Zhongxie’s ability will believe that Xiang Shaolong will lose without question. Zhu Ji’s support of the duel is as good as wishing Guan Zhongxie to eliminate Xiang Shaolong once and for all.

He can only accept fate now that his relationship with Zhu Ji has deteriorated to such a state. Lu Buwei energetic laughter rang out and he barked: "Let the duel begin!" The hall broke out into ear-splitting cheers and applause.

The drumbeats sounded again, adding to the liveliness.

After comforting Lu Niang Rong softly, Guan Zhongxie rose from his seat and the crowd quietened down at once.

Just by simply standing up, this super swordsman whose fame is only second compared to Xiang Shaolong exudes an aura of arrogance, earning the respect and fear of everyone.

Stepping out of his seat, Guan Zhongxie carried a smile as he enjoyed the cheering and scrutiny of the crowd. Reaching the centre of the stage, he stood still at ease and bowed to the hosts: "It is my happiest moment in life to exchange pointers with Official Xiang. I will die with no regrets."

Hearing his valiant words and his indifferent attitude towards death, the crowd became even more roused and were clapping madly and shouting at the top of their voices.

Xiang Shaolong had an ugly expression on his face. It is not so much about the fight but the pain he is undergoing from Zhu Ji's change of heart.

The guests mistook it for fear and were baffled.

Xiang Shaolong took a deep breath and suppressed his surging emotions

before standing up.

He realised that he has been heavily affected by Zhu Ji's 'severing' of relationship.

Xiang Shaolong is someone who values true friendship and relationships. For his friends, he is willing to forsake anything. It is because of this quality that he has won the unwavering trust of Li Yuan, Lord Longyang, Han Chuang and Tu Xian.

Despite his support for Xiao Pan, his devotion to Zhu Ji is strong too. But all he got in return for his dedication is her heartlessness, making him feel that life is meaningless.

Under the gaze of the entire hall, he walked towards Guan Zhongxie and stopped a distance away. After paying his respects to the hosts, he looked straight at Zhu Ji's face.

After their eyes met, Zhu Ji instantly lowered her head.

Converting his sorrow into strength, Xiang Shaolong vigorously laughed: "Bring my sabre!" Hearing the word 'Sabre', everyone was dumbfounded. Guan Zhongxie trembled strongly on the spot and he looked at Xiang Shaolong with his sharp eyes.

Jing Shan walked out and kneeled down, presenting the Hundred Battle Sabre in its sabre scabbard.

Xiang Shaolong took the sabre from him and held it in his left hand.

Cries of surprise can be heard among the guests as everyone is trying to catch a glimpse of the strange looking weapon.

Even Xiao Pan was curious: “What is the weapon Subject Xiang is holding?” Holding his sabre, Xiang Shaolong was rejuvenated on the spot as he fully abandoned all the negative emotions related to Zhu Ji. Brimming with heroism, he vociferously replied: “This is a new weapon I designed myself. It is named Hundred Battle which is taken from Hundred Battles; Hundred Victories proverb from Sun Zi’s Art of War.”

The guests began to discuss among themselves and could not wait for him to draw his weapon out of the scabbard for a good look.

However, Xiang Shaolong did not have the least intention of doing so.

Lu Buwei was blown away: “Didn’t Shaolong say you will fight using the Flying Dragon Spear? Why are you breaking your promise?”

Lord Changping laughingly interceded: “Premier Mentor has misunderstood. All military books advocate ever-changing tactics to take the enemy by surprise every time. Shaolong said that he would use a spear is to cover up his intention to use a sabre and it is an appropriate military strategy. Why did Premier Mentor say he is breaking his promise?”

Lord Changping’s words are firm and steady, stirring up a special emotion among those present.

Lord Changping may be the Left Premier but he lacks the experience and has always been slighted by others. He knows that he lacks the ability as well and dared not be too outspoken and maintained a low profile. Presently, he spoke out righteously and took the initiative to shield Xiang Shaolong. This shows that he is gradually gaining more confidence to assume his rightful position and contend with Lu Buwei.

Xiao Pan would definitely support Lord Changping. He smiled: "Left Premier is right. Official Xiang has created this extraordinary weapon and even I cannot wait to see what it is. If Premier Mentor has nothing to add, I will announce the commencement of the duel."

Suppressing his anger, Lu Buwei swore to go after Lord Changping after Xiang Shaolong has been killed. He solemnly agreed: "Crown Prince, please go ahead!" Shifting his view to the Hundred Battle Sabre Scabbard in Xiang Shaolong's left hand, a pleased Xiao Pan proclaimed: "Begin!" The drums are sounded again.

Everyone began to tense up.

Xiang Shaolong's supporters who did not know about the power of the Hundred Battle Sabre are so nervous their hearts seem to be stuck in their throats.

First, they have no confidence in this new and strange weapon; Second, Xiang Shaolong is known for his sword skills. With this new weapon, he will need to devise a different fighting style and given the short time he has to practise, it is indeed an unwise decision.

Po Hu is the happiest man in the hall. If the duel is called off, at the most, he will have to refund all the gamblers but if Xiang Shaolong wins, he will suffer a huge loss because of Wu Yingyuan exorbitant bet. Seeing that Xiang Shaolong is introducing a new and strange weapon to fight the highly skilled Guan Zhongxie, he was utterly thrilled.

Since ancient times, the sword has been used as a primary weapon and has an irreplaceable status in the minds of everyone. Every warrior would know how to handle a sword first and the sword fighting culture is deeply embedded in society. This is a kind of mindset that nobody can change in a short while.

Except for Ji Yanran and those who knows about the Hundred Battle Sabre, Xiao Pan has the most confidence in Xiang Shaolong. His hero-worship for Xiang Shaolong has begun since he was a child and there is nothing that can convince him otherwise.

The other person who dared not underestimate the Hundred Battle Sabre is Xiang Shaolong's opponent, Guan Zhongxie.

From his acute senses as a top expert swordsman, he can detect the strong confidence and powerful aura that is emitting from Xiang Shaolong the minute he held onto the Hundred Battle Sabre.

The drums gradually stopped.

The banquet hall is completely noiseless except for the sounds of heavy breathing or occasional coughing.

By now, every guest has squeezed themselves into the main hall and there are even people sitting in between the tables.

Both men slowly turned around and faced each other.

Holding onto Longstrike sword sheath, Guan Zhongxie bowed: "Official Xiang is full of surprises every time and you never fail to interest me. Regardless of the duel outcome, I am full of admiration for you."

Xiang Shaolong can feel a sensation from the sabre scabbard.

The scabbard containing the number one sabre of China is no ordinary scabbard. It contains chromium alloy which Uncle Qing formulated. It will not rust and can even be used as a blocking weapon. Guan Zhongxie has no idea about this but Xiang Shaolong will not hide this fact from him too. He smiled back: "Official Guan must be careful. My Hundred Battle Sabre Scabbard can double up as a weapon too."

His eyes flashing with mixed emotions, Guan Zhongxie nodded: "Thanks for reminding me. Please give me some pointers."

Grinning from the corner of his mouth, Xiang Shaolong glimpsed briefly at Lao Ai's men. Han Jie is looking at him so seriously as if he is the one fighting Guan Zhongxie.

A table away, Lu Niang Rong's face is filled with despair and she is looking at them with panic in her eyes. When she caught Xiang Shaolong looking at her, her lips quivered slightly but she did not shy away from his glance.

Finally resting his eyes back on Guan Zhongxie, Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Are you ready?” Guan Zhongxie took three steps back and with a JIANG! He drew Longstrike sword and adopted an attacking stance with the sword diagonally across his chest and the sword tip pointing at Xiang Shaolong.

A gust of strong killing aura instantly enveloped the entire hall and filled everyone’s mind with fear and danger.

JIANG! His eyes shining like electricity, Xiang Shaolong stared hard at Guan Zhongxie. At the same time, he leaned forward slightly and partially drew out the Hundred Battle Sabre. The bright flash of the sabre created an immense fighting pressure that seems to totally surround Guan Zhongxie.

Everyone stopped breathing in anticipation of an earth-shattering fight.

Xiang Shaolong bellowed: “Official Guan, please!” His eyes turning even sharper, Guan Zhongxie seriously replied: “Official Xiang, please!”

Others may be thinking that Guan Zhongxie is being modest but only Xiang Shaolong understands that he is not familiar with the might of the Hundred Battle Sabre and has decided to defend first, countering movement with stillness.

In a low voice, Xiang Shaolong warned: “The Hundred Battle Sabre never loses. Official Guan, please be careful.”

JIANG! The Hundred Battle Sabre finally left its scabbard but not many people are able to see how it looks like.

Nobody has expected this Hundred Battle Sabre to be so domineering.

Even Teng Yi and the rest who have fought against this sabre before could not imagine the sabre to have such an overwhelming effect when used to fight with all of Xiang Shaolong's might.

As everyone look on, the Hundred Battle Sabre exited the scabbard like a flash of rainbow and with Xiang Shaolong's swift advance, it transformed into a lightning attack. The distance between the two men disappeared as the sabre chopped down heavily on Guan Zhongxie.

All the guests were amazed by the attack but yet nobody cry out.

Guan Zhongxie was taken aback at he did not expect an all out first attack from Xiang Shaolong. Shifting a step to his side, he steadied his horse stance and met his blow head on with his own sword.

DANG! The clashing sound resonated throughout the hall.

The whistling sound of the sabre cutting through the air has everyone captivated. When the two weapons met, Guan Zhongxie's body was terribly shaken along with the loud clashing sound. He may have successfully parried Xiang Shaolong devastating blow but it is something that is definitely not easy.

This chopping attack has been executed with every single effort of Xiang Shaolong, creating a terrifying aura. However, the disadvantage is that he cannot follow up quickly with a second blow.

Xiang Shaolong was alarmed too and had assumed that this chop can make Guan Zhongxie move back by at least half a step. However, Guan Zhongxie managed to stay rooted to the spot and absorb the impact of his first blow.

Guan Zhongxie's martial arts have indeed improved vastly. No wonder people who are close to him have been trying to dissuade Xiang Shaolong from fighting him.

Based on Guan Zhongxie's high level of fitness, it is really hard for him to become even better. For him to reach this new level of fitness, Xiang Shaolong is the main reason. Without Xiang Shaolong as a motivation and a form of competition, Guan Zhongxie will never reach his current peak.

After utilising all his strength, Guan Zhongxie managed to block Xiang Shaolong's attack. He thought that he will be in danger if Xiang Shaolong continued with more blows like this. Now that Xiang Shaolong has yet to recover, he made use of his body weight and pushed back at Hundred Battle Sabre with Longstrike Sword.

AO! The friction between the sabre and the sword created an annoying noise. Ultimately, Xiang Shaolong's arm strength is inferior to Guan Zhongxie's and was pushed two steps back.

Ji Yanran and the others lost some colour on their faces. Making full use of this advantage, Guan Zhongxie withdrew Longstrike sword and made another attack at Xiang Shaolong's exposed left side. At the same time, he shifted sideways and exited the attacking range of the Hundred Battle Sabre.

Moreover, Guan Zhongxie is a left-handed swordsman and he has the advantage in terms of angle, speed and strength. He is in a superior position.

Just as Xiang Shaolong's supporters could not bear to look any further and those who hate him or gambled that he will lose are getting ready to go wild with happiness, JIANG! Using his left hand holding the scabbard, Xiang Shaolong executed a Mozi "Defending Attack" move and successfully blocked Guan Zhongxie's killing strike with plenty of energy leftover, forcing Guan Zhongxie to retreat with astonishment.

No matter which side they are on, everyone was stunned at Xiang Shaolong's unexpected move.

Blocking an attack using a scabbard is nothing new but for Xiang Shaolong to use his left hand to block the attack with his scabbard as if it was a weapon is something new and refreshing. There has never been any precedent.

This is a wonder strategy that Xiang Shaolong thought of recently to cover up Hundred Battle Sabre's weakness at defending. Of course, if his opponent is not Guan Zhongxie, Hundred Battle Sabre's forceful attack would have been sufficient to overcome them. But in the earlier scenario, the Hundred Battle Scabbard would serve as an additional protection.

Mozi Swordplay is the best defensive swordplay in the world and it will be a waste not to use it. This swordplay can still be performed by using the Hundred Battle Scabbard.

And this is also possible because chromium has been used in making the

scabbard.

All these conditions have resulted in the present Hundred Battle Sabre Play.

Among all the swordsmen Guan Zhongxie has ever fought, only Xiang Shaolong is able to force him to retreat in the last battle and the present one. He was groaning inside when a flash of sabre appeared in front of his eyes. Like a tsunami, the Hundred Battle Sabre is crushing down on him with ferocity.

DANG! DANG! The sounds of clashing filled the ears of everyone.

Xiang Shaolong began executing his full set of sabre play. In the blink of an eye, he had chopped seven consecutive times at Guan Zhongxie and every chop is performed with the best angle and in the best direction. The chops are swift as lightning strikes and the whistling of the sabre is piercing to the ear. As both weapons continued to clash, given Guan Zhongxie's ability, he was able to maintain his position but can only defend himself from this amazing sabre attacks that has incorporated science and the essence of martial arts all over the world.

Finally, the crowd went wild with their cheering.

The ones who shouted the loudest are the Tian Sisters and the Guardians. They are simply star-struck.

Even top experts like Han Jie and Xu Shang's faces lost colour after witnessing Xiang Shaolong's dominating attacks.

The worst of them is Po Hu. He could not imagine that Xiang Shaolong is a hundred times better than rumoured.

Every time the Hundred Battle Sabre clash with Longstrike sword, Longstrike sword would be deflected slightly, providing a small opening. At the same time, Guan Zhongxie will be shaken by the blow and his steadiness is gradually decreasing.

By the time Guan Zhongxie blocked the seventh blow, he can more or less understand Xiang Shaolong's Hundred Battle Sabre Play. Every chop actually has a weakness but because the chop is too fierce, overwhelming and unpredictable, there is no way he can counter attack.

This is the difference between swords and sabres. A normal sword can defend well but when up against a chopping sabre, moreover it is a newly invented weapon, even Guan Zhongxie would be caught unprepared and be at a huge disadvantage.

The Hundred Battle Sabre is like a combination of a snowstorm and a thunderstorm, manifesting countless flashes of sabre around both men. Every single chop will approach Guan Zhongxie in the most unpredictable direction and angle.

Xiang Shaolong has transformed into an all-powerful mighty immortal and performed his Hundred Battle Sabre Play to its best. He focused primarily on merciless attacks and did not have to worry about any counter attacks.

If Guan Zhongxie can somehow retaliate, the scabbard will be used to block

him with Mozi Swordplay.

The observers can only feel that the sabre play is like a flock of grazing sheep that will go wherever they please. There is neither a beginning point nor an ending point of each chop.

Guan Zhongxie who is on the receiving end of the chops know it better than anyone else.

DANG! Another loud clashing sound rang out. Using his full abilities, Guan Zhongxie blocked another blow from Xiang Shaolong but could not take the blow any more. He staggered two steps backwards and his footwork is in a mess.

Xiang Shaolong knows that this is the moment he has been waiting for. With a loud howl, he took three steps forward, trailing Guan Zhongxie like a shadow. Raising the sabre above his head, he chopped down heavily at the third step towards Guan Zhongxie's forehead.

Still as composed as ever, Guan Zhongxie could not retreat in time and used his sword to block the attack as a last resort.

DANG! The sword and the sabre clashed again.

Unable to withstand the blow, Longstrike Sword was broken into two and just as Hundred Battle Sabre is approaching his forehead, Guan Zhongxie displayed his top martial arts and shifted his head aside.

Sighing, Xiang Shaolong retrieved his sabre and did not attack anymore.

Guan Zhongxie staggered another step back, grasping onto his broken Longstrike sword. A trail of blood can be seen on his forehead which is caused by the sabre energy.

The sounds of cheering died down.

Both men exchanged looks.

Time seems to have stop.

After some time, Guan Zhongxie threw away his broken sword and smiled helplessly. He bowed: "Official Xiang's Hundred Battle Sabre is truly extraordinary. I admit defeat."

He did not praise Xiang Shaolong for his skills but only praised the Hundred Battle Sabre, indicating that he had lost in terms of weaponry and does not fully submit to Xiang Shaolong. But this is indeed a true fact.

Amidst the thunderous applause, Xiao Pan and the others could not help but secretly sighed. If not for the Longstrike Sword breaking into two, Guan Zhongxie will be a lifeless corpse by now.

Lu Buwei is green with shock and he sat there in silence.

There is no more trace of blood left in Lu Niang Rong's face as she stared at both men with a lost expression.

Xiao Pan secretly peeped at Zhu Ji who is maintaining a wooden look. He then smiled: "This fight is truly awesome. Grand Tutor Xiang's invention of the Sabre and Sabre play is so amazing."

Xiang Shaolong and Guan Zhongxie hurriedly paid their respects to Xiao Pan.

Unconsciously, everyone's gaze turned to Lu Buwei, wondering if he will announce the marriage between Lu Niang Rong and Xiang Shaolong.

Just as Lu Buwei was fumbling, Zhu Ji dryly coughed and coldly questioned: "This duel may be hedging on Niang Rong's marriage but they are not literally fighting over her. I suppose we can do away with the marriage agreement. What does Shaolong think?" Of course Xiang Shaolong will not object. He nodded: "As per Empress decision."

Wang Ci stood up and walked out of the seating area. Coming to Xiang Shaolong, he took the Hundred Battle Sabre from him and scrutinized the weapon closely. After some time, he faced Xiao Pan and reported: "It is not an easy feat for Shaolong to create such a fearsome weapon. During a cavalry skirmish, this will greatly benefit our armies' attacking power. This is a great merit with far-reaching effects and is even better than conquering a city. This is considered a military contribution. I recommend that Shaolong be promoted to be a Great General and be in charge of training the three armies. At the same time, he can oversee the Palace Guards, Imperial Cavalry, Imperial Infantry and protect the Royal Family. Will the Crown Prince please approve."

Lu Buwei and Lao Ai's expression became very ugly at the same time but they

could not intervene as given Wang Ci's status and his reasonable explanation, there is no reason for objection.

Xiao Pan was overjoyed and nearly wanted to run towards Wang Ci and hug him, showing his appreciation. After all, Wang Ci had mentioned exactly what Xiao Pan was trying to implement. Pleased, he replied: "My sentiments exactly. Will Empress please approve."

Zhu Ji was flustered and looked at Lao Ai before gritting her teeth and replying in a deep voice: "Shaolong deserves to be a Great General but regarding the control of the three Xianyang armies is something that needs to be considered thoroughly."

Xiao Pan was cursing inside as Wang Ci suggestion was brilliant. By making Xiang Shaolong in charge of all the armies in Xianyang City, there is no fear of any rebellions. With this suggestion, Zhu Ji cannot reject both ideas so no matter what, she must still give face and at least make Xiang Shaolong a Great General. Xiao Pan may be feeling hateful but was powerless too. He proceeded to announce that Xiang Shaolong has been immediately promoted to Great General Xiang.

The guests are generally happy at the outcome. However, Po Hu who has suffered a huge loss can only stare blankly at the delicious food in front of him without any appetite.

Xiang Shaolong has begun receiving congratulatory toasts from everyone while Xiao Pan announced the Spring Festival Prayers to be held five days later at River Wei. His announcement causes everyone to momentarily forget

about the effects of the earlier duel.

Noticing a disillusioned Po Hu whispering to Du Bi, Xiang Shaolong could not help but ask his father-in-law Wu Yingyuan how much he betted on his victory.

Holding back his laughter, Wu Yingyuan had a good look at the crestfallen Po Hu before whispering: "Only three thousand taels of gold!" Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck.

To an ordinary man, a hundred taels of gold can allow the entire family to live comfortably for their lifetime. Three thousand taels of gold is an astronomical amount. With the odds of three-for-one, even a tycoon like Po Hu will be severely affected.

The banquet is coming to a close and Lu Buwei personally sent Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji to the main door. After they left, everybody began to relax and offer their congratulations to Xiang Shaolong. Guan Zhongxie and Lu Niang Rong have quietly slipped away.

Teng Yi and Jing Jun took this break to leave first and prepare themselves for the Qi ambush.

As the guests gradually took their leave, under the company of Wu Yingyuan, Wang Ci, Wang He, Lord Changping, Huan Yi and the others, Xiang Shaolong left for the main door too. Ji Yanran, Qin Qing and the other girls followed closely behind him.

Lord Changping smiled: “From my deductions, there will not be many people who will dare to challenge Shaolong in the future.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled. Back in the 21st century, all the wuxia novels, movies and drama serials will have a male protagonist who is the best fighter but will be plagued by countless troubles. He hopes he will be an exception.

Chapter 12

The Assassin in the Starry Night

Xiang Shaolong, Ji Yanran, and the other women rode to a place a few streets just outside the Wu family manor, meeting Teng Yi and several dozen crack troopers who were waiting for them there.

They all dismounted.

Teng Yi walked next to Xiang Shaolong. In a low voice, he said, "Our people have seized the advantage by taking strategic hiding spots prior to the arrival of the assassination squad which Tian Dan sent. We know exactly where our enemies are emplaced. Shaolong, do you wish to exterminate them all? Or shall we do our best to take as many alive as possible. Xiang Shaolong stared hard at the deep, dark alleyways. One of them had ancient, towering trees on both sides, making it look especially gloomy and hidden. This was the best place for the opponent to ambush them.

Xiang Shaolong said in a deep voice, "Second Brother, what are your thoughts?" Teng Yi said, "To capture them alive would require only that we exert a bit more effort. We have many times their number of people, and so we can wait for them to flee when they realize that they have been discovered before springing our trap on them. Jing Jun has already deployed a squad of five hundred horsemen nearby, ready to assist us. I can guarantee that no one will escape."

Xiang Shaolong nodded. "We'll do it as Second Brother suggests. Tian Dan, that sly fox, really is formidable. Right after returning to Qi, he immediately sent this assassination squad to Xianyang. And, due to Lu Buwei's protection, we've only discovered their existence just now. From this, we can tell that there are critical, glaring gaps in our intelligence. After we deal with the situation, we must come up with a way to close the gaps."

Teng Yi nodded in response. "Let's go!" Xiang Shaolong, Ji Yanran, and the Eighteen Guardians followed Teng Yi and his men, swiftly traversing the dimly lit alleyway. Quite soon, they arrived at the section where the assassins lay in ambush.

Aside from the entrance to the street, which was lit by two large lanterns, the only light throughout the street was the silvery light of the moon, giving it an aura of desolate beauty.

Xiang Shaolong pressed himself against Ji Yanran's and whispered into her ear, "Today, the Learned Lady has really displayed her awe-inspiring majesty!" Ji Yanran pressed her fragrant, jade-like face against his lips, happily cooing, "Can it compare to milord husband? But the Hundred Battles Sabre is a bit too powerful, as Guan Zhongxie would have died if it hadn't snapped his sword. As the saying goes, 'Going too far is as bad as not going far enough.'" Teng Yi also thought it was funny. "How can there be such a thing as being 'too powerful'? It simply wasn't Guan Zhongxie's time to die yet. But his talent really is astonishing. He was actually able to dodge the Hundred Battles Sabre at the exact moment that his sword shattered."

At this point in time, the Eighteen Guardians and the fifty-odd crack troopers

dispersed themselves, taking strategic positions on the field, even clambering up onto trees to assume the highest strategic position. They sealed off every avenue of escape for the street.

Xiang Shaolong said in a low voice, "Only now do I realize that Guan Zhongxie intentionally allowed me to strike at an already-damaged section of his sword. He lost his sword, but preserved his life. His foresight really is astonishing." Ji Yanran and Teng Yi were simultaneously shocked. In a situation like that, on the verge of death, Guan Zhongxie still maintained his calm and presence of mind, using such a shocking method to preserve his life. He really was formidable.

Another person came with a report. Everything was in place, and they could make their move at any time.

Everyone waited for Xiang Shaolong's order.

Xiang Shaolong smiled. "The enemies must be anxious right now. Let's wait another hour, til the point there are absolutely bewildered and frightened. That will be the best time to strike."

Teng Yi and Ji Yanran both exclaimed their approval. The former said, "If that's the case, let me order some people to go and procure some nets and ropes, so that we might capture them more easily."

As Teng Yi went to do this, Xiang Shaolong pulled Ji Yanran over to sit beneath a nearby tree. Laughing, he said, "Tonight really is a night filled with excitement and danger. Based on Lu Buwei's temperament, after having lost

so much face, his desire to revolt must have grown only stronger. Fortunately, we have the ultimate backup plan of the Black Dragon. Otherwise, this really would cause a headache."

Ji Yanran stared up at the starry skies, a look of contentment flashing across her eyes. Leaning against him, she said in a shy voice, "With milord husband here, what can Lu Buwei possibly pull off? And when it comes to marshalling troops and fighting battles, Wang Ci is even more formidable than Xu Xian and Lu Gong. As long as we can prevent him from being murdered by Lu Buwei, Lu Buwei and Meng Ao will find it very hard to openly rebel. In addition, the people of Qin's devotion to crown and country is famous throughout the world. How could Lu Buwei possibly rebel so easily? I'm actually more concerned about Du Bi and Pu Hu. In their hands, they hold Cheng Qiao, the Lord of Chang'an, as a card to be played against the Crown Prince. They might be able to use the Qin people's dislike towards Lu Buwei. Combine that with his local influence, and the instability of the three eastern provinces, and their collusion with the people of Zhao...let's hope they don't act. If they do, they will cause disaster. My dear, you must be wary of them."

Xiang Shaolong had always held the advice of this beloved wife in the highest of esteem. Nodding, he said, "Thank you, Learned Lady, for your reminder. Tomorrow, when I enter the palace, I will discuss this with the Crown Prince, Li Si, and Lord Changping. This way, if something happens, we won't be caught flatfooted."

Ji Yanran leisurely sighed. Resting her head against his broad shoulders, she said, "That which I thank the Heaven the most for is Heaven allowing me to marry you, milord, after my country and home collapsed. In the past, each

time I thought about those events, I would always contemplate ending this meaningless life of mine. Fortunately, I did not. If I had, I wouldn't have been able to experience this deadly yet beautiful night."

Xiang Shaolong reached out and embraced her fragrant shoulder. Moved, he said, "Learned Lady, you favor me with your love. I should be the one moved to tears."

Ji Yanran straightened her lovely body, as joy sparkled across her face. "This is precisely the unique characteristic of milord husband, never treating women as servants or slaves. Sister Qing must be with Tingfang, Zhao Zhi, Xiao Zhen, and Xiao Feng at this moment, spending the night talking about you. No one's heart is ever away from your own.

Just as Xiang Shaolong thought to reply, a striking sound was heard as a brilliant flower of light exploded above the dark street, illuminating it.

Beneath the glare of this 'flash-bang grenade', several dozen people could be seen charging down the street.

The two rose to their feet and gave the order.

The battle began.

Instantly, the sounds of battle and killing filled their ears.

In the blink of an eye, the battle changed into a rout, with them pursuing after the fleeing targets.

In the face of Xiang Shaolong's ambush, all of the enemies were either killed, injured, or captured.

The commoners nearby were startled awake. Naturally, no one would dare to go out and look.

The sound of hooves and men had shattered this neighborhood's tranquility.

By the time Xiang Shaolong returned to the entrance, all of the captured Qi assassins had been bound in a group and held within the Wu manor.

Jing Jun reported, "We killed twenty five and captured sixty seven. Heh, looks like the midget and the prettiest 'soft-boned' performer didn't participate in this event. As a matter of fact, there isn't a single person from Qi who we've met before that is here."

Xiang Shaolong rode into the Wu family manor. He saw that although the prisoners looked dispirited, all of them had unyielding looks on their faces. His heart sank.

How should he deal with them? Just as he was hesitating, the sound of hoof-steps from afar could be heard as Guan Zhongxie led a squad of men rushing towards them. Bowing, he said, "Sir, I came a moment too late. Please forgive my tardiness."

Xiang Shaolong and the others knew that they came with no good intentions in mind. The air immediately became tense.

Xiang Shaolong leapt off his horse and calmly said, "Nothing major. Just a group of petty thugs who had some unscrupulous designs. Master Guan, feel free to take them away. You can report your disposition of them afterwards. I hope that this will not happen again."

Aside from Guan Zhongxie, even Teng Yi, Jing Jun, and Ji Yanran were shocked.

Everyone knew that Xiang Shaolong wasn't so easily handled. They just didn't know what he was plotting.

Guan Zhongxie was stunned for a long period of time. Just as he intended to speak, Xiang Shaolong impatiently waved his hand. "Take them away. Give me a report tomorrow so that I might know if there's anyone behind their actions, and find out their histories."

Although Guan Zhongxie was still suspicious, what more could he say? He immediately ordered his men to take the assassins away, not leaving so much as a corpse behind.

When Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi strode into the main hall, Jing Jun asked curiously, "Third Brother, why did you so easily give up this opportunity to pull down Lu Buwei?" Xiang Shaolong smiled. "None of these people had appeared tonight at the dance display. From this, we can tell that that scoundrel Lu made preparations in advance. Even though we captured them, none of them would have revealed any connection to that traitor Lu."

Ji Yanran nodded. "Lu Buwei would be an idiot to do otherwise. Cleaning up

after the disastrous early battle at our farm had already caused him a lot of headaches. Naturally, he would have learned to do better this time."

Jing Jun frowned. "But there was still no need for Third Brother to hand these people to Guan Zhongxie. If we questioned them severely, we would at least be able to discover how these people entered Xianyang, and from there find clues to follow. It would be worth it if we could cause Lu Buwei a few more headaches."

The four sat down in the hall, as a serving girl brought them tea. The bodyguards patrolled all around them.

Xiang Shaolong smiled. "The purpose of allowing Guan Zhongxie to take these murderers away is to catch him, the biggest fish of them all. We know that in tomorrow's report, Lu Buwei will have many excuses for these people. This is their long-planned out reserve strategy. That way, after dealing with me, they can still keep these people to deal with others."

Ji Yanran suddenly cried out, "Then it must be Du Bi!" Teng Yi slapped the table and called out, "I get it now. For Guan Zhongxie to allow so many people to sneak into the city is a gross breach of his duties. I want to see how he can possibly keep his position by tomorrow."

Xiang Shaolong calmly said, "If we didn't have two marvelous chess-pieces in the form of Meng Wu and Meng Tian, I'm afraid that we still wouldn't be able to budge Guan Zhongxie from his position. But with one of them being the next Imperial Infantry Commander, why would Lu Buwei continue to fight against it? Starting from tomorrow, both of the major military commands of

the city will be in my hands. It will be even more difficult for Lu Buwei to rebel."

Ji Yanran sighed in admiration. "Milord husband's calculations are never wrong. But we must be prepared to deal with Lao Ai fighting for that position. With the Empress supporting him, he still has a chance."

Teng Yi laughed. "Then let us allow Lu Buwei to fight against him and batter each other into pieces."

At this moment, the sound of hoofsteps could distantly be heard coming from far away. Ji Yanran happily rose to her feet. "It must be Ting Fang and the others returning!" After speaking, she stepped outside.

Jing Jun's expression became extremely excited. In a low voice, he said, "Third Brother, didn't you say that you were going to find Qiu Risheng and cause misfortune for him? It's such a fine night tonight that tomorrow must be a wonderful day as well. We can't let such a great opportunity go to waste!" Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi simultaneously burst into laughter.

Grabbing Jing Jun by the shoulder, Teng Yi said, "Kid, don't forget that tomorrow, General Xiang is going to take you to Lu Gong's family residence to formally propose marriage. All you can think about is fighting and killing."

A look of joy appeared on Jing Jun's face. He slapped himself once, blushing in acknowledgment.

At this moment, a female servant came by Xiang Shaolong's side. In a low

voice, she said, "Lord, please have some tea."

Xiang Shaolong didn't think too much as he casually accepted her teacup.

Suddenly, a knife flashed.

With a flip of her left wrist and a twist of her slim waist, the serving girl pulled out a dagger which flashed with cold light, piercing it towards Xiang Shaolong's throat like a bolt of lightning.

This was totally unexpected. Xiang Shaolong fell over backwards, barely escaping this lethal blow as the teacup flew backwards as well.

With loud roars, Teng Yi and Jing Jun simultaneously jumped up. Jing Shan and the others were shocked stiff.

With another twist of her hip, the serving girl shot out another dagger as she simultaneously dodged towards the left. Her movements were fast and nimble, causing others to exclaim in admiration.

Just as Xiang Shaolong leapt to his feet, the dagger plunged into his chest. With a miserable cry, he fell back down.

Teng Yi and Jing Jun were frightened out of their wits as they threw themselves towards Xiang Shaolong.

By this time, the Guardians had already detained the assassin and began battling with her.

Supporting Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and Jing Jun tore open his gown at the point of the dagger's entrance, only to find that he was wearing the armored vest which Qin Qing had personally woven for him. The dagger had only been able to penetrate the outer garments. Only then did the two let out a breath.

Xiang Shaolong let out a sigh. Still badly shaken, he said, "Do not kill her!" Teng Yi roared, "Master Xiang is fine! Take her alive!" With a shriek, the serving girl was thrown by Wu Guang to the floor.

Xiang Shaolong pulled out the dagger. Its tip was only slightly wet with blood, having barely cut through the doublet to lightly slice his skin.

The Guardians dragged the serving girl before them.

Xiang Shaolong glanced at her. Amazingly, it was the main performing girl from last night, the most beautiful soft-boned beauty.

End of Book 18