金庸

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Disclaimer

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This is a fan translation of Jin Yong's last book, The Deer and the Cauldron (Lu Ding Ji). In translating this story, I am making a conscious effort to stick as close as possible to theoriginal Chinese text (even more so that my previous works), for two reasons:

1. To distance this work as far as possible from existing work,
2. To save time, since I do not have to think too much about the proper English equivalent of the words.

Therefore, the names, titles, and especially curse words (which, surprisingly, Jin Yong used a lot in this book) are kept in their original forms, or translated literally. Those of you who are used to Hollywood-style cussing may find it sounds a bit strange. The only exception is 'tamade' [他妈的], which I translate as 'damn it'. I even keep the units of measurement in their original form, with modern day equivalent in footnote. For the same reason, I apologize for grammatically-inaccurate and other sounds-rather-strange sentences.

WARNING: This story is for mature audience for violence, rape and foul language.

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Chapter 21

Golden scissors silently utter winding ground, treasured hairpin dreams of swallow clinging to a man.

(Translated by Foxs)

Wei Xiaobao reached out and slapped her face twice, and punched her chest once; his right foot swept across, the Princess tumbled down. He leaped and sat astride her back, like beating a drum, his fists kept punching her legs, her back, her buttocks, as hard as he could, while shouting, "Stinky little mother, Laozi is going to beat you to death."

One day the boat reached Qinhuangdao [Hebei]; they came ashore and continued to Beijing. Wei Xiaobao said, “I must think of a way to sneak into the Imperial Palace, but I don’t know which day I will succeed. We all must find a place where we can take shelter.” Quickly Lu Gaoxuan rented a house at the Xuanwu Gate, Hair Alley, in a quiet neighborhood; they moved in immediately.

After settling down, Wei Xiaobao went out alone to the Water Well Alley, to look at Tian Di Hui’s temporary lodging. He saw that the place had been turned into a tea-leaves shop. He tried to ask several questions according to the secret code of the Society, but the man was just staring at him not understanding what he was talking about; obviously the Society had moved out of that place.

Next he strolled around the Heavenly Bridge area, thinking that even if the Eight-arm Ape Xu Tianchuan was also forced to join the Divine Dragon Cult and was no longer at Heavenly Bridge, he might come across the rest of the brethrens like Gao Yanchao, Fan Gang, Qian Laoben and the others. Who would have thought that after strolling back and forth around the Heavenly Bridge several times he unexpectedly did not see anybody he knew. Thereupon he went to Xizhimen [main northwest gate of Beijing], to the inn he stayed at the last time he came to Beijing. He took out three *taels* of silver and tossed it to the counter, saying that he wanted the best room.

Seeing how liberal he was with money, the innkeeper greeted him very respectfully. Wei Xiaobao took out five more *qian*, and stuffed it into the inn servant's hands, insisting that he wanted the Heaven Wing, room number three on the second floor. By coincidence this room was unoccupied, so it can be considered that the servant had made an easy five *qian*.

Wei Xiaobao drank a cup of tea, then he lay down and closed his eyes to rest. After making sure there was no noise everywhere, he pulled his dagger out and pried the hole on the wall. The copy of sutra Emperor Shunzhi gave him was still nicely tucked inside the hole. He unwrap the oilcloth to inspect the book. Finding nothing out of ordinary, he put the brick back on the wall. Fat Toutuo had become his subordinate; therefore, there was no need for him to summon the Imperial Bodyguards to escort the sutra. Putting the book into his bosom he walked toward the Forbidden City.

When he reached the Palace, the Imperial Bodyguard on duty saw a young

man in civilian clothes walking toward the Palace gate; he shouted, "Little fellow, what are you doing?"

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "You don't recognize me? I am Gui Gonggong of the Palace."

The Imperial Bodyguard looked at him carefully, and recognized him, it was indeed the Gui Gonggong, His Majesty's most favored eunuch. Quickly a big smile appeared on his face as he said, "Gui Gonggong, you are wearing this kind of clothes, hee ... hee ..."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "His Majesty sent me out on an important assignment, I was hurrying to go back and did not have time to change."

"Yes, yes," the Imperial Bodyguard said, "Gui Gonggong's face is glowing with good fortune, naturally this assignment is completed without any trouble at all, His Majesty will definitely reward you handsomely."

Wei Xiaobao returned to his own residence to change into his eunuch uniform. He wrapped the sutra using a piece of old cloth and then went directly to the Upper Study Room to see the Emperor. As soon as Kangxi heard that Xiao Guizi was seeking an audience, he said delightedly, "Come in quickly, come in quickly."

Wei Xiaobao quickly entered in and saw Kangxi, filled with joy, was waiting at the inner study room's door. "Damn it," he said, "Xiao Guizi, roll in quickly, why have you gone so long this time?" He only said those three character 'damn it' [ta ma de] in front of Wei Xiaobao, he had suppressed his desire to say those words for very long.

Wei Xiaobao kneeled down and kowtowed; he said, "Congratulations Your Majesty, it's an enormous happiness."

As soon as he heard it, Kangxi knew his *Fu Huang* [father emperor] was indeed still alive; emotion surged in his heart, his body swayed several times, he reached out to hold the door frame as he said, "Come in and tell me slowly." His chest ached, tears nearly flowed down his face.

Wei Xiaobao entered the inner study room, turned around to close the door and put on the door bolt. He looked around the bookshelves and after making sure there were no other eunuchs who usually serve the Emperor, he said in a

low voice, "Your Majesty, I saw the Old Emperor on Mount Wutai."

Kangxi grabbed his hand tight; he said in a trembling voice, "Fu Huang ... really became a monk on Mount Wutai? He ... what did he say?"

Thereupon Wei Xiaobao narrated how he met the Old Emperor in the Qing Liang Temple, how the Tibetan Lama intended to harm the Emperor, how summoning up courage and determination he had rendered his assistance, staking out his life to escort the Emperor, how luckily the Eighteen Luohan of Shaolin had come to their rescue; he told him everything one by one. This matter was already very thrilling, as it was being narrated by Wei Xiaobao, the excitement grew thirty percent, his own loyalty and gallantry grew by fifty percent.

He heard Kangxi was rubbing his cold-sweated hands and repeatedly saying, "How dangerous, how dangerous!" Kangxi also said, "We must send a thousand Imperial Bodyguards immediately to go up the mountain to protect the Emperor."

Wei Xiaobao shook his head and said, "Most probably the Old Emperor won't want that." Thereupon he repeated everything Shunzhi had told him.

Kangxi heard how his father did not want him to go up Mount Wutai, and how he had praised him with these words, "He is a good emperor, thinking about the important matters of the imperial court first, not like me ..." He could not bear and broke in loud cry as he wailed, "Definitely I must go, definitely I must go!"

Wei Xiaobao waited until he had cried for a while before he took out the sutra and presented it with both hands, saying, "The Old Emperor wanted me to tell you: 'In the matters of the world, he must let nature take its course, nothing can be forced. It would be best if he could benefit the common people of the Central Plains. But if the common people wanted us to leave, then from the place we came, there we should come back to.' The old emperor also wanted me to tell you: 'If he wants the whole world at peace, 'never raise taxes', these four words [yong bu jia fu] should be firmly planted in his mind. If he can accomplish these four words, it is good enough for me, my heart will be happy.'"

Kangxi listened in daze, tears flowing down his face and dripped onto the cloth wrapper of the sutra; with trembling hands he received the bundle, opened up

the wrapper, and saw a copy of 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra'. Turning the cover, he saw on the first page four large characters 'Never Raise Taxes' [yong bu jia fu]. The brush stroke was delicate yet supple, it was indeed his father's handwriting. With a sob he said, "Fu Huang's admonition, child will never dare to forget."

He calmed himself down, and then asked in details whether Shunzhi was in good health, how was his appearance now, whether he was suffering greatly in the Qing Liang Temple. Wei Xiaobao reported everything according to the facts. Kangxi was overwhelmed with grieve again and broke out crying.

Suddenly Wei Xiaobao had an idea, "Damn it," he mused, "I'd better accompany him crying for a while, then he would definitely give me more rewards; tears are free anyway." As soon as he had that thought, he started to sob, tears flowing copiously from his eyes. 'Boo hoo hoo ...' the more he cried, the more miserable he sounded.

Although Kangxi's grief was hard to endure and he cried audibly, but he had a reputation to maintain and must not demean himself, thereupon he constantly tried to suppress his emotion. Wei Xiaobao, on the other hand, intentionally putting an act and wailed loudly. This particular skill was developed when he was still in Yangzhou, and he was quite an expert on this. Before his mother's feathered bamboo clappers even reached his bottom, he was already crying an earth-shattering cry; moreover, although he was not really crying, but real tears would cascade down his face. It would be very difficult for other people to tell whether he was really crying or not.

Kangxi cried for a while, and then he wiped his tears and asked, "I miss my Fu Huang, hence I cried. But you are crying even sadder than I am; why is that?"

Wei Xiaobao replied, "I saw how grieved you are, and I remember the Old Emperor's gentle affection; he commended me repeatedly, saying that without giving any thought of my own life I protected him. He likes me very much, and thus I feel even more grieved." While saying that, he did not stop whimpering. He continued, "If I did not know how much you were concerned over this matter and wanted to rush back to report to you, I really wanted to stay on Mount Wutai to attend to the Old Emperor, so that I won't be worried over bad people bullying him."

"Xiao Guizi," Kangxi said, "You are very good, I will definitely reward you heavily."

Wei Xiaobao's tears had not stopped flowing; sobbing and sniffling he said, "Your Majesty is already very good to me, I don't want any reward. I only hope that the Old Emperor is safe and sound, we, as the servants, will be very happy." On the Divine Dragon Island he had heard people shouting loudly, 'Jiaozhu will enjoy immortal good fortune forever, his long life will be the same as the heaven's', and thought nothing of how shameful they were; inevitably his face grew thicker and thicker, his boot-licking skill made a tremendous progress. The more the Cult people wanted to make their Cult Leader happy, the more exaggerated their talk become.

Kangxi, however, accepted his speech as the truth. He said, "I am also deeply concerned that Fu Huang has nobody to attend to him. You said that that Monk Xing Dian is rude and impetuous, he is very clumsy; Fu Huang has no competent people by his side, it really makes me more anxious. Xiao Guizi, it's beyond my expectation that Fu Huang likes you ..."

Hearing this, Wei Xiaobao's jaw dropped and he could not close it up; while groaning inwardly, "Aiyo! Aiyo! This time *Laozi* is in a very big trouble; *Laozi* is blowing my horn a bit too hard."

He heard Kangxi continued, "... actually, I don't want to lose you either, but as a son, I have to have filial piety toward my father. Whatever I have in my hands, always give the best to my father. You are my most competent subordinate; although you are young, you are actually very competent, and very loyal and devoted to us, father and son ..."

Wei Xiaobao cried out in his heart, "Obedient my @ss! Mother! You send *laozi* to Mount Wutai to accompany the old monk, it's the same as sending me to prison."

Sure enough, he heard Kangxi continue, "Let's do it this way: you go to Mount Wutai, be a monk at the Qing Liang Temple and take care of my Fu Huang ..."

Wei Xiaobao realized the urgency of the situation: not only he had to accompany the old monk, he himself must become a little monk; the situation was far from encouraging, nothing could be worse than that. Thereupon without

waiting for Kangxi to finish, he hastily said, "Taking care of the Old Emperor is very good, but you want me to be a monk, this ... I don't want to!"

Smiling slightly, Kangxi said, "I did not mean for you to be a monk forever. It's just that Fu Huang has wholeheartedly decided to meditate; if you become a monk, it will be somewhat more convenient to serve him. In the future .... in the future, if you want to leave the monastic order, it will be up to you." The implication was clear: someday Shunzhi would grow old and die [the original world denotes 'the dying of Buddhist monk or nun'], if at that time you don't want to be monk anymore, nobody can stop you.

It does not matter if Wei Xiaobao had a hundred excuses, right now he had his hands bound and was unable to do anything about it. Although he knew that the young emperor was very good to him, since the Emperor had issued an order, if Wei Xiaobao resolutely refused to go, not only his previous merit would go down the drain, the Emperor might become hostile to him and immediately had his head chopped off; now *that* would not be fun. Thereupon he sullenly said, "I ... I hate to part with you ... Wah ...!" he broke into crying. But this time it was not a fake cry, he was crying for real. Only it was not because he was loyal to his lord or he loved his master, but because he really did not want to be a little monk.

Kangxi was greatly moved; he gently patted Wei Xiaobao's shoulder and warmly said, "How about this: you become a monk for several years, serve my Fu Huang well. Later I will send someone else to take your place so that you can return to my side; won't that be good? Fu Huang does not allow me to have audience with him, I simply cannot come to him. It does not have to be too long before you can come back and see me again. Xiao Guizi, be a good boy and listen to me, in the future I will make you a good government official."

Seeing Wei Xiaobao did not stop crying, he said consolingly, "When you have time in the temple, you may study and learn to read, so that when you take an official post someday, you can be a high-ranking official."

Wei Xiaobao mused, "Whether I be a government official in the future or not, it does not damn matter, but right now, I am afraid me being a little monk has already been decided." But then he had a second thought, "If I go to Mount Wutai, I can talk nonsense and making a ruckus so that the Old Emperor will let me go; I think it won't be difficult. I will say that without me serving the young

emperor, he does not feel like eating, this time I left him for a month or two, he already lost several *catties* and grew thin. The Old Emperor cherishes his son, certainly he would send me back to the Palace."

With this plan formed in his mind, he slowly stopped crying. He said, "Whatever mission you send me, I will go through water and tread on fire for you, under no circumstances I will decline. Let's not say being a monk, even if you ask me to be a turtle son of a b1tch, I will gladly do it. Your Majesty, set your heart at ease, I will definitely do my utmost to serve the Old Emperor, to make him, the Senior, strong and healthy, that he will reach a hundred years ... and ... and enjoy the immortal good fortune forever, his long-life will be the same as the heavens."

Kangxi was greatly delighted; he laughed and said, "You left Beijing for several months, unexpectedly your knowledge also progressed, your use of the idiom is not bad. Why did you tarry on Mount Wutai for so long? It was not easy to meet the Old Emperor, was it?"

Wei Xiaobao thought that it would be best if he did not say anything about the Divine Dragon Island. "That's right," he replied, "No matter what, the Abbot of Qing Liang Temple, also that Old Yulin Fashi, did not want to admit that the Old Emperor was in the Temple, while I felt it was inappropriate to point it out bluntly; I had no choice but to rove around at another temple on the mountain while thinking of a plan. Today I went to Xian Tong Temple to perform sacrifice, tomorrow I go to Fo Guang Temple to feed the starving ghosts. From among several thousand big monks, little monks on Mount Wutai, I know at least a thousand of them. If not for those evil Lama coming to harass the Old Emperor, perhaps I would still be donating Buddhist robes and vegetarian meals even today."

Kangxi laughed and said, "You must have spent a lot of money! To get reimbursement of your expense, go to the office of the internal affairs." He did not even ask the amount, thinking that Wei Xiaobao had already set up great merit, plus he was willing to be a little monk; he thought that even if Wei Xiaobao wanted to embezzle some money, he would simply let him.

Unexpectedly Wei Xiaobao said, "To tell Your Majesty the truth, the last time you sent me to search and seize Oboi's home, your servant had already taken

quite a bit of advantage. At that time I was embarrassed to report to you, so this time I went to Mount Wutai, after seeing the Old Emperor and receiving the Senior's lesson, I understand that I must not commit any dishonesty toward Your Majesty, thereupon I donated all the money I previously acquired to the temple. Just consider your servant is helping Your Majesty to amass secret virtue, hoping that Bodhisattva will bless and protect, so that the Old Emperor and Your Majesty will reunite sooner. That money originally belonged to Your Majesty, you do not need to reimburse me." He thought that if you, father and son, reunite sooner, the time I have to become a little monk would be reduced by several days; while at the same time he was covering his own back, just in case someday someone lodged an accusation against him by saying that during the search of Oboi's home he embezzled a huge sum of money, then he would say, "I have already donated the money on Mount Wutai on your behalf, what else do you want to investigate about?"

When Kangxi heard this, he was even happier; he nodded his head repeatedly and asked, "Is Mount Wutai fun?" Immediately Wei Xiaobao described the scenery of Mount Wutai. Kangxi listened with keen interest; he said, "Xiao Guizi, you go first, I will come soon. We have to think of a way to get Fu Huang back to the Palace. If the Senior is determined not to return to normal life and regain the throne, he could meditate in the Palace; won't that be the same?"

Wei Xiaobao shook his head and said, "I am afraid that would be very difficult ..."

Suddenly they heard the sound of boots outside the door, followed by a sharp and clear female voice calling out, "*Huangdi Gege* [Older brother the Emperor], why didn't you come to have a martial art competition with me?" While saying that, 'bang, bang bang!' she knocked the door as hard as she could.

Kangxi's face showed a faint smile as he said, "Open the door."

Wei Xiaobao thought, "Who is that? Could it be she is Princess Jianning?" Walking to the door, he lifted up the bolt and opened the door.

Like a whirlwind a girl wearing crimson embroidered clothes rushed in; she said, "*Huangdi Gege*, I have waited for a long time, you did not show up. You must be afraid of me, aren't you?"

Wei Xiaobao saw this girl was approximately fifteen, with an oval face and thin lips, her facial feature showed that she was quick-witted, there was a hint of heroic spirit in her mannerism.

Kangxi laughed and said, "Who's afraid of you? I'll say you can't even beat my disciple, you are not even worthy to fight me."

The young girl was surprised. "You have received a disciple?" she asked, "Who is it?"

Kangxi winked his left eye to Wei Xiaobao and said, "This is my disciple, Xiao Guizi; his martial art came from me." Turning to Wei Xiaobao he said, "Quickly pay your respect to your *Shigu* [martial aunt] Princess Jianning."

"Indeed she is Princess Jianning," Wei Xiaobao mused. He knew that the Old Emperor fathered six daughters; five died in childhood, only this princess grew up. [Author's note: Actually, Princess Jianning was Qing Taizong's[1] daughter, or Shunzhi's younger sister. The title Head Princess Jianning was bestowed only during Kangxi's sixteenth year. Shunzhi's daughter, Princess Heshuo, was actually Kangxi's older sister, who married Oboi's nephew. But in this novel, everything does not necessarily have to fit with historical fact; scholars and well-learned people do not need to perform an in-depth investigation.] She was the daughter of the Empress Dowager. Wei Xiaobao was extremely afraid of the Empress Dowager, normally he would not go to the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful, while the Princess had never been to the Emperor's study room. Consequently, today was the first time that they met each other.

Listening to Kangxi, Wei Xiaobao knew that the brother and sister loved to play around; thereupon he readily complied to please them. With a tee-hee giggle he stepped forward to pay his respect, "*Shizhi* [martial nephew] Xiao Guizi kowtowed in salute to senior *Shigu*; wishing *Shigu* ten thousand golden good fortunes …"

Princess Jianning also giggled; but suddenly her foot flew up and hit Wei Xiaobao right on his chin. This kick arrived without the least bit or warning, Wei Xiaobao was bending one leg, bowing in front of her foot, how could he evade? He had not finished speaking, his chin suddenly got heavy kicked; his lower jaw closed, biting his own tongue. "Ah!" he cried out in severe pain. When he

opened his mouth, fresh blood streamed down the front of his lapel.

Kangxi was shocked. “You … you …” he stammered.

Princess Jianning laughed and said, “*Huangdi Gege*, your disciple’s martial art skill is totally useless; I kicked him to test his skill, unexpectedly he could not evade. I think your own martial art skill is more or less just like this.” Finished speaking, she giggled happily.

Wei Xiaobao was furious, in his heart he cursed several dozen times, ‘stinky little mother, rotten little miss’; but in the Palace, Princess was his master, how could he dare to curse openly even for a word?

Expressing his sympathy, Kangxi asked Wei Xiaobao, “How is it? Your tongue is bitten? Is it very painful?”

With a forced laughed Wei Xiaobao replied, “Not too bad, not too bad!” But since his tongue was bitten, he could not talk clearly.

Copying his voice, Princess Jianning said, “Not too bad, not too bad! Most of my life has gone bad!” And then she broke out in laughter. Pulling Kangxi’s hand, she said, “Come on, let’s have a martial art match.”

When the Empress Dowager taught Kangxi martial art earlier, Princess Jianning was watching with keen interest, so she nagged at her mother to teach her as well, and the Empress Dowager taught her a little bit. Seeing her mother was half-hearted, only taught her with far less attention she gave to her brother, in her desire to outdo others, she went to the Palace’s Imperial Bodyguards and asked them to teach her boxing. Learning several moves from the east, training several styles from the west, she had been practicing diligently for two, three years, unexpectedly she made some progress.

These past several days she had learned several moves of *qin na* [grab and capture/grappling] techniques and had tested the new skill against the Imperial Bodyguards. Naturally everybody was yielding to her, they all put on an act and the little princess managed to rout them out completely. Yet she knew these Imperial Bodyguards were trying to make her happy, and was dissatisfied instead, thereupon she came to her *Huangdi Gege* to get him to have a martial art match with her.

Kangxi has not had any sparring with Wei Xiaobao for quite a long time, his hands and feet were itching, so he agreed to indulge his imperial younger sister and happened to have a match with her once. The two of them sparred in the small palace hall. Kangxi was half-hearted, half yielding and half serious; from five rounds, he won four. Princess Jianning was unbearably angry; she came back to her mother and badgered her to teach her some new moves.

The Empress Dowager was just recovering from her heavy injury, her vitality had not yet returned, so she expelled her out. Princess Jianning had no alternative but went to find Imperial Bodyguards again and learned *qin na* some more, and made an appointment with Kangxi today to have a match.

Unexpectedly Wei Xiaobao returned to the Palace and had a long talk, so that Kangxi forgot about this martial art match altogether. Obtaining news about his father emperor, Kangxi had mixed feelings of grief and joy, his heart and spirit were perturbed, how could he have any interest to play with his sister? He said, “Right now I have a very important matter to attend to, I don’t have time to play with you. Go and train some more, we will have a match in a few days.”

Knitting her pair of curved eyebrows Princess Jianning said, “When the heroes of Jianghu made an appointment for a martial art competition, they are dead set on not leaving until they meet. You don’t come to keep your appointment, won’t you be the laughingstock of the warriors under the heavens? You don’t come to have the match; that means you admit defeat.” It was the Jianghu’s custom, which she learned from the Imperial Bodyguards.

“Alright,” Kangxi said, “Just consider I concede. Princess Jianning’s martial art skill is number one in the world, punching the fierce tiger of the southern mountain and kicking the legendary dragon [orig. ‘legendary dragon with the ability to control rain and floods’] of the northern sea.”

Princess Jianning laughed and said, “Kicking the caterpillar of the northern sea!” Her foot flew up again toward Wei Xiaobao. Wei Xiaobao leaned sideways to evade; her foot kicked empty air.

She knew that the Emperor was not willing to have a martial art match with her today, while the Imperial Bodyguards were all tall and powerfully built, if she fought them for real, she knew she was not their match. This little eunuch, both

in terms of age and height, was about the same as she was, plus his movement was very agile, he was just the right person to test her martial art skill. “Alright!” she said, “Your Shifu is scared of me, he does not dare to fight me. You come with me.”

Kangxi had always been very fond of this vivacious and witty younger sister, he could not bear to sweep down her excitement. “Xiao Guizi,” he ordered, “Go accompany the Princess to play, tomorrow you may wait on me again.”

Princess Jianning suddenly shouted, “*Huangdi Gege*, en garde!” She threw both fists toward Kangxi’s temples [orig. ‘sun’ acupoints] in ‘bell and drum sounding simultaneously’.

“Good move!” Kangxi called out. He raised one hand to block, while turning his wrist and leaning sideways, executing the move ‘pushing the window to look at the moon’, pushing her back lightly. The Princess staggered and tumbled several steps forward.

“Pfft!” Wei Xiaobao stifled his laughter.

The Princess’ shame turned into anger, “Dead eunuch,” she cursed, “What are you laughing at?” Reaching out, she grabbed his right ear and dragged him out of the study room. If Wei Xiaobao really wanted to evade, the Princess would not be able to catch him, but in the end he did not dare to be rude and had no choice but to let her twist his ear.

Still twisting his ear Princess Jianning dragged him along the corridor. Outside the study room stood a large number of Imperial Bodyguards and eunuchs who were serving the Emperor. Seeing the two people, no one did not find it amusing, but being afraid of Wei Xiaobao’s power and influence, nobody dared to laugh audibly.

“Alright, alright,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Let me go; wherever you want to go, I’ll come with you.”

The Princess said, “You are the leader of a gang of bandits who were running amuck lawlessly; today I managed to catch you, how can I easily let you go? I will seal your acupoint first and then we’ll talk.” Stretching out her forefinger, she stabbed Wei Xiaobao’s chest and lower abdomen several times. She did not know how to seal acupoints, naturally these several stabs were merely random

poking.

Wei Xiaobao cried out loudly, “My acupoints are sealed!” He dropped sitting down, acted stunned, and thus motionless.

The Princess was startled but delighted. She lightly kicked him, Wei Xiaobao did not budge. The Princess shouted, “Get up!” Wei Xiaobao was still motionless. The Princess still thought that she accidentally did seal his acupoints; she said, “Let me unseal your acupoints!” She gave his lower back a kick.

Wei Xiaobao thought, “If this stinky little mother sees that she can’t unseal my acupoints, she will kick me again.” Thereupon he cried out, “Ah!” and sprang up and said, “Princess, your acupoint sealing skill is excellent, I am afraid even His Majesty cannot do it.”

“You, this little eunuch, is very crafty and sly,” the Princess said, “Since when do I know how to seal acupoints?” However, seeing his well-intention to please her, she was happy. “Come with me!” she said.

Wei Xiaobao went along with her, to the room where he and Kangxi used to have their martial art competition in the former days. “Bolt the door,” the Princess said, “Don’t let anybody steal my boxing style.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed, while in his heart he mused, “Just with your meager martial art skill, who would want to steal your boxing style?” Immediately he turned toward the door and closed it. The princess picked up the door bolt, as if she was going to give it to him, but suddenly there was a loud ‘Bang!’ on Wei Xiaobao’s ear, with a severe pain on the top of his head, he passed out instantly.

When he regained his consciousness, he opened his eyes and saw the Princess was standing in front of him with arms akimbo, grinning, “What a good-for-nothing trash. People who learn martial art will pay particular attention to the eyes watching the six pathways and the ears listening to eight directions. I struck you this time, why didn’t you guard against it? What kind of martial art did you learn?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “I … I … I …” he felt a splitting headache; suddenly he realized his left eye was wet and sticky, he could not open this eye. His nose smelled blood, and suddenly it dawned on him that he had been struck with the door bolt that his head was broken and his blood flowing.

The Princess waved the door bolt in front of him and shouted, “If you have guts, quickly get up.” ‘Whoosh!’ she swung the door bolt toward his shoulder.

“Ah!” Wei Xiaobao cried out and sprang up.

The Princess swept the door bolt horizontally, aiming toward his leg’s bone. Wei Xiaobao sidestepped while reaching out to snatch the door bolt away.

“Good move!” the Princess called out. The door bolt went up, fiercely jabbing the pit of his stomach. Wei Xiaobao dodged to the left, unexpectedly the door bolt made a turn and ‘Bang!’ it hit his right cheek heavily.

Wei Xiaobao saw golden stars dancing randomly before his eyes, he staggered several steps. The Princess called out, “You are a big bandit of Lulin [Lit. ‘green wood’ – a reference to the criminal world], I must exterminate you immediately.” The door bolt swept across violently, Wei Xiaobao threw himself onto the floor. The Princess was greatly delighted, she raised the door bolt and heavily swung it toward the back of his head.

Wei Xiaobao only heard the strong and swift wind at the back of his head. In his shock, he quickly rolled away. ‘Bang!’ the door bolt struck the floor. “Aiyo!” the Princess cried out. She had used too much force that the door bolt jolted the palm of her hand and gave her severe pain. In her rage, she kicked his waist as hard as she could.

“I surrender! I surrender!” Wei Xiaobao cried out, “Don’t hit me!”

The door bolt shot down, this time the Princess hit his lower abdomen. ‘Crack!’ luckily it hit the Five Dragon Command hidden inside Wei Xiaobao’s pocket. Wei Xiaobao was just about to spring up, but was thrown down again.

Again and again the Princess swung the door bolt trying to hit him, while cursing in rage, “Dead eunuch, I want to hit you, you dare to evade?” Although her strength was not too big, she was dealing with Wei Xiaobao without any leniency, as if she wanted to beat him to death on the spot.

Wei Xiaobao was scared and angry at the same time, he did everything he could to turn around and leap. The Princess raised her door bolt directly toward his face. Wei Xiaobao raised his left hand to block. ‘Crack!’ the bone of his arm nearly broke. His mind was racing, “Obviously Princess is not playing with me,

why would she want to kill me? Ah, right, she must be under the Empress Dowager's order to take my life!" Thinking to this point, he no longer wanted to allow her to beat him. Stretching out the two fingers of his right hand, he swiftly aimed the Princess' eyeballs using the move 'a pair of dragons fights over a pearl'.

"Aiyo!" the Princess cried out and took a step backward. Wei Xiaobao swept away with his left foot, the Princess hit the ground head first. "Dead eunuch," she yelled, "You hit me for real?"

Wei Xiaobao clamped his hands over the door bolt and seized it, he wanted to strike the top of her head, but seeing the fear in her eyes mixed with anger on her face, he was startled, "This is the inner courtyard of the Imperial Palace, once my door bolt strike down, it will be a matter of treason and heresy. Unless I kill her and use transforming corpse powder to pulverize her, it will cause no end of trouble." With this slight hesitation, the door bolt in his hand stopped midair.

"Dead eunuch," the Princess cursed, "Pull me up."

Wei Xiaobao thought, "She really want to kill me, but it won't be easy." Instantly he reached down to pull her up.

The Princess said, "Your martial art skill is not as good as mine, it's just that I was not careful and I tripped; that's all. Just now you called out you want to surrender, why did you hit me? As a real man, why didn't you keep Wulin's custom?"

Wei Xiaobao's forehead was drenched with blood, it covered his eyes. He reached up to wipe it with his sleeve. The Princess laughed and said, "You lost, such a useless thing. Come, let me wipe the blood off you." From her bosom she took out a snow white handkerchief, and took several steps closer.

Wei Xiaobao took a step back and said, "Your servant does not dare to accept the honor."

The Princess said, "As the heroes and warriors of Jianghu, we must enjoy blessings and endure misfortune together." She then used her handkerchief to wipe the bloodstain on his face.

Wei Xiaobao could smell a delicate fragrance coming out of her body; his heart

was slightly shaken. Right now the two of them stood very close to each other, he could see her beautiful face and very fair skin; he thought, “This little princess is actually very pretty!”

The Princess said, “Turn around, let me have a look at the wound at the back of your head.”

Following her instruction, Wei Xiaobao turned around, thinking, “Previously I was over suspicious; turns out the little princess is really playing, it’s just that her desire to outdo others is too strong, when making her move, she did not realize the gravity of things.”

The Princess gently ran her hand over the wound at the back of his head; she asked with a laugh, “Is it really painful?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Not bad …” Suddenly there was a sharp pain on Wei Xiaobao’s back, she swept his feet away and sent him tumbling down on the floor. Turned out the Princess quietly took out a short dagger she had hidden inside her small boot and caught him off guard with a sneak attack.

Her left foot treaded on his back, she raised her blade and stabbed his left and right legs. And then she laughed and said, “Is it really painful? Since you said ‘not bad’, I added several stabs with my dagger.”

Wei Xiaobao was greatly astonished; he groaned inwardly, “*Laozi* is about to die!” His back was protected by the treasured clothes he was wearing, the blade could not stab him there, the cuts on his legs were not serious injury, but the pain made him hover between life and death. He wanted to unleash the second move ‘Little Lian lies in disarray’, which was taught by Madame Hong, to escape, but because of his previous injury, he did not have any strength. Besides, he had not trained this move to perfection. He struggled hard trying to crawl in between her legs toward her back, but his movement was way too slow, he had just started moving when his buttocks suffered another stab. He heard her giggling as she said, “Is it really painful?”

“Very painful,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Princess’ martial art skill is superior, your servant is not the Senior’s match. The … heroes of Jianghu, the great warriors, after they seize people, they would definitely spare their lives.”

The Princess laughed and said, “Capital offence might be forgiven, but living

hell is difficult to spare.” Squatting down, she sat on his buttocks and shouted, “If you move, I will stab you dead immediately.”

Wei Xiaobao replied, “Your servant cannot move half an inch.” But the Princess happened to sit right on the wound; he could not bear not to groan loudly.

The Princess loosened his belt and used it to bind his legs together, and then using the dagger she cut the front piece of his jacket and used it to bind his hands together. She laughed and said, “You are my prisoner, we are going to practice a new move, called … called ‘Zhuge Liang captured Meng Huo seven times’.” Everybody in the imperial family of Manchurian Qing was very familiar with the stories of the ‘Romance of the Three Kingdoms’; in fact, she had read the story three times.

Wei Xiaobao had also seen the play of this story; “Yes, yes,” he hastily said, “Zhuge Liang captured Meng Huo seven times and released him seven times; Princess Jianning captures Xiao Guizi, but she has caught him only once and released him only once. If you release me, I am not going to revolt against you. Compared to Zhuge Liang, you are seven times more formidable.”

“That won’t do!” the Princess said, “Zhuge Liang must burn down the rattan-armored troops.”

Wei Xiaobao was scared out of his wits; he hastily said, “Your servant does not … does not wear rattan armor.”

The Princess laughed and said, “In that case, burning your clothes is just the same.”

“No, don’t! You can’t do that!” Wei Xiaobao shouted.

The Princess angrily said, “What do you mean I can’t do that? Zhuge Liang wanted to burn, he just burned, the rattan-armored troops did not have anything to say.” Seeing a candlestick and a fire-blade flint next to it on the table, she immediately made fire and lighted the candle.

Wei Xiaobao screamed, “Zhuge Liang did not burn Meng Huo to death. You want to burn me to death. You are not Zhuge Liang, you are Cao Cao!”

The Princess grasped the corner of his clothes with her fingers; she was just

about to light it with the candle flame when suddenly she saw his glossy and shining black braided hair, she had an idea, and used the candle flame to light the tail of his braided hair.

Hair is extremely easy to catch fire. As soon as it was lighted, it immediately burned, making a ‘chi, chi’ sound. A burning smell filled the room. Wei Xiaobao was so scared that his soul flew to the outer sky. “Help, help!” he cried out, “Cao Cao is burning Zhuge Liang to death!”

Grasping the root of his pigtail, the Princess swung it back and forth while laughing heartily and said, “It’s a torch, it’s much more amusing.” In the blink of an eye the flame burned toward the head. The Princess let it off her hand. In an instant Wei Xiaobao’s head would caught fire. In this desperate situation, his strength suddenly increased greatly. He struggled free and rammed his head toward the Princess’ bosom.

“Aiyo!” the Princess cried out, it was too late for her to dodge, Wei Xiaobao had already struck her lower abdomen, unexpectedly the flame on his head died out. With both hands the Princess swatted the ashes and burning hair from her clothes, her lower abdomen felt very painful. She was startled and frightened at the same time, and raised her foot to kick several times randomly on Wei Xiaobao’s head. After a few kicks, Wei Xiaobao fainted.

In his daze, Wei Xiaobao felt severe pain on the wounds all over his body. When he regained his consciousness, he realized he was lying on his back on the floor. His chest was bare, his clothes, vest, and undergarments were unexpectedly undone. The Princess, with her left hand holding some kind of white powder, was cutting a three, four *fen* [about one, one and a third centimeter] deep cut on his chest using her short dagger, and then scattered the white powder on the wound. “What are you doing?” Wei Xiaobao screamed.

The Princess laughed and said, "The Imperial Bodyguards told me that when they capture bandit or evil thief and the thief did not confess, they would put salt on his wound. The thief would then scream for his life and he would definitely confess. Therefore, I brought along this salt to especially deal with you, a Jianghu big thief."

Wei Xiaobao felt his wounds were throbbing with pain; he screamed, "Help!

Help! I confess, I confess!"

The Princess giggled and said, "You are useless; you readily confess, where's the fun in that? You should say: 'Today *laozi* has fallen into your hands, you want to kill me, you want to cut me into pieces, if I frown I am not a real man.' I'll cut some more wounds and put a bit more salt on you. And then you can beg for your life; now that should be interesting."

Wei Xiaobao was furious. "Damn it," he cursed, "You are a stinky little mother ... hey, hey, I wasn't cursing you; I ... I am not a real man. I confess, I confess!"

The Princess sighed. She was about to throw the salt away when suddenly she had a second thought; scattering the salt to his wounds, she grimly said, "I am the *Zhangmen* [sect leader/head master] of Jianning Pai [Sect], my martial art skill is number one in the world. I have just captured this big bandit who does not shrink from any crime ..."

"Alright, alright," Wei Xiaobao said, "I am the big pirate of the rivers and oceans, today my skill is inferior to others, and am being caught by the *Zhangmen* of Jianning Pai, whose martial art skill is number one in the world, my lot is death, not life. The saying in the Jianghu is right: It's all exaggeration, you don't need to take it seriously. Since *zaixia* has already submitted, so be it."

Hearing him speaking the Jianghu lingo, which was similar to what Zhang Kangnian and the other Imperial Bodyguards had told her, the Princess was very happy. "Now you are talking," she praised, "Since we want to pretend, we must do it properly."

In his heart Wei Xiaobao cursed 'stinky little mother, rotten little miss'; he felt like the pain he suffered had entered his bone and marrows. In that instant he could not tell whether she had received the Empress Dowager's order to take his life, or she was simply imitating the way of life of Jianghu's heroes. He thought that this stinky little mother was so vicious; even if she was simply playing with me, *laozi*'s life would be gone under her hands for sure. Suddenly he recalled the effective scheme he played on Mu Jianping when he was trying to threaten her: young misses are always afraid of ghosts. Thereupon he suppressed his pain and said, "On second thought, *Laozi* does not want to submit. Senior Master *Zhangmen*, if you have guts, let me go, we'll compete again. If you are afraid of

Laozi's superior martial art skill and do not dare to fight with me, then kill me with a stab of your dagger. I will die in injustice and become a ghost; I will follow behind your back during the day, and will enter your quilt during the night, to grip your neck and suck your blood ..."

"Ah!" the Princess screamed. "Why would I want to kill you?" she said in a trembling voice.

"Quickly let me go, then," Wei Xiaobao said.

"I won't let you go!" the Princess said, "Dead eunuch, you scared me." Picking up the candlestick, she put the flame on his face.

As soon as the flame made contact with the face, there was a 'chi' sound; Wei Xiaobao suffered a terrible pain, he threw he head backward and used his right shoulder to bump her arm as hard as he could. The Princess' arm was jolted, the candlestick fell to the ground and the flame died instantly. In her anger, she picked up the door bolt again, and swung it toward the back of his head.

Wei Xiaobao's pain was unbearable; he was extremely terrified, "This time I won't live anymore," he thought, and cried out loudly, "I am dead." Pretending to be dead, he lay down motionless.

The Princess was angry, "You pretend to be dead!" she said, "Quickly wake up, accompany me playing!" Wei Xiaobao did not move at all. The Princess lightly kicked his foot. Seeing he did not budge the least bit, she said in a gentle voice, "Alright, I won't hit you anymore, please don't die."

Wei Xiaobao mused, "When I am dead, I am dead; how could I not die? Dog's fart nonsense."

The Princess tore off the precious hairpin for her hair and poked his face and neck several times. Wei Xiaobao tried hard not to move. The Princess said in gentle voice, “Please, please … don’t … don’t scare me. I … I did not mean to kill you, I only wanted to have a martial art match and fight with you, who told you … who told you to be that useless and unable to defeat me …” Suddenly she realized that there was a very light sound of breathing coming from Wei Xiaobao’s nose, she was very happy; reaching out toward his chest, she felt that his heart was still beating. She laughed and said, “Dead eunuch, turns out you are not dead yet. This time I’ll spare you. Quickly open your eyes.”

Wei Xiaobao was still motionless. But the Princess did not fall into his trick; she shouted, “I’ll dig your eyes, so that after you are dead, you will become a blind ghost and can’t find me.” Picking up the short dagger, she placed the tip of the dagger on his right eyelid.

Wei Xiaobao was shocked; he rolled away to evade immediately. The Princess angrily said, "Spoiled little demon, you scared me. I ... I must prick your eyes blind." Leaping over, she stretched her foot and slammed it onto his chest, while raising her dagger and jabbed it toward his right eye. This time she was not pretending, she threw her body along to increase the momentum of the stab. If Wei Xiaobao was hit, not only his eye would be blinded, undoubtedly the dagger would be thrust straight into his brain.

Wei Xiaobao hurriedly bent his legs and struck her chest with his knees. 'Bang!' the Princess staggered and slowly fell down. Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted, bending his body over, he extracted the dagger from his boot and cut the cloth binding his legs first. As soon as he was able to stand, he kicked the top of the Princess' head heavily, to make sure that she would not awake for a while. Only then did he stick the dagger into the table's leg, turned around, and gently ran the belt binding his hands over the edge of the blade. He only needed to run the belt twice, and it was instantly cut.

He heaved a deep sigh; after a narrow escape, his heart was unspeakably happy, momentarily the painful wounds all over his body were forgotten. He thought, "How am I going to handle this stinky little mother? This is an extremely difficult matter. Listening to her tone, apparently she really wanted to play with me; if she received the Emperor Dowager's order to take my life, why would she be afraid to see I pretended to be dead? But if this is merely child's play, why would she have to be that vicious? Ah, I get it: she is the Princess, she has never considered eunuchs and palace maids as humans; people die or live, she does not care, in her eyes, it's like pinching an ant."

The more he thought, the angrier he was, and he landed another kick on her chest. Unexpectedly, this kick had opened up the breathing passage that was blocked before. The Princess moaned softly and woke up. She slowly propped herself up while cursing, "Dead eunuch, you ..."

Wei Xiaobao was still angry, he reached out and slapped her face twice, and

punched her chest once; still not enough, his right foot swept across, the Princess tumbled down again. Wei Xiaobao leaped and sat astride her back, and then, like beating a drum, his fists kept punching her legs, her back, her buttocks, as hard as he could, while shouting, "Dead little mother, stinky little mother, daughter of a wh0re, *Laozi* is going to beat you to death."

"Don't hit, don't hit!" the Princess yelled, "You are not following the rule, I am going to have the Empress Dowager kill you, I will have ... have the Emperor kill you, to ... to put you to death by a thousand cuts."

Wei Xiaobao's heart turned cold; his hands immediately stopped moving. But then he had a second thought, "I will keep beating you, you might as well enjoy it." Moving his fists, he started beating her again, while cursing, "*Laozi* f*ck your eighteen-generation ancestors, I will beat you, stinky little mother, to death!"

After being beaten several times, suddenly the Princess giggled. Wei Xiaobao was greatly surprised, "I beat her this hard, how come she did not cry, but she is laughing instead?" he thought. He pulled the dagger from the table leg and pointed it to her neck, with his left hand he turned her body over and shouted, "What are you laughing at?"

He saw her silk-like brows and eyes, there was a smiling expression on her face, as if she was really happy, so she was not pretending at all. With a tender voice she said, "Don't hit too hard, but don't hit me too light either."

Wei Xiaobao was unable to make any sense of it; he was afraid she would suddenly play a trick on him, so he planted his right foot firmly on her chest and shouted, "Whatever trick you are playing on me, *Laozi* will not fall into it."

The Princess struggled, while making grunting noise, twice, with her nose, as if she wanted to spring up. "Don't move!" Wei Xiaobao shouted. He pushed her forehead, hard, the Princess fell back down instantly.

Wei Xiaobao felt his wounds were throbbing with pain, his rage was blazing again. 'Slap! Slap! Slap! Slap!' he slapped her face left and right four times. The Princess moaned a few more times, her chest was heaving up and down, the expression on her face was that of an unspeakable pleasure. "Dead eunuch," she said softly, "Don't hit my face. If you injure my face and the Empress Dowager asked about it, I am afraid I cannot conceal it from her."

"Stinky little mother," Wei Xiaobao cursed, "You rebellious s1ut, the more you are beaten the happier you are, right?" Reaching out, he heavily pinched and twisted her left arm, twice. "Aiyo, aiyo!" the Princess cried out; her eyebrows were knitted, but there was a smiling expression in her eyes.

"Damn it," Wei Xiaobao said, "Does it feel good?" The Princess did not reply. Slowly she closed her eyes, but suddenly her foot flew up, kicking Wei Xiaobao's thigh, right on the dagger cut earlier.

Feeling severe pain, Wei Xiaobao threw himself onto her shoulder and violently pinched and twisted her arms, shoulder, chest, and abdomen. The Princess giggled incessantly and cried out, "Dead eunuch, little eunuch, good gong-gong, good *Gege*, please spare me, I ... I can't take it anymore."

Her voice was so tender that Wei Xiaobao's heart was shaken; he thought, "Her cry sounds just like Miss Fang when she was pleading to me on the boat." His anger greatly subsided, but as for her real intention, he really had no idea; therefore, copying her action earlier [orig. 'draw a gourd from the model' - to copy something mechanically without attempt at originality.], he loosened her belt and bound her hands and feet.

The Princess laughed and said, "Dead little demon, what are you doing?"

"So that you won't get any bad idea of harming others," Wei Xiaobao replied. He stood up with a labored breathing, his body was hurting all over that he felt he was about to pass out.

The Princess laughed and said, "Xiao Guizi, I had so much fun playing with you today. Are you going to hit me again?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "If you don't hit me first, how could I dare to hit you?"

"I can't move," the Princess said, "If you want to hit me, there is nothing I can do."

Wei Xiaobao spat and said, "You are not a princess, you are a s1ut." And then he kicked her bottom again.

"Aiyo!" the Princess cried out, "Are we still playing?"

"Most of *Laozi*'s life has gone from your playing; why would I want to continue

playing?" Wei Xiaobao replied, "Right now I am Zhuge Liang, I want to burn down the rattan-armored troops, I am going to burn your hair and your clothes."

"You must not burn my hair ..." the Princess said anxiously. Suddenly she giggled and said, "It's alright for you to burn my clothes; even if you burn me until my body blisters, I am not scared."

"Pei!" Wei Xiaobao spat, "You are not afraid of death, *Laozi* will not accompany you return to heaven. I must go to tend to my injuries, you have put salt on my wounds, do you think it is fun?" It was only now that he was convinced that the Princess really did not have any intention to kill him; thereupon he loosened the belt binding her hands and feet.

"You really don't want to play anymore?" the Princess asked, "How about tomorrow?" There was earnestness in her voice.

"If the Empress Dowager and His Majesty found out," Wei Xiaobao replied, "Do you think I will still live?"

The Princess slowly stood up; she said, "As long as I did not say anything, how could the Empress Dowager and His Majesty find out? Tomorrow you must not hit my face. More bruises on my body are not a big deal."

Wei Xiaobao shook his head and said, "I can't come tomorrow. You have beaten me really bad. One or two months will not be enough for me to recuperate from my wounds."

"Humph," the Princess snorted, "You won't come tomorrow? Just now you curse me what? You said you were going to f*ck my eighteen-generation ancestors. My eighteen-generation ancestors are exactly *Huangdi Gege*'s eighteen-generation ancestors, my Emperor Grandpa's seventeen-generation ancestors, *Taizong Huangdi*'s [posthumous name given to the second emperor of a dynasty] sixteen-generation ancestors, *Taizu Huangdi*'s [posthumous name given to the first emperor of a dynasty] fifteen-generation ancestors ..."

Wei Xiaobao was dumbstruck; he groaned inwardly. But suddenly he had a bright idea; he said, "You are not the Old Emperor's daughter, I was cursing your ancestors, it has nothing to do with His Majesty, the Old Emperor, or some *Taizong Huangdi* and *Taizu Huangdi*."

The Princess was enraged; "What do you mean I am not the Old Emperor's daughter?" she shouted, "You dead eunuch is talking nonsense. Tomorrow afternoon I am going to wait for you here, if you, dead eunuch, do not come, I will tell the Empress Dowager that you beat me." While saying that, she stretched out her arm and pulled her sleeve, showing patches of black and blue bruises on her white, tender arm, from his pinching and twisting earlier.

Wei Xiaobao was secretly alarmed, "How could I beat her that heavy a moment ago?"

"Humph," the Princess said, "If you don't come tomorrow, I want to see if you can keep your life."

Things have come to this, even if Wei Xiaobao did not want to yield, he simply did not have any choice. He nodded and said, "I will come to accompany you playing tomorrow, but you must not hit me."

The Princess was greatly delighted; she said, "It's great that you are going to come. If I hit you, you can hit me back. We, the heroes of Jianghu, make a clear distinction between gratitude and grudges."

With a bitter smile Wei Xiaobao said, "If you beat me again, I will turn from a hero to a malicious ghost."

The Princess laughed and said, "Don't worry, I can't possibly kill you for real." After a short pause, she continued, "At most I will beat you half-dead and half-alive." Seeing his changed countenance, she smiled sweetly and said in a gentle voice, "Xiao Guizi, there are a lot of eunuchs and Imperial Bodyguards in the Palace, but I only like you, one person. Those other fellows are too lacking in courageous spirit, even if I beat them to death, they would not dare to curse me any 'stinky little mother, s1ut ...'" she was imitating his accent, "... daughter of a wh0re! Hee ... hee ... no one has ever curse me like that."

Wei Xiaobao was happy, but also amused, "You like to be cursed?" he asked.

The Princess laughed and said, "Only if you curse me like that. The Empress Dowager would also reprimand me with a wooden face, telling me to abide by the rules. I don't like that kind of cursing."

"In that case," Wei Xiaobao said, "You'd better go to the Lovely Spring

Courtyard." He was thinking, "If you become a wh0re, there will be a lot of people cursing you. The pimp [orig. 'female brothel keeper'] will curse and hit you, the brothel's patron may burn you, or beat you and curse you."

The Princess' spirit was aroused; she asked, "What kind of place is the Lovely Spring Courtyard? Is it a fun place?"

Wei Xiaobao laughed in his heart; he said, "It's a very fun place, but it is in Jiangnan, you can't go there. If you stay in the Lovely Spring Courtyard for three months, I guarantee you will be awfully happy that you won't want to be a Princess anymore."

The Princess sighed; her thought wandered far away as she said wistfully, "When I grow up, I must go there."

With a straight face Wei Xiaobao said, "Good, good! In the future I will definitely take you there. A real man gave his words, dead horses cannot chase it." He could never remember the phrase 'a team of four horses cannot chase it', but instead of saying 'some horses cannot chase it', he said 'dead[2] horses cannot chase it'.

The Princess grabbed his hand and said, "When I fight with those eunuchs and Imperial Bodyguards, everybody always intentionally yields to me, it's not fun at all. Only yesterday when *Huangdi Gege* had a martial art match with me, he really hit me 30%, but he was not willing to hit too hard to hurt me, to pinch too hard to hurt me. Good Xiao Guizi, you are the only one who hit me for real. Don't you worry, I definitely will not kill you." Puckering her mouth, she landed a kiss on his lips. Her face blushed, and she dashed out of the room.

In that instant Wei Xiaobao felt the sky spun, the earth turned over; he fell sitting down on the floor, thinking, "I am afraid this Princess is a little bit insane, the more I hit her and curse her, the happier she is. Damn it, could it be that the Old Wh0re's little girl really take a liking on a fake eunuch like me?" Recalling her beautiful face, his heart was befuddled. Slowly he stood up and walked back toward his residence. He was so exhausted that as soon as he touched the bed, he fell asleep instantly.

He slept for more than ten hours [orig. 5 *shichen*] straight. By the time he woke up, the sky had turned dark. Feeling the pain on his entire body, he could

not bear not to groan. He got up, thinking that he was going to wash the salt from his wounds. Who would have thought that as he tried to take off his clothes, the blood from his wounds had congealed and stuck firmly onto his clothes? When he tried to pull it, it was so painful that unavoidably he rained curses again, 'stinky little mother, rotten little miss'. Finally he washed off the salt and spread metal-cut wound medicine on his injuries.

When he went to see the young emperor the next day, Kangxi saw his nose was blue and his eyes swollen, his hair and his eyebrows were burned, everything was broken and in disarray. Kangxi was shocked; he immediately guessed that it must be his precious imperial younger sister's masterpiece. "Did the Princess beat you?" he asked, "Is the injury heavy?"

With a forced smile Wei Xiaobao said, "Not too bad. Shifu, your disciple has brought disgrace to you [orig. 'throw away your face'], Senior. I will have to painstakingly train for three more years before I can retrieve it back and bring honor to you, Senior."

At first Kangxi was worried that in a towering rage Wei Xiaobao would ask Kangxi to stick out for him. It’s just that although his imperial sister was in the wrong, it had always been her right as the master to beat up the slaves. However, if Kangxi ignored him, he was afraid when Wei Xiaobao went up Mount Wutai to serve his father emperor, he would not do so with all of his heart. While he was feeling awkward, suddenly hearing Wei Xiaobao say so, *i.e.* he did not complain over this matter, but consider it as child’s play, Kangxi was ecstatic. He laughed and said, “Xiao Guizi, you are really good! I must reward you well. Tell me, what do you want?”

Wei Xiaobao replied, “Shifu did not reproach disciple for being not proficient in my training, disciple is already very grateful, I do not need any reward.” After a short pause, he continued, “Shifu may pass on to me some brilliant moves, so that when I meet with danger in the future, I won’t be bullied by others. That’s all I want.”

Kangxi burst out laughing; he said, “Alright, alright!” Thereupon he taught him several exquisite moves the Empress Dowager had bestowed to him.

Although these several *qin na* techniques were quite extraordinary, they were

far inferior compared to the six moves Hong Jiaozhu, husband and wife, had taught him. When Wei Xiaobao was having martial art match with Kangxi previously, he had seen Kangxi use these moves. Now that he had special instruction, he managed to master the moves without spending too much time.

Wei Xiaobao thought, “When I fought with him earlier, we were wrestling as friends. But he is the Emperor, I am a slave, this friendship will not last too long. This time I return to Beijing, I can see that although physically he did not grow too much, his power and prestige have actually grown considerably. I can’t call him ‘Xiao Xuanzi’, three characters, anymore; but if I simply change the way I address him, it will be no more than an ingenious way of flattering him.” Thereupon he kneeled down, ‘dong, dong, dong’ he knocked his head against the floor eight times, and said, “Shifu, disciple Wei Xiaobao is your, Senior’s first disciple [orig. ‘first disciple of cutting into a mountain’ – a reference to opening a monastery].”

Kangxi was startled; but he understood his intention immediately. On one hand, he felt it would be fun, on the other hand, he also felt that the appellation ‘Xiao Xuanzi’ was no longer appropriate. He laughed and said, “Being a ruler I can’t go back on my own words! Since I have had you call me Shifu, I have no choice but to receive you as my disciple.” Then he called out, “Guards!”

Two eunuchs and two Imperial Bodyguards entered the study room. Kangxi said, “Turn around.”

“Yes,” the four people complied. But the rule said that subjects should never turn their backs toward the Emperor, otherwise, it would be extremely disrespectful. The four people did not understand Kangxi’s intention, they only turned their bodies slightly, no one dared to turn his back.

From his desk Kangxi picked up a pair of golden scissors and walked toward the four people’s backs. Again the four of them turned their bodies slightly. Kangxi looked at the four people’s braided hair, and saw a court eunuch had the most glossy and shiny black hair. His left hand grabbed the pigtail, ‘crash’ he cut the braid down from the base.

The eunuch was so scared that he felt his soul had flown to the outer sky. Instantly he kneeled down and kowtowed repeatedly, saying, “Your servant

deserves to die, your servant deserves to die!”

Kangxi laughed and said, “Don’t be afraid, I reward you ten *taels* of silver. Everybody get out!” The four of them were bewildered; they only thought that the power of Heaven was hard to fathom, they walked backward out of the room.

Kangxi gave the pigtail to Wei Xiaobao and said with a laugh, "You are going to be a monk, the Princess has burned your hair, it seems that this is the will of Heaven. The Heaven is borrowing the Princess' hand to tell you to shed your hair and become a monk. You may tie this false braid on your head first, otherwise you will look unsightly."

Wei Xiaobao kneeled down and said, "Yes, Shifu cherishes your disciple, you are very considerate."

Kangxi laughed and said, "You have done obeisance, taking me as your master, you must not mention it to anybody else. I know you are tightlipped, very prudent and careful, and that was the reason I agreed. If you act ostentatiously outside, as the *Zhangmen*, I will cripple your martial art skill and expel you from my school."

"Yes, yes," Wei Xiaobao repeatedly promised, "Disciple will not dare."

When Kangxi had martial art match with Wei Xiaobao, other than the Empress Dowager and Hai Dafu, nobody else in the Palace knew about it. He thought that by playing along and taking him as disciple, as long as nobody else knew, he would not lose face as the Emperor. But his natural disposition was cautious, hence he repeatedly warned Wei Xiaobao.

Kangxi sat down and mused, "The Empress Dowager is sinister and ruthless, she can't be teaching me martial art with all of her heart; otherwise, she knew a formidable martial art that can break people's bones in pieces, why didn't she teach me even for half a move? Although I am the Shifu, in reality I am not much stronger than this kid, I don't have any superior martial art that I can teach him. The monks of Shaolin Temple have extremely high martial art skill, I only hope that when Fu Huang is in trouble, they would come to help him again ..." Thinking to this point, a plan started to formed in his mind. He said, "Go and take a rest, take care of your wounds, come again tomorrow to see me."

Wei Xiaobao returned to his residence, he ordered the eunuch working for him to invite the imperial physician to treat his injury. Although his wounds were painful, they were actually flesh wounds, his muscles and bones were not harmed at all. The imperial physician said that after recuperating for ten days to half a month, he should be healed completely, so he told him not to worry.

After eating his lunch, Wei Xiaobao went out to keep his appointment with the Princess. His mind was in a mess; he was afraid she would beat him up again, but he was also excited to see her again.

As soon as he pushed the door open, the Princess yelled and pounced on him. This time Wei Xiaobao was prepared; with his left arm he blocked, with his right foot he hooked, while grabbing the back of the Princess' neck with his right hand and pressed her body that she was bending forward.

The Princess laughed and cursed, "Dead eunuch, how come you are so formidable today?"

Wei Xiaobao grabbed her left arm and twisted it behind her back; he said in a low voice, "If you don't call me 'Good Guizi, Good *Gege*', I am going to twist your arm broken."

"Pei!" the Princess cursed, "You are a dead slave!"

Wei Xiaobao twisted the Princess' arm heavily and shouted, "You don't call, I will twist and break this arm of yours."

The Princess laughed and said, "I won't call."

Wei Xiaobao thought, "This little mother's skin [小娘皮 - see Chapter 10] is indeed a rebellious s1ut. The more I beat her, the happier she is."

'Slap!' he heavily slapped her buttocks with his left hand. The Princess jumped, but she was giggling incessantly. "Damn it," Wei Xiaobao said, "Turns out you love to take a beating." With all his might he punched her repeatedly. It was so painful that the Princess curled on the floor, unable to get up. It was only then did Wei Xiaobao halt his hand.

The Princess panted. "Alright," she said, "Now it's my turn to beat you."

Wei Xiaobao shook his head. "No," he said, "I won't let you beat me." He

thought that this little miss was so ruthless, if he let her beat him, he might lose his life at any time. The Princess pleaded with him in gentle voice, but Wei Xiaobao simply refused.

The Princess threw a fit, she pounced on him, beat him and bit him. Wei Xiaobao slapped her on the face, sending her tumbling to the floor. He pulled her hair and hit her buttocks, thinking that since he had hit her buttocks, he did not need to be polite anymore, thereupon he pinched and twisted randomly all over her body.

The Princess crouched by his feet, hugging his two legs. She gently rubbed her face against his calves, in a coquettish and lithe manner, and said in a flirtatious way, "Good Guizi, Good *Gege*, let me beat you just once, I promise not to hit you too hard."

Wei Xiaobao thought she looked like a timid and helpless little girl, and he heard her affectionate request, his heart was shaken. He had the urge to consent. The Princess added, "Good *Gege*, I love nothing more than to see blood coming out of your body."

Wei Xiaobao jumped in fright; "That is out of the question!" he angrily said. Lifting his left foot, he kicked her head and said, "Let me go, I must leave. If I stay around you, inevitably there will come a day when I die in your hands."

The Princess sighed and said, "You don't want to play with me anymore?"

"It's too dangerous," Wei Xiaobao said, "I may lose my old life any time."

The Princess giggled. She stood up and said, "Fine! In that case, help me back to my room. You have hit me too hard that I cannot walk."

"I won't help you," Wei Xiaobao said.

Propping herself against the wall, the Princess slowly hobbled out, saying, "Good Guizi, will you come again tomorrow?" Suddenly her left leg gave up, she almost fell down. Wei Xiaobao rushed forward to hold her.

The Princess said, "Good Guizi, sorry to bother you, but could you get two eunuchs to help me go back to my room?"

Wei Xiaobao thought that if he called the eunuchs, the Empress Dowager

would probably find out, and then she would investigate why the Princess was injured. As soon as this matter was leaked ever so slightly, he would be charged with capital offense punishable by beheading. Having no other choice, he supported her and said, “I will help you back to your room.”

The Princess laughed and said, "Good Guizi, thank you very much.” Leaning on his shoulder she walked westward.

The Princess’ residence was located west of the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful, right next to the Shou Kang [Abundant Long-live] Palace. The two of them slowly approached the garden of Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful. Recalling the Empress Dowager’s manner, Wei Xiaobao’s heart was trembling with trepidation. When they reached the corridor, the Princess suddenly blew air into his ear.

Wei Xiaobao blushed. “No … don’t,” he stammered.

With a gentle voice the Princess said, “Why? I am not hitting you.” While saying that, she gently bit his earlobe; she stuck out her tongue and licked his ear slowly.

Wei Xiaobao felt the itch was unbearable, he said in a low voice, “If you bit and hurt my ear, I am not going to see you again, ever. A real man gave his words, dead horses cannot chase it.”

The Princess actually wanted to bite a piece of his earlobe off, but listening to his words, she did not dare to continue, she only laughed softly. This laugh made Wei Xiaobao flushed with excitement, his whole body turned limp and aching.

Finally they reached the Princess’ personal quarter. Wei Xiaobao turned around to leave. The Princess said, “I want you to come in, I have something interesting to show to you.” At that time, there were four eunuchs and four palace maids standing outside the door of the Jianning Palace, to wait upon her. Wei Xiaobao did not dare to blatantly disobey, he had no choice but to follow her.

Pulling his hand, the Princess took him straight into her own bedroom. Two palace maids followed in, they presented hot towel for the Princess to clean her face. The Princess took one towel and handed it over to Wei Xiaobao. Wei Xiaobao took it, and wiped the sweat on his face.

Seeing the Princess unexpectedly broke the rule by giving this little eunuch a deferential treatment, the two palace maids could not help but stare in disbelief. She had never been this polite even toward the Empress Dowager or the Emperor, and the little eunuch also unexpectedly accepted it calmly, which was considered extremely rude.

The Princess caught a glance; she glowered and said, “What are you looking at?”

“Yes, yes!” the two palace maids replied. Bending their waists, they withdrew immediately. Who would have thought that it was already too late? The Princess stretched out her hand to dig the eye of the palace maid nearer to her. The palace maid dodged slightly, and let out a miserable cry. Although her eyeball was safe, her face was drenched with blood, from her forehead down to her chin, as four nail marks appeared. The two palace maids were scared out of their wits and hastily withdrew from the room.

The Princess laughed and said, “Did you see that? Those slaves could only shout, begging for mercy; where is the fun in that?”

Seeing the ruthlessness of her action, Wei Xiaobao thought that this little wh0re was too violent, she was more or less the same as her mother, the old wh0re, it would be best for him to get away from her at the earliest possible time. “Princess,” he said, “His Majesty sends me out to do something for him, I must go.”

“What’s the rush?” the Princess asked. She turned around, closed the door, and bolted it. Wei Xiaobao’s heart was pounding, he wondered what kind of strange thing she was going to do. The Princess laughed and said, “I have been the master for fifteen years, I always have people serving me, it’s getting quite tasteless. Today we change roles, you are the master, I am the slave.”

Wei Xiaobao waved his hands wildly, “That won’t do, that won’t do,” he said, “I don’t have that good fortune.”

The Princess’ pretty face sank, she said, “You don’t want to? I am going to scream, I will say that you are being rude to me, and beat me black and blue.” Suddenly she raised her voice and called out, “Aiyo, it hurts!”

Wei Xiaobao repeatedly bowed with cupped fists and said, “Don’t shout, don’t

shout, I'll listen to your instruction."

This was the Princess' personal chamber, there were many eunuchs and palace maids standing outside to wait on her, she only had to call several times, there would be a throng of people rushing in; it was completely different from the small room where they were having the martial art match, where there were nobody around.

The Princess smiled and said, "Miserable wretch! I talked to you nicely, you did not want to listen; you insist on refusing a toast only to be forced to drink a forfeit."

"You are the miserable wretch," Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, "You don't want to be the master, you want to be the slave instead."

The Princess bent her knees and respectfully paid her respect to him, saying, "Prince Gui[3], do you want to sleep now? Your servant will help you change your clothes."

"Humph," Wei Xiaobao snorted, "I don't want to sleep. You may give me a gentle pound with your fist on my legs."

"Yes!" the Princess replied. She sat on the floor, lifted his right foot and placed it on her own legs, and then gently pounded it with her fists, being careful not to touch the wounds on his leg.

"What a good servant," Wei Xiaobao said, "You are serving me exceptionally well." Stretching out his hand, he gently pinched her cheek.

The Princess was very happy, "Thank you for Master's praise," she said in low voice. Taking off his boot, she kneaded his foot for a while, then she started working on his left foot. After pounding it for half a day, she took the boot and massaged his foot. "Prince Gui," she said, "Lie on the bed, I will pound your back gently."

Massaged by her, Wei Xiaobao was very comfortable; he thought that if I did not satisfy this miserable wretch's craving of being the slave, she would not let me go anyway. Thereupon he climbed on her bed and lay down. His nostrils were assaulted by bursts of fragrance. "This miserable wretch's bed is so gorgeous," he mused, "Even the top wh0re in the Lovely Spring Courtyard did not have this

kind of pretty bedding and pillow.” The Princess pulled a thin quilt over his body and then gently beat his back with her fists.

Wei Xiaobao was in a daze. While he was enjoying being the Prince Gui, suddenly he heard the voices of many people outside the door, “The Empress Dowager has arrived!” His shock was really not a small matter, hastily he sprang up.

The Princess’ face also showed terrified expression. “No time to escape,” she said in trembling voice, “Don’t move, get into the quilt.” Wei Xiaobao pulled his head and sank into the quilt; he heard faint knocking on the door, and was so scared that he almost fainted.

The Princess pulled down the mosquito net before turning around and unlatched the door. As soon as she opened the door, the Empress Dowager strode into the room. “Clear sky in the middle of the day, why did you close the door?”

The Princess laughed and said, “I am very tired, I was about to take a nap.”

The Empress Dowager sat down and asked, “What kind of trick are you playing? Why is it that your face does not have any color of blood?”

“I said I am very tired,” the Princess replied.

The Empress Dowager looked down and saw a pair of boots in front of the bed, she also saw the embroidered screen was moving slightly; she knew something was different. Turning toward the eunuchs and palace maids, she said, “Go wait outside.” When everybody was out, she said, “Close the door, put the bolt on.”

The Princess laughed and said, “Empress Dowager also wants to play some trick?” Obeying her order, she closed the door. She then followed the Empress Dowager’s vision and saw the boots; she could not stop her countenance from changing greatly. With a forced laugh she said, “I was going to put on men’s clothing, I want to dress up as a boy and show it to the Empress Dowager. I want to know when I put on the men’s clothing, whether you think I will look handsome or not.”

The Empress Dowager coldly said, “Is the boy on the bed handsome or not?” Suddenly she stood up and walked toward the bed.

The Princess was greatly shocked, she pulled the Empress Dowager's hand and called out, "Empress Dowager, he and I are just playing games …"

The Empress Dowager flung her hand to throw her several steps away; she opened the screen, pulled the quilt away, grabbed Wei Xiaobao's neck, and lifted him up.

Wei Xiaobao kept his face facing the inside of the bed, he did not dare to turn his head around and see her, he was already so scared that his entire body was trembling.

"Empress Dowager," the Princess called out, "This is the little eunuch *Huangdi Gege* likes the most, you … you must not harm him."

"Humph," the Empress Dowager snorted; she thought that her daughter was growing up, her interest in the opposite sex had opened, she was hiding a little eunuch in her bed, it was no more than a shady business of playing fake (male) phoenix and empty (female) phoenix, so it could not be considered a big deal. Her right hand circled, she turned Wei Xiaobao around, 'slap, slap', she slapped his face twice, and shouted, "Get lost! If I ever see you fooling around with the Princess again …" Suddenly she saw his face clearly and was startled, "So it's you!"

Wei Xiaobao turned his face away, "It isn't me," he said. These three characters were an oxymoron [orig. unfathomable mystery], but while his heart alarmed, he was trembling in fear, what else could he say?

The Empress Dowager firmly grabbed the back of his neck and slowly said, "There are many roads in the heavens but you don't want to take, there is no gate in hell but you insist on breaking in. You are being rude to the Princess, today you cannot blame me."

"Empress Dowager," the Princess anxiously said, "It was me who wanted him to sleep in here, you must not blame him."

The Empress Dowager lightly patted Wei Xiaobao's forehead with her left palm; raising her left arm, she concentrated her strength on her hand ready to shoot it down, to kill him instantly with one palm strike.

In this extremely critical situation, Wei Xiaobao suddenly remembered the

move ‘Di Qing subduing the dragon’, which was taught by Hong Jiaozhu. His hands reached backward to grope the front of the Empress Dowager’s chest. The Empress Dowager was startled, she pulled her chest back and scolded, “You are asking to die!”

Wei Xiaobao kicked on the bed with both feet, he made a somersault backward, and landed astride the Empress Dowager’s neck, with both his forefingers on her eyes, and both his thumbs on her temples. “If you move,” he shouted, “I am going to dig your eyeballs out!”

He had not trained this move to perfection, so it was actually difficult for him to use it properly; fortunately, he was standing on the bed, while the Empress Dowager was standing on the floor. One on higher position, the other on lower position, so it was easier for him to ride on her. Moreover, the fingers with which he threatened to dig her eyeballs should be the middle fingers, but he was using forefingers instead; and when he somersaulted, the tip of his foot caught the mosquito net. Indeed he executed the move sloppily [lit. ‘wading in mud and water’], and it looked very awkward. If Hong Jiaozhu personally witnessed this, he would have been angered half dead. However, although the execution was incorrect, the style was indeed ingenious; the Empress Dowager still fell under his control, although she reacted hastily, unexpectedly it was still hard for her to ward off.

The Princess burst out laughing and called out, “Xiao Guizi, don’t be rude. Quickly let the Empress Dowager go.”

Wei Xiaobao raised his right leg, he drew the dagger with his right hand and pressed it against the middle of the Empress Dowager’s back; it was only then did he slide down from her neck. Suddenly ‘splat!’ a multi-colored, glittering object fell onto the floor; it was exactly the Divine Dragon Cult’s Five-Dragon Command.

The Empress Dowager was very shocked. “This … this … thing … where did it come from?” she said.

Wei Xiaobao remembered that the Empress Dowager was secretly in collusion with Divine Dragon Cult’s fake palace maid, Deng Bingchun and Liu Yan; perhaps he could use this Five-Dragon Command to force her into submission. “What do

you mean this thing or that thing?" he said, "This is our Cult's Five-Dragon Command, don't you know it? What a nerve!"

The Empress Dowager's entire body trembled, "Yes, yes!" she said.

Hearing her deferential tone, Wei Xiaobao could not help bursting with joy; he said, "Seeing the Five-Dragon Command is like seeing Jiaozhu in person. Hong Jiaozhu enjoys immortal good fortune forever, his long-life is the same as the heaven's."

With a trembling voice the Empress Dowager repeated, "Hong Jiaozhu enjoys immortal good fortune forever, his long-life is the same as the heaven's." She stooped down to pick the Five-Dragon Command and lifted it up high above her head.

Wei Xiaobao reached out to receive it. "Are you going to obey my command?" he asked.

"Yes," the Empress Dowager replied, "I will respectfully obey your command."

Wei Xiaobao said, "With Jiaozhu's treasured teaching always in our hearts, we can set up meritorious deed and subdue the enemy, nothing is unachievable!"

The Empress Dowager respectfully followed, "With Jiaozhu's treasured teaching always in our hearts, we can set up meritorious deed and subdue the enemy, nothing is unachievable!"

It was only now did Wei Xiaobao let out a sigh of relief; he loosened the dagger, and haughtily sat down on the edge of the bed.

The Empress Dowager turned toward the Princess and said, "Go outside, don't say anything, otherwise I will kill you."

The Princess was startled. "Yes," she replied. She cast a glance toward Wei Xiaobao, her heart was filled with doubts. "Empress Dowager," she said, "Is this *Huangdi Gege*'s imperial edict?"

As Kangxi gradually grew older, his power and authority gradually grew bigger; when eunuchs, palace maids, as well as Imperial Bodyguards, were talking about His Majesty, their fear and respect also grew steadily. The Princess also knew earlier that the Empress Dowager was rather afraid of the Emperor. The Empress

Dowager nodded and said, “Yes, he is the Emperor’s trusted aide, there is some important matter he needs to talk to me. You must never, ever reveal this secret. In front of the Emperor, you must never mention it even more, so as to avoid … to avoid the Emperor getting angry at you.”

“Yes, yes,” the Princess replied, “I am not that stupid.” While saying that, she went out of the room and closed the door behind her.

As she sat face-to-face with Wei Xiaobao, the Empress Dowager’s heart was filled with doubts. After a while, she said, “The walls have ears, this is not a good place to talk. Would it be better if you please go to the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful to discuss it further?”

Hearing her using the word ‘please’, plus her tone was asking for opinion, not authoritatively making a one-sided decision, Wei Xiaobao felt even more relieved; but he was still thinking, “This old wh0re is vicious and merciless, I wonder if she is luring me to the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful to use some crafty scheme to harm *laozi*?” Thereupon he nodded and said in a low voice, “I am the newly-appointed White Dragon Envoy of our Cult, under Hong Jiaozhu’s order to bear this Five-Dragon Command.”

The Empress Dowager immediately felt deep veneration toward him, she bowed and said, “Subordinate pays her respect to the White Dragon Envoy.”

Although Wei Xiaobao had long suspected that since the Empress Dowager was in collusion with the Black Dragon Gate’s people, she was bound to have utter veneration toward Hong Jiaozhu, so this Five-Dragon Command most probably would have some effect on her; but never in a million years would he guess that she herself was a member of the Divine Dragon Cult. Based on her status as the Empress Dowager, there was nothing in the world that she could not get, yet shockingly she still entered the Divine Dragon Cult. Not only that, her rank was far below that of his own, which was really unthinkable. Seeing her respectfully making her salutations, he could not help but was shocked and at a loss of what to do.

Seeing him sitting silently without saying anything, the Empress Dowager thought that he was still thinking of the former hatred, she was very frightened and said in a low voice, “Previously subordinate did not know honorable envoy’s

status, and thus has offended you a lot, and now I am very terrified, only hoping for the honorable envoy's magnanimous forgiveness."

She saw that he was very young, yet was holding a very high position within the Cult, in the end it was still hard to believe. But then again, for the past few years Jiaozhu and Madame had promoted young people to higher position on a large scale, the older brethrens of the Cult were either slaughtered, or were met with suspicions, their power were gradually reduced. Therefore, this little child being the newly-appointed White Dragon Envoy was absolutely not an unusual happening. She thought further, "Even if he is really the White Dragon Envoy, if I kill him right now, nobody in the Cult would know. This little demon bears an extreme grudge toward me, if I let him live, it will only cause no end of trouble for me."

Her murderous intention aroused, her eyes could not help but revealing a malicious look. Wei Xiaobao immediately caught it, and said in his heart, "Not good, the old wh0re is going to kill me." He said in a low voice, "The technique I used to capture you just now, obviously you know who had taught me that, don't you?"

The Empress Dowager was startled; she recalled the technique used by this little demon a moment ago, and found it to be immeasurably secretive, just in one move he was able to subdue her. It was precisely the Cult Leader's technique. "Could it be … could it be that Jiaozhu has personally taught you?" she asked in a trembling voice.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Jiaozhu taught me thirty killer moves, Madame Hong taught me thirty *qin na* techniques. Comparing the two of them, naturally Jiaozhu's techniques are a lot more formidable. It's just that each one of the Senior's moves will take the human's life. I did not want to kill you, therefore, I only used the move that Madame taught me, the 'the flying swallow circle around overhead'."

Since bragging did not need any capital, he multiplied the number of moves by a factor of ten. But the Empress Dowager did not have the slightest doubt. She knew that the moves Madame Hong used all have ancient beauties' name in it; she could not help but broke into cold sweat. She thought, "Luckily he used Madame Hong's move to deal with me. If he had used the move Jiaozhu taught

him, I would have been dead by now.” This moment, how could she still have the intention to harm him? She said respectfully, “Thank you for honorable envoy’s kindness in not killing me.”

Feeling very proud of himself, Wei Xiaobao said, “I did not dig out your eyeballs, compared to Madame’s instruction, I was being lenient to you thirty percent.” These words were actually the truth, if he really wanted to dig the Empress Dowager’s eyes, he could do that. It’s just that when she was severely injured, she would strike back with all of her strength, and then she would definitely want to take his life.

The more the Empress Dowager heard him, the more she was afraid. “Thank you for being lenient to me,” she said, “Subordinate appreciates it very much. I will certainly repay honorable envoy’s benevolence.”

Originally, each time Wei Xiaobao saw the Empress Dowager, it was like a mouse seeing a cat, he could not stop his entire body from trembling; who would have thought that this time unexpectedly he managed to control her that she became docile, standing in front of him in fear and trepidation. He was very pleased with himself, and it was very hard to contain. He lifted his left leg and crossed it above his right, and swayed it several times. He said in a low voice, “This time, we have Fat Toutuo and Lu Gaoxuan, two people following the Envoy from Shen Long Jiao coming to Beijing.”

“Yes, yes,” the Empress Dowager said. She thought that Fat and Lu, two people were martial art experts from their Cult, unexpectedly they were second to him. It was really fortunate that she was not being reckless a moment ago; if she did kill him, forget that she would have to face the Cult Leader' investigation later, as soon as Fat and Lu, two people find out, death would be her only way out. She saw the finger marks on his face from her slaps earlier, and said in a trembling voice, "Subordinate has committed all kinds of heinous crimes in the past. I am hoping for honorable envoy’s magnanimous, generous and boundless good fortune."

Wei Xiaobao smiled and said, "The White Dragon Envoy Zhong Zhiling betrayed Jiaozhu, Jiaozhu and Madame have him killed, and ordered me to take over the White Dragon Gate. The Black Dragon Envoy Zhang Danyue did not do his best in handling his assignment, Jiaozhu and Madame are very angry. The mission to

fetch the sutras now becomes my responsibility."

The Empress Dowager's entire body trembled. "Yes, yes," she said. Recalling the several copies of sutra that she had just obtained but then lost, day and night she had been feeling uneasy these past few days, and now finally the matter was brought to light. She said in a trembling voice, "This matter is complicated and not easy to explain succinctly. Would honorable envoy take the trouble to visit the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful? Subordinate will present detail reports to you."

Wei Xiaobao nodded and said, "Very well." He thought that there were too many things he did not understand about this matter, and was about to question her anyway; thereupon he stood up.

The Empress Dowager turned around, pulled the door bolt, and opened the door. And then she stepped aside to let him walk out first. Wei Xiaobao said loudly, "The Empress Dowager is leaving!"

"Excuse me!" the Empress Dowager said in a low voice, as she went out the door. Wei Xiaobao followed behind her. Dozens of eunuchs and palace maids followed from a far.

The two of them arrived at the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful. The Empress Dowager led him into her bedroom. After sending out the palace maids, she closed the door, and then personally poured a bowl of ginseng soup, which she offered to Wei Xiaobao with both hands. Wei Xiaobao accepted it and drank several mouthfuls; he thought, "My prestige today is comparable to the Old Emperor Shunzhi in the past. I don't think the Empress Dowager would treat the young Emperor with this kind of respect." He was very happy in his heart.

The Empress Dowager opened a trunk and took out a brocade box. From the box she took out a small jade bottle; she said, "Reporting to honorable envoy: there are thirty 'snow ginseng jade moon pills' in this bottle, it was a tribute from King of Korean Joseon dynasty, incomparably priceless. After taking this, the body will be invigorated, it will not be invaded by a hundred poisons. From these, would honorable envoy please forward twelve pills to Jiaozhu, ten pills to Madame Jiaozhu, and would honorable envoy take the remaining eight pills for yourself, as a token of ... a token of subordinate's negligible appreciation."

Wei Xiaobao nodded. "Thank you very much," he said, "But I wonder if these pills will clash with the ‘leopard embryo tendon altering pill’?"

"It won't clash at all," the Empress Dowager replied, "Congratulations, honorable envoy, on receiving Jiaozhu's gracious gift the ‘leopard embryo tendon altering pill’. I wonder ... I wonder if Jiaozhu has instructed honorable envoy to bring subordinate's antidote for this year."

Wei Xiaobao was startled. "This year's antidote?" he asked, but then he immediately understood. The Empress Dowager must have had taken the ‘leopard embryo tendon altering pill’. Jiaozhu bestowed her the antidote every year, which would not eradicate the poison thoroughly, and thus it has to be taken once every year, so that it would not flare up. Otherwise, she was deep in the Palace, with countless martial art master Imperial Bodyguards, even if Jiaozhu had a higher skill, he would not be able to control her. Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "You and I both have taken the ‘leopard embryo pill’, how can I bring the antidote with me?"

"Yes," the Empress Dowager replied, "But honorable envoy enjoys special favor from Jiaozhu, how can subordinate be compared to you?"

Wei Xiaobao thought, "She is really terrified, I must comfort her a little bit." Thereupon he said, "Jiaozhu and Madame said that as long as you display utter loyalty to Jiaozhu, and will not have any infidelity, you work on his behalf with all your might, Jiaozhu will never treat you unfairly. Don't worry."

The Empress Dowager was greatly delighted; she said, "Jiaozhu's benevolence is as heavy as the mountain, subordinate cannot repay it even with ten thousand deaths. Jiaozhu enjoys immortal good fortune forever, his long-life is the same as the heaven’s."

Wei Xiaobao mused, "You are originally the Empress, and now you are the Empress Dowager, other than the Emperor, no one in this world has a higher rank than you. Even if Shen Long Jiao is more formidable, it still can't be compared to you; why would you want to enter the Cult and take orders from Jiaozhu? Aren't you being a rebellious s1ut? Ah, right, maybe you are just the same as your daughter, you are both miserable wretch, you won't be happy unless other people beat you and curse you." He was still too young, his life

experience was limited; for the time being, he was unable to grasp the importance of the information he had just received.

Seeing he was hesitating, the Empress Dowager thought that he was about to ask her about the sutra; therefore, without waiting to be asked, she volunteered, "Subordinate has sent Deng Bingchun and Liu Yan, two people, to forward those three copies of sutra to Jiaozhu. Has he, the Senior, received it?"

Wei Xiaobao was startled; he thought, "The fake palace maid Deng Bingchun was killed by Tao *Gugu*, Liu Yan was stabbed to death by Miss Fang's sword; what sutra has been forwarded to Jiaozhu?" Unclear of her real intention, he asked, "Did you say three copies have been forwarded to Jiaozhu? I have never heard about it. Jiaozhu said that the Black Dragon Envoy took too long to get hold of the sutra, yet he has not gained anything. Jiaozhu was very angry, he almost forced him to commit suicide."

The Empress Dowager showed an astonished expression. "That's strange," she said, "Subordinate clearly sent Deng Bingchun and Liu Yan, two people to make a special trip to Divine Dragon Island to deliver those three copies of sutra. Naturally it was before honorable envoy put Liu Yan to death."

"Oh," Wei Xiaobao said, "Is there such thing? Deng Bingchun? Was he your bald *Shixiong*?"

"Exactly," the Empress Dowager replied, "When the honorable envoy return to the Divine Dragon Island in the future, please ask him, you will understand everything."

Wei Xiaobao suddenly realized; he mused, "That's right, Deng Bingchun was killed by Tao *Gugu*, this old wh0re thinks I know nothing of it. She lost three copies of sutra, for fear that Jiaozhu would blame her, she pushes all the blame on to those two dead people; this is called 'dead men tell no tales', she is really smart. She would not know that those three copies are actually in *Laozi*'s hands. If she used this lie to swindle others, it is indeed a damn top-notch lie; unfortunately, whatever trick she is performing, she cannot deceive *Laozi*. I'd better not expose your trickery for the time being." He said, "You have already obtained three copies, your merit cannot be considered small. On the other five, you must make the extra effort."

"Yes," the Empress Dowager replied, "From dawn to dusk subordinate always thinks about how to get the other five copies of the sutra, to repay Jiaozhu's benevolence."

"That's very good!" Wei Xiaobao said, "You are actually this loyal, the poison in the ‘leopard embryo tendon altering pill’ has been dissolved one time for you, you should not have any problem. I will see Jiaozhu soon, I will definitely speak several words of praise on your behalf."

The Empress Dowager was ecstatic; she bowed to salute and said, "Honorable envoy's great kindness, subordinate will never dare to forget. It will be best if subordinate can transfer to the White Dragon Gate, to follow honorable envoy's leading; it will be my greatest good fortune."

"That can be done easily," Wei Xiaobao replied, "But about you entered the Cult and everything you went through, you must tell me in detail, don't conceal anything at all."

"Yes," the Empress Dowager replied, "Subordinate will not dare to speak even half a sentence of incomplete, untrue words toward our Gate's Envoy ..."

Suddenly there were footsteps outside the door, a palace maid coughed and said, "Reporting to the Empress Dowager: His Majesty summoned Gui Gonggong, saying that there is an urgent matter, to have him return immediately."

Wei Xiaobao nodded and said in a low voice, "Don't worry about anything, we'll continue later."

The Empress Dowager replied in a low voice, "Thank you honorable envoy." And then in loud and clear voice said, "His Majesty summons you, you may go now."

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao replied, "I wish the Empress Dowager ten thousand good fortunes and peace like gold."

As he went out the door, he saw eight Imperial Bodyguards standing outside the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful; he was slightly shocked, thinking, "What urgent matter could it be?" So he rushed toward the Upper Study Room.

"Good, you are alright," Kangxi happily said, "I heard the old traitor took you

away, so I was worried, I was afraid she might harm you."

"Many thanks for Shifu's concern," Wei Xiaobao said, "That old ... old ... she asked me where have I been these past several days? I thought that I must never say anything about the Old Emperor, I must not even mention Shanxi or Mount Wutai, but I also am not a good liar. When pressed by her, an inspiration appeared in a moment of desperation, I said that Your Majesty sent me to Jiangnan to see if there is any amusing gadget, to be bought and brought back to the Palace. I also said that Your Majesty instructed me not to let the Empress Dowager find out, so that the Empress Dowager would not blame Your Majesty being the Emperor, yet still loves to play like a child."

Kangxi laughed aloud, while patting his shoulder and said, "It's best that you said it that way. Let the old traitor thinks that I am still like a child who love to play; that way she won't guard against me. So you are not a good liar? What you said is very interesting."

"Do you think so?" Wei Xiaobao said, "Your servant was worried that Your Majesty won't be happy to hear it."

"Very good, very good," Kangxi said, "Just now I was afraid the old traitor would harm you, so I sent eight Imperial Bodyguards to the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful. If the old traitor was unwilling to let you go, I ordered them to break into the Palace and get you out of there. I know I would have had direct confrontation with her, but it was a desperate situation."

Wei Xiaobao kneeled down and kowtowed. "Emperor Shifu's kindness is as heavy as the mountain, your servant disciple cannot repay even if I have my body crushed to powder."

Kangxi said, "If you serve the Old Emperor well, then you are repaying my kindness to you."

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao replied.

Kangxi picked up a large sealed yellow envelope from his desk and said, "This is an imperial edict to the monks of the Shaolin Temple. You pick forty Imperial Bodyguards and two thousand valiant cavalry's officers and men, and go to Shaolin Temple to announce the imperial decree for them to do something for me. What it is that I want them to do, everything is written in the letter, which

you may open when you arrive at the Shaolin Temple. You are to obey and act accordingly. And now I promote your official position to the Vice Commander of the Plain Yellow Banner's Valiant Cavalry, which is a 2a rank[4]. You are actually a Han, but now I bequeath you the status as a Manchu, we call it 'entering the Manchurian's Flag Bearers'. The Plain Yellow Banner is the Emperor's personal Manchurian Banner men, the Valiant Cavalry is the Emperor's personal elite soldiers. You are still holding the Imperial Bodyguard Deputy Chief."

He knew Wei Xiaobao was without learning or skills, plus he was still too young, he could not serve as a real official, consequently, both positions were deputy position.

Wei Xiaobao said, "As long as I can always be at the Emperor Shifu's side, high ranking or low ranking position, your servant disciple does not care." While saying that, he kowtowed vigorously to express his gratitude. He mused, "I am fine being a Han, now I have to change shape in a single shake and become a Manchu Tatar." He thought further, "Emperor Shifu did not order me to hasten to the Qing Liang Temple and become a little monk there, but to lead the troops to Shaolin Temple first to deliver the imperial edict, to reward those *Dashi* [great master] who rendered meritorious service in saving the Old Emperor. Most likely he is simply letting me to enjoy the limelight. This is called 'sweet first, bitter later', I become the master first, and then he would spank my bottom later."

Kangxi had the Commander of the Plain Yellow Banner's Valiant Cavalry Chalju [orig. Cha'er Zhu] summoned. He made him aware that Xiao Guizi was not a court eunuch at all, but he was actually the Imperial Bodyguard Deputy Chief, and his real name was Wei Xiaobao. For the purpose of capturing Oboi, he was ordered to disguise himself as a eunuch. And now he was bestowed the status as a Manchu, under the Plain Yellow Banner, and was promoted to be the Vice Commander of the Plain Yellow Banner's Valiant Cavalry.

When Oboi was still in power, Chalju had suffered greatly from the internal strife, so much so that he was put in prison, and day and night his life was in danger. Fortunately for him, Oboi was defeated and he was released from prison, hence early on he has had deep gratitude to Wei Xiaobao who had killed Oboi. Hearing that the Emperor had assigned Wei Xiaobao to be his own deputy, he was greatly delighted. Immediately he congratulated Wei Xiaobao, saying,

"Wei *Xiongdi*, the two of us are going to work together, there is nothing better than that. You are a young hero, from now on our Valiant Cavalry will show our face."

Wei Xiaobao uttered some modest remarks. Chalju had made up his mind: this Wei Xiaobao had received great favor from the Emperor, although officially he was his assistant, in reality Chalju was the one who ought to be the assistant. As long as Chalju could win Wei Xiaobao's favor, there would be no problem for him to make a rapid career advance in the future.

Kangxi said, "I am sending Wei Xiaobao on a mission. You two may carry on, prepare your troops. Wei Xiaobao is to leave Beijing tonight, no need to take your leave from me." He took the golden seal, the symbol of authority to maneuver Valiant Cavalry troops and gave it to Wei Xiaobao.

Wei Xiaobao received the golden seal and kowtowed to bid Kangxi farewell. He thought, "I have not investigated clearly why the old wh0re entered Shen Long Jiao. It's not a big deal, most likely it was because she is a s1ut. I will ask her again next time I return to the Palace." He thought further, "Last night I was beaten by the Princess, my body aches all over, and I slept until the sky was bright, thus I was unable to go see Tao *Gugu*. I wonder how she is doing, living the Palace. Next time I return, I must meet with her."

The two of them immediately went to see the Imperial Bodyguard Chief Dolong. Wei Xiaobao produced the imperial decree Kangxi gave him earlier, the one where he was appointed the Imperial Bodyguard Deputy Chief, and showed it to Dolong. Dolong repeatedly congratulated him, saying, "Wei *Xiongdi* can freely select whichever Imperial Bodyguards you want. As long as His Majesty nods his approval, I can even accompany you on this mission."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "I do not dare to accept the honor. Protecting His Majesty is a great responsibility. Dolong *Zongguan* may find strolling around the Capital is not an easy thing for you to do."

Dolong laughed and said, "Next time I will ask His Majesty, the two of us can change our duties, you become the chief, I become your deputy. And then whenever there is good assignment going out of the Capital to catch the autumn breeze, you can let your *Gege* to go."

Wei Xiaobao selected Zhang Kangnian and Zhao Qixian, two Imperial Bodyguards, telling them to select a group of Imperial Bodyguards who were close to them. Chalju selected two thousand Valiant Cavalry officers. Each officer was ordered to pay their respect to their new Deputy Commander.

The articles Kangxi wanted to give to the Shaolin Temple's monks were prepared promptly; everything was loaded into several dozen carriages. Whatever the Emperor wanted, his shout and his sigh, would be done immediately. In about more than four hours, everything was completely ready.

Actually, Wei Xiaobao was supposed to wear the Valiant Cavalry military uniform, but such a small-sized general uniform was not readily available. Chalju came up with an idea: he gave Wei Xiaobao his own set of uniform, and sent for four highly-skilled tailors to come along. He ordered them to work on altering the uniform inside the large carriage, told them not to sleep that night, and would not allow them to return to Beijing unless the uniform was ready. If they goofed off, the reward would be heavy flogging with army stick.

Wei Xiaobao found the time to go back to the Hair Alley, and told Lu Gaoxuan and Fat Toutuo, "Today I managed to sneak into the Palace, the plan of stealing the sutra has begun to materialize." He instructed the two of them to stay quietly in the house, waiting for his news; they must not go out recklessly, to avoid revealing their secret. As Lu and Fat, two people saw that Wei Xiaobao had handled this matter without a hitch, that he managed to obtain a clue in just two days, they were both very happy, and thus repeatedly expressed their gratitude and promised to follow his instruction.

Wei Xiaobao had Shuang'er changed into men's clothing, to disguise herself as his attendant and travelled together with him.

Chapter 22

The old cassock of the mountain altering revealed secret, the out-of-this-world beautiful woman altering the adornment.

(Translated by Foxs)

More than wenty prostitutes crowded the alley, the girl in blue raised her saber in threatening gesture, but the crowd of prostitutes knew she would not dare to really kill anybody; thereupon they taunted her randomly and even reached out to pull her clothes. The girl in green's beautiful eyes widened, she was completely at a loss.

By the time Wei Xiaobao set out on the journey, it was already late afternoon,

but the imperial decree required him to leave the Capital that very same day, so no matter what they had to exit the city wall. Going out the Yong Ding Gate, they only travelled for twenty *li* when they had to pitch camp for the night.

The Valiant Cavalry was the Emperor's personal guards, its members were all the children of Manchurian royal family, close relatives or trusted subordinates of the Emperor. Its provision was ten times better than regular soldiers. They have been staying in the Capital for quite a long time, hence going out of Beijing, without exception everybody was in high spirit, much less they were not going out to fight any battle. This assignment to go to Henan was like going on a scenic tour funded by the imperial court; it was completely different from their regular duties.

After dinner, it was too early for Wei Xiaobao to go to bed, thereupon he summoned Zhang Kangnian, Zhao Qixian, and the other Imperial Bodyguards, along with the officers of the Valiant Cavalry, to assemble in the command tent. They all thought, "I wonder what important matter His Majesty wants Vice Commander Wei to handle; he is summoning us all, it must be because he wants to brief us on the special imperial decree."

After everybody had paid his respect, Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "We, boys, do not have anything to do. His granny, let us gamble, *Laozi* will be the banker."

The officers stared at him blankly; they thought he was joking. But then they saw him took out four dice from his pocket and tossed them to the small table in front of him, the dice rolled around, and only then did the people cheered thunderously. Generally, the soldiers were not prohibited from gambling, except when they were marching into battle, then gambling was strictly prohibited, to avoid the troops from having unstable minds and thus damaging the important matter. But how could Wei Xiaobao understand this rule? Although the officers of the Valiant Cavalry knew this martial law, they thought that this time they were not marching to battle, why would they want to obstruct the Vice Commander's esthetic pleasure?

Wei Xiaobao fished a pack of banknotes from his pocket and placed it on the small table, it worth at least five or six thousand *taels* silver. He said, “Who has the ability to win?” The officers scattered back to their tents to get their money.

Although there were a lot of low ranking officers in the Valiant Cavalry, their families were rich. Hearing that Vice Commander Wei was opening a gambling table, they quietly sneaked into the tent.

Wei Xiaobao called out, “There is no young and old on the gambling table, only money and banknotes! Heroes and warriors, the more they lose, they happier they are. Turtles and lambs, they win and immediately run away!” He blew on the four dice before tossing them onto the table.

When he was in Yangzhou, he envied the power and prestige of the bankers of the casino. Being the Deputy Chief, the Vice Commander, was nothing to him. Today he had a couple of thousands crowd and he was being the banker, now that was the thing he was most proud of in his entire life.

One after another the officers placed their bets, some won, some lost. After a while, their spirit aroused, the stake was growing higher and higher, the lower ranking officers at the back were starting to lay their bets. The Imperial Bodyguard Zhao Qixian and a Manchu officer stood by Wei Xiaobao, helping him collect the winning and pay the winners. The large army tent was filled with the shouts of people winning and the cry of those losing, just like the sound of a big gambling establishment. More than two hours later, there were more than twenty thousand *taels* of silver piling up on the gambling table. Some people lost all, they went back to their tents to borrow more capital from their companions who were not gambling.

Wei Xiaobao threw the dice, all four dice showed red spots, which means sweep the decks. Everybody was dejected, some cursed, some sighed. Zhao Qixian reached out to take all the money. “Wait!” Wei Xiaobao called out, “This is the first day that *Laozi* leads the troops and be the banker. This time I am giving away everything to the friends here, I won’t take the money!”

The troops cheered happily, they shouted, “Vice Commander Wei is a true hero!”

“Anybody wants to increase his bet may do so!” Wei Xiaobao called out.

Having been through a narrow escape, they all felt that their luck was really good. One after another they put more money that it piled high on the table. Suddenly a loud and clear voice said, “I bet on the Gate of Heaven!” and he threw a watermelon-shaped object on the Gate of Heaven.

As soon as they saw it, everybody was shocked. The object on the gambling table was a badly mangled human head. The severed head was still wearing an officer hat, unexpectedly he was an Imperial Bodyguard. “Getong!” Zhao Qixian cried out in fear. Turned out it was the Imperial Bodyguard Getong’s head. He was on duty, patrolling outside the tent tonight, and had his head chopped by the intruders.

The crowd raised their heads in alarm, and saw at the entrance of the army tent stood a dozen or so people wearing blue clothes, each one held a long sword. The officers’ attention was focused on the gambling table, nobody knew when did these people come in? The crowd of military officers in the tent did not bring any weapons, momentarily they were at a loss of what to do.

A young man, about twenty five or twenty six, stepped toward the gambling table, both hands were empty, he said, “Gambling Officer, do you accept the bet?”

“Seize him!” Zhao Qixian called out, immediately four Imperial Bodyguards pounced on the young man.

The man spread his arms and grabbed two men on the pit of their stomachs. ‘Bang!’ he banged the two heads against each other, the two men immediately fainted. Immediately afterwards white ray flashed, two swords were thrust forward, the swords pierced the other two Imperial Bodyguards’ backs and went

straight through to their chests. The two Imperial Bodyguards cried miserably as they fell to the ground, dead. The blue-clothed men who thrust their swords were a middle-aged man and a Taoist priest. They pulled their swords and waved their hands, the two swords flew up and 'pop, pop!' the swords stuck onto the gambling table.

The middle-aged man shouted, "I bet on the Upper Gate!" The Taoist priest shouted, "I bet on the Lower Gate!" The two swords, not surprisingly, landed on the Upper and Lower Gates, respectively.

The young man waved his left hand, four people in blue rushed forward, four swords were pointed at the vital points all around Wei Xiaobao's body.

With a trembling voice Zhao Qixian shouted, "Who are you? What … what a nerve! You killed officers, broke into an army camp, aren't you … aren't you afraid of … of being beheaded?"

Suddenly from among the four people pointing their swords at Wei Xiaobao came a scoff as someone laughed and said, "We are not afraid; are you afraid?" It was a tender and delicate voice of a woman.

Wei Xiaobao stole a glance sideways, and saw a young woman, about fourteen or fifteen years old, her face was rather round, her appearance very sweet, her pair of large eyes were pitch-black and bright, there was a smiling expression at the corner of her mouth. He was actually scared out of his wits, but as soon as he saw this good-looking girl, his courage involuntarily grew. He laughed and said, "With Miss one person pointing your sword at me, I am already scared."

The girl raised her sword a little, the tip of the sword was pressed against his shoulder; she said, "Since you are scared, why are you laughing?"

Immediately Wei Xiaobao's face turned serious, he said, "I am most obedient to women, Miss says for me not to laugh, I am not laughing." Sure enough, there was no trace of smiling expression left on his face. Seeing him putting on an act, the girl could not help but stifling her laughter.

The young man who acted as their leader frowned slightly and said with a cold laugh, “Manchurian Tatars will soon meet their end, they send this little baby whose smell of mother’s milk has not yet dried to lead the troops. Hey, two swords and one head are already placed on the table, why haven’t you rolled the dice?”

With a good-looking young woman by his side, also hearing the man said to throw the dice, Wei Xiaobao’s panic diminished somewhat; he asked, “If I lose, what must I pay?”

“Do you need to ask?” the young man said, “You lost to a sword you pay a sword, you lost to a head you pay a head!” He thought this juvenile general would definitely beg for mercy.

Who would have thought that when Wei Xiaobao was having martial art match, when he lost he would simply surrender, but on the gambling table, whatever happened he would never be a coward, and admit himself to be useless, much less there was a pretty young lady by his side; while he was still alive, how could he lose face in front of a good-looking girl? He also thought, “Your four swords are pointed to me already, if you want to kill me, it won’t matter if I win or lose, you will kill me anyway, why would I want to give you the satisfaction of winning the argument?” Immediately he picked up the dice and said, “Alright, I accept! If I lose to a sword, I’ll pay a sword, I lose a head I pay a head, I lose a pair of pants I’ll take my clothes off! You throw first!”

The young man did not expect this young general to have such courage and insight; he was stumped for words instead. The middle-aged man said in a low voice, “Large army outside, if we delayed, there will be a big change of the plan!” He wanted him not to waste time senselessly, if those two thousand Manchurian troops burst in, contrary to what he might expect, they would not be easy to deal with.

The young man cast a glance to Wei Xiaobao, he noticed there was not a scared

look on his face. “If I don’t bet with you this time, you won’t submit to me even in your death,” he said. Taking the dice, he threw a six. The Taoist priest and the middle-aged man also threw the dice and both got eight.

Wei Xiaobao picked up the dice and held them in front of the young woman. “Miss,” he said, “Please blow on the dice!”

The young woman smiled and asked, “What for?” But she still blew on the dice.

“That will do!” Wei Xiaobao said, “When a beautiful woman blew on the dice, I would only make a kill and would not lose!”

He shook the dice several times in his hands and was about to throw when Zhao Qixian suddenly said, “Hold on! Vice Commander Wei, ask … ask them what they really want.” He was afraid that when Wei Xiaobao threw the dice this time, he would get less than six dots, inevitably there would be someone’s life to be concerned about. Moreover, he was afraid that instead of compensating the loss with his own head, Wei Xiaobao would want to pay with his, Zhao Qixian’s, head; who told him to stand on the side to be the banker’s assistant?

The young man laughed coldly and said, “If you are scared, just kneel down and beg for mercy.”

“Only turtle bastards are afraid!” Wei Xiaobao said. His hands had not stopped moving, his only fear was that his technique was not too good. Tossing the four dice, they rolled around on the table. When the dice stopped, it did not show a couple of Heavens, but showed six dots. Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted, “Six beats six!” he called out, “I killed the Heavenly Gate, and lost to the Upper and Lower.” He picked Getong’s head and placed it in front of him. “Zhao Dage,” he said, “Get a couple of swords to pay for the Upper and Lower Gates.”

“Yes!” Zhao Qixian replied. He walked toward the tent’s entrance, but a man in blue stuck out his sword on Zhao Qixian’s chest and shouted, “Stop!”

“You won’t let him get the swords?” Wei Xiaobao said, “Very well, not a

problem. One sword can be considered a thousand *taels* of silver." From the pile of money in front of him, he took two thousand taels, and divided it equally and placed the money by the swords.

This group of heroic visitors rushed into the army tent and took control of the commander in chief, the military officers were at a loss. Not only the enemy had high martial art level, they killed people without the slightest scruple. Although their side had more men, they were all outside the tent, and had not been alerted. When a tangled battle ensued, the people in the tent were unarmed and defenseless, perhaps everybody would lose their lives. While they were trembling in fear, they saw Wei Xiaobao and the enemy were tossing the dice, gambling, talking and laughing as though nothing had happened. They could not help but admiring his courage, but some people thought, "Little child does not know the immensity of heaven and earth; do you think this bunch of bandits are here to have fun with you?"

The young man laughed coldly and said, "With our two treasured swords we only win your two thousand *taels*? Take all the money on the gambling table!" Six, seven men in blue stepped forward and took all the money and banknotes on the table. The young man took a sword and pointed it toward Wei Xiaobao's throat and shouted, "Little slave, are you a Manchu or a Han? What's your name?"

Wei Xiaobao thought, "Even if *Laozi* surrenders, you have already barged in, if I surrender now, it would be 'starting without able to finish', 'completely discarding previous achievement'; a real man want to fight, he will fight to the end." Thereupon he laughed aloud and said, "*Laozi* is the Plain Yellow Banner's Deputy Commander, my name is Huacha Huacha Xiaobao. You want to kill then just kill, you want to gamble then let's gamble! Hey, hey, the big bullying the small, not a hero's conduct." By saying the last eight words [the big bullying the small, not a hero's conduct] he was in reality begging for mercy, but in the way he said it there was a little bit of heroic spirit.

The young man smiled and said, "The big bullying the small, not a hero's conduct. You are right. *Xiao Shimei* [little younger martial sister], you are more

or less of the same age as him, you can fight him."

The young girl laughed and said, "Alright!" Raising her sword, she stepped forward and said with a laugh, "Hey, General Huacha Huacha Xiaobao, I am asking some advice of your masterstroke."

The other three people pointing their swords to Wei Xiaobao pushed the swords slightly, nudging his clothes, they said, "Go out and fight!"

The young man waved his hand, the sword in his hand flew and landed on the table in front of Wei Xiaobao. Wei Xiaobao mused, "I don't know anything about swordsmanship, I won't have any guarantee I can beat this little miss." He said, "The big bullying the small, not a hero's conduct. I am bigger than this Little Miss, how can I bully her?"

The young man grabbed the back of his neck and lifted him up. He shouted, "You don't dare to have a sword duel, then kowtow to my *Xiao Shimei* and beg for mercy."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Alright, you want me to kowtow, I will kowtow. Men have gold on their knees, it's best that we kneel in front of women every day!" Bending his knees, he kneeled in front of the young girl. The group of people in blue clothes roared in laughter.

Suddenly Wei Xiaobao leaned sideways, and turned toward the young man's back, the dagger in his hand was pointing to his back. He laughed and said, "Are you going to surrender or not?"

This changed happened so suddenly and amazingly that although the young man's martial art skill was high, unexpectedly he was caught off guard and the vital point on his back was threatened by Wei Xiaobao.

What happened was that realizing that the six moves to save his life he learned on the Divine Dragon Island had not been trained to perfection, Wei Xiaobao was

forced to act happy and keep giggling, to jest and assume the role of a clown, so that the enemy would laugh while looking at him making a fool of himself. When he kneeled down, he reached out to grab the handle of his dagger, and suddenly used the move 'the flying swallow circle around overhead', and unexpectedly succeeded in turning the tide. If he were a grownup, the opponent would guard against him, and if he had not mastered the move, the half-baked move would definitely be in vain. But first of all, the move was indeed very ingenious, although it was not used properly, it still had quite a formidable power; secondly, how could the young man think that this clown-like teenager unexpectedly was able to come up with such a smart trick? Consequently Wei Xiaobao succeeded.

The people in blue clothes were shocked, seven or eight swords were immediately pointed toward Wei Xiaobao's body. They shouted together, "Let him go!" But seeing that Wei Xiaobao's dagger was aimed at the young man's back, although there was no doubt that each one of these seven, eight swords could stab him to death, but he only needed to push the dagger lightly, and then the young man would undoubtedly lose his life. Thereupon as the points of the swords were about a *chi* away from Wei Xiaobao's body, nobody dared to advance anymore.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "You want me to let him go, then I'll let him go; what's so strange about that?" Brandishing his dagger, he cut around in a circle, 'clang, clang!' and cut the tip of the seven or eight swords down, and then he put the dagger back on the young man's back. The people in blue clothes were shocked, they all take a step back.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Put the money back, I'll spare your leader's life." The people in blue who were holding the money did not hesitate at all, they put all the money and the banknotes back on the table.

They heard several hundreds of people yelling outside the tent, "Don't let the bandits escape!" "Quickly surrender!" Turned out in the chaos just now, two officers in the tent managed to escape and gathered the troops; they had surrounded the army tent.

The Taoist priest shouted, “Kill the little Tatar first!” He pulled the sword from the gambling table; a white ray flashed, ‘stab’ he thrust the sword into Wei Xiaobao’s right chest. This sword strike was accurately calculated; it cut down in an oblique angle, stabbing from the front of Wei Xiaobao’s body into his back, he knew for sure that when Wei Xiaobao was hit by the sword, his body would be pushed backward, then the tip of the dagger would definitely move away from the young man’s back. To his surprise, however, the sword bent, and ‘crack!’ it snapped off instantly.

Wei Xiaobao called out, “Aiyo! The stab did not kill me!” Seeing that unexpectedly blade and spear could not enter his body, the people in blue clothes were startled that they were staring blankly at him.

The Taoist priest felt that the tip of his sword had bumped into a soft flesh, not a hard steel armor; momentarily he did not understand what was going on. How could he know that Wei Xiaobao was wearing the treasured vest to protect his body that he could not be injured by sharp blade?

By this time, several hundred officers had burst into the tent, the people in blue were densely covered by spears and broadswords all around, the Imperial Bodyguards and the officers had also obtained weapons from their subordinates’ hands. Even if those people in blue had higher martial art skill, it would be difficult to break through the tight encirclement; much less several people had their swords broken, and their leader was under the enemy’s control. Their upper hand had instantly reversed, and they were now completely beaten and in a hopeless position.

The young man shouted loudly, “Don’t mind me, everybody kill the enemy and rush out!” But the Imperial Bodyguards and the officers rushed forward, each group of seven, eight people surrounded one person in blue. As soon as one person moved ever so slightly, he would face the calamity of blades raining on his body that he would turn into a minced corpse; they had no choice but throwing down their weapons, with hands tied and waiting to be captured.

Wei Xiaobao thought, “These several people have superb martial art skill, and are opposing the imperial court, perhaps they have some association with Tian Di Hui, how to release them and let them go?” Thereupon he laughed and said, “*Laoxiong* [old chap], just now you could have killed me but you didn’t. If at this time I killed you, and not giving you any chance to recover your capital, unavoidably you would think I am not a hero and a warrior; this is called ‘turtles and lambs, they win and immediately run away’. How about this: let us bet over our heads again.” At this time there were seven, eight different weapons were pointing toward the young man. Wei Xiaobao drew back his dagger and with a chuckle he sat down.

The young man angrily said, “You want to kill me just kill, no need to toy with *Laozi*.”

Wei Xiaobao picked up the four dice; he laughed and said, “I be the banker, we bet on your heads. Each one of you throws the dice, whoever wins, then you can walk out immediately, plus take a hundred *taels* as your travel expenses; whoever loses, Zhao *Dage*, you get ready with a sharp blade on the side, chop down and cut their heads away to avenge our Getong *Dage*.”

He counted the opponents, altogether there were nineteen people. Immediately he set aside some money, altogether he made nineteen piles, each pile a hundred *taels* of silver.

Those people in blue killed government official and thus they were starting a rebellion; since they were captured, naturally they would be beheaded without the slightest hope of lucky escape. Unexpectedly this young general wanted to be a real man and opened up a path to life. If they lose, they were doomed to die anyway. The Taoist priest called out, “Very well, a real man gave his words …”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Dead horses cannot chase it! When I, Huacha Huacha Xiaobao, do my business, I never take advantage of other people. This *Xiao Jiejie*, or perhaps *Xiao Meimei* [little older sister, little younger sister, respectively], just

now helped me by blowing on my dice and thus helped me preserving my head; you don't have to throw dice. Just consider it I have won your little head, and am giving it back to you as a bonus. Take these hundred *taels* and walk out the tent first. Pass on this order: the guards outside must not give her any difficulty."

An aide announced the order in loud voice, "Deputy Commander's order: those who are released out of the command tent are to be allowed to leave on his own, they are not to be stopped or given any difficulty." The guards outside the tent complied in loud voices.

Wei Xiaobao took two *yuanbao* worth fifty *taels* each and pushed them in front of the young woman. The young woman's countenance alternated between white and red as she shook her head slowly and said in a low voice, "I don't want to. We … nineteen of us of the same school, we … we will live and die together."

"Very well," Wei Xiaobao said, "You do have *yi qi*. Since you will live and die together, then there is no need for each one of you to throw the dice. Little Miss, you and I are going to gamble. If you win, all nineteen of you will walk away with the money; if you lose, all nineteen heads will roll. Don't you think it's straightforward and quick?"

The girl looked at the young man, waiting for his decision. The young man had a difficult time making one; if the nineteen people bet separately with this young general, some would be bound to lose while some would win. If the general was as good as his word, then about half of the nineteen people would live, and someday they might try to get revenge. But if he let the *Xiao Shimei* to toss the dice, if she won all of them would withdraw, if she lost, it would be a complete wipe-out; unavoidably it would be too dangerous. His gaze slowly swept his companions.

A big man in blue said loudly, "*Xiao Shimei* is right, we live and die together. *Xiao Shimei* please throw the dice. Otherwise, even if I won, I can't live alone." Seven or eight people echoed his sentiment.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Very well! Little Miss, you may throw first!" He

pushed the dice bowl in front of the young woman.

The girl looked at the young man, she wanted to see how he would handle this matter. The young man nodded and said, "*Xiao Shimei*, life and death is a fate. Be courageous and throw the dice. We live and die together anyway!"

The girl reached out into the bowl and grabbed the four dice, her long eyelashes drooped down, suddenly she looked up and cast a glance toward Wei Xiaobao; her hand holding the dice trembled slightly, she let the dice dropped into the bowl, creating a sharp and clear tinkling noise. The girl closed her eyes, she did not dare to look. She only heard all around her people were shouting, "Three! Three! Three! Three dots!" The shouts mixed with the sound of Imperial Bodyguards and army officers laughing and cursing. Although the girl did not understand dice and gambling rule, hearing the enemy was shouting and laughing happily, she knew that her throw must be extremely lacking. Opening her eyes slowly, she saw all of her companions' faces were deathly pale.

The largest value four dice could be thrown was a pair of six and three, followed by the Heaven pair, Earth pair, Man pair, Harmony pair, Plum Blossom, Long Three, Wooden Bench, Ox Head, and other pairs. Even if it was not in pair, there were nine dots down to four dots, which were greater than three dots. When these three dots were thrown, nine out of ten it would lose. Even if Wei Xiaobao also threw three dots, as the banker his three would beat the opponent's three; he could still chop the nineteen people's heads.

A man in blue clothes suddenly shouted, "My own head, I want to gamble it myself. Other people's throw does not count."

The Taoist priest angrily said, "How can a real man so greedy for life, afraid of death like this? You are damaging our Wangwu Pai's prestige."

Wei Xiaobao nodded. "So all of you are from Wangwu Pai?"

The Taoist priest said, "Everybody is going to die anyway, so it's not a big deal to

let you know."

The man in blue loudly said, "It was my father, my mother who gave birth to me, other than my father, my mother, nobody has any right to decide my life or death."

The Taoist priest angrily said, "Before your *Xiao Shimei* threw the dice, you did not say anything, after she threw three dots, you speak out. In our Wangwu Pai there should not be any unreasonable character like you."

The man wanted to preserve his life, he loudly said, "Wu Fu *Shishu* [fifth martial uncle surnamed Fu], there is nothing serious with me not being a disciple of Wangwu Pai."

Another man in blue coldly said, "You only want to save your life and won't care about anything else, do you not?"

The man said, "This young general plainly said that each of us should bet against him. *Xiao Shimei* throwing the dice, it was you who agreed to it, have I even said that I agree?"

The young man in blue grimly said, "Alright, Yuan *Shixiong*, from this moment on, you are not a Wangwu Pai disciple. You may gamble with him yourself."

The man surnamed Yuan replied, "The sooner I am out the better."

"You, surnamed Yuan," Wei Xiaobao said, "What's your name?"

The man surnamed Yuan hesitated a little bit, seeing that his companions had become his enemy, if he told him a false name, someone would uncover his lie, thereupon he said, "*Zaixia* Yuan Yifang."

"Humph," the young man snorted and said, "There is no harm in Sire changing your name to Yuan Fang."

“Why does he have to change his name?” Wei Xiaobao asked, “Hmm, Yuan Fang, Yuan Fang, short one character ‘Yi’ [justice/righteous], he is scolding you as having no ‘*yi qi*’ [spirit of loyalty and self-sacrifice]. Hey, friends of Wangwu Pai, anybody else want to bet with me?” His gaze was fixed on those people in blue; he saw two people with their lips moving slightly, as if they wanted to gamble themselves, but after hesitating for a moment, they did not say anything.

Wei Xiaobao said, “Very good, everybody under Wangwu Pai is a hero and a warrior, you really have *yi qi*. This Yuan *Xiong* does not belong to Wangwu Pai anyway, so it does not matter if he has *yi qi* or not.”

The young man showed a faint smile and said, “Thank you very much.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Pour some wine! I want to drink a cup with these eighteen friends. Either they lose or win, we will part for ever. These eighteen friends have heavy *yi qi*, I cannot not make friends with them.”

The sergeant under his command poured nineteen cups of wine, he placed one cup in front of Wei Xiaobao, and handed over one cup to each of the eighteen people in blue clothes. As the people in blue saw the young man their leader took the cup, they also accepted the cups.

In a loud and clear voice the young man said, “We will never make friends with Manchu Tatars. It’s just that your conduct is straightforward, plus you hold our Wangwu Pai in high regard, drinking a cup of wine with you is not a big deal.”

“Good,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Cheers!” He tossed down the wine. The eighteen people also downed their drinks, and then one after another they tossed the cup to the ground. Yuan Yifang’s face was ashen, he turned his head around, not wanting to look.

Wei Xiaobao shouted, “Prepare eighteen sharp blades, if I throw three dots or more this time, these eighteen good friends’ heads will be chopped down.” The

officers complied with loud voice; eighteen officers raised their sabers or swords and stood behind the eighteen people.

Wei Xiaobao thought, “My set of dice is loaded, it won’t be difficult to throw one or two dots. But I rarely practice lately, my hand skill is out of practice; just now I wanted to throw a pair of Heaven, but it turned out to be six dots. If I made the slightest mistake, inevitably I would harm these eighteen people’s lives. I don’t care if these stinky men are dead, but if this flower-like little girl is also dead, isn’t it a pity?”

He picked up the four dice and shook them inside his hand, blew on them himself, his finger turned lightly, and he tossed the dice. Immediately his left palm covered the mouth of the bowl. He heard the dice were rolling several times, and when they stopped, he did not immediately take his palm away, but only opened a crack from which he took a peek. He saw out of four dice, two showed two dots, one showed one dot, and one showed five dots, so the total was only ten. ‘Departing Ten’ was equal to zero, there was nothing smaller than that. Originally he had concocted a plan, if his technique was ineffective, that is, he threw three dots or more, he would say either one or two dots, and then shook the bowl to disturb the dice, and hence the dead cannot testify, the opposite party would be overjoyed at unexpected good news, at most his own troops would be suspicious, but no one would dare to openly confront him. Now that he succeeded in cheating, he was ecstatic, but cursed himself, “Damn it, *Laozi*’s hand deserves to be chopped!” With his left hand he slapped his own right hand several time.

As everybody saw the dice, they all shouted, “Departing Ten! It’s Departing Ten!”

Having been in mortal danger and escaped alive, the people in blue clothes could not help but cheering loudly. The young man, the leader of the people in blue, looked at Wei Xiaobao and thought, “Manchu Tatars do not speak in good faith, I wonder if he will keep his words?”

Wei Xiaobao pushed the money on the gambling table forward and said, “You

have won the money, take them. Could it be that you still want to gamble with me?”

“We don’t dare to accept the money,” the young man said, “Sire is as good as your word, you are a real hero. I’m sure we’ll meet again someday.” Cupping his fists, he turned around to leave.

“Hey,” Wei Xiaobao called, “You won but don’t want to take the money, aren’t you looking down on *Zaixia*, Huacha Huacha Xiaobao?”

The young man thought, “We are in a dangerous spot, must not delay too much.” He said, “Thank you very much then.” The eighteen of them took the money, turned around and went out of the tent.

Wei Xiaobao kept staring at the girl’s face. After taking the money, she could not help but casting a glance toward Wei Xiaobao. Four eyes met, the girl blushed; she smiled and said in a low voice, “Thank you.” After taking two steps, she turned her head around and said, “Little General, do you mind giving me the four dice?”

Wei Xiaobao laughed. “Of course I don’t, why should I?” he said, “Are you going to bet against your *Shixiong*?”

The girl smiled and said, “I am not. I want to keep it well. I was so frightened a moment ago that I lost half of my life.” Wei Xiaobao grabbed the four dice and put them in her hand; he took this opportunity to gently pinch her wrist. He always wanted to take this kind of small advantage. The girl said again, “Thank you,” and left the tent in quick steps.

Seeing his companion walked out the tent, Yuan Yifang was about to follow. “Hey,” Wei Xiaobao called, “I have not bet against you.”

Yuan Yifang’s face immediately paled; he thought, “This is so wrong, if I knew he would throw a Departing Ten, why should I become a vile character?” He said,

“General does not have the dice anymore, I … I thought you don’t want to bet.”

“Why not?” Wei Xiaobao said, “We can bet on anything, we can play finger-guessing game, or rolling copper coin.” Casually he grabbed a pack of banknotes and said, “You can guess altogether how many taels of silver in here.”

Yuan Yifang said, “How can I guess it?”

Wei Xiaobao slapped the table and shouted, “This bandit is being rude to the General, seize him and off with his head!” The crowd of officers complied in chorus.

Yuan Yifang was so scared that his face turned ash-grey, his knees turned soft, he kneeled down on the ground and said, “*Xiao* … *Xiaoren* does not dare, Great General … Great General please spare my life.”

Wei Xiaobao was very happy; he thought, “This fellow is calling me Great General[5].” He shouted, “I am going to ask you questions, answer everything truthfully, if there is the slightest bit of covering the truth, your head will be chopped down.”

“Yes, yes!” Yuan Yifang repeatedly said.

Wei Xiaobao ordered his men to get foot fetters and handcuffs, and had him shackled. Then he ordered to have the money returned to those who lost and told them to withdraw. Only Zhang Kangnian, Zhao Qixian, two Imperial Bodyguards, and the Valiant Cavalry *Can Ling* [Regimental Commander] Fu Chun, remained in the tent. Zhang Kangnian commenced the interrogation immediately. He asked one sentence, Yuan Yifang answered one sentence; as expected, he did not conceal anything.

Turned out the *Zhangmen* [Sect Leader] of Wangwu Pai was Situ Bolei, a deputy general during the Ming Dynasty, an affiliate and subordinate of the Shanhai Pass Commander Wu Sangui, who, at that time, was fighting against

Manchurian's invasion. He was a brave and very able fighter, and had rendered quite a bit of meritorious deeds. Afterwards Li Zicheng broke into Beijing and Wu Sangui led the Qing army entering the Pass, Situ Bolei led his troops to fight Li Zicheng, killed the enemy using extreme force of will, attacked them back into Beijing. At that time he only knew that the Qing troops entered the Pass in order to avenge Emperor Chongzhen; to his surprise, however, the Qing troops seized that opportunity to occupy the Han people's rivers and mountains, and Wu Sangui became the great traitor to China.

In his rage, Situ Bolei immediately relinquished his official position and went to Wangwu Mountain to live in seclusion. A considerable number of his former subordinates were not willing to surrender to the Manchurian Qing, they came to Wangwu Mountain to live with him. Situ Bolei's martial art skill was actually very high, having no other engagement, he taught his former subordinates martial art, and after a long time, they automatically became the Wangwu Pai. They were master and disciples first before becoming a sect or a martial art school, so it was not quite the same as other schools. Mentioning Situ Bolei's name, Zhang Kangnian and the others had also heard about him.

Yuan Yifang said that the young man who led them was Situ Bolei's son, Situ He; the rest of their group was his martial brothers, and several of his seniors, equivalent to his martial uncles. The young girl was called Zeng Rou; her father was Situ Bolei's subordinate, who passed away several years earlier. Toward the end of his life, he ordered his daughter to do obeisance and enter his former superior's school.

Recently they obtained information that Wu Sangui's son, Wu Yingxiong had come to Beijing. Situ *Zhangmen* then sent them to meet with him. Passing this place, they saw the Qing troops' camp. Situ He was young and like to meddle, sneaking into the camp, they saw everybody was gambling, so he had the urge to rob them. His real intention was not for the money, he wanted to kill some Manchu soldiers to vent his anger.

"What do you want to see Wu Sangui's son for?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

“Shifu’s order,” Yuan Yifang replied, “Is for us to think of a way to kidnap him and bring him back to Wangwu Mountain, thereupon threatening Wu Sangui, coercing him … coercing him …”

“What?” Wei Xiaobao asked, “Coercing him to revolt?”

“It was what Shifu had said,” Yuan Yifang said, “It has nothing to do with *Xiaoren*. *Xiaoren* is loyal to the Great Qing, I will never dare to revolt. Today *Xiaoren* has made a clean break [orig. one knife two segments] with Wangwu Pai, it was exactly because I am unwilling to be attached to the rebels, I want to throw away the dark and invest in the light, to be in the front of the troops against the insurrection.”

Wei Xiaobao kicked him and said with a laugh, “Damn it, you are a big loyalist.”

Yuan Yifang did not dodge at all, he received the kick and said, “Yes, yes! I rely entirely on Great General’s training. Hereafter *Xiaoren* will be Great General’s servant, Great General’s slave; I will be loyal and devoted, will go through water and tread on fire, under no circumstances will I decline to obey your command.”

Wei Xiaobao thought that this time the opponent had killed three Imperial Bodyguards, yet I have let Situ He, Zeng Rou and the others go, I am afraid Zhang Kangnian and the other Imperial Bodyguards would not accept, or at least blame *Laozi*’s luck in throwing the dice was too disappointing. Seeing the case in front of him, he thought that he must give everybody some benefit, so that he could save his own face as the banker that day. After pondering for half a day, he came up with an idea. Stretching out his hand, he heavily slapped the table and shouted, “What a brazen traitor, clearly you are in collusion with Wu Sangui, planning a rebellion, yet you still say you wanted to kidnap his son. How much have you received from Wu Sangui that you are willing to cover up the truth for him? Damn it, son of a b1tch, get someone here, beat this guy severely for me!”

From outside the tent entered seven or eight sergeants, who spread Yuan Yifang

on the ground and beat him with the army stick until his flesh was bruised and lacerated.

“Are you going to confess now?” Wei Xiaobao asked, “You said you are going to kidnap Wu Sangui’s son, why did you come to our army camp and kill our Imperial Bodyguards? The Imperial Bodyguard and the Valiant Cavalry are the Emperor’s most trusted subordinates; by offending the Imperial Bodyguard and the Valiant Cavalry, you are not giving the Emperor any face.” Hearing this, Zhang Kangnian, Fu Chun and the others were very pleased, they spoke out together to threaten him.

Wei Xiaobao said, “This fellow utters graceful words, flowery speech, he is fabricating lies to deceive us. This kind of rebellious traitor, how can he tell the truth unless he is beaten? Beat him again!”

The crowd of sergeants shouted and randomly struck their army sticks down. Yuan Yifang screamed, “Don’t hit, don’t hit! *Xiaoren* is willing confess!”

Wei Xiaobao asked, “Altogether, how many of you live on Mount Wangwu?”

“Altogether we have more than 400 people,” Yuan Yifang replied.

“Including your families?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

“Approximately two thousand people,” Yuan Yifang replied.

Wei Xiaobao slapped the table and cursed, “F*ck your granny! How can there be so little? Beat him again!”

“Don’t hit, don’t hit!” Yuan Yifang screamed, “There are more than four thousand … five thousand people.”

Wei Xiaobao cursed again, “F*ck your granny’s eighteen-generation ancestors, why don’t you just speak straightforward; nine thousand is nine thousand, why

do you have to divide it into four thousand and five thousand?”

“Yes, yes!” Yuan Yifang said, “There are more than nine thousand.”

“You are a rebellious traitor,” Wei Xiaobao said, “How can you tell the truth? If you say nine thousand, there must be at least nineteen thousand of you.” ‘Bang!’ he slapped the table again and shouted, “The rebels gathering on Mount Wangwu, how many are there?”

Listening to his tone, Yuan Yifang realized that the higher the number he mentioned, the happier the young general was; thereupon he said, “I heard … I heard there are thirty thousand people altogether.”

“That’s right,” Wei Xiaobao happily said, “That’s more like it.” Turning toward the Regimental Commander Fu Chun he said, “This miserable wretch will not confess unless he is beaten.”

“Exactly,” Fu Chun replied, “But he must be beaten ferociously.”

“No need to hit,” Yuan Yifang shouted, “Whatever Great General ask, *Xiaoren* will confess.” He had already decided that he would simply follow this young general’s tone of speech so that his skin and flesh would not suffer.

Wei Xiaobao said, “With more than thirty thousand of you, each one is trained in martial art, is that right? The young miss just now, she is only fourteen or fifteen, but she is trained in martial art. You are all Wu Sangui’s former subordinates, but some of you are young, you must be the offspring of his former high-ranking military officer, are you not?”

“Yes, yes!” Yuan Yifang said, “Everybody knows … knows martial art, all of us are Wu Sangui’s former subordinates.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Your leader Situ Bolei, he was Wu Sangui’s favorite general, when he fought a battle, he was very formidable, was he not? He said he wanted

to completely wipe us, the Manchu people, out?”

“That was his talk of treason and heresy,” Yuan Yifang said, “It was … it was extremely wrong of him.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “He sent you to Beijing to see Wu Sangui’s son, to discuss how you are going to revolt. Why didn’t you go to Yunnan and discuss it with Wu Sangui face to face?”

Yuan Yifang said, “This … this … perhaps … perhaps there is another reason.” In reality, they only wanted to kidnap Wu Yingxiong, so it was really not easy to answer Wei Xiaobao’s question.

“Scoundrel!” Wei Xiaobao angrily said, “What other reason? Your Situ Bolei has already gone to Yunnan and has reached an agreement with Wu Sangui, hasn’t he?”

“Probably … probably he has,” Yuan Yifang replied.

Wei Xiaobao cursed, “What do you mean probably or probably not? Damn it, if yes say yes, if no say no.”

“Yes … yes,” Yuan Yifang said, “He has.”

Zhang Kangnian, Zhao Qixian and Fu Chun, three people heard how Wei Xiaobao was guiding the confession, gradually pushing the blame of major crime of scheming a rebellion to Ping Xi Wang Wu Sangui’s head. They could not help but look at each other in blank dismay, while worrying inwardly, not knowing Wei Xiaobao’s real intention.

Wei Xiaobao asked further, “Situ Bolei was Wu Sangui’s favorite general, he raised these more than thirty thousand elite troops, why didn’t he set up his garrison in Yunnan? Your granny, where in the world is Wangwu Mountain?” He thought, “If Wangwu Mountain is in Yunnan, my question is a wrong question.”

Fortunately Yuan Yifang replied, “It’s in Jiyuan County, Henan province.” But Wei Xiaobao did not have the slightest idea what kind of place Jiyuan County, Henan province was. He asked, “That’s close to Beijing, is it?”

“It’s not too far,” Yuan Yifang replied.

“F*ck your granny,” Wei Xiaobao cursed, “Close to Beijing is close to Beijing, what do you mean not too far?”

“Yes, yes,” Yuan Yifang said, “It’s very close, it’s very close.”

“Alright,” Wei Xiaobao said, “So it is very close to Beijing! You, rebellious thieves indeed have a malicious intention, on a mountain very close to Beijing you dare to raise elite troops. When Wu Sangui in Yunnan raises a rebellion, you will immediately go down the mountain to attack straight to Beijing, and will have each and every one of the Imperial Bodyguards and Valiant Cavalry killed like chopping melon or slicing vegetables, you will make a killing until the blood flow like a river, the corpses pile up like a mountain. You will attack like a billowing sandstorm and leave us to piss in our pants in terror, right?”

Yuan Yifang kowtowed and said, “This is Wu Sangui and Situ Bolei, two rebellious thieves’ conspiracy on treason and heresy, it has nothing … nothing to do with *Xiaoren*.”

Wei Xiaobao showed a faint smile; he mused, “This fellow is very clever.” He said, “In your Wangwu Pai, how many people have worked as military officers under Wu Sangui? I want you to give me names, one by one.”

“There are too many of them,” Yuan Yifang said. Immediately he started mentioning names, but this time he did not fabricate the names.

“Very good!” Wei Xiaobao said, “Write down these people’s names, I also want the names of those who were previously holding official positions under Wu Sangui.”

Yuan Yifang said, “Some … some names *Xiaoren* is not too clear.”

“You are not clear?” Wei Xiaobao asked, “Drag him down and beat him thirty more times. I am sure he will be clear.”

Yuan Yifang busily said, “No … don’t hit, *Xiaoren* will … will write down everything.” A sergeant brought pen and paper, Yuan Yifang wrote a list of names.

Seeing he had not finished after writing for half a day, Wei Xiaobao was getting impatient; he turned to Zhang Kangnian and said, “Get Mr. Secretary to record his oral confession.” He shouted to Yuan Yifang, “I want you to repeat the oral confession you gave just now, if you are being unclear for even half a sentence, your head will roll. Take him away.” Two officers took him away.

Wei Xiaobao chuckled and said to his three companions, “*Laoxiong*, this time we are really lucky, to be able to uncover this gargantuan rebellion conspiracy; all four of us will definitely enjoy big promotion.”

Zhang Kangnian and the others, three people, were surprised and happy at the same time. Zhao Qixian said, “This is Commander’s clear eye and brave decision, what merit do subordinates have?”

“Everybody has a share in seeing this matter,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Everyone has meritorious service.”

Zhang Kangnian said, “About Ping Xi Wang staging a rebellion, I wonder if we have enough evidence?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “This bunch of rebellious thieves of Mount Wangwu is planning to revolt, isn’t that the truth? They are going to Beijing to see Wu Sangui’s son, what good thing can possibly come out of that meeting?”

Zhang Kangnian said, “This man surnamed Yuan said that they wanted to kidnap

Ping Xi Wang's Heir Apparent, to compel Ping Xi Wang into revolting, I am afraid Ping Xi Wang did not necessarily have prior contact with them."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Zhang *Dage* has had some dealings with Ping Xi Wang Mansion's people, therefore, you know quite a bit of inside information, don't you? If their rebellion succeeded, Ping Xi Wang will become the Emperor, hey, hey."

Hearing the ill-intention in the tone of his voice, Zhang Kangnian was shocked; he hastily said, "I don't know even one of the Ping Xi Wang Mansion's people. Com … Commander is … is right, that servant Wu Sangui is … is planning treason and heresy, we must … must immediately report this to His Majesty."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Would the three gentlemen discuss it with Mr. Secretary on how we are going to present this memorial to the throne."

After Zhang Kangnian, three people and the armed force secretary finished writing the memorial to the throne, they read it out for Wei Xiaobao. The content was just like Yuan Yifang's oral confession, with the list of names of Wu Sangui's former subordinates on Wangwu Mountain attached to the letter. The memorial was replenished with sauce and spice, recounting how Wei Xiaobao had seen the rebellious traitors during the day, and pretended to be unprepared when they set up camp in the night, to lure the bandits to attack. The rebellious traitors were exceptionally fierce; Wei Xiaobao led the troops to fight bravely, he provided the leadership and captured the chief of the traitors, whose name was Yuan Yifang, alive, and learned about the rebellion plan. The Imperial Bodyguard Getong and two others gallantly died for their country, asking the Emperor to bestow grace by generously rewarding comfort and aid to the three persons' bereaved families.

After listening to this, Wei Xiaobao said, "Please also add several sentences on the meritorious service of the Regimental Commander Fu and Zhang and Zhao, two captains of the Imperial Bodyguards." Fu Chun and the others, three people, were greatly delighted and immediately expressed their gratitude.

Wei Xiaobao added, “Also, add several sentences about we captured nineteen rebellious thieves, but no matter what, those rebellious traitors were unwilling to reveal the rebellion plan, therefore, according to His Majesty’s prior instruction, I intentionally release eighteen rebellious traitors, so that we can investigate clearly the entire rebellion plan.”

The three people asked together, “So releasing the eighteen rebellious traitors was part of His Majesty’s plan?”

“Naturally,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “I am so young, how can I be that smart? If not for His Majesty's foresight, how can I uncover this major rebellion plan?"

Previously, Kangxi had ordered Wei Xiaobao to release Wu Lishen, Ao Biao, Liu Yizhou, three people, in order to find the fact about the rebels entering the Palace. Zhang Kangnian and the others thought that the Emperor had already known that Wangwu Pai people would come to attack. In that case, the framing of Wu Sangui was also part of the Emperor's plan. Seeing that for no rhyme or reason great riches and honor was being delivered into their hands, they were all overjoyed and did not stop expressing their thousand thanks and ten thousands gratitude.

According to Manchurian Qing custom, when a general went into battle, he could not return without an imperial edict. Although Wei Xiaobao was only about twenty *li* from Beijing, he could not personally return to Beijing to submit the memorial to the throne. Thereupon he sent two Company Commanders and ten Imperial Bodyguards to lead one company [orig. 'niru'] of three hundred ordinary soldiers that very same night, with Yuan Yifang in custody, to present the memorial to the throne to Kangxi.

[Author's note: in the Eight Banners Army, three hundred men formed one 'niru'. The idea behind 'niru' was 'big arrow', the leader held a big arrow as the symbol of his authority. Five 'niru' formed one 'jalan', five 'jalan' formed one 'gusa'.]

Wei Xiaobao was very proud of himself; he thought, "This time I am giving Wu Sangui enough trouble. Mu Palace is having a competition against us, Tian Di hui, to see who will topple Wu Sangui first. Today *Laozi* has rendered great service to both Shifu. Shifu Chen of Tian Di Hui will be happy, Emperor Shifu will also be happy."

The next day he led his troops to continue their journey slowly southwards. By noon, two Imperial Bodyguards from Beijing, riding fast horses, caught up with them. They said, "His Majesty has a secret imperial edict."

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted, immediately he gathered all the Imperial Bodyguards and the Valiant Cavalry officers in his tent to receive the imperial decree. The Imperial Bodyguard bearing the imperial decree stood in the middle and read in loud and clear voice: "The Deputy Commander of Valiant Cavalry of Plain Yellow Banner, who simultaneously hold the Deputy Chief of the Imperial Bodyguards position, Wei Xiaobao, listen to this: *Zhen* told you to go to Shaolin Temple on a mission, who told you to meddle in other people's business along the way? You have listened to lowly characters speaking nonsense, bringing a false charge against a minister who has given outstanding service, foolishly pursuing this kind of business; how could you not bitterly disappoint your lord? Henceforth you are forbidden to mention that kind of rubbish talk, if even a word or a sentence leak out, all of you will return to Beijing to see *Zhen* with your heads hanging by your sides. By the Emperor himself."

As soon as Wei Xiaobao heard it, he was so scared that his back was wet with cold sweat. He had no choice but to kowtow and thank the Emperor's favor. The faces of everybody else in the tent went pale, they were very ashamed. Fu Chun, Zhang Kangnian and the others did not dare to talk too much, they thought that this little child was fooling around deliberately, His Majesty did not blame him for the crime, it could be considered that the Emperor treated him very well. Realizing that right now Wei Xiaobao's mood must be very bad, they did not want to look for a nail to bump, thereupon they took their leave and walked out the tent.

The Imperial Bodyguard bearing the imperial decree walked toward Wei Xiaobao and said in a low voice, "His Majesty's order: you must be very careful in everything."

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao replied, "His Majesty's grace, servant Wei Xiaobao is extremely grateful." Taking out four hundred *taels* of silver, he gave the money to the two Imperial Bodyguards.

After the two Imperial Bodyguards left, Wei Xiaobao was puzzled, "Could it be that the Emperor knows that I am slandering Wu Sangui? Or after he arrived in Beijing that servant Yuan Yifang retracted his statement and reported that he had confessed under torture? The Emperor seems to be very fond of Wu Sangui, toppling him is actually not going to be easy."

That evening, the Imperial Bodyguards and the Valiant Cavalry soldiers who were sent to escort Yuan Yifang caught up with them. After Wei Xiaobao bumped into this big nail, everybody did not have any interest to gamble anymore. Without speaking too much, one day the group arrived at the Shaolin Temple on Mount Song.

Having received the report of the arrival of the imperial decree, the Abbot led a group of monks going down the mountain to welcome the party, and then they took Wei Xiaobao and his entourage into the Temple.

Wei Xiaobao took out the imperial decree, opened the sealed envelope, and handed it over to Zhang Kangnian to be read. He heard quite a bit of lengthy and flowery sentences, something like 'The Masters[6] have profound understanding of mysterious principles of Buddhism, have the foreknowledge of wonderful reason, able to establish auspicious scheme, supporting the Emperor on both sides', or 'In the Palace of Nirvana hang the sun and the moon in their splendor, changing the color of the mist and cloud in the garden of Buddha', or 'The cloud circles peaks of Mount Song, the *luan*[7] return to Shaoshi[8], the grass bend down of the immortal dew, peaceful forest under Buddha's sun, the manifest of Buddhist people, the clear wisdom of our generation'. Following those

sentences, the Head Monk of Shaolin Temple, Abbot Hui Cong was bestowed the title of 'The Zen Master [orig. chan shi] Protector of the Country, Blessing to the Sages', also, the eighteen Shaolin monks who had rendered great service on Mount Wutai were duly rewarded. Finally Zhang Kangnian read, "Hereby I am sending the Deputy Commander of Valiant Cavalry of Plain Yellow Banner, who simultaneously hold the Deputy Chief of the Imperial Bodyguards position, the wearer of Yellow Magua bestowed personally by the Emperor, Wei Xiaobao, to act on *Zhen*'s behalf, to become a Buddhist monk in Shaolin Temple, granted by the Emperor to spend time to learn Buddhist law, namely, to take the tonsure. By the Emperor himself."

Listening to the bookish part in the front, Wei Xiaobao had no idea where the Emperor was driving at, but toward the end, he actually understood; he could not restrain his countenance from changing greatly. Kangxi wanted him to go to Mount Wutai and be a Buddhist monk there, and he had agreed. But never in his wildest dream would he expect that he was being sent to Shaolin Temple to have his head shaved here. He had the imperial decree continuously in his possession, but before arriving at the destination, how could he dare to open it? Besides, even if he took a peek, he would not know what was written on it anyway.

Hui Cong Chanshi[9] led the monks to thank the Emperor's favor. The officers took out the gift and distribute it. Wei Xiaobao stood on the side, watching. His heart was in chaos.

Hui Cong Chanshi said, "Wei *Daren* is going to be a monk in place of His Majesty, this is our Temple's rare honor." He took out a razor on the spot, and said, "Wei *Daren* is His Majesty's proxy, this is not a small matter, even *Lao Na* [lit. old cassock] does not dare to be your Shifu. Let *Lao Na*'s late master receive you as his disciple, you are *Lao Na*'s *Shidi* [younger martial brother], your Buddhist name will be Hui Ming. In all Shaolin Temple, other than you and *Lao Na*, two people, nobody else has this 'Hui' generation-character in his name."

Facing this situation, Wei Xiaobao had no choice but kneeling down with tears in his eyes to have his head shaved. Using the razor, Hui Cong Chanshi shaved his

head three times first, and then the tonsure monk continued shaving his sparse hair, whatever was left of his burnt pigtail, until nothing was left. With authority Hui Cong Chanshi said, "Do not consider Shaolin's unadorned wall as an obstruction. Do not consider becoming a monk on the Emperor's behalf as grandeur. The glory and splendor of the dust was unlucky ['Hui'] in the past, but now it is bright ['Ming']. No coming, no going, no decrease, no increase!" Taking out the document conferred by the Emperor, he filled in the name 'Hui Ming' onto the document and had Wei Xiaobao kneeled down to worship the Tathagata[10]. The crowd of monks chorused in calling the name of Buddha.

Wei Xiaobao cursed in his heart, "You, bald-headed thief, do not have eighteen generations ancestors who accumulate merits, but come here and shave *Laozi*'s head. You recite Amitabha Buddha, *Laozi* recite hot piece Mama in my heart." Suddenly he was overwhelmed with grief and bawled. The officers filling the hall were startled and stared at him. The monks continued their recitation; nobody paid him any attention.

After crying for a while, Wei Xiaobao had no choice but to stop. Hui Cong Chanshi said, "*Shidi*, among the monks in our Temple, currently we have eight characters of seniority, namely 'Da Jiao Guan Hui, Cheng Jing Hua Yan'. Our master Guan Zheng Chanshi has passed away twenty-eight years ago, all the Cheng generation monks in our Temple are your *Shizhi* [martial nephew]."

Immediately the monks, in the order of seniority, stepped forward to pay their respect; among them were Cheng Xin, Cheng Guang, Cheng Tong, and the others, who had had friendship with him before. The Cheng generation old monks with their white, silvery beards were all calling him as *Shishu* [martial (younger) uncle]. Among the Jing generation monks, there were quite a few of old men, yet they were all calling him *Shishuzu* [martial granduncle]. The most interesting thing was the Hua generation monks; some of them were thirty, forty years old, but they paid their respect to him by calling him *Tai Shishuzu* [martial great-granduncle]. Wei Xiaobao was amused and could not help but bursting into loud laughter. Seeing the tears on his face had not been wiped, yet he was laughing happily, everybody smiled.

Turned out the reason Kangxi dispatched the Imperial Bodyguards and his personal troops the Valiant Cavalry to Shaolin Temple was no more than escorting Wei Xiaobao to take the tonsure and become a Buddhist monk; however, as the Emperor's proxy, how could he be compared to ordinary person? If not for the fanfare, how could the Shaolin monks see the grandeur of this matter?

The Regimental Commander Fu Chun of the Valiant Cavalry, the Imperial Bodyguards Zhao Qixian, Zhang Kangnian, and the others bade their farewell to Wei Xiaobao. Wei Xiaobao took out three hundred *taels* of silver and asked Zhang Kangnian to rent a private house at the foot of the mountain where Shuang'er could stay. Shaolin Temple has never accepted female benefactors inside their temple. Although Shuang'er was wearing a man's clothing, the eighteen Luohan of Damo Hall had all known her as Wei Xiaobao's servant girl; therefore, she was waiting at the foot of the mountain. She only knew that Wei Xiaobao was going to pass on the imperial decree, and hand over the rewards to the monks; afterwards, Wei Xiaobao would come down the mountain and return to Beijing. Who would have thought that he was supposed to be a monk in the Temple?

Not only Wei Xiaobao was the Emperor's proxy, he had the 'Hui' character in his name, denoting him a senior monk; therefore, everybody in the Temple revered him. The Abbot reserved a large meditation room for him. Abbot Hui Cong said, "*Shidi*, you are free to do anything in the Temple, you may do morning and night chores as you wish. Other than abstaining against taking life, stealing, being lascivious, lying, drinking wine, five major Buddhist monastic disciplines, you can choose whether to observe or not to observe the minor discipline." And then he explained in details what those five major Buddhist monastic disciplines mean.

Wei Xiaobao thought, "Lying is included in these five major Buddhist monastic disciplines, to *Laozi*, I don't want to guard against whatever I say." He asked, "Is gambling also to be abstained?"

Abbot Hui Cong was taken aback. "What gambling?" he asked.

"Gambling for money?" Wei Xiaobao said.

Hui Cong smiled and said, "Within the five major Buddhist monastic disciplines, gambling is not mentioned. Other people may want to abstain against it, but *Shidi* may do as you wish."

Wei Xiaobao thought, "Damn it, if I am the only one who does not abstain against it, what's the use? Could I be betting against myself?"

After living in the Temple for several days, he was already bored to death; he pondered, "Xiao Xuanzi wanted me to serve the Old Emperor, but he sent me to Shaolin Temple to be a monk. I wonder when is he going to let me go to Mount Wutai?"

One particular day he wandered aimlessly to the outside of the Luohan Hall. He saw Cheng Tong was overseeing six disciples in martial art training. As soon as those monks saw his arrival, they bowed together to salute. Wei Xiaobao waved his hand and said, "Don't be too polite, you may continue your training."

He saw the six 'Jing' generation monks boxing technique was precise and rigorous, their movements were very nimble, the changes in their stances were very dynamic; compared to this 'martial granduncle' of theirs, they were actually much more superior. He heard Cheng Tong giving them directions, how firm and how fast should this punch be, how to be powerful but flexible, how to position this kick, how not to kick too high, and so on. Wei Xiaobao did not understand anything, so he was just watching without any interest. After a while he turned around and walked away, thinking, "I always hear people say that Shaolin Temple's martial art skill is number one under the heavens. Now that I am a monk in the Temple, won't it be a pity if I don't learn the skill?" Suddenly it dawned on him, "Aiyo! I got it! The dog fart Shaolin martial art that the old turtle Hai Dafu taught me was fake, it is totally useless. Xiao Xuanzi is sending me to Shaolin Temple to be a monk here, he wants me to learn the real skill of Shaolin Pai before I can protect the Old Emperor. But my Shifu died twenty eight years

ago, who will teach me martial art?"

After pondering for half a day, he finally understood one thing: "Old Monk Abbot makes me his *Shidi*, it's precisely so that I don't have any Shifu; this old bald thief is very crafty. Hmm, that's right, he knew I am the Emperor's trusted aide, who is a high-ranking Manchu official; there is no way he would be willing to pass on excellent martial art skill to this little Tatar. Humph, you don't want to teach me, do you think I cannot learn by looking?"

In Wulin world, when people were teaching martial art, it was a big taboo for any school or sect to have other people watching on the side. However, this Hui Ming Chanshi was their own Temple's 'Senior Monk of Older Generation'. When their Sect's disciples and grand-disciples were practicing martial art and he wanted to watch on the side, nobody could raise any objection.

Wei Xiaobao looked to the east and gazed to the west in all courtyards and halls around the Temple. Whenever there were people training martial art, he would stand and watch for a while. Unfortunately, this 'senior monk's' foundation was indeed too superficial. What Hai Dafu taught him was not a real martial art, while what Chen Jinnan taught him, the internal energy cultivation technique, he only practiced for several days. Shaolin Pai's martial art was wide-ranging and profound, by casually watching like this, how could he reap any benefit? Much less he did not have any patience to watch for an extended period of time.

Therefore, after wandering around Shaolin Temple for more than a month, he did not learn even one bit of martial art skill. However, he had an easy-going personality, he loved to mingle around and make friends. Since in term of seniority his position in the Temple was second only to the Abbot, and he was willing to make friends with other people, all monks were very warm toward him.

One day, the spring breeze was gentle and pleasant, Wei Xiaobao felt his entire body was comfortably warm. Living in a monastery with monks as his only companions was really not the most fun thing to do, thereupon he went out the Temple's gate and strolled down the mountain. He thought that he had not seen

Shuang'er for quite a while, he wanted to know how this girl was doing, so he wanted to see her. Moreover, day in and day out he ate vegetarian dishes in the Temple, he had already cursed the green vegetables and tofu's ancestor several thousand, several tens of thousand times. He wanted Shuang'er to buy some chicken, fish and meat, and let the great monk eat to his heart's desire.

Walking near the Welcoming Guest Pavilion [Ying Ke Ting] outside the Temple, he suddenly heard the sound of people quarreling; he was delighted, "Wonderful, wonderful! A fight." Quickening his steps, he heard the voices of men, intersperse with the sharp and clear voice of several women.

When he came near, he saw two young women in the Pavilion squabbling with four of their Temple's monks. When the four monks saw Wei Xiaobao, they said together, "*Shishuzu* is here, let's have the Senior be the judge over this matter." Welcoming him to the Pavilion, they put their palms together and bowed. These four monks were of the 'Jing' generation. Wei Xiaobao knew that they were in charge of receiving guests and benefactors outside the Temple. Usually they were very well-disposed and very affable, yet somehow they were engaged in a squabble with these two young women. Looking at the two women, one was approximately twenty years old, wearing blue garment, the other was younger, perhaps around sixteen or seventeen years old, wearing light green garment.

As soon as Wei Xiaobao looked at this young woman, he could not stop his heart from jumping, he felt as if the pit of his stomach was beaten by an invisible iron hammer, in an instant his lips were parched, his tongue dried, he was dumbstruck and could only thought, "I am dead, I must be dead! Where did this beautiful woman come from? If this beautiful woman is given to me as my wife, even if the young emperor wanted to switch places with me, I don't want it. Dead or alive, the heaven above the earth below, forest of spears or rain of arrows, mountain of blade or a deep fryer, no matter what Wei Xiaobao must take this miss as a wife."

Seeing how these four monks were calling the young monk 'martial granduncle', and were treating him with great respect, the two women were very surprised.

And then they noticed his eyes were staring blankly at the girl in green clothes. Even a common man ought not to be so impolite, much less this was someone who had left home to become a monk. The girl in green blushed, she turned her head away. An angry look started to appear on the woman in blue's face.

Wei Xiaobao was oblivious; he mused, "Why did she turn her head away? When she is blushing slightly like that, even if a hundred girls of Lovely Spring Courtyard stand together, they do not look as good as one strand of her eyebrow. If I have to give her ten thousand taels each time she laugh, it is still worth it." He also thought, "Miss Fang, Xiao Junzhu, Madame Hong, Princess Jianning, that girl Shuang'er, plus that Miss Zheng who threw the dice, put together are not as beautiful as this fairy. I, Wei Xiaobao, do not want to be the Emperor, I don't want to be the Shen Long Jiao's Jiaozhu, I don't want to be Tian Di Hui's *Zongduozhu*. Some Yellow Magua or three peacock feathers, one-*pin* or two-*pin* rank officer, I don't care about all those things, I ... I only want to be this Miss' husband."

In that instant, myriads of thoughts filled his mind, he was determined to go through water and tread on fire, to risk his life and limbs, to realize his dream; consequently, his expression looked very strange. To the four monks and two women who were looking at him, he looked just like an idiot: suddenly beaming with joy, and then suddenly clenching his jaw.

"*Shishuzu*," Jing Ji and Jing Qing called several times, but Wei Xiaobao was totally oblivious to them. Only after a long time, did he finally wake up as if from a dream, and blew out a breath.

At first the woman in blue thought that Wei Xiaobao was a horny philanderer; afterwards, seeing his blank look, she thought this little monk must be a lunatic, and found it amusing. She asked, "So this little monk is your *Shishuzu*?"

Jing Ji hastily said, "Miss, please be a bit more respectful. This senior monk's Buddhist name is Hui on the top and Ming on the bottom. In our Temple, he is one of the only two Senior Monks with 'Hui' generation-character; he is our head

monk, the Abbot's *Shidi*."

The two women were slightly startled, but then they thought they were joking; they shook their heads in disbelief. The woman in green laughed and said, "*Shijie*, he is swindling us, don't be fooled. This little ... little master, how can he be a senior monk?"

Her voice was melodious, sweet and charming, tender and alluring. Hearing her, Wei Xiaobao's soul flew and scattered away, he could not help but repeating, "This little ... little master, how can he be a senior monk?" But the way he said it sounded frivolous, with no effort to conceal his uncouthness. The two women's faces immediately sank, the four Jing generation monks also felt that this young martial granduncle kind of forgetting his manners too much, hence they were very ashamed.

"Humph," the woman in blue snorted and asked, "Are you a Shaolin Temple's senior monk?"

"A monk is a monk," Wei Xiaobao said, "Nothing senior about it. You can see that I am short, I am nothing more than a short monk[11]."

The eyebrows of the woman in blue shot up; in loud and clear voice she said, "I heard people say that Shaolin Temple's martial art is the leader of the world, their seventy-two unsurpassed skills are immeasurably deep. We, the two sisters, envied it in our hearts, and have come here specifically to admire it. Unexpectedly, your martial art is so-so, worse yet, the monks of the Temple do not observe propriety, oily-mouthed and smooth talking, just like the hoodlums of the marketplace, making other people sorely disappointed. *Shimei*, let us go!" Finished speaking, she turned around to exit the Pavilion.

Jing Qing blocked in front of her, "*Nu Shizhu* [female benefactor] has come to Shaolin Temple, committed violence and hit people, even if you want to go, you must at least leave your revered master's name."

Hearing the words 'committed violence and hit people', Wei Xiaobao thought,

“Turns out they have already assaulted people, no wonder Jing Qing and the others quarreled with them.” He saw red palm marks on the left cheeks of Jing Qing and Jing Ji, evidently they both have suffered a palm strike each.

Wei Xiaobao had chatted with everybody in the Temple, so he already knew the level of martial art skill of these four monks who were in charge of receiving the guests; in the Temple, they could be classified as less-developed. Because they had low martial art skill yet they were eloquent and fluent speakers, the Abbot assigned them the duty of receiving the benefactors who were going to perform their charitable deeds.

In the Wulin world, Shaolin Temple’s fame spanned more than a thousand years. The number of people who came to the temple each month to experience their martial art was too numerous to mention. The monks in charge of receiving the guests had low martial art skill, it was precisely because they were not supposed to fight. Otherwise, the Shaolin Dhyana Temple would turn into an arena where people fought for martial art supremacy. Not only it would disrupt their peace in meditation, it would also be a great disobedience to the Buddhist’s teaching about mercy, hence fighting was an unacceptable behavior.

Obviously the woman in blue did not understand this reason, she only thought that since with one strike she had succeeded in beating two Shaolin monks, she had a reason to be very proud of herself. She said, “Based on your mediocre martial art, you want your Miss to leave behind Shifu’s name, humph, do you think you deserve it?”

Jing Ji has just suffered defeat; he knew that with the five of them combined, they could not stop the women. If these two young women went down the mountain and proclaimed that they had beaten two Shaolin monks and then shook their sleeves and left, while even their origins were unknown, where would they put Shaolin Temple’s reputation at? Thereupon he said, “The four of us have the duty to receive benefactors, our martial art skill is extremely low, and those who have left home hold friendship as our foundation, how can we meaninglessly fight with others? Since the two of you have come to get advice

about our humble Temple's martial art, please wait for a moment, *pinseng* [impoverished monk] will invite several *Shibo* and *Shishu* [martial (older) uncle and martial (younger) uncle] to come, we will introduce them to you." Finished speaking, he turned around to rush toward the Temple.

Suddenly a blue shadow flashed. Jing Ji angrily shouted, "You …" 'Slap' he was thrown tumbling down on the ground. It was the woman in blue who ran after him and stretched out her leg to hook his feet. Jing Ji sprang up and angrily said, "*Nu Shizhu*, why are you …"

The woman in blue laughed aloud and sent a right punch. Jing Ji hastily raised his right arm to block. The woman in blue grabbed with her left hand, 'Crack!' unexpectedly she dislocated his right arm joint. There was a series of 'Crack!', 'Aiyo!', 'Clack, clack!' as in an instant she also broke either the other three monks' wrist bones or their arm joints. The four monks withdrew to the side, completely unable to resist. Jing Ji turned around and rushed back to the Temple to report.

Wei Xiaobao was so scared that he was at a loss of what to do, and was completely helpless. Suddenly the back of his neck tightened, someone grabbed him, while at the same time sealed the acupoint on the back of his neck. Immediately his whole body went limp and painful, he could not exert his strength. He saw the woman in blue was standing in front of him, in that case, the one grabbing his back was obviously the girl in green. His heart was wild with joy. "Wonderful! Wonderful!" he shouted loudly.

Having his back grabbed by the girl, Wei Xiaobao felt he had not walked in this world in vain. It would be best if she added several kicks to his behind, or landed several punches on the top of his head. Even if he were killed immediately, he would enjoy infinite pleasure and would think that his good fortune in love department was great. This moment his nostrils caught a whiff of light, delicate fragrance, hence he called out, "Smells good, smells good!"

The woman in blue angrily said, "This little bald thief is so rotten. *Meizi*, cut his

nose!”

“Alright!” Wei Xiaobao heard a charming voice from behind him, “But let me dig his pair of thief eyeballs first.” And then he felt the fingers of a warm, soft and smooth hand pressed against his left eyelid.

“Please dig it slowly, don’t do it too quickly,” Wei Xiaobao shouted.

The girl was surprised, “Why?” she asked.

“It would be best if you grab me like this,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “Grab me for a lifetime, never let me go, forever.”

The girl angrily said, “Little monk, you are at the death’s door, and still speaking nonsense to me?”

Wei Xiaobao suddenly felt a sharp pain on his right eye; the girl was really going to dig his eyeball out. Greatly shocked, he bent his waist and lowered his head, all reasons and logic were thrown away beyond the ninth level of clouds, both hands reached backward, he only hoped he could pry open the hand holding the back of his neck. The girl punched him on the back. Wei Xiaobao screamed, “Aiyo! Mama!” His hands frantically clawed backward, unconsciously he had launched the move ‘Di Qing subduing the dragon’ that Hong Jiaozhu had taught him. Suddenly he felt both of hands touched something soft; unexpectedly he had grabbed the girl’s breasts.

This style was originally intended to force the enemy behind his back to withdraw, then he would somersault backward and ride on the enemy’s neck. Who would have thought that the girl did not have much experience dealing with the enemy and did not guard against Wei Xiaobao’s grabbing her chest? Since the result was entirely different than what was expected, naturally the second half of the move ‘Di Qing subduing the dragon’ could not be executed.

The girl was shocked and ashamed at the same time, she brought her

outstretched arms inside and caught Wei Xiaobao's arms and 'crack, crack!' she broke the joints of both of his elbows. This move was called 'the young swallow returns to its nest', a refined name, but was actually a killer move from the 'separating tendon dislocating bone technique'. It was followed by a flying kick, sending Wei Xiaobao reeling about a *zhang* or so.

The girl was extremely angry, she pulled the willow-leaf saber from her waist and violently chopped it down on Wei Xiaobao's back. Wei Xiaobao hastily rolled around and finally rolled underneath the stone table in the middle of the pavilion. The girl's saber struck the ground, sparks flew in all directions; she kicked with her left foot, kicking Wei Xiaobao from underneath the table.

"*Shimei*," the woman in blue called out, "You must not kill him!"

The girl in green acted as if she did not hear, she forcefully chopped down on Wei Xiaobao's back again. "Aiyo!" Wei Xiaobao screamed again, "I want my Mommy!" The girl in green chopped down twice more, the chop was so hard that Wei Xiaobao felt the pain in his bone and marrow. Luckily he had his treasured undergarment to protect him that he was not injured.

The girl in green wanted to chop again, but the woman in blue pulled her own saber; 'clang!' she stopped her steel saber while calling out, "This little monk will not live, let us quickly leave!" She thought that they had killed a monk in the Temple, the disaster they brought to themselves was indeed not small.

The girl in green had received significant disgrace, plus she believed she had killed this little monk, shock and shame mixed together, suddenly tears streamed down her cheeks, she raised her saber and slashed it across her own neck. The woman in blue was greatly alarmed, hastily she stretched out her saber to block; although she managed to divert the blade of her saber, but the tip of the saber still scratched across her neck, blood gushed out instantly.

"*Shimei*," the woman in blue cried out in fear, "You … you … what are you doing?"

The girl in green's vision darkened, she blacked out and fell down to the ground. The woman in blue threw her saber away and rushed to catch her. "*Shimei*!" she cried out, "You … you … you must not die!"

Suddenly she heard a voice behind her. "Amitabha Buddha, must save her quick."

The woman in blue cried, she said, "It's … it's too late."

She saw a hand reached out from behind, the fingers continuously moving, sealing the acupoints surrounding the wound on the girl in green's neck, followed by a voice, "Saving people is urgent, Miss please don't blame me." 'Rip, rip' he tore a piece of his own robe and wrapped the girl in green's neck, and then he stooped down to carry her up.

The woman in blue was at a loss of what to do; she stood up and saw the man was an old monk with white long beard hanging down to his chest. As he held the girl in green in his arms, he rushed up the mountain. The woman in blue was frightened; she had no choice but to follow behind him. She saw the old monk was carrying her martial sister entering Shaolin Temple's main gate, immediately she followed in.

Wei Xiaobao crawled out from underneath the stone table; his arms had already refused to follow his command, they hung down limply on his sides. He thought, "This ... this Miss is very vicious, why did she want to commit suicide? If she is really dead, what will happen? I ... I'd better escape, damn it."

But as soon as he thought about the girl's exceptional countenance, his heart boiled, and he made up his mind: "I must not run away, I must take a look at her." His arms were extremely painful, cold sweats as big as soy beans were dripping from his forehead; bracing himself, he walked up the mountain.

He only walked for about a dozen steps when he saw more than ten monks

rushing out from the Temple to help him and the other three Jing generation monks back to the Temple. All five of them were treated from their dislocated bones injuries. Grab and capture [*qin na*], tumbling and bare-hand fighting were the best among Shaolin Pai's martial arts, immediately there was a monk coming to fix their arms.

Wei Xiaobao was eager to see the girl, he asked the two women's whereabouts, and immediately walked toward the eastern courtyard's meditation room. He had just rounded a corner along a corridor when he saw eight monks with *jiedao*[12] in their hands, walking straight toward him. These eight monks were law enforcer monks from the Jielu [monastic disciple] Courtyard. The leader bowed and said, "*Shishuzu*, Fangzhang Dashi requests the pleasure of seeing you."

"Very well," Wei Xiaobao replied, "I want to see that little Miss first, I wonder if she is alive or dead."

The monk said, "Fangzhang Dashi is waiting at the Jielu Courtyard, asking *Shishuzu* to come over immediately."

"Damn it," Wei Xiaobao angrily said, "I said I want to see that pretty little Miss first; didn't you hear?" Usually his temperament was good, now that his heart was anxious, unexpectedly he was cursing at people in the Temple.

The eight monks looked at each other in dismay, they did not dare to stop him. Immediately four monks followed behind him, while the other four continued to summon Jing Ji and the others, four welcoming-guest monks.

Wei Xiaobao arrived at the Eastern Courtyard's meditation room and asked, "The Little Miss did not die?"

An old monk replied, "Reporting to *Shishu*: the injury is not heavy, *Xiao Seng* [little/lowly monk] is giving her medical treatment." Wei Xiaobao felt relieved immediately.

The woman in blue was standing by the door, she pointed to Wei Xiaobao and cursed, "This little monk is not good."

Wei Xiaobao stuck out his tongue to her. He hesitated for a moment, but in the end he did not dare to enter the room. Turning around, he went to Jielu Courtyard. He saw the gate to the Courtyard was wide open, several dozen monks wearing kasaya were standing on either side of the gate, their expression solemn. The four monks escorting him with the Buddhist knife in their hands opened their mouths together, "Reporting to Fangzhang [Abbot]: Monk Hui Ming is here."

Seeing this kind of expression, Wei Xiaobao mused, "Who do you think you are? The Grand Master of the Courtroom? His granny, what an air." Entering the great hall, he saw several dozen candles were lighted in front of the image of Buddha, the Abbot, Hui Cong Chanshi stood on the left head-position, while on the right stood an old monk, big and tall, whose expression did not show any anger, yet his standing was evident; he was the head of Jielu Courtyard, Cheng Shi Chanshi. Jing Ji, Jing Qing, and the others, four monks, stood below the head-position.

"*Shidi*," Hui Cong Chanshi said, "Pay your respect to Tathagata." Wei Xiaobao kneeled down in worship.

Hui Cong Chanshi waited until Wei Xiaobao finished paying his respect and stood up before saying, "I will have to bother *Shidi* to explain what happened at the Pavilion halfway up the mountain to the Head of Jielu Courtyard."

Wei Xiaobao said, "I heard them quarrelling, hence I came over to take a look. As for why they quarreled, I don't have any clue. Jing Ji, why don't you explain?"

"Yes," Jing Ji said. Turning around, he said, "Reporting to Fangzhang and Head of Jielu Courtyard *Shishu*: disciples, four people, were welcoming the guests at the Pavilion halfway up the mountain. Those two *Nu Shizhu* have come to the Temple to join in charitable deeds. That was what they tactfully reported to us.

Our Temple has always had a custom of not receiving *Nu Shizhu*. The *Nu Shizhu* who is slightly older said, 'I heard Shaolin Temple claims itself to be the orthodox school of martial art, each one of the seventy-two unsurpassed artistry is unequalled in the present age. We are here to increase our knowledge, we want to see how formidable it really is.' Disciple replied, 'Our humble Temple does not dare to claim to have unequalled martial art in the present age. Each school, each sect under the heavens has its own strong points, how can Shaolin Pai dare to be arrogant and conceited?'"

Hui Cong Fangzhang said, "You said it well, it was very fitting."

Jing Ji said, "That *Nu Shizhu* said, 'In that case, Shaolin Pai only enjoys unearned reputation with their 'three-legged cat' boxing technique, isn't that a joke?' Disciple said, 'May I ask which school do the two *Nu Shizhu* belong to? Whose senior Wulin master's distinguished disciples are you?'"

"Exactly," Hui Cong said, "Those two young women came to this Temple to cause trouble, to look down on our Sect's martial art, their background must be noteworthy, so we should ask clearly their school's origin."

Jing Ji said, "That *Nu Shizhu* said, 'Do you want to know our school's origin? That's very easy; as soon as you see it, you will know.' Suddenly she made her move and struck disciple and Jing Qing *Shidi* with her palm. Her movement was very fast, disciple did not guard beforehand, I am very ashamed, unexpectedly I was not able to evade at all. Jing Qing *Shidi* said, 'How can you play rough and beat people?' That *Nu Shizhu* laughed and said, 'You asked my school's origin; talking is cheap, action shows result. Now you have seen it, don't you recognize it?' Speaking to this point Hui Ming *Shishuzu* arrived."

Cheng Shi asked, "When that *Nu Shizhu* struck you, what technique did she use?"

Jing Ji, Jing Qing lowered their heads and said, "Disciple did not see clearly."

Cheng Shi turned to the other two monks, "You did not take a beating, shouldn't you be able to see the technique that *Nu Shizhu* used?"

The two monks said, "We only heard 'slap, slap' twice, two *Shixiong* have been slapped, the woman's hand did not seem to move at all, even her body did not move."

Cheng Shi looked at the Abbot, waiting for his decision. Hui Cong pondered deeply for a moment, then he ordered the monk on duty, "Invite the Heads of Damo Hall and Bo're Hall[13] to come over here."

Not too long afterwards, the two head monks arrive in succession. The Head of Damo Hall was Cheng Xin, the head of the Eighteen Luohan who went to Mount Wutai to rescue the Old Emperor. The Head of Bo're Hall was Cheng Guan Chanshi, an old monk about eighty years of age. The two monks paid their respect to the Abbot.

Hui Cong said, "There are two *Nu Shizhu* who came to our Temple to create trouble; we don't know which school or sect they belong to. The two of you have extensive knowledge and vast experience, please join us in considering this matter in detail." And he recounted what had happened immediately.

Cheng Xin said, "All along the four martial nephews have never seen her move, but two of you suffered palm strike on your faces. Our Sect's Thousand-Leaf Hands, Wudang Pai's Circling Wind Palm, Kunlun Pai's Falling Wild Goose Fist, as well as Kongtong Pai's Flying Phoenix Hand, all have this kind of technique."

Hui Cong said, "Just based on these two palm strikes, we cannot tell her martial art school. *Shidi*, how did you fight with them?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "That lady in blue broke four ... four monks' hands first ..." Hui Cong inquired how the four monks had their arms and wrists dislocated. The four monks then successively narrated and acted what had happened to them.

Cheng Xin was watching with rapt attention; he questioned in detail about the woman's technique one by one, finally he turned to Wei Xiaobao and said, "May I ask *Shishu*, how did that Miss break the Senior's arms?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "The back of my, the Senior's, neck was grabbed by that good-looking Miss, immediately my body was numb, she was grabbing right here." While saying that, he pointed to the back of his neck.

Cheng Xin nodded and said, "That is the Dazhui [big hammer] acupoint, the most vital acupoint on human's body."

Wei Xiaobao said, "I reached backward to get her arm off me, but she punched me on my back; it was so painful I almost died. I, the Senior, was anxious, I clawed wildly backward, and grabbed her chest. This little Miss was also anxious, she broke my arms, threw me to the ground, and chopped me randomly. Damn it, killing people does not need any capital, she was determined to murder her husband and wanted to be a young widow."

Hearing him blabbering nonsense, the monks looked at each other in consternation. Cheng Xin stood behind him, he reached out to examine Wei Xiaobao, and saw that there were three saber slashes on the back of his Buddhist robe. He was shocked and said, "She chopped you three times; *Shishu*, how is your injury?"

Wei Xiaobao was immensely proud of himself; he said, "I have treasured clothes to protect me, I am not injured at all. Fortunately those three chops did not land on my bald head. That little sister chopped me but I did not die, she must be scared out of her wits, thinking that my, the Senior's, martial art skill was immeasurably deep; therefore, she had no choice but slashing her own neck. Actually, my martial art skill is sloppy and ordinary, but she has a countenance of a flower, face like the moon, so I, the Senior, can't possibly make things difficult for her ..."

Hui Cong was afraid he might continue blabbering nonsense, hence he

interrupted, "*Shidi*, that's enough."

Now the crowd of monks understood the reason why that young woman wanted to kill herself; it was because her breasts were grabbed, she had received enormous humiliation. But at that time Wei Xiaobao's life was hanging on a thread, the three slashes on his robe were the evidence. In critical situation, he randomly grabbed backward and touched whatever part of the enemy's body, so nobody could say he should be blamed. His martial art skill was low, he was grabbed by the enemy and was struggling for his life, how could his action follow any kind of rule?

Cheng Shi's countenance immediately turned gentle; he said, "*Shishu*, previously I heard that *Nu Shizhu* kept saying and cursing that you did not observe Buddhist monastic rule, that you violated religious commandment by taking liberty with women, therefore, you have committed a serious offense. Turns out it was an accident during the struggle, so we cannot say that you have violated the monastic discipline. *Shishu*, please sit down." Personally he picked a chair and placed it next to Hui Cong. By doing this, he was saying that since you did not violate the monastic discipline, Jielu Courtyard did not need to deal with you, you were still my superior in the Temple, then I should show my respect to you.

Giggling, Wei Xiaobao sat down. Seeing his frivolous behavior and senseless talk, Cheng Shi could not help but saying, "Although *Shishu* did not violate the Buddhist monastic discipline against sexual conduct, when you see the *Nu Shizhu*, you must maintain your dignity and stern facial expression, you must not fail to show the Shaolin Temple's eminent monk's elegant demeanor."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "My eminent monk status is informal, I got it just to make up the number, it should not be taken seriously."

Hui Cong was about to open his mouth in admonition when the Head of Bo're Hall, Cheng Guan, suddenly said, "There is no school."

Cheng Xin asked in surprise, "*Shixiong* is saying that those two *Nu Shizhu* do not

belong to any school?"

"They learned martial art by stealing!" Cheng Guan said, "The ‘separating tendon dislocating bone technique’ of those two women contains Wudang, Kunlun, Kongtong and Diancang, four Sects' technique. The three saber slashes on Shishu's back contain Emei, Jingcheng and Shanxi's Luhe Saber[14], three schools' saber technique. It was a random mixture of several techniques; not only that, their mastery is not perfect. There is no sect in the world with that kind of martial art."

Wei Xiaobao was greatly astonished, "Uh," he said, "You can tell the origin of each move in the style they used?"

He did not know that Cheng Guan left home to become a Buddhist monk in the Shaolin Temple when he was only eight years old; for more than seventy years he had single-mindedly study martial art, and had never left the Temple's gate for even one step. He had read extensively ancient books on martial art, his knowledge was vast.

In Shaolin Temple, Damo Hall specialized in researching their own martial art, while Bo're Hall actually specialized in researching the martial art of each house and sect under the heavens. The several dozen of eminent monks of the Bo're Hall were all proficient in one or more sects' martial art.

In the last years of Sui Dynasty, the monks of Shaolin Temple had helped Li Shimin flattening Wang Shichong[15]; from that moment on, their martial art has overawed the world. For the next thousand years their reputation did not diminish, admittedly it was because their Sect's martial art was broad and profound; but the fact that Bo're Hall researching other sects' martial art was also one of the principal factors. After acquiring thorough understanding of other sects' martial art, first, they would analyze the strength and weakness of each martial art style, to patch up the inadequacy of their own martial art; second, if they had any confrontation with other sects' experts, by knowing the ins and outs of the opponents' skill, they would gain great advantage.

As Shaolin disciples went out in Jianghu to perform their heroic deeds, when they returned, they would pay their respect to the Abbot and their own master first, and then they would go to Jielu Courtyard to report if there was any fault, next they would go to Bo're Hall to report what they saw and heard. If there was any style or move belonging to other sect worth having, the monk of Bo're Hall would then record everything. In this way, after accumulating such records for a thousand years, they knew various schools' martial art from all over the world like the back of their hands. Even if there was no talented person with outstanding ability and wisdom in the Temple, Shaolin Pai could still be considered the leader of the realm.

Cheng Guan single-mindedly studied martial art, he knew nothing about the way of the world, his conduct was rather naive, but his understanding of each school and sect's martial art was very clear. When a scholar reads too many books, he is known as a 'bookworm'; this Cheng Guan Chanshi learned too many martial arts that he had become 'martial art worm'[16]. In all his life, other than sparring with his fellow disciples, he had never exchanged a move or half a style with outsiders; yet his knowledge of martial art studies was vast, he could even be considered the top among his peers, the monks of the Temple.

Cheng Xin said, "Turns out the two *Nu Shizhu* do not belong to any school or sect; this matter become slightly easier to handle. When that Miss' injury is healed, we can send them off from the Temple, then there won't be any future trouble."

Cheng Shi said, "Those two martial sisters' technique are compatible with each other, apparently they have a Shifu."

Cheng Xin said, "Even if they have a Shifu, it can't be a renowned master from a famous school or major sect."

Cheng Shi nodded. Abbot Hui Cong said, "The two *Nu Shizhu* are young and love to meddle. In this affair we have not made any serious error. Nevertheless, we

must not fail to show courtesy, we must treat the two *Nu Shizhu* well. You are dismissed." Finished speaking, he stood up.

Cheng Xin smiled and said, "At first I thought there was a martial art in Wulin world who instructed these two young women, with the intention to humiliate our Sect; I was a little worried. Shaolin Temple has enjoyed our reputation for a thousand years, it must not fall in our hands." All the monks smiled and nodded their heads.

Wei Xiaobao suddenly said, "In my opinion, the name of Shaolin Pai's martial art is resounding, but actually it is only so-so."

Hui Cong had just about to go out the door, as soon as he heard it, he turned his head in shock. Wei Xiaobao said, "Jing Ji, Jing Qing, how long have you been training martial art?"

Jing Ji said that he had been training for fourteen years, Jing Qing for twelve years; they both admitted that their intelligence was low, and had not made any progress, hence they were extremely ashamed.

Abbot Hui Cong said, "We are studying Buddhism here, our aspiration is to understand the way to free ourselves, whether our martial art skill is high or low is inessentials."

Wei Xiaobao shook his head and said, "I think there's a major flaw in that argument. These two young girls are at most twenty years old, plus they were only stealing one move from the east, one style from the west, to create some hodgepodge three-legged cat moves of their own school or sect, yet they were able to beat Shaolin monks with more than ten years of training that we flee to the wilderness and piss in our pants in terror, without any ability to parry and die without a burial site. It seems to me that Wudang Pai, Kunlun Pai's one move or half a style is a lot more formidable than our orthodox Shaolin Pai's martial art."

Hui Cong, Cheng Shi, Cheng Xin, and the other monks looked very awkward.

Although Wei Xiaobao's words were extremely offensive to hear, momentarily they found it very difficult to refute. They all thought, "Jing Ji and the others, four people's martial art skill is extremely disappointing, how can we say it is an orthodox Shaolin Pai's martial art?"

Yet Cheng Guan nodded his head and said, "What *Shishu* said makes a perfect sense."

Cheng Shi was surprised, "Why did *Shixiong* say it makes sense?"

Cheng Guan said, "Other people's hodgepodge martial art beats our orthodox martial art; there is something wrong here."

Hui Cong said, "People's natural endowments are not the same. Jing Ji and the others are not very good at martial art, but they are busy with receiving visitors to our Temple, it means they are rendering great merit in propagating Buddhist teaching. Jing Ji, Jing Qing, Jing Ben, Jing Yuan, the four of you delegate your receiving-visitors duty to others, you may devote your time in practicing martial art." Jing Ji and the others, four monks bowed in compliance.

The monks left Jielu Courtyard. Wei Xiaobao shook his head. Cheng Guan knitted his brows; he was deep in thought for half a day, then he also shook his head. Hui Cong and Cheng Xin looked at each other; they both thought, "These two, one old the other young, are both ignorant people, we should not pay them any attention." Without a word they walked out.

Cheng Guan turned his gaze toward the courtyard, where a maidenhair tree's leaf was floating slowly to the ground; he had a sudden inspiration. "*Shishu*," he said, "I want to see those Nu Shizhu."

Wei Xiaobao was ecstatic, "Nothing could be better than that," he said, "I am coming with you."

The two of them went to the Eastern Courtyard's meditation room. The old

monk treating the girl in green's injury came out to greet them. Wei Xiaobao asked, "Can she die?"

The old monk replied, "The saber cut is not deep, nothing serious, she won't die."

"Wonderful, wonderful," Wei Xiaobao happily said, as he entered the meditation room.

He saw the girl in green was lying on the couch, her eyes were shut tight, her face was so white that it looked almost transparent, her neck was wrapped with cotton and a piece of plain white cloth, her right hand was outside the quilt, her five fingers were slender and looked delicate, it really looked like the fingers were carved from a piece of white jade. At the end of the fingers, there were five tiny round spirals. Wei Xiaobao's heart was greatly moved, he could not control his strong desire to stroke the beautiful, extremely adorable small hand. "I wonder if she still has the pulse," he said. Pretending to feel the pulse, he reached out to touch the hand.

The woman in blue had been standing at the foot of the bed. Seeing Wei Xiaobao walked in, her anger had already shot to the sky. "Don't touch my *Meizi*!" she shouted. Seeing he did not withdraw his hand at all, her left hand stretched out, she wanted to grab his wrist.

Cheng Guan flicked his middle finger toward the Yanggu [lit. positive valley] acupoint on the side of her left palm; he said, "You are using the Hao Family of Shanxi's *qin na* technique."

The woman in blue withdrew her hand, while sending her elbow out at the same time. Cheng Guan extended his finger to flick the Xiaohai [lit. minor ocean] acupoint at the base of her elbow. The woman in blue countered with a right backhand strike. Cheng Guan's middle finger flicked again, forcing her to stop midway and withdrew one step back. The young woman was startled and angry at the same time, she moved her fists like whirlwind, and in an instant she had already sent seven or eight punches.

Cheng Guan nodded his head continuously, while his finger also flicked seven, eight times. "Aiyo!" the girl screamed, the Qinglengyuan [lit. clear and cold abyss] on her right arm was hit by his finger, her arm immediately went limp. "Dead monk!" she cursed.

Cheng Guan was surprised. "I am alive," he said, "If I were a dead monk, how could I use my finger to flick you?"

Seeing his formidable martial art, the girl was actually scared, but she was unwilling to lose the argument; she cursed, "You are still alive today, you will be dead tomorrow."

Cheng Guan was startled. "How does *Nu Shizhu* know?" he asked, "Could it be that you have the foreknowledge?"

“Humph,” the girl said, “Shaolin Temple monks are oily-mouthed and smooth talkers.”

She thought Cheng Guan was joking with her, she did not know that although this old monk had a superb martial art skill, he was completely oblivious of other affairs. All his life he had never left the Temple. All the monks in the Temple strictly maintained Buddhist monastic disciple against wild talk, there had never been one person who told him any lie; thereupon he always thought that there was no such thing as untrue statement in the world.

Hearing the girl said that Shaolin Temple monks were oily-mouthed and smooth talkers, he thought, “Could it be that in the vegetarian dish today there was too much soy bean oil?” Extending his sleeve, he wiped his lips, but did not see any oil. He rolled his tongue around in his mouth, but did not feel anything greasy or slippery.

While he was still in the state of bewilderment, the woman in blue hissed, “Get out! Don’t wake my *Shimei*.”

“Yes, yes …” Cheng Guan said, “*Shishu*, let’s get out of here.”

Wei Xiaobao was staring at the girl lying on the couch, he was already not in his right mind for quite some time. He grunted his acknowledgement, but did not move a single step. The woman in blue slowly walked toward his back, suddenly her palms shot out, she gave him a violent push. “Ah!” Wei Xiaobao screamed, he was sent flying out of the room, and ‘Bang!’ he landed heavily on the ground. “Aiyo, aiyo!” he cried out, unable to crawl up.

Cheng Guan said, “That was the ‘rivers pour away by the day’, part of the Laoshan Pai’s palm technique. But *Nu Shizhu* did not use it properly.” While his mouth was prattling, he walked out of the room to help Wei Xiaobao up and said, “*Shishu*, the palm push that she did, altogether there are thirteen ways to deal with it. If you did not want to fight with her, then there are six ways to dodge it, any one of those six may be used easily. Supposing you want to strike back, you can employ wrist hook, elbow strike, finger flick, reverse acupoint sealing, arm seizing, diagonal block, or backward kick, seven techniques; each technique can be used to neutralize her.”

Wei Xiaobao was thrown down that his back and arms were hurting, he was not in a good mood at all. “Why do you tell me all this now?” he asked, “What’s the use?”

“Yes,” Cheng Guan said, “*Shishu*’s admonition is correct, your *Shizhi* [martial nephew] was wrong. If I told you beforehand, even if *Shishu* did not mean to make things difficult for her, if you only wanted to evade, you would not have to be thrown like that.”

Wei Xiaobao’s heart was moved, “Those two girls are very vicious; when we meet again later, they would immediately punch and kick me, which would be hard to ward off. This old monk is very familiar with those two girls’ martial art; just with a flick of his finger he forced them away that they did not dare to come over anymore. I want to take that girl to be my wife, I must swindle the old monk that

he will be with me to protect me." But then he had a second thought, "This old monk is so old, I don't know how many more days he will live; supposing he is gone tomorrow, won't that be really bad for me?" Thereupon he said, "Just now you flicked your finger several times and that girl is immediately tamed. What kind of martial art was that?"

Cheng Guan said, "It is called 'one finger Dhyana'; *Shishu* does not know it?"

"I don't," Wei Xiaobao replied, "Why don't you teach me?"

Cheng Guan said, "*Shishu*'s order ought to be followed. This 'one finger Dhyana' is not difficult to learn; if you know the accurate location of acupoints, and the power on your finger can penetrate the opponent's acupoint, then you can do it."

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted, "That's wonderful," he hastily said, "Quickly teach me." He thought that if he could master this skill, he only needed to flick several times, the girl in green would not be able to move a single step, and then if he wanted her to be his wife, wouldn't that be easy? Besides, the words 'not difficult to learn' were more important to him; all the amazing martial art skills in the world, nothing exceeded this. In an instant he was beaming with joy, his heart was unbearably itching.

Cheng Guan said, "I wonder *Shishu*'s 'tendon altering sutra' internal energy cultivation has been trained to which level? Would you please try to flick your finger?"

"How do you flick your finger?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Cheng Guan bent his finger and flicked. 'Chi' a burst of powerful wind shot out, a dead leaf on the ground floated up.

Wei Xiaobao laughed, "That looks fun," he said. Copying Cheng Guan, he bent his right hand thumb to hold his middle finger, and then flicked the middle finger

out. Naturally this time there was no sound, nothing happened; even no dust was stirred the least bit.

Cheng Guan said, “Turns out *Shishu* has not trained ‘tendon altering sutra’ internal energy cultivation. If you want to train this internal energy cultivation, you must train Bo’re [Prajna/Wisdom] Palm first. Let me spar with you in Bo’re Palm, I want to see the depth of *Shishu*’s palm strength, then I can teach you the ‘tendon altering sutra’.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “I don’t know Bo’re Palm.”

“Not a problem,” Cheng Guan said, “Let us spar in ‘Picking Flower Grab and Capture’.”

“What ‘Picking Flower Grab and Capture’? I have never heard of it,” Wei Xiaobao said.

An awkward expression appeared on Cheng Guan’s face, he said, “How about we try something more basic? ‘Vajra [Budda’s warrior attendant] Divine Palm’ should be fine. You don’t know it either? How about ‘Boluomi [Paramita] Hand’? Don’t know as well? How about ‘Scattering Flower Palm’? Ah right, *Shishu* is still young, you have not learned these different palm techniques. How about ‘Weituo Palm’? ‘Subduing Tiger Fist’? ‘Luohan Fist’? ‘Shaolin Long Fist’?” Each time he mentioned a fist technique, Wei Xiaobao shook his head.

Seeing Wei Xiaobao did not know any fist technique, Cheng Guan did not get angry; he said, “Our Shaolin Pai martial art must be trained in sequence. When one enters our school, one must learn ‘Shaolin Long Fist’ first. After he masters it, then he will learn ‘Luohan Fist’, afterwards ‘Subduing Tiger Fist’. When he has appropriate foundation in both internal and external energy, he may learn ‘Weituo Palm’. If he does not want to learn ‘Weituo Palm’, he can train 'Great Compassion Great Sorrow Thousand-Leaf Hand' instead …”

Wei Xiaobao’s lips started to move, he wanted to say, “I know this 'Great

Compassion Great Sorrow Thousand-Leaf Hand'." But he stopped himself immediately, realizing that the 'Great Compassion Great Sorrow Thousand-Leaf Hand' Hai Laogong taught him, perhaps nine out of ten moves were fake; no matter what, he could not say that he 'knew' this technique.

He heard Cheng Guan continued, "Either the 'Weituo Palm' or the 'Great Compassion Great Sorrow Thousand-Leaf Hand', one with intelligence and diligence will need about seven or eight years to master. If his comprehension is strong, he can continue with 'Scattering Flower Palm'. After he masters the 'Scattering Flower Palm', not many disciples of Wulin's other sect can defeat him. Whether he can continue with Boluomi Hand depends on his temper. Take Jing Ji, Jing Qing, those several martial nephews for example, they all trained in 'Subduing Tiger Fist', but they don't have the patience to train martial art, their progress is rather slow. In ten years' time, Jing Qing perhaps can train 'Weituo Palm'. Jing Ji cannot concentrate in learning martial art, I think it would be better for him to specialize in Vajra Sutra's Zen meditation."

Wei Xiaobao sucked in a mouthful of cold air; he said, "You said that that 'one finger Dhyana' is not difficult to learn, but from 'Shaolin Long Fist' followed by those other fist and palm techniques, all the way to mastering the 'one finger Dhyana', how many years must I train?"

Cheng Guan said, "This thing is actually recorded in the ancient book in Bo're Hall. During the Later Jin of the Five Dynasties period, there was this Fa Hui Chanshi in our Temple, he had the innate intelligence, in less than thirty-six years from the time he entered the Temple, he had already mastered the 'one finger Dhyana'; his advancement was amazingly quick, no one, before or after him, ever have the same progress. I guess he must be a great martial art scholar in his previous incarnation, so he brought with him many martial art skills from his previous existence. Next in line was during the establishment of the Southern Song Dynasty, there was this Ling Xing Chanshi, who spent less than thirty-nine years. Those two are rare talent with divine-given wisdom and intelligence, geniuses who are hard to come by in hundreds of years, who make other people full of admiration; a model older generation, someone who younger generation

can only imagine."

Wei Xiaobao asked, "How many years did you spend from the time you started training martial art until you master the 'one finger Dhyana'?"

Cheng Guan smiled and said, "*Shizhi* has started training Shaolin Long Fist when I was eleven, I have been very lucky to have Hui Zhi Chanshi as my benevolent master, so I got to learn martial art at a lot higher pace than my fellow disciples. By the time I was fifty-three, I was able to comprehend my prying into our school's sutra of this finger technique."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Since you were eleven, until you were fifty-three, you were able to comprehend the kneeling in front of the door bolt (he did not know that the expression 'lue kui men jing' [comprehend the prying into the school's sutra], what he heard was 'lue gui men shuan'). So altogether you spent forty-two years before you master it?"

Cheng Guan was very proud of himself, he said, "To be able to master the 'one finger Dhyana', in the thousand plus years of our Sect's history, *Lao Na* [old cassock] ranks the third." After a short pause, he continued, "It's just that *Lao Na*'s internal energy cultivation is only average. Strictly speaking about finger power, I am afraid my rank is lower than seventieth." Speaking to this point, he could not help but feeling dejected.

Wei Xiaobao mused, "I don't care if you rank the third or the seventy-third, *Laozi* did not bring any martial art skill from my previous incarnation, neither did I start training in my mother's womb. If I have to spend forty-two years to master this finger technique, that girl and I will both be old man, old woman in our fifties or sixties; *Laozi* might as well train a fart!" He said, "Other people's little miss only trains for one or two years, you must train for forty, fifty years to beat her; it's extremely disappointing."

Actually, Cheng Guan had already thought about this fact as well, all along he had been pondering about it. "Yes, yes!" he said, "Our Shaolin martial art is this

inferior to others', it's really … really not … not too good."

"What do you mean not too good?" Wei Xiaobao said, "It's practically very bad. All of a sudden our Shaolin Pai is unable to grab Wulin's cow's ear, horse's ear. You are the Head of Bo're Hall, if you don't think of something, won't you let down the several thousands, several tens of thousands years of Shaolin Temple's eminent monks? When you die and see that Fa something Chanshi, Ling something Chanshi, and my *Shixiong*, Hui Zhi Chanshi, everybody will ask you, saying that you only eat and defecate, but don't care about anything else, you don't want to think of a way to protect Shaolin Pai's prestige, won't you be so ashamed that you want to die all over again?"

Cheng Guan's old face turned deep red; he was completely terrified. Repeatedly nodding his head, he said, "*Shishu*'s instruction is very true, when *Shizhi* comes back, I will peruse the ancient books in the Bo're Hall, to see if there is an ingenious technique that can be learned in a short time."

"That's right," Wei Xiaobao happily said, "If you cannot find any, our Shaolin Pai needs not mingle in the Wulin world anymore. We might as well invite those two little misses to let the older one becomes the Abbess, the younger one becomes the Head of Bo're Hall. Let those two teach us martial art. Compared to our stupid head stupid brain clumsy martial art, theirs must be a lot stronger."

Cheng Guan was startled, he asked, "Those two *Nu Shizhu*, how can they be our Temple's Abbess and Head?"

"Who told you not to be able to find a martial art that can be trained quickly?" Wei Xiaobao said, "*Fangzhang* will lose face, you will lose face; that need not be mentioned, from now on Shaolin Pai will lose its foothold in Wulin, the several thousand monks of our Temple will have to do obeisance to these two little misses as their new masters. Everybody will question what's the use of many dozens of years of training Shaolin martial arts? The two little misses only train for a year or half a year and they can 'crack, crack, crack' break Shaolin monks' hands and feet. Everybody will think that preserving their hands and feet is more

important, hence they might as well respectfully ask the Little Miss to be the Head of Bo're Hall!"

This speech had made the sweat on Cheng Guan's forehead streaming down his face; his hands did not stop trembling as with a trembling voice he said, "Yes, yes! Asking those two ladies to be our Temple's Abbess and Head, ay, that … that will be too humiliating."

"Isn't that so?" Wei Xiaobao said, "By that time we cannot call ourselves Shaolin Pai anymore."

Cheng Guan asked, "Then … then what should we call ourselves?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "We might as well bluntly call ourselves Shaonu[17] Pai. Shaolin Temple becomes Shaonu Temple. We must take down the signboard above the mountain gate, erase that 'Lin' character and change it to 'Nu' character. Only one character. That should be easy to do."

Cheng Guan's face turned ash-grey. "That won't do, that won't do!" he hastily said, "I … I am going to think of something. *Shishu*, please forgive *Shizhi* for not keeping you company you anymore." Putting his palms together, he saluted, then turned around and left.

"Wait a moment!" Wei Xiaobao called, "This matter must be kept in strict confidence. If anybody in the Temple knew about it, it will be highly improper."

"Why?" Cheng Guan asked.

"Nobody will believe you," Wei Xiaobao replied, "They won't know if you have thought of something. Those two young ladies are still recuperating in our Temple, if everybody is frightened, they might do obeisance and take those women as their masters. Shaolin Pai is such a big Sect, how can we scatter away just like that?"

Cheng Guan said, “*Shishu*’s direction is very true. This matter concerns the rise and fall, the existence or perishes of our Sect; absolutely it must be kept secret.” He was very grateful in his heart, thinking that although this martial uncle was young, his insight was far-reaching; indeed he deserved to be the respected Senior. If not for his clear sight and superior judgment, Shaolin Pai will inevitably become Shaonu Pai. Thousand-year fame cannot be redeemed in ten thousand years.

Seeing him leaving in a hurry, with the sleeve of his robe trembling, an obvious sign that he was in extreme panic, Wei Xiaobao thought, “Now that the old monk will stake his old life to find something, he is bound to find something. Everybody else would find a hundred mistakes in my speech, but as long as he did not say anything to anybody, this stupid monk won’t find out that I am swindling him.”

Thinking about the flowery countenance of the young woman lying on the couch, his heart was like a frisky monkey, his mind was like a cantering horse. He wanted to re-enter the room to look at her again. But after turning around and walking for only several steps, he suddenly saw the flashing blue skirt behind the curtain on the door. Thinking about the ruthlessness of the woman in blue, while he did not have Cheng Guan by his side to protect him, if he entered the room alone, he would definitely pay dearly. Without any other choice, he sighed and returned to his own meditation room.

The next day he woke up early in the morning and went straight to the Eastern Courtyard to visit. The old monk who treated her injury put his palms together and greeted him, “Good morning *Shishu*.”

“Is the *Nu Shizhu*’s injury getting better?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

The old monk replied, “That *Nu Shizhu* came to her senses in the middle of the night; realizing she was in our Temple, she insisted on leaving immediately, while saying rude words. *Shizhi* persuaded her nicely, but she said even if she died, she did not want to die in little ... little ... little monk's temple."

Hearing him humming and hawing, Wei Xiaobao knew that if the little miss did not scold him as 'little pervert thief', then she must have said 'little wicked monk'. "And then what happened?" he asked.

The old monk replied, "*Shizhi* advised her to leave the next morning, the *Nu Shizhu* struggled to get up, her *Shijie* helped her out. *Shizhi* did not dare to stop them, besides, that *Nu Shizhu*'s injury won't be a problem anyway, so I had to let them go. I have reported this matter to the Abbot."

Wei Xiaobao nodded; he was quite disappointed, thinking, "Once this little miss left, I don't know where she is going. I don't even know her name or her surname, how am I going to find her?" He blamed the old monk for not handling this matter at the best of his ability and grumbled for a while. And then he had a second thought, "Those two girls are beautiful, they will greatly stand out from the masses. When they make their move, they have all schools all sects' martial arts in it; it should be possible to find them eventually." Thereupon he strolled toward Bo're Hall.

He saw Cheng Guan was sitting on the floor, with several hundred books piling up all around him. He had his hands supporting his head, and seemed to be very deep in thought; his eyes were bloodshot, most likely because he did not sleep at all the previous night. Looking at his appearance, it was obvious that he had not found anything good. He saw Wei Xiaobao walking in, but he simply stared at him blankly, as if he did not see him at all. Unexpectedly he was so immersed in his thought that he was completely oblivious of everything around him.

Seeing his distressed expression, Wei Xiaobao wanted to utter some words of encouragement, telling him that the two young ladies had left and that he had nothing to worry about for now. But then he had a second thought, "If he did not work diligently, how could he come up with good result? I am afraid as soon as I tell him, this old monk will goof off."

Quickly one month had passed. Wei Xiaobao often took a walk toward Bo're Hall.

He saw Cheng Guan was getting thinner to the bone and looked alone and helpless, his countenance was wan and sallow, and never said anything to him. He looked like an idiot, sometimes he would stand up and punch and kick for a while, and then he would shake his head and sit down again. Wei Xiaobao only thought that this old monk was very stupid, after working hard for more than a month, he was still unable to find anything useful. He did not know that each one of Shaolin Pai martial arts paid particular attention to strong foundation, slow progress was preferable to a fast one. A crash course was precisely Shaolin martial arts' big taboo. Although Cheng Guan knew almost all martial arts under the heavens, for him to violate his own Sect's rule by creating a crash course technique was actually akin to asking him not to conform to the teachings he had been following all his life.

The weather was gradually getting warmer. Wei Xiaobao had been staying in the Temple for several months. Recently, there was not a day pass by when he did not think about that girl in green several dozen times in a day.

One particular day he felt stifled and was extremely bored. Taking his money, he went down Mount Shaoshi to the west, toward a small town of considerable size called Tantoupu. He went to a clothing store and bought a set of clothes, head covering, shoes and socks. Then he changed in a cave outside the town, putting the monk robe and shoes into a bundle, which he then slung over his shoulder. When he looked at his reflection on a mountain stream, he looked like a son of a wealthy family.

Returning to the small town, he went to a restaurant and indulged himself with chicken, duck, fish and meat. "I'll find a casino and gamble for a bit," he thought. Knowing that gambling establishments are usually located in alleys, he went through the streets and alleys, looking to the east and glancing to the west.

Each time he entered an alley, he listened to shouting and drinking sounds. By the time he entered the seventh alley, finally he heard someone shouted, "Pair of earth, heavenly nine king, sweep the decks!" As soon as these words entered his ears, he felt an indescribable comfort in his heart; compared to the 'Namo

Amitabha Buddha' that he heard all the times in Shaolin Temple, it was like comparing the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss with the eighteen layers of hell.

He quickly went to the door and stretched out his hand to push it. A man in his forties, wearing a hat at a crooked angle, came out, and looked at him with squinted eyes. "What do you want?" he asked.

From his pocket Wei Xiaobao took out an ingot of silver and tossed it back and forth from one hand to the other, and said with a laugh, "My hands itch, I want to lose a few *taels*."

"This is not a casino, it's a brothel," the man said, "*Xiao Xiongdi*, you want to visit a prostitute, come back in several years."

Wei Xiaobao had been craving for some gambling for a long time, as soon as he heard the words 'pair of earth, heavenly nine king, sweep the decks', even if the sky was falling, he simply must bet. What's more, coming to a brothel was just like coming home; how could he be willing to leave? He laughed and said, "Just find me several free ladies and prepare some tea, tonight *Shaoye* [young master] wants to have three tables of drinking party." And he stuffed the silver ingot worth two *taels* into the man's hand and said with a laugh, "To buy you a drink."

The turtle slave[18] was greatly delighted; seeing the visitor was a grand customer, immediately his face was blooming with smile. "Thank you for *Shaoye*'s gift!" he said. Raising his voice, he called out, "We have visitor!" while respectfully invited him to enter.

The female brothel keeper came out to greet him. Seeing it was a fourteen, fifteen years old teenager with luxurious clothing, she thought, "This kid stole money from his home and come here to squander it; must rip him off heavily." With a giggle she pulled his hand and said, "*Xiao Shaoye*, we have a rule here, just like the lucky poster on the door[19]. You want to see a girl, you must pay up front."

With a wooden expression Wei Xiaobao said, "Do you think I am a newly hatched bird who has never visited a brothel before? We are the experts here, *Laozi* opens this kind of establishment at home." He groped his pocket for a pack of banknotes, roughly three, four hundred *taels*, and slapped it onto the table. He said, "A table of tea five *qian*, including one girl. A 'flower head' is three *taels*, the servant who pours tea five *qian*, the Auntie five *qian*. *Laozi* is in a very good mood today, I'll double everything."

A succession of brothel shoptalk without half a word of layman term had caught the procuress off-guard; she was stunned and stared blankly for half a day before finally she laughed and said, "Turns out *Xiao Shaoye* is of the same profession, I was mistaken. I wonder which courtyards does Xiao Shaoye open?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "In Yangzhou Laozi opens Li Chun Yuan [Lovely Spring Courtyard] and Yi Qing Yuan [Harmony Passion Courtyard], in Beijing I open Shang Xin Lou [Bountiful Heart Balcony, 'lou' - multi-storied house] and Chang Chun Ge [Carefree Spring Pavilion], in Tianjin I open Rou Qing Yuan [Tender Feeling Courtyard] and Wen Ju Lou [Yearning for Chrysanthemum Balcony]; six affiliates." Actually these six establishments were Yangzhou's famous brothels, otherwise, he would not be able to fabricate six brothels' names in such a short period of time.

Listening to him, the procuress thought, 'Oh my goodness, the big boss of six courtyard affiliates is here; his business must be very big.' Thereupon she laughed and asked, "What kind of girl would *Xiao Shaoye* like to accompany you to have a heart-to-heart talk?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "I suppose a little place like this won't have a Suzhou girl. Do you have any Datong [prefecture level city, Shanxi] girl?"

The procuress' face showed an awkward expression as she said in a low voice, "We do have one, but she is fake goods; actually she is a Shanxi Fenyang [county level city, Luliang prefecture, Shanxi] girl, she can only fool someone with more

money than sense, but not a connoisseur."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Just call all the girls in the courtyard, *Shaoye* will reward everybody three taels each."

The procuress was greatly delighted; she passed on the order for all the girls to come. In an instant the room was crammed with twittering and squawking girls. In this little town brothel, naturally the girls had rough hands and thick feet, with faces adorned with coarse rouge powder. Each one pulled his hand or embraced his waist; everybody was doing her utmost to curry his favor. Wei Xiaobao was really happy. Although these prostitutes had thick eyebrows, high cheekbones or mouths as big as sacrificial bowl, which were practically several points more ugly than himself, but since he was little, he was determined to be the rich man and show extravagance in the brothel. Today his life-long dream had come true, hence he was immensely proud of himself. Pulling the prostitute by his side, he planted a kiss on her lips, and was assaulted by a flourishing stench of green onion and garlic that he almost threw up.

Suddenly the door curtain was lifted up, two women walked in. "Alright!" Wei Xiaobao shouted with glee, "Two more *Meizi* come together. Come here and give me a kiss first ..." Before he finished, he had seen clearly the appearance of these two girls, and could not help but was greatly shocked.

He cried out, sprang up, and overthrew the two prostitutes in his arms to the ground. Turned out these two women were the girl in green, whom he thought of during the night and he missed during the night, and her older martial sister.

With a cold laugh the woman in blue said, "As soon as you entered the town, we have been following you, we want to see what evil deed you are going to commit."

Wei Xiaobao's back was wet with cold sweat; forcing a laugh he said, "Yes, yes. This Miss, your ... your neck's wound ... neck's wound healed?"

"Humph," the girl in green snorted, but she ignored his question. The woman in blue angrily said, "We waited outside Shaolin Temple every day, to cut your body into ten thousand pieces to repay my *Shimei*'s deep enmity and great hatred. Humph, finally the Heaven did not disappoint those who try, and have you, evil monk, fallen into our hands."

Wei Xiaobao groaned inwardly, "*Laozi* will definitely return to Heaven today." But he laughed and said, "Actually ... actually I did not offend ... did not offend Miss; it's just that ... it's just that one grab was not a big deal. I think ... I think ..."

The girl in green blushed, a killing aura appeared in her eyes. The woman in blue coldly said, "What did you say a moment ago? What did you call us?"

"Bad, it's really bad luck," Wei Xiaobao replied, "I ... thought the two of you were ... were also flower ladies of this pleasure house."

The girl in green said in a low voice, "*Shijie*, why do you talk too much to this bald-headed thief who committed all kinds of evil things? Just kill him with a chop."

'Shua!' white light flashed, Wei Xiaobao screamed and shrank his neck, the hat on his head was slashed by her willow-leaf saber, exposing his bald head. The prostitutes were thrown into confusion, they screamed, "Murder, murder!"

Wei Xiaobao ducked and hid behind a prostitute. "Hey!" he called out, "This is a pleasure house, only wh0res are allowed here. If you do not get out quickly and people knew about it, it would be ... would be very shameful ..."

'Shua, shua!' the two women repeatedly slashed around, but the room was crowded with a dozen or so prostitutes, how could they chop him? The blades swept past, they narrowly missed two prostitutes. Wei Xiaobao called out loudly, "*Laozi* is visiting a brothel, what's there to be looked at? I ... I am going to undress, I am going to take off my pants." He loosened the bottom part of his garments and tossed it away.

The two women were furious, yet they were afraid Wei Xiaobao would really act shamelessly by taking off his pants. The girl in green turned around and bolted out the door. The girl in blue was startled, but she also dashed out of the room. 'Bang, bang!' she bumped the procuress and the 'turtle slave' [see my note earlier] who came in to look, and sent them tumbling down to the left and right.

In that instant the screams in that brothel shook the sky, and the curses moved the earth. For the time being Wei Xiaobao escaped the danger of the blades, but he knew those two women would definitely guard the exits; as soon as he left the brothel for even one step, they would immediately kill him. Raising his voice, he shouted, "Everybody, don't move randomly, everyone will get ten *taels*, no exception, nobody will be skipped." As soon as they heard it, everybody calmed down immediately.

Wei Xiaobao took out twenty *taels* and handed it over to the turtle slave, ordering him, "Quickly go and get me a horse, wait at the mouth of the alley." The turtle slave received the money and left.

Wei Xiaobao pointed to a prostitute and said, "I'll give you twenty *taels*, take off your clothes quickly, let me change into it." The prostitute was greatly delighted, she took off her clothes immediately.

Everybody started to talk at once, they wanted to know what was going on. Wei Xiaobao said, "Those two are my first wife, my second wife. They shaved my head, forbidding me from visiting a brothel. I ran away, then they pursue me to kill me."

When the procuress and the prostitutes heard this, they could not help but were delighted. It was quite common for the wife and children of a patron to come to the brothel to quarrel and fight; nothing special about it. But raising a saber to kill was a rarity. As for the wife and concubine working together to shave their husband's head and forbidding him from visiting a brothel, it was the first time that they ever heard such thing.

Wei Xiaobao hurriedly changed into the prostitute's clothing, and used a piece of printed cloth to wrap his head. When the prostitute realized that he wanted to dress up to escape, laughing and giggling, they helped him apply rouge and face powder. When the other patrons of the brothel who were gambling heard the news, they all came over to watch the fun.

Soon the turtle slave returned and reported that the horse was ready. After knowing the reason, he said, "*Shaoye*, you must be careful. Your first madam is guarding the back door, the young madam is guarding the front door. They both have sabers in their hands."

Wei Xiaobao produced a large sum of money while swearing, "Those two vixens maintain such a tight control over their husband; it's really rare and highly unusual."

Receiving thirty *taels* gift from him, the procuress said, "Those two tigresses are destroying others' clothes and food. If all women in the world are like your two wives, won't we drink the northwest wind? May Er Lang Shen[20] curse those two tigresses that they be without a son or a grandson. Aiyo, *Xiao Shaoye*, I did not mean you. You'd better divorce those tigresses and then you can come here to play without any care every day."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "That is actually a brilliant idea. Mama, go to the front door and curse that vixen for a while; but you'd better hide behind the door to protect against her resorting to violence and harming you with the saber. Sisters, everybody dash out from the back door. Those two brutish wives of mine won’t be able to catch me.” Immediately he took out some money and distributed it among the prostitutes. Without exception, all of them jumped for joy.

Because of the generous reward, those who were inherently brave would be braver, while those who were not brave gathered enough courage. As the prostitutes received the shining white silver, everybody suddenly put ‘loyalty’

above everything else, they would strife to put their lives at stake.

They heard the voice of the procuress raining curses from the front door, “Old vixen, little vixen, if you want to keep your husband, you must obey him, winning his favor is the right thing to do. If you don’t have any ability, he will go to the brothel to seek pleasure. You use the saber to scare him, to kill him, what’s the farting use? Your husband is kind-hearted and generous, he is the number one good person in the world, you, two tigresses are not his match. Let *Laoniang* [old lady, referring to self; the counterpart of *Laozi*] tell you: you must behave, quickly kowtow and apologize to him, and then do obeisance to me, let *Laoniang* be your master, I’ll teach you skills you can use in bed, so that you can serve him well. Otherwise, he might decide to sell you to *Laoniang*, let you become prostitutes in here. We’ll make a deal today … aiyo, aiyo, it hurts so much I am going to die.”

Wei Xiaobao knew that the woman in blue had lost her patience and beat the procuress. He said, “Everybody, let’s go!” More than twenty prostitutes rushed out from the back door, with Wei Xiaobao mingled among them.

The girl in green was guarding the back door with willow-leaf saber in her hand. Suddenly she saw more than twenty heavily made-up women burst out of the door. Her beautiful eyes widened, she was completely at a loss.

The crowd of prostitutes rushed toward the alley. Wei Xiaobao jumped onto the horse and galloped toward Shaolin Temple.

Seeing the change of events, the woman in blue abandoned the procuress immediately and turned around to give chase. The prostitutes crowded the alley, they reached out to pull her, while shouting, “Tigress, your husband is gone riding a horse, you won’t catch him! Hee! Hee! Ha! Ha!”

The girl in blue was so furious that she almost pass out; she raised her saber in threatening gesture, but the crowd of prostitutes knew she would not dare to really kill anybody. “Lowly vixen, vinegar pot, wicked b1tch,” they taunted

incessantly.

The girl was anxious; raising her voice, she called out, "*Shimei*, that wicked thief ran away, quickly pursue him!" But she heard the hooves beat was getting farther and farther away; how could they pursue him?

Wei Xiaobao rushed out of the town, while taking off the female clothing he was wearing and tossed it away one by one. In his rush and panic to get out of the brothel, he had left the bundle containing his monk robe in the room. Spitting into his sleeve, he wiped the cosmetics from his face, thinking, "*Laozi*'s lot on life this year is really bad; first I became a monk, then I dressed up as a prostitute. Ay, if only that miss in green is willing to be my wife, even if my head is chopped down, I won't want to go to the brothel."

In one breath he galloped back to Shaolin Temple; he steered the horse toward the back of the mountain, jumped down the horseback, and quietly sneaked into the Temple via the side door. Covering his face, he dashed madly into his own meditation room. Only after washing off the rouge and the powder from his face, and putting on the monk robe, did his heart finally calmed down. He mused, "If those two old wife and little wife came to the Temple to make trouble, even if I die, *Laozi* will not admit anything to them."

Toward the afternoon the next day, Wei Xiaobao was still lying on the bed in his meditation room, dreaming about the girl in green's figure, which moved his heart; he could not bear not to take chances again, thinking, "How can I find a way to see her again?"

Suddenly Jing Ji entered his meditation room and said in a low voice, "*Shishuzu*, for the next few days you must not leave the Temple; this affair is getting somewhat worse."

Wei Xiaobao was startled; hastily he asked for the full details. Jing Ji said, "A worker from the Xiang Ji kitchen told me just now: he was chopping some firewood at the side of the mountain when he came across two young women

with sabers in their hands; they were inquiring about you.”

“What did they ask?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

“They asked him if he knew you,” Jing Ji replied, “They asked him what time do you usually go out, where do you usually go. *Shishuzu*, those two young women harbor evil designs toward you, they are guarding outside the Temple, they want to harm you. As long as you stay inside the Temple, they won’t dare to come in.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “We, Shaolin Temple eminent monks, are afraid of them and do not dare to go out the Temple, what kind of talk is that?”

“*Shizhisun* [martial grandnephew] has already reported this to Fangzhang,” Jing Ji said, “The Senior ordered me to report to *Shishuzu*, asking you to yield one step to them. Presumably those two young women will not persevere, if they don’t see you after waiting for several days, naturally they will leave. Fangzhang said that Wulin friends can only say that we are great and magnanimous people, they cannot possibly say that the grand Shaolin Temple is unexpectedly afraid of two young women that don’t belong to any school or sect.”

Wei Xiaobao said, "Young women that don’t belong to any school or sect, humph, they may be much more formidable than us, the great monks who belong to a school or sect."

"Who said it wasn't true?" Jing Ji replied. He remembered his hatred because of his broken arm, which would be difficult to avenge. He said, "It's just that Fangzhang has ordered that no matter what we must keep the peace and patch up a quarrel."

After Jing Ji left, Wei Xiaobao thought, "I'd better see that old monk Cheng Guan; it would be best if he has come up with a wonderful idea."

When he got to Bo're Hall, he saw Cheng Guan with his head between his hands, his eyes were looking at the beam of the roof, while pacing back and forth

around the room, and mumbling incessantly. Wei Xiaobao did not dare to interrupt his train of thought, he waited for a long time, watching Cheng Guan circling the room several times, while still looking like he did not see him. Wei Xiaobao coughed several times. Cheng Guan did not pay any attention. Wei Xiaobao called, "*Lao Shizhi* [old martial nephew], *Lao Shizhi*!" Cheng Guan still did not hear.

Wei Xiaobao stepped forward, he reached out to tap Cheng Guan's shoulder, while saying with a laugh, "*Lao* ..." His palm had just touched his shoulder, suddenly his body was jolted and he was thrown away. 'Bang!' he crashed onto the wall, his breathing was blocked, he opened his mouth to cry, but nothing came out.

Cheng Guan was shocked; hastily he came forward and kneeled down. Putting his palms together he saluted and said, "*Shizhi* is guilty, deserving ten thousand deaths, by offending *Shishu*. *Shishu*, please punish me heavily."

After lying down for half a day, Wei Xiaobao was finally able to breathe; he forced a laugh and said, "Please get up, please get up, don't be overly courteous, it was my own fault."

Cheng Guan still did not stop apologizing. Propping himself against the wall, Wei Xiaobao crawled up, and then, helping Cheng Guan up he asked, "What kind of martial art was that? It was so formidable." He thought, "If this martial art is not too difficult to learn, perhaps there is a benefit for me to learn it."

Cheng Guan's face showed a terrified expression. He said, "I am really sorry. In response to *Shishu*'s question, this is the 'hu ti shen gong' [divine skill to protect the body] from Bo're Palms."

Wei Xiaobao nodded; he thought that to learn this skill, he would have to master some Shaolin Long Fist, Luohan Fist, Subduing the Tiger Fist, Weituo Palm, Scattering Flower Hand, Boluomi Hand, Vajra's Divine Palm, Picking Flower Grab and Capture, all kinds of gibberish set of martial art techniques. He did not have

time; even if he did, he would not have the mind to take the trouble to practice hard. He asked, "Have you found anything that can be learned in a short time?"

With a dejected expression Cheng Guan shook his head and said, "*Shizhi* has already thought that without using 'one finger Dhyana' or ‘tendon altering sutra’ internal energy cultivation, we can neutralize those two *Nu Shizhu*'s martial art by using only the Bo're Palm; it's just that ... it's just that ..."

Wei Xiaobao said, "It's just that to train Bo're Palm, I will need twenty, thirty years; isn't it?"

Cheng Guan haltingly replied, "Twenty, thirty years, I am afraid ... I am afraid ..."

Wei Xiaobao's face showed contempt as he flatly said, "You are afraid it might not be enough?"

Cheng Guan looked very ashamed as he said, "Exactly." After staring blankly for a moment, he continued, "Let *Shizhi* think: I wonder if Picking Flower Grab and Capture will be effective against them."

Wei Xiaobao thought that this old monk was one who rigidly adheres to formalities; whatever he was doing must be in sequence. Even if the Picking Flower Grab and Capture was effective, he would have to spend at least a dozen or so years to train. This old monk had a profound level of internal energy, perhaps he was not inferior to Cult Leader Hong. Yet Cult Leader Hong was able to casually creating new moves, which were able to change according to the situation, which were free, natural and unrestrained. This old monk, on the contrary, was a blockhead; Wei Xiaobao must show him the enlightened path.

"*Lao Shizhi*," he said, "In my opinion, those two women are very young, they can't possibly have several years of martial art training."

"That's right," Cheng Guan said, "That's why I feel very strange."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Since they can't possibly train step by step, we also do not need to strictly practice step by step. I don't believe they have internal energy cultivation as deep as yours. In my opinion, to deal with those two girls, we simply do not need to cultivate internal energy."

Cheng Guan was shocked; his voice was trembling as he said, "Training martial art without ... without good foundation, won't that be ... won't that be heretical?"

"But they are not heretical," Wei Xiaobao said, "Only without school without sect. To deal with martial art without school and without sect, we must also use without school without sect technique."

Cheng Guan was completely bewildered; he mumbled to himself, "Without school without sect, without school without sect? This ... *Shizhi* does not understand."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "You don't understand? Then let me teach you."

Cheng Guan respectfully said, "Would *Shishu* please give your advice?"

In all his life, all the martial art uncles with a 'Hui' character in their names were virtuous eminent monks with outstanding martial art skill. He thought that this little martial art uncle was very young, his internal energy cultivation was insufficient, but he must have some outstanding quality; otherwise, how could he be his martial art uncle? For the past several days he had racked his brain trying to find a martial art skill that can be learned quickly, but all along he did not make any breakthrough. It seemed that even if he spent another ten years or twenty years, even until his death, he would not be able to solve this problem. Now that there was this young eminent monk with 'Hui' character in his name who was willing to give him direction, inevitably he was surprised but delighted at the same time; feeling of respect sprang up automatically in his heart.

Wei Xiaobao said, "You said that those two girls were using some Kunlun Pai,

Emei Pai moves. If we compare our Shaolin Pai martial art to these random mix of school and sect's martial arts, which one is stronger?"

"Perhaps our Shaolin Pai is somewhat stronger," Cheng Guan replied, "Even if we are not stronger, at least we are not weaker than they."

Wei Xiaobao clapped his hands and said, "That makes it easy. They do not use internal energy, but only use some *Xili Hulu* [meaning: gibberish] Pai style; we do not need internal energy either, just use some Shaolin Pai style, then we will be able to defeat them. I don't care if it is Bo're Palm, Vajra's Divine Fist, Boluomi Hand or Amitabha Buddha Foot, as long as internal energy cultivation is not needed, then it will be very easy to learn, won't it?"

Cheng Guan knitted his brows. "Amitabha Buddha Foot?" he said, "I don't think our Sect has that martial art; I wonder if it is other sect's martial art? But without internal energy cultivation, our Sect's fist or palm techniques won't have the least bit of formidable power; if we came across other sect's martial art expert with profound internal power, we might get our tendon broken and our bones fractured in just one move."

Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud and said, "Those two young women, are they martial art experts with profound internal power?"

"They are not," Cheng Guan replied.

"Why worry, then?" Wei Xiaobao said.

It was as if Cheng Guan had just been woken up by this last sentence; he blew off a deep sigh and said, "So that's how it is, so that's how it is! *Shizhi* has never thought about it." He was quiet for a moment before continuing, "But there is another problem: our Sect's has eighteen different palm techniques, special skills, inside and outside, thirty-six techniques, unique skills, seventy-two. Each technique has at least several dozen variations, at most more than a thousand. It's really not easy to master all of these different techniques to perfection. Even

without internal energy cultivation, that is, learning the style only, we are talking about several decades here."

Wei Xiaobao mused, "This old monk is really annoyingly dumb." He laughed and said, "Why do we have to master everything to perfection? As long as we know the girl uses what style, we'll simply counter soldiers with arms, counter water with an earthen wall; the young girl attack with what move, the old monk neutralize her with what move. I guarantee they will be beaten so badly that they'll flee to the wilderness and will be wiped out to the last man."

Cheng Guan repeatedly nodded his head with a happy expression on his face, as if murky darkness was suddenly opened.

Wei Xiaobao said, "That Miss wearing blue has used some Laoshan Pai's 'rivers pour away by the day'; you said there are six ways to dodge it, seven ways to counterattack. Actually, why bother with all those stuffs? As long as I can use one move to defeat her, why should I learn the other twelve techniques? Won't it be a lot simpler?"

Cheng Guan was greatly delighted. "Absolutely right! Absolutely right!" he exclaimed, "Those two *Nu Shizhu* has broken *Shishu*'s arms and injured martial nephew Jing Ji and the others, four people, using the ‘separating tendon dislocating bone technique’ involving four different sects' techniques. We can use Shaolin Pai martial art to counter their move." Immediately he demonstrated the technique used by the girls one by one, and then he explained the technique to counter each move, followed by demonstrating it for Wei Xiaobao.

Sometimes the technique proposed by Cheng Guan was too complicated and too difficult to learn; sometimes unwittingly he used internal energy. Wei Xiaobao would then ask him to think about other technique that was simple and clear. Shaolin Pai martial art was indeed very broad and greatly abundant, while Cheng Guan was really patience. As soon as Wei Xiaobao felt that the move was too hard to learn, he simply shook his head, and then Cheng Guan would try different technique. If it did not work, he would try a different move, until Wei

Xiaobao was able to execute the move effortlessly.

Seeing in less than an hour this young martial uncle was able to master a particular style, while he himself had painstakingly spent many days to solve the problem, Cheng Guan was so happy that he pulled his own ear and stroked his own cheek, while his heart was unbearably excited. But suddenly he remembered something and said, "What a pity, what a pity." And then he shook his head and said, "Dangerous, dangerous."

Wei Xiaobao hastily asked, "What do you mean 'what a pity'? What's the danger?"

Chapter 23

Scholars with innate talent have a lot of hobbies, the Lord made pictures to convey a message.
(Translated by Foxs)

Carrying the secret edict, Wei Xiaobao went to Hui Cong's meditation room and said, "Fangzhang Shixiong, His Majesty has a secret order for me, I am asking you to give me directions." Breaking the secret edict's seal, he saw a large sheet of fine writing paper. Upon spreading it out, he saw four

drawings.

Cheng Guan said, "If I want *Shishu* [martial uncle], the Senior and Jing Ji and the others, four people to go out and fight those two *Nu Shizhu* [female benefactor], to have them break your hands and feet. If they break your limbs really bad and cannot be cured easily, you will be crippled for life; won't that be a pity? Moreover, if the two *Nu Shizhu* are too ruthless and unexpectedly kill the five of you, won't that be dangerous?"

Wei Xiaobao was puzzled, "Why would you want us, five people, to fight?" he asked.

Cheng Guan said, "I am sure these are not the only move those two *Nu Shizhu* learned. *Shizhi* [martial nephew] does not know what other moves they have, naturally I cannot devise a technique to counter them. If the five of you do not go up to take a beating to test their moves, how can I investigate and find out?"

Wei Xiaobao roared in laughter. "So that's how it is," he said, "I have an idea: as long as you can fight with them, it won't be a pity, and there won't be any danger."

Cheng Guan's expression became awkward. "Those who left homes must not get angry," he said, "We must not fight other people without rhyme or reason; that would be greatly inappropriate."

"I got it!" Wei Xiaobao said, "The two of us can go out the Temple to take a walk. If the two *Nu Shizhu* have already gone far away, nothing could be better than that. This is called 'if you don't offend me, I won't offend you'. Whatever other moves they might have, we don't have to pay them any more attention."

"Absolutely right, absolutely right!" Cheng Guan said, "But *Shizhi* has never gone out the Temple gate. As soon as go out deliberately creating trouble seems to be ill-will. When my master first taught me Buddhist teaching at the Luye Garden, he taught me about the Four Noble Truths and Eight-fold Noble Way. This 'righteous intention' is one of Eight-fold Noble Way …"

“We don’t need to go far,” Wei Xiaobao cut his discourse, “Just take a stroll around the Temple. It would be best if we do not meet them at all.”

“Exactly, exactly,” Cheng Guan said, “Shishu has a virtuous heart, unwilling to strife and struggle against other people, it could be considered ‘righteous intention’. Shizhi definitely must follow your example.”

Wei Xiaobao was secretly amused, taking along his hand, he went out Shaolin Temple via the side door. Cheng Guan had never seen even the forest by the Temple; seeing a vast stretch of pine trees, he could not help but clucking his tongue in amazement as he praised, “Those many pine trees grow together, it’s quite a spectacle. In our Bo’re Hall courtyard there are only two …”

Before he could finish, suddenly they heard female voice from behind, “The little bald thief is here!” Followed by a flash of white ray, a steel saber chopped down on Wei Xiaobao.
Cheng Guan said, “This is the Fierce Tiger Descends the Mountain from Five Tiger Breaking Gate’s Saber Technique.” Reaching out, he grabbed the saber using ‘grabbing blade from someone’ technique, but then he suddenly recalled that the move he used was from the ‘Picking Flower Grab and Capture’; which was too difficult to learn. “It won’t do!” he said, and hastily pulled his hand back.

The ‘one using the blade’ was precisely the woman in blue; seeing Cheng Guan withdrew his hand, she swiftly flipped her willow-leaf saber and swept toward his waist. Right this moment, the girl in green dashed out from among the pine trees and brandished her saber to chop Wei Xiaobao. Wei Xiaobao hastily dodged and hid behind Cheng Guan, thereupon the girl in green’s saber chopped down on Cheng Guan’s shoulder.

“This is Taiji Saber move,” Cheng Guan said, “There is no simple and easy way to neutralize it …” Before he finished speaking, the two women’s sabers attacked him together, the sabers swung faster and faster, Cheng Guan shouted, “*Shishu*, it won’t do, it won’t do! The two *Nu Shizhu* are moving too fast, I can’t … I can’t

think fast enough. Please … please ask the two *Nu Shizhu* not to be impatient, ask them to chop slowly."

The girl in blue sent out several ruthless moves in succession, but all along she failed to chop the old monk, several times she almost had her saber snatched away by him. Hearing him making such a big fuss, she thought he was deliberately mocking her. In her fury, she chopped even more violently.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Hey Miss, my *Shizhi* is asking you not to be impatient, to execute your moves slowly."

"Exactly," Cheng Guan said, "My brain is not that quick, I can't think of this many ways of neutralizing your moves in such a short period of time."

The girl in green hated Wei Xiaobao to the bones; after several times trying to chop Cheng Guan to no avail, she swung her saber onto Wei Xiaobao. Cheng Guan stretched out his hand to block, while saying, "This *Nu Shizhu*, my *Shishu* has not learned the technique to neutralize this saber move of yours; don't chop him now, wait until he has learned it and know how to block your move. It won't be too late for you to chop him again. Ay, my moves won't work. *Shishu*, forget everything you see, the moves I am using right now are quite useless. After we're back, we will slowly think it over again." While his mouth was prattling incessantly, his hands did not stop grabbing and snatching, poking and striking, tightly entangling the two girls; how could the girl in green kill Wei Xiaobao?

Seeing he was out of danger, Wei Xiaobao giggled happily as he leaned against a tree to watch the fight. His eyes feasted on the girl in green's face, body, hands, feet, and then back to her face again; he looked very satisfied and extremely happy.

When the girl in green did not see Wei Xiaobao anymore, she thought he had run away; when she found out that he was watching her closely, her face blushed. Without giving any thought to Cheng Guan, she turned around with raised saber and rushed toward Wei Xiaobao. Who would have thought that right this

moment, Cheng Guan was aiming his finger toward her flank? He intentionally moved his finger slowly; she could have been able to evade it, but in her excitement to kill Wei Xiaobao, she was hit by the finger and fell down to the ground with a shriek.

"Aiyo!" Cheng Guan hastily said, "I am so sorry. The finger power behind *Lao Seng*'s [old monk] move, 'laughing finger southern sky', was not too formidable, *Nu Shizhu* must use one move from the Five Tiger Breaking Gate's Saber called 'vicious tiger blocking the road'. By slanting your saber slightly, you could have parried it. Although *Nu Shizhu* had not used this move, but that *Nu Shizhu* in blue had used it; *Lao Seng* thought that *Nu Shizhu* must also know how to use it; who would have thought … Ay, I have committed an offense, I have committed an offense."

The girl in blue was fuming mad; her steel saber swept horizontally, swiftly and fiercely, but her martial art skill was much too inferior to Cheng Guan's, all along she was unable to even touch the corner of his monk robe. Cheng Guan's mouth was mumbling nonstop, he was trying to memorize all her moves. Since he was unable to find a simple and easy way to break her stances on the spot, he had no choice but to understand clearly her saber techniques, so that he could consider it in detail later.

Wei Xiaobao went toward the girl in green; he praised, "This kind of good-looking little beauty, throughout the world there's only you, one person, tsk, tsk, tsk! Just by looking at you my soul is flying up to the sky." Stretching out his hand, he lightly caressed her face.

The girl was shocked and angered, her breath failed to flow, she fainted immediately. Wei Xiaobao was startled; he no longer dared to be frivolous and reckless. Standing up, he called out, "Cheng Guan *Shizhi*, seal that *Nu Shizhu*'s acupoint as well; we'll have her explain her moves slowly later, so that we won't harm our friendship."

Cheng Guan hesitated. "Don't you think it will be rather bad?" he asked.

Wei Xiaobao replied, “By exchanging blows and kicks right now, it is already too unsightly. Asking her to talk is fairly more refined and in good taste.”

Cheng Guan was delighted. “*Shishu* is right, exchanging blows and kicks is not the ‘just way’.”

The girl in blue knew that as soon as this old monk went all-out, she would not be able to withstand even his single move or half a style. Right now her martial sister was captured; if she also fell into his hands, nobody would report their capture and ask for help. Thereupon she leaped back and called out, “If you harm a single strand of my Shimei’s hair, I will burn your Shaolin Temple to the ground.”

Cheng Guan was startled. “How can we dare to injure this *Nu Shizhu*?” he asked, “If she sheds a single strand of her own hair, are you going to set our temple on fire?”

The girl in blue had already rushed several steps; she turned her head around and cursed, “Old bald thief is oily-mouthed and smooth talking, little bald thief …” She was going to say ‘obscene, heretic and lecherous’, but felt it was inappropriate to say those four words. Stomping her foot, she disappeared into the forest.

Wei Xiaobao gazed on the girl in green lying on the ground, her white jade-like tender face on the green grass, her white jade-like pair of hands truly looked like the white jade image of Guanyin sitting on an emerald pedestal; he could not help but staring blankly at her.

Cheng Guan said, “*Nu Shizhu*, your *Shijie* [older martial sister] has left. You’d better go as well, don’t let a single strand of your hair falls, otherwise, your *Shijie* will come and burn our Temple.”

Wei Xiaobao thought, “Good opportunity must not be missed. Since this little beauty has fallen into my hands, whatever happens, I must not let her go.”

Putting his palms together he said, “This is our Buddha’s blessing. Cheng Guan *Shizhi*, our Buddha wants you to expand Shaolin’s martial art study, to uphold our Pai’s thousand-plus years of martial prestige; you are indeed our Pai’s greatest contributor of meritorious service.”

Cheng Guan was puzzled, “*Shishu*, what are you talking about?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “We were concerned over what other moves those two *Nu Shizhu* might have. It is very fortunate that our Buddha has pity on us, by sending this *Nu Shizhu* to honor our Temple with her presence, so that she can explain everything one by one.” Finished speaking, he bent down to carry the girl and said, “Let’s go home.”

Cheng Guan was astonished and puzzled; he only felt that there was something greatly amiss in this matter, but what exactly was wrong, he could not tell. After a while he said, “*Shishu*, inviting this *Nu Shizhu* inside the Temple does not seem to follow the rule.”

“What do you mean not following the rule?” Wei Xiaobao asked, “Hasn’t she been in the Temple before? Fangzhang [Abbot] and Jielu Courtyard Head both said nothing was wrong, clearly it was in accordance with the rule, wasn’t it?”

The more he talked, the lower Cheng Guan hung his head; he only felt that each sentence cannot be disputed. He saw the little martial uncle took off his monk robe and wrapped it around the girl’s body, and carried her into the Temple via a side door. Cheng Guan had no choice but to follow behind him. He looked lost, his brain was in confusion.

Wei Xiaobao’s heart was pounding; although from head to toe the girl was covered by the monk robe and nothing was visible from the outside, but if any monk in the Temple saw them, unavoidably they would raise some suspicion. He was carrying a warm, fragrant, and tender jade, in his bosom, but in his heart he was afraid. Fortunately, Bo’re Hall was located in a secluded area at the back of the Temple; while he was hurrying toward the Hall, they did not meet any other

monk.

When he entered the Hall, the monks on duty saw their grand-martial uncle personal visit, with their chief following behind him, they all stepped aside respectfully to let them pass. By the time they entered Cheng Guan's meditation room, the girl had not regained her consciousness. Wei Xiaobao put her down on the couch. His hands were wet with cold sweats, he wiped his palms on the side of his legs and heaved a deep sigh. "There!" he said with a laugh.

"We are going to invite this … this *Nu Shizhu* to stay in here?" Cheng Guan asked.

"That's right," Wei Xiaobao replied, "This is not the first time she stays in the Temple. Previously, when her neck was injured, didn't she stay at the Eastern Courtyard?"

Cheng Guan nodded. "Yes," he said, "But … but that time it was to treat her injury, it was a matter of life and death; we did not have any choice but temporarily taking care of her."

"That's very easy," Wei Xiaobao said. Pulling the dagger from his boot, he said, "I only need to ruthlessly cut her once, so that her life will be in danger, and then we won't have any choice but temporarily take care of her." Finished speaking, he stepped toward her and raised his hand, poised to make a cut.

"No, no," Cheng Guan hastily said, "That … that won't be necessary."

"Alright," Wei Xiaobao said, "I will listen to you then. But you must not let anybody know. After she finishes explaining all kinds of moves and styles, we will quietly escort her out. Otherwise, I have no choice but to slash her."

"Yes, yes," Cheng Guan said, "I won't say anything." He only felt that this young martial uncle's conduct was really strange; but recalling that he was his superior from the 'Hui' character generation, his knowledge and experience must be superior to his own. Listening to his order, he did not have the slightest

inclination to question it.

“This *Nu Shizhu*’s temperament is strong,” Wei Xiaobao said, “She is determined to snatch the Bo’re Hall Chief position from you, I must advise her well.”

Cheng Guan said, “If she insists, Shizhi will let her have it, and that’s the end.”

Wei Xiaobao was taken aback; he did not expect this old monk to have a very simple character, without any desire to compete at all. “She is not a monk of our Temple,” he said, “If she took over the Bo’re Hall leadership, where would we put our Shaolin Temple’s face? If you harbor that kind of mindset, you are letting down Shaolin Pai.” While saying that, his expression was grim, so that even Cheng Guan was also scared into thinking that that was the truth.

“That’s right,” Wei Xiaobao said with wooden expression, “Get out now, wait for me outside, I must persuade her.” Cheng Guan bowed to comply, walked out of the meditation room, and closed the door behind him.

Wei Xiaobao untied the monk robe wrapped around the girl. The girl was about to scream when she saw a dagger, glittering like frost and snow, right in front of her nose. Her mouth was opened wide, but she did not dare to make any noise. Wei Xiaobao giggled and said, “Little Miss, as long as you obediently listen to me, I won’t harm a strand of your hair. Otherwise, I won’t have any choice but to cut your nose before letting you out of the Temple. When one lacks a nose, one can’t smell fragrance or stench, not a big deal, isn’t it?”

The girl was scared and angered at the same time; her face was devoid of any color even more. “Are you going to listen to me?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

The girl was extremely angry. “Quickly kill me,” she said in a low voice.

Wei Xiaobao sighed and said, “You have a countenance of a flower, face like the moon; how could I bear to kill you? Yet if I let you go, from now on day and night I will always miss you, and then I will die from lovesickness; that means I am

spoiling the virtue given to me by the Heaven."

The girl's face turned red, but immediately turned back to white. Wei Xiaobao said, "There is only one way: I must cut your nose, then your appearance won't be beautiful anymore, hence I won't die of lovesickness."

The girl shut her eyes tight, two drops of clear tear seeped through her long and beautiful eyelashes. Wei Xiaobao's heart softened; "Don't cry, don't cry!" he said consolingly, "As long as you listen to me nicely, I would rather cut my own nose than yours. What's your name?"

The girl shook her head, more tears flowed from her eyes. Wei Xiaobao said, "Oh, so your name is Yaotou Mao [shaking-head cat]; that's not a nice name."

The girl opened her eyes; with a sob she said, "Who's Yaotou Mao? You are Yaotou Mao."

Hearing her reply, Wei Xiaobao was ecstatic. "Alright," he said with a laugh, "I am Yaotou Mao. Who are you, then?"

The girl angrily said, "I won't tell you!"

Wei Xiaobao said, "Since you don't want to tell me, I'd better give you a name. How about … how about Yaba Mao [mute cat]?"

"Rubbish!" the girl said, "I am not mute."

Wei Xiaobao was sitting on a stack of books on Shaolin martial art, crossing his leg on top of the other, and was swaying gently back and forth. Seeing the angry look on her beyond-compare-beautiful face, his heart was excited. He laughed and said, "What is your honorable surname and your great name, then?"

"I said I won't tell you, I won't tell you," the girl replied.

“I have something I’d like to discuss with you,” Wei Xiaobao said, “If you don’t have any surname and have no name, it’s going to be awkward. Since you are unwilling to tell me, I’ll have to give you one. Mmm, what name should I give to you?”

“I don’t want it, I don’t want it, I don’t want it,” the girl repeatedly said.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “I got it! Your name is Wei Menyao[21].”

The girl was startled. “How quaint,” she said, “I am not surnamed Wei.”

Wei Xiaobao grimly said, “Emperor of Heaven above, Empress of Earth below, in all my life I will climb the mountain of sabers, or go down a deep fryer, to be cut into pieces, to be executed along with my whole family unto the third generation, committing heresy and treason, with dozen unpardonable evil crimes, let my sons be robbers, my daughters be prostitutes, let me be without sons without grandsons, beaten by the sky stricken by thunder, my entire body covered with 1001 big and deep boils, I must take you as my wife.”

Listening to him uttering that many heavy oaths in one breath, the girl was dumbfounded. But when suddenly she heard the last sentence, she could not help but blushing deep red. “Pei!” she spat.

Wei Xiaobao said, “I am surnamed Wei, and thus you are already decreed by fate to be surnamed Wei as well. I don’t know your surname, and you always shake your head, thereupon your maiden name is Wei Menyao.”

The girl shut her eyes and angrily said, “There has never been a crazy and unfounded ravings monk like you on the earth. You have left home, yet you want to take … take something … Aren’t you afraid Bodhisattva will punish you, when you die you will enter the eighteenth level of hell?”

Wei Xiaobao put his palms together and threw himself prostrate on the floor. When the girl heard the noise of him kneeling, her curiosity was piqued; she

opened her eyes and saw him facing the window, kowtowing several times while saying, "My Tathagata Buddha, the merciful Buddha, Bodhisattva Guanyin, Bodhisattva Manjushri, Bodhisattva Samantabhadra, the Jade Emperor, Four Great Vajrapani, King Yama, the underworld judge, Little Demon Wuchang, please listen to me. I, Wei Xiaobao, simply must take this Miss as my wife. Even if after I die I will enter the eighteenth level of hell, have my tongue pulled out, my skull sawed, will not reincarnate for ten thousand years, it's not a big deal. When I am alive, I don't care about anything, when I am dead, I am not afraid of anything. Taking her as my wife has been decided."

The girl noticed how resolute and decisive he was [orig. 'chop the nail and slice the iron'], without the slightest hint of frivolous attitude; she knew he was not joking. She began to feel afraid and begged, "Please stop, please stop." After a brief pause, she said bitterly, "I don't care if you kill me or beat me every day. I hate you to the death, I will never ... will never comply."

Wei Xiaobao stood up and said, "I don't care if you comply or not, in brief or at length, from now on I will spend the next eighty years with you. Even if you have changed into a 100 year-old woman, if I don't succeed in taking you as my wife, I will not die with my eyes closed."

The girl angrily said, "You have disgraced me like this, there will come a day that you will die in my hands. I am going to kill you first before I'll kill myself."

Wei Xiaobao said, "You can always kill me, but that means you are committing a premeditated murder against your own husband. If I cannot be your husband, I won't die that easily." Speaking to this point, he could not stop his voice from trembling.

Seeing him gnashing his teeth with the blue vein on his forehead stuck out, the girl was scared and closed her eyes again. Wei Xiaobao wanted to take several steps toward her, but his entire body went weak, his hands and feet trembled, suddenly he had a strong urge to kneel down and prostrate himself in front of her, to plead with her sincerely; but as he took another step toward her, his

throat emitted a low growling noise like a wounded beast, followed by a desire to strangle her to death.

As the girl heard the strange noise, she opened her eyes and saw the strange gleam on his eyes; she shrieked. Wei Xiaobao was startled; he withdrew several steps and sat down dejectedly, thinking, "In the Imperial Palace I called Miss Fang and Xiao Junzhu my first and second wife. We were laughing hee-hee ha-ha, so relaxed and unrestrained. When I wanted to embrace them I just embraced them, when I wanted to kiss them I simply kiss them. This little girl's acupoint is clearly sealed by the old monk, she is unable to move a single step; how come I do not dare to even caress her hand?"

He saw her beautiful and delicate hand was peeking underneath the monk robe; he only wanted to hold her hand gently, but he did not have any courage to do so, and could not help but swearing, "Hot piece mama!"

The girl did not understand; she stared at him. Wei Xiaobao's face blushed; he said, "I was cursing my own cowardice and uselessness; I wasn't cursing you."

"You disregard the law and natural morality, yet still saying that you are a coward," the girl replied, "If you are truly a coward, I should really thank the Heaven and thank the Earth."

As soon as he heard this, Wei Xiaobao's spirit soared. He stood up and said, "Alright, I want to disregard the law and natural morality. I want to strip you naked." The girl was so shocked that she almost fainted.

Wei Xiaobao walked near her and saw the deep hatred in her eyes; he said in his heart, "Forget it, forget it. I, Wei Xiaobao, am a turtle son of a b1tch. I surrender to you, I don't dare to make a move." In a gentle voice he said, "I have always been afraid of my wife since I was born. I will let you go."

Only now did the girl's fright diminished; but her anger flared up again as she said, "You ... in that town, what kind of rubbish did you tell those ... those bad

women? You said my *Shijie* and I ... are ... are your ... whatever. You said we were going to seize you and take you back. You ... you are an evil man ..."

Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud and said, "What do those bad women understand? Later on, after I take you as my wife, the hundred thousand prostitutes of a thousand brothels in the world lining up in front of me, Wei Xiaobao won't even cast a glance with the corner of my eyes. From morning till night, from night till morning, twelve *sichen* a day, I will only have eyes for my beloved wife."

The girl said, "If you call me one more time as your ... your ... whatever, I will not speak to you again, ever."

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted; he hastily said, "Alright, alright, I won't call you out loud, I will only call you in my heart."

The girl said, "You must not call me in your heart."

Wei Xiaobao smiled and said, "I will secretly call you in my heart, you won't know it."

"Humph," the girl said, "How can I possibly not know? Looking at the weird expression on your face, I know you are calling me in your heart."

Wei Xiaobao said, "When Mama gave birth to me, my expression has already been weird like this. Most likely it was because ever since I was in my mother's womb, I have already known that in the future I am going to marry you as my wife."

The girl shut her eyes and no longer paid attention to him. Wei Xiaobao said, "Hey, I have not called you my wife, how can you ignore me?"

"You haven't?" the girl said, "You lie to my face. You said you were going to marry me as your ... whatever; that was it."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Alright, I won't say it. I was only saying that in the future I will be your husband ..."

The girl was extremely angry; she shut her eyes as tight as she could. Afterwards, no matter what Wei Xiaobao said to her, whether he was rambling incoherently or teasing her, she did not respond at all.

Wei Xiaobao was at a loss; he wanted to say, "If you ignore me, I am going to kiss your face." But as the word was at the tip of his tongue, he swallowed it back again, thinking that by coercing this fairy-like beauty, he would actually be profaning her. He sighed and said, "I only have one favor to ask you. If you tell me your name and surname, I will let you go."

"You deceived me," the girl said.

"I deceived a lot of people in the world," Wei Xiaobao said, "You are not the only one. This is called being a real man, whatever I say, dead horse cannot chase it. Little wife does not say anything, a live horse can chase it easily."

The girl was startled; "What dead horse cannot chase, a live horse can chase easily?" she asked.

"It's our Shaolin Pai's saying," Wei Xiaobao said, "In short, I am not deceiving you. Just think, I single-mindedly want your grandson to call me *yeye* [paternal grandfather]; if I deceived you today, your son won't call me Dad, and then where can I get the grandson?"

At first the girl did not understand his rambling about grandson, grandfather, *etc.* After thinking about it, she understood he was saying the same thing in a roundabout way. She said in a soft voice, "I don't want you to let me go, you have bullied me like this, I have already decided I don't want to live. Just kill me quickly with your blade!"

Wei Xiaobao saw the blade's scar on her neck was still new; a long red scar

remained visible. Feeling deep remorse, he kneeled down on the floor, 'Dong! Dong! Dong! Dong!' he knocked his head heavily in front of her. "I have offended Miss!" he said. With both hands he slapped his own cheeks heavily left and right more than a dozen times, his face immediately turned red and swollen. He said, "Miss, please don't be sad; Wei Xiaobao, this son of a b1tch, indeed deserves to be beaten!" Standing up, he opened the door and said, "Hey, Old *Shizhi*, I want to unseal this Miss' acupoints. How do I do that?"

Cheng Guan had been standing outside the door, waiting. His internal energy was deep, although Wei Xiaobao and the girl were talking in low voices, nothing escaped his ears. He only felt that the way this little martial uncle's 'persuaded' the female benefactor was a profound mystery. All those 'husband, wife, grandson, grandfather' and so on did not seem to have anything to do with martial art, the little martial uncle's wisdom and witticism were too deep to comprehend, his own cultivation in the teachings of Buddha was inadequate so that he failed to understand. Later on he heard the little martial uncle kneeled down and kowtowed, and struck his own cheeks; Cheng Guan could not help but feeling even more admiration.

In Zen Buddhism, when a master passes on the Buddhist doctrines to his disciples, if the disciple did not understand the subtlety of the master's magnificent teaching, the master oftentimes beats the disciple with a stick and shouts at him. Using the stick to pass on the doctrines originated from De Shan Chanshi [Dhyana Master Virtuous Mountain(?)] of the Tang Dynasty; the shout was supposed to urge the person to come to see the truth, it was also originated from a Tang Dynasty dhyana master. The saying 'stick and shout on the head' [i.e. 'severe warning'] came from this custom.

Cheng Guan thought that the eminent monks of the past were using a stick to enlighten people, his little martial uncle was slapping his own face to enlighten the female benefactor. It was an act of abandoning self for others, his heart of mercy surpassed those of his predecessors; he could only admire with gratitude and sigh in admiration. Hearing him asking about how to unseal the acupoints, Cheng Guan hastily replied, "The *Nu Shizhu*'s acupoints being sealed are the 'Da

Bao' [large bundle] acupoint belonging to the Foot Taiyin Channel of the Spleen. *Shishu* only needs to 'push the blood to the palace' (?) of the 'ji men' [winnow basket gate] and 'xue hai' [blood ocean], two acupoints on her leg; that should unseal it."

"'Ji men' and 'xue hai' acupoints, where are they located at?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Cheng Guan lifted his robe and pointed to the inside of his knee to show him the locations of the acupoints, he let Wei Xiaobao to run his finger on the acupoints to verify that he got the correct ones. He also taught him how to 'push the blood to the palace'; saying, "*Shishu* has not practiced internal energy, the way you unseal the acupoints will be somewhat slower. But after massaging for about an hour, the acupoints will definitely open." Wei Xiaobao nodded, closed the door, and returned to the couch.

The girl heard the exchange between those two, she cried out in fear, “I don’t want you to unseal my acupoints, I don’t want you to touch me!”

Wei Xiaobao contemplated, “Massaging the inside of her knee for an hour is indeed not too proper. I really want to unseal her acupoint, but she will definitely think that I am being frivolous. Although a husband can be frivolous toward his wife, I still have to follow Heaven’s rule and the Earth’s way; much less this is a good opportunity that I must not lose, if I fail, I will lost her forever. It’s just that this girl’s temper is very fierce; as soon as I unseal her acupoints, I am afraid she would immediately drive me to the wall and kill me. And then Wei Xiaobao indeed won’t have any son and won’t have any grandson.”

Turning his head, he raised his voice and asked, “Men and women should not have direct contact. As people who have left home, we must pay special attention to the rule. If I don’t want to massage her, is there any other technique I can use?”

“Yes,” Cheng Guan said, “*Shishu* precisely and rigorously abides by the commandments, *Shizhi* is full of admiration. There is a way to unseal other people’s acupoint without touching. You can use the light brushing of the corner

of your sleeve, or use the ‘one finger Dhyana’ through the empty air … Aiyo, it’s not right, *Xiao Shishu* [young martial uncle] has not cultivated internal energy, you cannot use these techniques. Let *Shizhi* think it over …”

Actually, all he had to do was to enter the room himself and lightly brush the corner of his sleeve, or perhaps use the ‘one finger Dhyana’ through the empty air, then the girl’s acupoint would be unsealed immediately. But since his martial uncle had asked, he must try to come up with an answer. However, how difficult it was for someone without internal energy to unseal acupoint without using fingers or massage? Even if he thought about it for a year or so, he would not necessarily be able to come up with anything.

Listening to him for a long time without getting any answer, Wei Xiaobao pushed the door a little bit, and saw Cheng Guan was looking up with a blank stare, lost in thought. He would not be surprised if Cheng Guan could stay motionless and speechless like that for six hours. Thereupon he closed the door and turned around, thinking that when he unsealed Mu Jianping’s acupoint at the Imperial Palace that day, he was using first-class technique all the way to the ninth-class technique: pinching, massaging, beating and jabbing, without the least bit of second thought. Although she was a *junzhu* who should be respected, in his eyes, he did not consider her important at all; however, in front of this nameless young woman, why did he tremble with fear and venerate her as if she was a deity?

Glancing toward the girl, he saw her delicate eyebrows were tightly knitted together with a distressed expression; he could not help but feeling a deep compassion toward her. Picking up a wooden fish mallet, he walked over toward her and said, “In the previous life Wei Xiaobao owed you a debt. In this life I fear neither the Heaven nor the Earth, yet I fear you, a young Miss. Right now I surrender to you, I really want to unseal your acupoints, and not deliberately want to take advantage of you.” Finished speaking, he took off his monk robe, and gently struck the inside of her left knee several times with the wooden fish mallet.

The girl stared at him coldly, her small mouth was tightly shut. Wei Xiaobao jabbed the mallet several more times and asked, “How do you feel?”

The girl said, “You … other than speaking some rogue words, you don’t know anything.”

Cheng Guan’s internal energy was deep, his light poke with his finger penetrated deep into the acupoint, although Wei Xiaobao’s placement of the wooden fish mallet was very accurate, his strength was lacking, he failed to unseal the acupoint. Hearing the girl’s sarcastic remark, he could not suppress his anger, and struck the wooden fish mallet heavily down several times. “Ah!” the girl screamed. Wei Xiaobao was startled. “Does it hurt?” he asked.

“I … I … I …” the girl angrily said. Wei Xiaobao moved to her right knee, but this time he started beating gently. After pounding several times, the girl’s body slightly trembled. “That’s it!” Wei Xiaobao happily said, “Originally Shaolin Pai only has 72 unique skills, from now on there will be 73. This new unique skill is invented by the Eminent Monk Hui Ming Chanshi, it is called … it is called the ‘Wooden Fish Mallet Acupoint Unsealing Divine Technique’, hey hey …”

While he was feeling complacent, suddenly he felt a dull pain on the small of his back; he was dumbstruck. The girl suddenly rolled around and sat up, she reached out to snatch his dagger and thrust it into his chest. “Aiyo!” Wei Xiaobao cried out, “You murder your own husband …” and fell sitting down on the ground.

The girl snatched her willow-leaf saber that was placed by her side; pulled the door open, and bolted out of the meditation room.

Cheng Guan stretched out his arms to block, he called out in alarm, “*Nu Shizhu*, you … killed … killed my *Shishu* … that … that …”

The girl moved the willow-leaf saber from her left hand to her right, ‘Shua! Shua! Shua!’ she hacked three times in succession. Cheng Guan flicked the sleeve of his

robe. The girl's legs went numb and she tumbled down.

Cheng Guan rushed toward Wei Xiaobao's side; he flicked several times with the middle finger of his right hand to seal the acupoints all around Wei Xiaobao's wound. "Amitabha, my Buddha is merciful," he said. With three fingers he pinched the hilt of the dagger and gently pulled it out, blood was seeping out of the wound. Noticing the bleeding was not too bad, Cheng Guan hurriedly untied Wei Xiaobao's clothes, and saw the wound to be approximately half a cun [± ½"], and the cut was not too wide. He repeatedly said, "Amitabha."

Wei Xiaobao was wearing his treasured vest; if not for the fact that his dagger was incomparably sharp, he would not have been wounded at all. Although the dagger penetrated his clothes, its force was greatly reduced and only went into his flesh shallowly. However, looking at his bleeding chest and feeling the pain from the wound, he thought his life would be difficult to save. He mumbled, "Murder your own husband … (cough, cough) … murder your … your own …"

The girl was lying on the floor, she cried and said, "It was me who killed him, Old Monk, quickly kill me to … to pay for … for his life."

"Ay," Cheng Guan sighed, "My Shishu has enlightened you. *Nu Shizhu*, if you persist on your wrong doings, there is nothing I can do. But a violent crime like this … a murder, it is rather too much."

Wei Xiaobao said, "I … I'm about to die. (Cough), you murder your own …"

Cheng Guan stared blankly. Dashing out of the room, he fetched the medicine to treat metal-cut wound and applied it on Wei Xiaobao's wound, saying, "*Shishu*, you have great compassion and great mercy, you enlightened the fierce and uncontrollable, your karmic reward has not been exhausted yet, you won't die this easily. Besides, your injury is not serious, it's not a big deal."

Hearing Cheng Guan said that his injury was not serious, Wei Xiaobao's spirit was greatly aroused, and felt that his wound was not too painful after all. "Stoop

down," he said, "Aiyo, I am going to die, I am going to die!"

Cheng Guan stooped down and put his ear next to Wei Xiaobao's mouth. Wei Xiaobao said in a low voice, "You may unseal her acupoint, but don't let her out of the room. Wait until she finishes using all martial art skills she knew, and then … and then …"

"And then what?" Cheng Guan asked.

"At that time … at that time we …" Wei Xiaobao stammered, while saying in his heart, "Even until then, we still cannot let her go." He said, "Just … just follow my instruction … quickly … quickly … I am about to die; once I died, I cannot die again!"

Although Cheng Guan did not understand his intention, hearing the urgency in his voice, he turned around and snapped his fingers to unseal her blocked acupoints.

The girl saw how sneaky Wei Xiaobao was talking to Cheng Guan, she thought that this young evil monk was wily and mischievous, at the death's door, he must be planning some treacherous scheme to deal with me, otherwise, why would he want to let me go? Immediately she wanted to leap up, but her acupoints had just been unsealed, the blood had not flowed freely yet, her legs were still numb and weak, she tumbled down again. Cheng Guan looked at her with blank expression on his face, while his mouth repeatedly calling the names of Buddha.

The girl was frightened even more, she shouted, "Quickly kill me with one palm strike, tormenting people like this is not the act of a hero and warrior."

Cheng Guan said, "*Xiao Shishu* said we cannot let you go at this time, naturally we cannot kill you either."

The girl was greatly alarmed; her face blushed, she thought, "This young evil monk said that no matter what he must take me as his wife, otherwise he would

die without his eyes closed. Could it be … could it be that before he breathes his last he wants … he wants to make me … make me … whatever … whatever wife?" Leaning sideways, she picked up the willow-leaf saber from the floor and forcefully chopped it onto her own forehead.

Cheng Guan flicked the sleeve of his robe again, it coiled around the edge of the blade, while the left sleeve brushed toward her face. The girl felt a strong gust of wind sweeping her face, and had no choice but to release her grip on the saber and leaped backward to evade. Cheng Guan flicked his sleeve again, the willow-leaf saber shot up, 'pop!' it stuck on the beam of the roof.

Seeing Cheng Guan was looking up at the saber, the girl kicked her left foot and slipped away from his left side. Cheng Guan stretched out his hand to block. Forming her right hand's five fingers into a claw the girl attacked his eyes. Cheng Guan flipped his hand to catch her right elbow, he said, "'Smoke Over the Eyes', this is Jiangnan's Jiang Family's martial art."

The girl's leg flew toward his lower abdomen. Cheng Guan slightly bent his waist and the kick hit an empty air. "This is 'Sound of Footsteps in an Empty Valley', originated from Jin Yang of Shanxi, a Shatuo people's martial art," he said, "But Shatuo people must have another name, *Lao Na* is ignorant and inexperienced, I looked everywhere but could not find out. I wonder if *Nu Shizhu* knew the original name of this move."

Why would the girl pay him any attention? Her fists punched, her feet kicked, her fingers poked, her elbows struck; launching move after move endlessly. Cheng Guan identified all the moves one by one, only her movement was really fast, he did not have enough time to say it out loud; he had no choice but parrying the attacks and simply memorized everything in his heart. The girl successively launched several dozen moves, but Cheng Guan effortlessly neutralized everything. Seeing it would be difficult for her to escape, she was extremely frightened; her breathing failed to flow, she swayed several times, and then she fell down, fainted.

Cheng Guan sighed and said, “*Nu Shizhu* is greedy and covetous, you learned various schools and sects’ exquisite moves, yet without possessing enough internal energy; naturally you won’t last in a prolonged fight. In *Lao Na*’s opinion, you’d better cultivating internal energy from the beginning, and in a proper way. Fighting this time, your strength failed. If I help you by waking you up, undoubtedly you will want to fight again, and then inevitably you will suffer internal injury; you’d better lie down to rest for a moment, what does *Nu Shizhu* think? But you must never misunderstand, thinking that *Lao Na* is only watching with folded arms, knowing you are fainting and paying you no attention. Aiyo, *Lao Na* is so muddle-headed, you are already fainted, of course you won’t hear a thing, yet I kept talking endlessly.”

He went toward the couch to check Wei Xiaobao’s pulse, and found it to be steady and solid, there was no indication of danger at all; he said, “*Shishu*, don’t you worry, your injury is not the least bit serious.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Do you remember all the moves that the Little Miss used?”

“I do,” Cheng Guan replied, “But to find techniques to deal with her that are simple, clear and easy to practice is indeed not easy.”

“Just remember the moves she used,” Wei Xiaobao said, “As for how to deal with her, we can think about it slowly, it won’t be too late.”

“Yes, yes,” Cheng Guan said, “*Shishu*’s direction is right.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “After she has finished using all her punching and kicking skills, have her use her saber, and take note of her moves.”

“Right,” Cheng Guan said, “We must also remember her moves using a weapon. There is one difficulty though: her willow-leaf saber is stuck on the beam. I am afraid she cannot jump that high, she won’t be able to retrieve it.”

“What about you?” Wei Xiaobao asked, “Can’t you jump up to get it?”

Cheng Guan was startled, then he burst out laughing and said, “*Shizhi* is indeed muddle-headed.”

His laughter had awakened the girl. Propping herself up with both hands, she ran toward the door. Cheng Guan flicked his left sleeve to push the side of the girl’s body. The girl staggered and hit the wall. Cheng Guan flicked his right sleeve toward the wall to support her body gently. Instantly the girl was able to steady her footing. She was startled, and realized at once that in all honesty that the difference between her martial art and this old monk’s is simply too far. If she continued fighting, he would make a fool of her without she being able to do anything. Thereupon she took two steps back and sat down on a chair.

“Uh,” Cheng Guan was puzzled, “You are not fighting anymore?”

The girl angrily said, “I am not your match, why would I want to fight you?”

Cheng Guan said, “If you don’t fight, how can I recognize the style you are using? How can I think of a way to counter that style? Quickly fight!”

The girl thought, “Fine, turns out you want me to fight so that you can understand my martial arts, I simply won’t let you know.” Suddenly she sprang up, her fists went straight up and down, waving wildly and hitting arbitrarily, her feet also kicked randomly, without using any technique at all.

Cheng Guan was greatly astonished. “Uh! Ah!” he exclaimed, “That’s odd! Strange! Ay! Wow! What’s that? Amazing! That’s weird!” He had a feeling that he had seen those moves before, but it also seemed that he had never seen them. Some moves seemed similar to certain school or sect’s style, yet the resemblance was so little, the difference was so great; the moves looked right, but felt wrong. In that instant his brain was overloaded with confusion. He felt that the martial arts he diligently and painstakingly accumulated over the dozens of years had suddenly changed, the moves he learned following the Heaven’s law

and Earth's principle, the golden rule and jade regulation, in a split second everything was shattered and nothing was left.

He did not realize that the girl did not move according to any martial art style, she was simply beating and kicking randomly. She knew that no matter what move she used, this old monk could not possibly harm her, at most he would only seal her acupoint so that she would lie down on the floor without being able to move at all, nothing more. If he really wanted to subdue her, it would be as easy as lifting his own hand. Even if she had used the most exquisite of martial art move, the result would be the same; so she might as well beating and kicking randomly. You want to study my martial art style, I simply won't let you take a single glimpse.

Cheng Guan was very familiar with the world's each school and sect's martial art; however, he had never thought that in this world, there are millions of people who have never learned martial art, who, when they fight, if they want to punch they would simply punch, if they want to kick, they would simply kick. They do not understand any fist technique or kicking technique, do not know whether certain move is correct or wrong. Seeing the girl executing strange move and weird style, each one seemed more bizarre than the previous one, each one he had never seen in his entire life, each one he had never even heard about, he could not help but feeling frightened and was at a loss.

In all his life he had always lived inside Shaolin Temple, from the time he shaved his head he had never left the Temple's gate even for a single step. Whenever someone was using his fist and feet in Shaolin Temple, naturally each move would follow some kind of style or technique; whenever someone was talking about each sect's martial art, naturally he would mention some exquisite and original move. Everybody in the world would have seen people punching and kicking wildly like this little girl, only this Head of Bo're Hall of Shaolin Temple, who was extremely knowledgeable in martial art, Cheng Guan *Dashi* [great master], had never seen anything like this, and had never heard people mentioning this either.

After watching a dozen more moves, he was even more stunned, he could not even sigh or say something like ‘strange, amazing, weird’, and so on. All kinds of styles came thick and fast before his eyes. “That looks like ‘Falling from Dragon Ride’ of Wudang’s Long Fist, but the style appears to be incorrect. Perhaps it is an alteration of Kongtong Pai’s ‘Dragon Prancing on the Cloud’? Uh, that kick looks even weirder, if she kicks straight out like that, the opponent could easily catch it, and grab her ankle. But in martial art study, greatly skillful person may not necessarily win over clumsy one, there must be an extremely formidable change that comes later. Ah, in this move she is grabbing with both hands, apparently she wants to grab my hair, but obviously I do not have any hair, so this move must be a fake one. Martial art study pays particular attention to solid in the midst of void, and void in the midst of solid. Why would she want to grab Buddhist monk’s hair? There must be a profound meaning behind this, I simply must consider the details carefully …” The more the girl moved arbitrarily, the more Cheng Guan was baffled. From being puzzled, his admiration slowly grew; from admiration, he slowly became frightened.

Wei Xiaobao could see that the girl was moving randomly, yet in all seriousness Cheng Guan was diligently watching and studying everything; he could not help but make a ‘Ha!’ sound as he broke into laughter. This laugh affected his wound, which became really painful that he could only clench his teeth trying to endure. In that moment pain and amusement mixed together, and it was really difficult to endure.

Cheng Guan was at a loss, anxious and perplexed, suddenly hearing Wei Xiaobao’s laugh, he blushed from ear to ear, thinking, “*Shishu* is laughing because I do not know this *Nu Shizhu*’s fantastic moves; perhaps he would ask her to be the Head of Bo’re Hall.” When he turned his head around, he saw Wei Xiaobao’s painful expression, and felt even more grateful, “*Shishu* is indeed kind-hearted, he wants me to hand over the Head position to this *Nu Shizhu*, but he cannot bear to say it.”

Seeing the girl’s punching and kicking was getting more and more chaotic, he thought, “The people of old said that when one has reached outstanding

attainments in martial art, even hanging something on the antelope's antler won't leave any trace that's possible to seek[?]. I heard that in the previous dynasty there was this Dugu Quibai [Dugu Seeking-a-loss] *Daxia* [great hero/knight], and then there was Linghu Chong *Daxia*, who defeat a move without a move; they were unequalled in their era. Could it be … could it be …"

He wanted to try, hence he stepped forward and casually punching and kicking, trying to overthrow the girl. However, when a martial art master is making his move, he must look clearly the opponent's move first, and then thinking about a way to counter it later. Since he was already at a complete loss over the girl's random punching and kicking, it was like a tiger cub that saw a donkey for the first time, who was terrified endlessly.

Actually, the girl did not dare to attack him. One was punching and kicking randomly with anger that was difficult to restrain, the other was having his imagination running wild while his heart was extremely frightened. After moving around randomly for quite a while, the girl's hands and feet were exhausted and aching. Thinking that in any case it would be difficult for her to escape, her heart turned bitter, she swayed and abruptly sat down on the ground.

Cheng Guan was greatly shocked; he thought, "According to legend, when someone has trained martial art to an extremely high level, he could sit down on the ground and still injure the opponent from a distant. I am afraid … I am afraid …" His brain was overloaded with confusion; in his fright, his blood surged up, slowly he sat down and passed out.

The girl was startled but delighted; afraid that those two monks were setting up some sinister scheme, she did not dare to step forward and kill those old and young, two monks, but sprang up and ran out of the meditation room.

Suddenly seeing a woman rushing out, the monks of Bo're Hall were taken by surprise. Without their superior's order, who would dare to step forward and stop her? Wei Xiaobao was lying on the couch and could only watch helplessly.

After quite a while, Cheng Guan slowly regained his consciousness. With an ashamed expression he said, "*Shishu*, I … I am really ashamed to face our Temple's forefathers and ancestors."

Forcing a laugh, Wei Xiaobao said, "Where do you think you want to go?"

Cheng Guan said, "That *Nu Shizhu*'s martial art is exquisite, *Shizhi* did not recognize a single move, I am ignorant and inexperienced, I am really ashamed." He tried hard to remember the girl's style, but her moves changed irregularly without any pattern, completely without any set of rule he could follow; how could he remember it? Shakily he tried to stand up while supporting himself against the wall, but he almost faint again.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "You … you think moving around wildly like that is an exquisite martial art? Ha ha … hee hee … this … this is so … so funny … I want to die!"

Cheng Guan was puzzled. "Is *Shishu* saying that … that was moving around wildly? And not … not exquisite martial art?"

Wei Xiaobao pressed down his wound and struggled hard not to laugh. Beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. He could not refrain from coughing and said with a laugh, "That was something that … that all children in the world can do well. Ha ha … aiyo … I will die of laughter!"

Cheng Guan blew out a breath, in his heart he was still half believing half doubting, but a smile appeared on his face. "*Shishu*, was that really moving around wildly?" he asked, "How come I have never seen anything like that?"

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Naturally there has never been such martial art in Shaolin Temple."

Cheng Guan stared at the ceiling and was lost in thought for half a day. Finally he slapped his thigh and said, "That's right. Although that *Nu Shizhu*'s punching and

kicking is peculiar, it is actually very easy to neutralize, we only need to use Shaolin Long Fist's shallowest move to prevail. It's just that … it's just that *Shizhi* thought that there is no such easy thing like that in the world, great skill may appear as clumsiness, great intelligence may appear to be stupidity, good merchant may hide his treasure away so that no one knows about it. There must be a profound martial art principle hidden inside a style that looks extremely easy on the outside. Who would have thought that those random punching and kicking were not profound martial art at all? This is very strange. Why did that *Nu Shizhu* display such style, which seems to be unfit for elegant hall, in here? Won't that means she was simply making a fool of herself?"

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "I think it's not strange at all. She could not produce any new style, hence she simply moved her hands and feet randomly. Ay, ha ha … hee hee …" He could not help bursting into laughter again.

Wei Xiaobao's injury was light, plus Shaolin Temple's metal cut wound medicine was extremely effective; after recuperating for about ten days, he was completely healed. He was the current Emperor's proxy, he held a place of honor in the Temple, nobody would dare to ask about his business. Since nobody knew about this, as long as he did not say anything, others would not find out.

During his recovery, Cheng Guan recorded the two women's each style and each move clearly, he also figured out a way to counter each one. As soon as Wei Xiaobao was healed, he passed on each move each style to him. Although the moves Cheng Guan taught him were quite diverse, they were based primarily on the 'Picking Flower Grab and Capture' technique. 'Picking Flower Grab and Capture' was Shaolin Pai's profound martial art, it used pure and profound internal energy as the foundation, the moves were not complicated, but were powerful and elegant, without the slightest degree of aggressiveness.

According to Zen Buddhism legend passed down from generation to generation, at the assembly on Lingshan, Sakyamuni Buddha picked a golden Boluo flower and showed it to the crowd. The audience was silent, no one understood his meaning, only Revered Monk Jiaye [Kasyapa] broke into a smile. Buddha said, "I possess the true Dharma eye, the marvelous mind of Nirvana, the true form of

the formless, the subtle [D]harma [G]ate that does not rest on words or letters but is a special transmission outside of the scriptures. This I entrust to Mahākāśyapa.[22]„

Mahakasyapa was one of Buddha's ten main disciples, he was known as 'the first *toutuo*[23]', the Zen Buddhists revered him as their forefather. Shaolin Temple can be classified as Zen Buddhism, who pays particular attention of self-awareness. Thinking about Buddha picking the flower, Kasyapa smiled. Without a word, he had already comprehended the meaning; wasn't that a state of comprehension beyond amazing?

The people of later generation used the term 'picking flower' as a name for this *qin na* [grab and capture/grappling] technique. Naturally each move was beautiful and each style elegant, a lot more interesting to watch than ordinary flipping of the hand or pulling of the leg. It's just that Wei Xiaobao did not have any foundation in internal energy cultivation; using this kind of refined and elegant technique against a martial art master, as soon as the opponent lightly pushed, he would be immediately thrown down and roll around several times on the ground. He fell down until his nose turned blue and his eyes swollen, needless to say, he would either wail or laugh loudly. Luckily those two women did not have any internal energy either, hence the technique he learned would come in handy in dealing with them. Cheng Guan thought that the opponents were a couple of girls, they must not treat them roughly, hence the reason he put emphasis on this kind of technique.

When Wei Xiaobao learned martial art from Hai Dafu, because he was under supervision, he received double benefits: learning the move and how to use it, as a result, he did learn something from Hai Dafu. Later on Chen Jinnan gave him a martial art manual, which he only learned several times, and then he stopped altogether because it was too difficult. As for the six moves taught by Cult Leader Hong, husband and wife, he only practiced carelessly to get the general idea; he stopped practicing as soon as he left the Divine Dragon Island. The reason he learned martial art this time was to get that green-clothes girl as his wife. He had made an oath that in order to be her husband, he was willing to climb the

mountain of blades or go down a deep fryer, when he died he would enter the eighteenth level of hell. It was indeed not a small matter; not surprisingly, he trained very diligently. He learned every move every style, and sparred with Cheng Guan.

After training for several days, his laziness came back, suddenly he thought about Shuang'er, "That girl's martial art is not weak, most likely she will be able to deal with these two girls. I only need to have Shuang'er by my side as my escort, I don't need to personally practice martial art." But then he had a second thought, "I must use my own skill to get that green-clothed girl. It would be great to smell the fragrance of her face. If I ask Shuang'er to seal her acupoint and then I smell the fragrance of her face, I would appear too gutless, that green-clothed girl will look down on me even more. Besides, if I ask Shuang'er to do this kind of thing, although she would obey me, in her heart she must be grieved, I must not wrong her too much. Even if their faces both look happy, I have to be fair, neither one of them must be discontented." In the end, he made a strenuous effort to learn the style.

One particular day Cheng Guan said, "*Shishu*, You are diligently learning this martial art, actually … actually it won't do you any good. If you grab me like this, and I reacted using my internal energy, your wrist … your wrist will be … will be …"

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "My wrist will be 'crack!' broke in two."

Cheng Guan said, "You are my superior, no way would I use my internal strength against you, *Shizhi* absolutely will not dare. However, in *Shizhi*'s opinion, practicing Shaolin Long Fist from the start, step-by-step in proper order is the way to go."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Why do you say that what we are practicing right now is not the way to go?"

"This style does not have any internal energy foundation," Cheng Guan replied,

“If you are facing a martial art master, it does not matter how ingenious the changes are, inevitably you will fail and be wiped over the floor. It is only useful to deal with those two *Nu Shizhu*.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed. “That’s wonderful,” he said, “The only reason I learn this is only to deal with those two *Nu Shizhu*.”

Cheng Guan looked at him with a baffled expression, he was completely lost. He said, “Supposing *Shishu* will not come across those *Nu Shizhu* again in the future, won’t the effort of learning this martial art be wasted? Not to mention you will delay the time to learn proper martial art.”

Wei Xiaobao shook his head and said, “If I can’t see this *Nu Shizhu* again, I will definitely die; what use will learning proper martial art be?” What Cheng Guan said was ‘those two *Nu Shizhu*’, but Wei Xiaobao was referring to ‘this *Nu Shizhu*’.

Cheng Guan was even more baffled; he asked, “Could it be that *Shishu* has been hit by that *Nu Shizhu*’s poison and thus must find her to get the antidote, otherwise your life would be difficult to protect?”

Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, “I was talking about the matter between a man and a woman, where did this old monk get that idea?” With a grim expression he said, “Exactly, exactly, I was hit by her poison; the poison has entered my five viscera and six bowels, into the bones and marrows of my entire body, only she can neutralize it.”

“Aiyo!” Cheng Guan exclaimed, “Our Temple’s Cheng Zhao *Shidi* is adept at neutralizing poison, let me ask him to come here to examine *Shishu*.”

Suppressing his laugh, Wei Xiaobao said, “No need, no need, the poison that hit me is actually slow to take effect, she is the only antidote, other people are useless. The old monk Cheng Zhao is even more useless.”

Cheng Guan nodded. “Turns out only she has the antidote,” he said. Wei Xiaobao was saying ‘only she was the antidote’, Cheng Guan erroneously assumed that ‘only she has the antidote’. One word makes the meaning entirely different.

The old monk was anxious, he muttered to himself, “Ay, *Shishu* is being hit by the strange poison of this *Nu Shizhu*’s unique school, luckily it is slow to take effect …”

The girl’s martial art was actually very broad and diverse, the techniques Cheng Guan came up with to counter her were not a few either, some were more challenging than the others, Wei Xiaobao did not have any martial art foundation at all, how could he learn everything in such a short period of time? Every day he sparred with Cheng Guan, oftentimes he treated this white-bearded old monk as that beautiful young green-clothed girl.Sometimes he went as far as speaking with him frivolously and treated him tenderly. Luckily Cheng Guan did not understand anything, he thought this young martial uncle had a deep comprehension of Buddhist teaching, and that he was using a profound Buddhist allegory. Cheng Guan blamed himself for being stupid for failing to grasp the essence of the attainment of the spiritual learning.

One day the two of them were talking about the two girls’ saber technique in Cheng Guan’s meditation room when the Bo’re Hall monk on duty came to the door and said, “*Fangzhang Dashi* [great master abbot] is inviting *Shishuzu* and *Shibo* [grand martial uncle and martial (older) uncle] to the main hall to discuss something.”

The two of them went to the Hall of Great Strength[24] and saw several dozens of guests in the Hall, some were sitting down, some were standing up. Abbot Hui Cong *Chanshi* was sitting on the second seat of honor to accompany the guests. On the main seats of honor sat three people. The first one was wearing Mongolian nobleman attire, he looked about twenty or so; the second one was a middle-aged Lama, thin, short and swarthy; the third one was a military officer, from his uniform it looked like he was a commander of the army, about forty

something years old. Standing behind these three were a mix of several dozen military officers, Lamas, and about a dozen or so men in civilian clothing. They all looked strong and heroic, obviously they knew martial arts.

Seeing Wei Xiaobao entering the Hall, Abbot Hui Cong stood up and said, "*Shidi*, honored guests are descending on our Temple. This is His Highness Prince Galdan [ge'er dan] of Mongolia, this is *Da Fashi*[25] Great Lama Chang Qi of Tibet, and this one is Ma Bao, Ma *Daren*[26], a military commander under Ping Xi Wang's banner." Turning toward the three guests, he said, "And this is Lao Na's *Shidi*, Hui Ming *Chanshi*."

Everybody could see that Wei Xiaobao was young man with a flippant expression, a complete picture of a frivolous teenager, yet unexpectedly he was a *Chanshi* of the same standing as the Abbot himself; they were all astonished. Prince Galdan could not help but laughing; he said, "This little eminent monk is really young and fascinating. Ha ha … odd, very odd."

Wei Xiaobao put his palms together and said, "Amitabha, this big prince is really big and amusing. Hee hee … strange, very strange!"

Galdan angrily said, "What's so amusing and strange aboutme?"

Wei Xiaobao replied, "Whatever is fascinating and odd about the little monk is the same as whatever is amusing and strange about Your Highness; it's hard to differentiate between the elder and younger brother, one is just as bad as the other." Finished speaking, he sat down on the seat below Abbot Hui Cong, while Cheng Guan stood behind him. Hearing Wei Xiaobao, everybody thought that it was an unfathomable truth, and they all secretly praised him.

Abbot Hui Cong said, "I wonder what instruction the three honored guests have by gracing our humble Temple with your presence."

Lama Chang Qi said, "The three of us came across each other by accident along the way. Upon talking to each other, we agreed that Shaolin Temple is the

Mount Tai and Big Dipper constellation [i.e.the ultimate] of martial art study in the Central Plains, worthy of our admiration. The three of us are uncouth people of the borders, what we see and hear is shallow, thereupon we come to your precious temple together to admire. We will be much honored to see the eminent monks' respected example." Although he was a Tibetan Lama, he spoke with good Beijing bureaucratic language, his voice was sharp, clear and bright, his manner in speaking was elegant.

"We do not dare," Hui Cong said, "In Mongolia, Tibet and Yunnan, three places, Buddhist teaching is usually flourishing. The three gentlemen have received Buddha's illumination for a long time, your wisdom and self-awareness must be clear, what other direction we can hope to give you?" Chang Qi Lama was talking about martial art study, but Abbot Hui Cong was talking about the Dharma. Although Shaolin Temple was renowned all over the world for its martial art, yet all the eminent monks of the Temple took diligently cultivated Buddhist doctrine as the proper way, they always thought that the martial art study was merely a minor detail to protect and sustain the Buddhist teaching.

Galdan said, "I heard that Shaolin Temple's previous generations passed on altogether seventy-two special skills, which overawe the world, not often to find a match. Is it possible for *Fangzhang Dashi* to ask the eminent monks to demonstrate them one by one so that *Xiao Wang* [little king, referring to self] and the others could have our eyes opened?"

Hui Cong said, "It is only proper to let Your Highness know that the hearsay of the Jianghu is not to be trusted. Our humble Temple's monks are diligently cultivating Zen meditation in order to reach true enlightenment. Although some of us have spare time to practice martial art, it is nothing more than to have a strong and healthy body. Trivial small skills, not worth mentioning."

"*Fangzhang*," Galdan said, "You are indeed frank and candid. All we ask is that you demonstrate these 72 unique skills, we only want to watch, not to steal it; why should you be narrow-minded?"

ShaolinTemple's reputation was simply too great, over the last thousand years, nearly every month there were people who pay a visit asking for advice. Some came with sincerity because they really wanted to learn, some with evil intention to pick a quarrel. The monks of the Temple always politely declined. Even if the visitors were extremely arrogant, the Temple's monks always treated them with due respect, and would never argue. Only when the visitors resorted to violence would the monks be forced into fighting back. Otherwise, they would always send off the visitors with good wishes. Something like this Prince Galdan just said, Abbot Hui Cong had heard countless times. He simply smiled and said, "If the three gentlemen are willing to expound the Zen teaching and discuss the Buddhist doctrine, *Lao Seng* [old monk] will convene the monks to respectfully listen to your discourse. As for some martial art, our Temple always follows the rule that we do not dare to show off our meager skills before an expert, to be presumptuous toward the visiting benefactors."

Galdan's eyebrows stood up as he loudly said, "In that case, Shaolin Temple only enjoys unearned reputation. The Temple's monks' martial art is not as good as dog fart, not worth a *qian*."

Hui Cong smiled and said, "Everything is life is indeed fabricated, is indeed not as good as dog fart, not worth a *qian*. The Five Aggregates [from Sanskrit 'skandha'] are empty, our bodies are empty, reputation is no more than worldly possessions. Your Highness says our humble Temple only enjoys unearned reputation; that is the truth."

Galdan had not expected this old monk did not get the least bit angry; he could not help but was startled. Standing up, he laughed loudly while pointing his finger at Wei Xiaobao and said, "Little monk, are you also not as good as dog fart, not worth a *qian*?"

Wei Xiaobao giggled and said, "Naturally Big Prince surpasses Little Monk. Little monk is indeed not as good as dog fart, not worth a *qian*. Big Prince is definitely as good as dog fart, and worth a *qian*. This is called you win by a gambling chip." Immediately some people from among those who stand snickered.

Galdan was furious; he wanted to leave his seat and use force against Wei Xiaobao immediately, but then he had a second thought, “This little monk’s seniority in Shaolin Temple is very high, perhaps there is something wrong here, which I don’t know yet.” Panting with rage, he struggled hard to suppress his anger.

Wei Xiaobao said, “Your Highness does not need to lose your temper. You must know that the smelliest thing in the world is not dog fart, rather, it is one’s words. There are some people, who, when they speak, stink to the high heaven, just like … just like … hey, hey, I don’t need to say it. As for not worth a *qian*, it is not the lowliest thing. The lowliest thing is someone who owes other tens of million, hundreds of million *taels*, yet refuse to pay. Whether Your Highness owe others money or not, you alone know it in your heart.” Galdan was stunned with his mouth agape, temporarily he did not know how to respond.

Abbot Hui Cong said, “*Shidi*’s words contain profound Buddhist allegory; my admiration, my admiration. Affairs of life, karma and retribution, everything has its cause and definitely has its fruit. Committing evil deeds will result in evil consequence. Not worth a *qian* is no more than ‘without virtue, without malice’, it is a lot better than owing innumerable evil debts.”

Eminent monks of Zen Buddhism were constantly in search of Zen truth. In actuality, Wei Xiaobao was saying those things only to ridicule Galdan’s casual remark, yet in Abbot Hui Cong’s ears, it concealed deep crucial points.

Listening to the Abbot’s explanation, Cheng Guan was immediately enlightened; he could not help but sighing in admiration, “Hui Ming *Shishu* is young yet virtuous,” he said happily, “He had attained the wonderful comprehension of the truth. *Lao Na* has been studying under him for several months, when I meditate recently, my brain seems to be clearing up a lot.”

A little monk babbled nonsense, two old monks echoed each other; to outsiders, they seemed to be deliberately trying to embarrass Galdan. Galdan’s face turned

deep red; suddenly he sprang up from his chair and pounced on Wei Xiaobao. The hosts and the guests were sitting opposite to each other, separated by a distance of approximately two *zhang* [±20 feet/6 m], but his movement was vigorous and nimble, quickly he arrived in front of Wei Xiaobao, both hands formed a couple of claws, one clawed Wei Xiaobao's face, the other clawed his chest. Before the claws even arrived, Wei Xiaobao had already felt a strong gust of wind enveloping his body. He wanted to dodge, but there was not the least bit of leeway, and had no choice but to resign himself to extinction.

Abbot Hui Cong's right hand sleeve lightly brushed away to block in front of Galdan. As Galdan's powerful force collided with his sleeve, Galdan felt the *chi* and blood inside his chest bubbling up, as if he was hitting a thick steel wall, lined with a layer of cotton on its surface. Without being able to control his own body, he staggered back three steps. He made a strenuous effort to halt, but unexpectedly he could not control his feet and was pushed back three more steps. In the meantime, the incoming force vanished, but in that instant, his own strength also vanished without a trace. He was greatly shocked; his knees went soft and he fell sitting down. "Bad," he thought, "This time I am greatly humiliated." He had just had that thought when he suddenly realized that his buttocks came in contact with a hard wooden board; unexpectedly he was returning to his own chair.

The force behind the flick of Abbot Hui Cong's sleeve was soft and dispersed, there was no trace of aggressiveness at all. The force that collided with the opponent was exceptionally accurate, it was just enough to push Galdan back to his own chair. If the force was slightly stronger, Galdan would undoubtedly crash and break the chair, and he would tumble backward. If the force was slightly lighter, Galdan would not reach the chair so that when he fell down, he would sat on the ground.

When some of the visitors who happened to have profound martial art witnessed how Hui Cong's light flick with his sleeve was brimming with an outstanding attainment in martial art training, they could not help but bursting out in loud cheer.

Not being humiliated on the spot, Galdan was somewhat consoled. Quietly he took a deep breath and felt that his internal energy was not damaged; the old monk did not injure him internally at all, hence was delighted. But then he recalled that just now he was so hot-headed, yet it seemed that he was not humiliated; he realized that in fact he had made a complete fool of himself, immediately his face turned red. Hearing some people behind him cheering, he presumed that they were not cheering him being beaten by the old monk; his anger flared again.

Wei Xiaobao was still shaken. Hui Cong turned around and said to him, "*Shidi*, your mental power is indeed superior, external force coming fiercely, you neither see nor take any notice. The 'Collection of Great Treasures Sutra' says: 'Like a man in a forest of thistles and thorns, being motionless means the thorn will not harm him. Rashness does not arise in his heart, anxiety will fade away happily. Rashness moves in his heart, the thorns will immediately prick him.' The ancient sutra says, 'When the heart is bitter, there will be no mood for happiness.' *Shidi* is young, yet unexpectedly your meditation cultivation has reached the extremely high state of 'constantly not in the mood, constantly motionless'; your root is indeed very deep, you have great wisdom and great intelligence."

How would he know that not only Wei Xiaobao did not have the power to fight back, even if he had the desire to dodge, he simply could not? Galdan's pounce was too fast; it was called the 'thunderbolt surpass the covering of the ear'; it was not that one did not want to cover his ears, but rather he did not have time to cover his ears. With a clear heart Abbot Hui Cong was always looking for orthodox skill, normally he diligently and single-mindedly trying to reach the 'non-self' realm; therefore, when he saw Wei Xiaobao surprisingly did not care about either his own life and death or safety and danger, he could not help but admiring him completely. As for him warding off Galdan's attack using the 'worn-out cassock skill' by sending his force via the flick of his sleeve, he felt it was not worth-mentioning instead.

Cheng Guan was even more full of admiration, he said, "Vajra Sutra says, 'no

self, no people, no living things, no long life'; unexpectedly Hui Ming *Shishu* has reached that state. Some other day he must have reached the *Aruduoluo*[27], three-despise three-enlightenment."

Galdan had been in an uncontrollable rage, listening to these two old monks showering praises to this little monk, he roared, "Halisiba'er, nimahong, jianubiding'er!" Several warriors under his command behind him quickly waved their hands, several yellow rays flashed, nine golden projectiles separately flew toward Hui Cong, Cheng Guan and Wei Xiaobao's chests.

The two sides were very close to each other, plus Wei Xiaobao and the others did not understand since Galdan gave the order to throw the projectiles in Mongolian, hence the projectiles were totally unexpected.

The nine projectiles came swiftly and were already at their chests. Hui Cong and Cheng Guan simultaneously cried out, "Aiyo!" Hui Cong still used the 'worn-out cassock skill' by flicking his sleeve to wrap around three projectiles. Cheng Guan joined his palms together with the move 'saluting three precious treasures[28]' to catch the three golden projectiles in his palms. 'Pop!' the three projectiles flying toward Wei Xiaobao all hit his chest.

These nine projectiles arrived almost at the same time, Hui Cong and Cheng Guan were going to help him, but it was simply too late. They were all shocked, but they only heard 'plink, plink, plonk', the three projectiles fell to the ground. Wei Xiaobao was wearing his treasured vest, the golden projectiles could not harm him.

Instantly the main hall was abuzz with sensation. Everybody saw how this little monk was very young, yet unexpectedly had mastered Shaolin Pai's highest internal energy cultivation, the 'Jin Gang Hu Ti Shen Gong[29]'; it was indeed inconceivable. They all thought, "No wonder this little monk belongs to Shaolin Pai's 'Hui' generation, of the same standing with Shaolin Temple's head monk, Hui Cong Fangzhang, who has made his name for several decades."

Actually, Hui Cong and Cheng Guan's techniques in catching the projectiles were

also extremely brilliant; were it not for their internal energy cultivation had reached the stage of perfection, what they did would be very difficult to accomplish. It's just that Wei Xiaobao's 'skill' was too marvelous that the crowd did not pay attention to these two old monks.

While the crowd was still in awe, Chang Qi Lama laughed and said, "Little eminent monk's 'Jin Gang Hu Ti Shen Gong' has been trained to such level, it is indeed not easy. However, it seems to me that this divine skill still has some shortcoming, it is still unable to shake the secret projectiles off completely, to such an extent that the monk robe is poked by three small holes."

According to old legend, when this 'Jin Gang Hu Ti Shen Gong' has been trained to reach the pinnacle, there will be a layer of invisible force field around the body, so that before the enemy's weapon or secret projectile even reaches the body, it will be shaken off immediately. However, it was no more than a legend circulating among the Wulin world, nobody knew whether there was a real person who had really trained to that level. When Chang Qi Lama said those words, people knew he was simply trying to 'look for a bone in a chicken egg', he was bent on playing down the opponent's marvelous ability.

Being hit by the three golden projectiles, Wei Xiaobao's chest was really painful, one of the projectile hit really close to his wound that the pain penetrated deep into his bones and marrow; he could not even breathe, how could he speak? All he could do was forcing a laugh. Yet the crowd thought that his cultivation had reached such an extremely high level that he did not feel it was worth the trouble to respond to Chang Qi's pointless provocation. Quite a few people mused, "You said his divine skill has not been trained to perfection, I want to see if I shoot you three projectiles, whether three big holes will appear on your chest or not, not just three small holes appear on your clothes." It's just that they came together, so it was inconvenient to ridicule their companion.

Seeing Wei Xiaobao's fierceness, Galdan's rage immediately vanished. He thought, "Shaolin Pai's martial art is indeed formidable."

Chang Qi continued, “Finally Shaolin Temple’s martial art has indeed increased our knowledge; definitely it was not an unearned reputation, not as good as dog’s fart. However, we heard that your precious Temple has given shelter to women, which is rather deficient in following the clear regulation of monastic discipline.”

Hui Cong’s countenance sank; he said, “Great Lama is wrong! Our humble Temple does not accept female benefactors to enter the Temple to worship Buddha; where did you get the idea that we give shelter to women?”

Chang Qi laughed and said, “But the Jianghu is abuzz, a lot of people are saying that.”

Abbot Hui Cong smiled and said, “Why would we want to pay attention to rumors in Jianghu? Ultimately we must be like Hui Ming Shidi, external force coming fiercely, our hearts will be unmoved. That is the self-awareness of the wonderful truth, the evidence of true enlightenment skill.”

Chang Qi Lama said, “I heard that in this young eminent monk’s meditation room hidden an outstandingly beautiful woman, furthermore, it was he who kidnapped her with force. Could it be that Hui Ming Chanshi’s heart is also completely unmoved by this beautiful woman?”

By this time Wei Xiaobao had been able to catch his breat; he was shocked and thought, “How did they know?”

Then he immediately understood, “That’s right, that Miss wearing blue clothes ran away. Obviously she went back to their teacher to report. Looks like these men are the reinforcement she sent; today they are here to rescue my wife. He said I have a beautiful woman in my room, in that case, after my wife ran away, she has not met with them.” At once he smiled and said, “Whether there is a beautiful woman in my room or not will be evident as soon as you look. Gentlemen, there is no harm in you going to look.”

In a loud voice Galdan said, “Alright, we will search the Temple. As the water receded, the rocks appear.” Finished speaking, he rose up and waved his left hand. “Search the Temple!” he ordered. The men under his command started to move toward the back of the Hall.

Hui Cong said, “Your Highness wants to search our Temple, I wonder under whose order?”

Galdan said, “My order is enough, why must I receive other people’s order?”

Hui Cong said, “You are mistaken. Your Highness is a Mongolian Prince, if we were in Mongolia, you may give order at will. Shaolin Temple is not within Mongolian borders, hence we are not under Your Highness’ jurisdiction.”

Galdan pointed to Commander Ma and said, “He is an imperially appointed official, with him issuing the order to search the Temple should be enough.” He saw how superior Shaolin monks’ martial arts were, plus they had many more people. If a fight broke, the several dozen men on his side would not be their match. Thereupon he added, “You are defying the Imperial Court’s order; that can be considered rebellion.”

“Defying the Imperial Court’s order, Shaolin Temple will not dare,” Hui Cong said, “However, this gentlemen is a military official under the Ping Xi Wang of Yunnan’s banner. Even if Ping Xi Wang’s power grew, it won’t reach Henan province.”

Hui Cong actually was an astute man, it was only when discussing Zen’s truth that he gave no thought to worldly affair. Apart from that, he was quite knowledgeable in other affairs; he was completely different from Cheng Guan who did not understand anything about the outside world.

Chang Qi Lama laughed and said, “This young eminent monk has agreed, why should Fangzhang Dashi use that pretext to stop the search? Could it be that the beautiful woman is not in Hui Ming Chanshi’s room, but actually in … in … hee

hee … in Fangzhang Dashi's meditation room?"

"Amitabha," Hui Cong said, "Sin, sin. Why would Dashi utter such words?"

Suddenly someone behind Galdan spoke in a delicate voice, "Your Highness, my Shimei was clearly captured by this little monk, quickly tell them to hand her over, otherwise we definitely won't let this matter drop, we will burn Shaolin Temple to the ground." It was a female voice, but the one speaking was a man, with sallow complexion and face full of beard.

As soon as Wei Xiaobao heard it, he knew this person was that girl in blue in disguise. She put some yellow wax on her face and stuck some fake beard. He was unable to restrain his ecstasy, "These past several days I was worried because I did not know my wife's school or sect, I did not know her name or surname. She turned her back on her husband and ran away, where would I go to find her? Now I know that they belong to this Mongolian Prince's group. Very good, very good. She won't escape from me."

Hui Cong also recognized her; he said, "Turns out this is the Miss who came to our Temple and injured people the other day. There was another Miss who was mending her wound in our Temple; she is not coming with Miss this time?"

The girl angrily said, "Afterwards my Shimei was captured and brought to your Temple. That old monk was his accomplice, it was him who defeated my Shimei." While saying that she pointed to Cheng Guan.

Wei Xiaobao was greatly alarmed; he mused, "Aiyo! Not good! The old monk Cheng Guan cannot lie, this affair will be exposed. What should I do?" Momentarily he was at a loss of what to do.

The girl pointed to Cheng Guan and loudly said, "Old monk, tell me, tell me, am I telling the truth?"

Cheng Guan put his palms together and said, "Please tell us where did the Nu

Shizhu, your respected Shimei go? My Shishu was hit by her violent poison, only she has the antidote. Nu Shizhu is infinitely merciful, please beseech your respected Shimei to quickly grant the antidote. Although Hui Ming Shishu's wisdom is profound, he is free and does not care about life and death, considering life and death as the Nirvana, the Nirvana as life and death, but … ay …"

He was babbling a string of incoherent sentences. Although other people could not comprehend what he was saying, they all knew that the girl was not in the monastery; moreover, Wei Xiaobao was poisoned by her and was looking for her for the antidote, otherwise his life would be difficult to protect. Everyone could see Cheng Guan's simple appearance, his words were extremely sincere, they all believed he was not lying. They thought, "Even if the woman was indeed hidden in the Temple and the Abbot allow us to search, Shaolin Temple has hundreds of rooms and thousands of residence, how could we search everything in such a short period of time? If we really want to search, most likely we will only invite a rebuke in vain."

With a sharp voice the girl shouted, "Clearly you have captured and brought my Shimei into the Temple, perhaps you have already killed her. You are evil monks who offend the Heaven and disregard reasons, you must have had destroy her body to leave no trace, naturally we won't find her." Toward the end, her anger mixed with anxiety that her voice turned into sobbing.

Galdan nodded, "That makes sense. This … this little monk is not a good person."

The girl pointed to Wei Xiaobao and cursed, "You are an evil man, that day in the brothel you fooled around with a lot of bad women, when you saw my Shimei's beauty, you were having an evil thought. It must be because my Shimei was unwilling to … unwilling to come with you that you killed her. If you can go to the brothel, what other bad things you can't do?"

When Hui Cong heard this, he showed a faint smile, thinking that it was absurd. Cheng Guan did not know what kind of place was a 'brothel', he thought it was a

place similar to Shaolin Temple's Jielu Courtyard, Damo Courtyard, or Bodhi Courtyard[30]. He thought, "Xiao Shishu is fearlessly forging ahead, diligently doing good works and practicing Buddhist teachings. This is the 'forging ahead vigorously boluomi[31]' of the six paramita. Leading a pious life in a brothel is also very good!"

In his heart, Wei Xiaobao was very anxious; he was afraid she would go into the details and narrate how he deliberately created some trouble.

Suddenly from behind Commander Ma a man stepped forward, cupped his fist and said, "Miss, Xiaoren knows that this Chanshi is practicing strict and refined monastic discipline; he would never set foot in a brothel. I am afraid it was a baseless rumor."

As soon as Wei Xiaobao saw him, he was delighted. Turned out this man was Yang Yizhi whom he had met in Beijing. He was escorting Wu Yingxiong to Beijing. Presumably Wu Yingxiong had returned to Yunnan and now he came to Henan with Commander Ma. All along he was hanging his head low and stood behind other people, thereupon Wei Xiaobao did not immediately recognize him.

The girl angrily said, "How do you know? Do you know him?"

"Xiaoren knows this young Chanshi," Yang Yizhi respectfully replied, "Our Heir Apparent also knows him. This young Chanshi has shown enormous kindness toward our Wangye's [master king] family. Before he left home, he was a Gong-gong in the Imperial Palace. Consequently, there must be no such thing as going to a brothel, or forcing your respected Shimei, and so on. Please Miss understand."

When the crowd heard him, "Oh!" they exclaimed. They all thought, "If he was a court eunuch, naturally he could not visit a prostitute, even more impossible for him to kidnap a woman and hide her in the Temple."

Looking at everybody's expression, the girl realized that they did not believe her;

she grew even more angry. With a shrill voice she said, “How do you know he was a eunuch? If he was a eunuch, why did he say he wanted to take … to take my Shimei as … as his wife? Not only this little monk talked nonsense, that old monk is also oily-mouthed and a smooth talker, they love to take advantage of other people.” While saying that, she pointed her finger at Cheng Guan.

The crowd could see that Cheng Guan was over eighty years old, with a rather dumb expression. Only a while ago they heard him stammering, when he was trying to express his thought with difficulty. It would be almost impossible to find someone more ‘oily-mouthed and smooth talking’ than he was. Hence they did not believe the girl even more. They all thought that because they listened to her one-sided wild fantasy today they had come to Shaolin Temple and made a fool of themselves; they were quite regretful.

Yang Yizhi said, “Miss, you did not know that before he left home, this young Chanshi was very famous; he was the Gui Gong-gong who has put that big treacherous court official Oboi to death. Our Prince was framed by some crafty scoundrels, he was in danger of suffering an unredressed injustice if not for this young Chanshi vigorously explaining the facts in front of His Majesty. This great kindness and great favor so far has not been repaid yet.”

Everybody had heard the name Xiao Guizi who killed Oboi, they all knew that he was Kangxi’s most favorite little eunuch. They could not help but exclaimed, ‘Oh!’ while their faces showed admiration.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Yang Xiong, long time no see. Is your Heir Apparent well? It was a minor matter of the past, why do you keep mentioning it?”

Yang Yizhi came along to Mount Shaoshi with Commander Ma. Other than Ping Xi Wang’s people, Galdan and Lama Chang Qi’s people did not know his name and surname. Hearing Wei Xiaobao greeted him as ‘Brother Yang’, they had no doubt that they knew each other. They heard Yang Yizhi continued, “Chanshi’s benevolence comes from your heart, being of service to others, you say it was a

small matter, but our Wangye is endlessly grateful. Although His Majesty is an enlightened sage, knowing right and wrong, black and white, and would be able to clarify in the end, yet were it not for Chanshi stated the actual truth at the earliest possible time, the twists and turns of this matter might be difficult to say."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "You are too kind, you are too kind. Your Wangye is also too polite." But in his heart he said, "I really wish to pull down your traitor-to-China Wangye. It was the Emperor who was the enlightened sage and ascertained the truth on his own; I was only doing a favor without costing me anything, which I had to do anyway. Finally the good karma that day bears the fruit today as this man came out to help me out of trouble."

Galdan look at him from top to bottom, sizing him up, and then said, "Turns out you are the little eunuch who killed Oboi. Even in Mongolia I have also heard your reputation. Oboi was known as the number one warrior of Manchuria, in that case you did not learn your martial art from Shaolin Temple."

Wei Xiaobao said with a laugh, "My martial art is extremely lacking, not worth mentioning at all. The number of people who taught me martial art is actually quite a few. This Yang Dage once taught me the move 'sweeping a thousand army' and the move 'flowing water from a high mountain'." Finished speaking, he stood up and demonstrated the two moves he mentioned. He did not use the slightest bit of force, so others could not see the level of his martial art skill; however, undoubtedly the style was from 'Mu Family Fist'.

Yang Yizhi said, "It was because Chanshi demonstrated these two moves in front of His Majesty that he understood clearly that our Wangye was framed by a personal enemy."

The girl's expression was not as angry as she previously looked. "Yang Dage," she said, "This little … this man is a eunuch? Has he really shown kindness to Ping Xi Wang mansion?"

“Absolutely,” Yang Yizhi replied, “There are many people in Beijing who knew about this.”

The girl hesitated a little bit, and then she asked Wei Xiaobao, “In that case, you were … you were joking with us, sisters, like that, what is your intention?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “I was not joking, of course I have an intention.” In his heart he said, “My intention is to marry your Meizi, but there are too many people here, of course I cannot say it out loud.”

“What is your intention?” the girl asked.

Wei Xiaobao only showed a faint smile without saying anything. Everybody else thought, “Since he has an intention, naturally it is inconvenient to expose it in the presence of everyone.”

Chang Qi put his palms together and said, “Fangzhang Dashi, Hui Ming Chanshi, we have come here on impulse, please forgive our offense, we are taking our leave now.”

Hui Cong put his palms together to return the propriety and said, “Good guests coming from afar, please enjoy vegetarian dish with us first. However, this Nu Shizhu …” he thought that you disguised yourself as a man and sneaked into the Temple, we did not look into it, and that’s that. But by inviting you for a vegetarian meal, we are inevitably breaking the Temple’s regulation too much.

Chang Qi laughed and said, “Thank you very much, thank you very much! To avoid giving Fangzhang Shixiong too much trouble, all of us won’t eat this vegetarian feast.” Immediately they all bade their farewell and walked out. The Abbot and Wei Xiaobao, Cheng Guan and the other walked them out to the mountain gate.

Suddenly they heard the sound of horses’ hooves, about a dozen or so riders galloped-toward them. When they were near, it could be seen that the riders

were wearing Imperial Bodyguards' uniform, altogether there were sixteen men. Before they even reached the Temple, all sixteen of them stopped and dismounted the horses, and walked toward the Temple in formation. The two foremost men were none other than Zhang Kangnian and Zhao Qixian.

As soon as Zhang Kangnian saw Wei Xiaobao, he called out loudly, "Du … Du … Daren, are you, Senior well?" He was going to call 'Dutong [commander] Daren', but seeing Wei Xiaobao was wearing monk robe, he had no choice but to call vaguely. Immediately the sixteen of them kneeled down to pay their respect to Wei Xiaobao.

Wei Xiaobao was delighted. "Gentlemen, please rise," he said, "No need to be overly courteous. I have been looking forward to seeing you daily."

Galdan and the others noticed that these sixteen men were imperial bodyguards whose pin rank[32] was not low, yet they were that respectful toward Wei Xiaobao. They all thought, "This little monk indeed has some background."

According to Qing military system, commanders were of regular second pin rank, first-class imperial bodyguards were of regular third pin rank, and the second-class imperial bodyguards were of regular fourth pin rank. Although compared to army commanders the official rank of Zhang Kangnian and the others was quite low, they were the Emperor's personal bodyguards, they did not have any regard toward 'outside' military officials. They only nodded slightly toward Commander Ma as a way of greeting, and then were back showing their eager attention to Wei Xiaobao.

Seeing how these Imperial Bodyguards doing everything they could to please Wei Xiaobao while turning a blind eye to everybody else, Galdan was angry. "Humph," he snorted, and said, "Let's go, I can't bear to see this kind of attitude." His party cupped their hands toward Abbot Hui Cong and then walked down the mountain.

Wei Xiaobao invited the Imperial Bodyguards to enter the Temple. Zhang

Kangnian walked beside him and said in a low voice, “His Majesty has a secret edict.” Wei Xiaobao nodded.

When they entered the Hall of Great Strength, Zhang Kangnian took out the Imperial Edict and read it out loud; it was only several sentences of official announcement: the Emperor bestowed five thousand taels to Shaolin Temple, to build more monks’ residence, to repair the gilded image of Buddha, and also to confer Wei Xiaobao the title of ‘Fu Guo Feng Sheng Chanshi’ [Dhyana Master Revered Sage Supporter of the Country]. Hui Cong and Wei Xiaobao kowtowed to express their gratitude.

Zhang Kangnian said, “His Majesty’s order: for ‘Fu Guo Feng Sheng Chanshi’ to get ready to set on a journey, your destination will be Mount Wutai.”

Wei Xiaobao had already anticipated this matter; he bowed to comply and said, “Your servant obeys the Emperor’s decree.”

After they all had been served tea, Wei Xiaobao invited Zhang Kangnian and Zhao Qixian, two people toward his own meditation room to chat. From his pocket Zhang Kangnian produced a secret imperial edict, which he presented with both hands while saying, “His Majesty has another decree.”

Wei Xiaobao kneeled down and kowtowed, and received the edict with both hands. Seeing that it was sealed with stamped lacquer wax, he thought, “I wonder what instruction His Majesty might have. The letters written on the Imperial Edict may recognize me, but I don’t recognize them. Since it is secret, I am not supposed to let Zhang and Zhao to know, I’d better ask Fangzhang Shixiong for guidance. I am sure he won’t reveal the secret.”

Thereupon, carrying the secret edict, he went to Hui Cong’s meditation room and said, “Fangzhang Shixiong, His Majesty has a secret order for me, I am asking you to give me directions.” Breaking the secret edict’s seal, he saw a large sheet of fine writing paper. Upon spreading it out, he saw four drawings.

The first drawing depicted five mountain peaks. Wei Xiaobao recognized it as Mount Wutai. On the southern peak there was a drawing of a temple, with the caption ‘Qing Liang Si’ three characters. Wei Xiaobao has stayed in Qingliang Temple for many days, and was somewhat familiar with these three characters. If the characters were written someplace else, he would never recognize them; but written on a temple, it could be considered meeting an acquaintance.

The second drawing depicted a little monk entering a temple, written above the temple also the three characters ‘Qing Liang Si’. The little monk was followed by a group of monks, above these monks’ heads there were five characters ‘Shao Lin Si He Shang’ [monks of Shaolin Temple]. Wei Xiaobao recognized the first three characters. Although he did not know the last two characters ‘he shang’, he could guess what they mean.

The setting on the third drawing was the Hall of Great Strength, where the little monk sat in the middle, happy and grinning, his face looked a lot like Wei Xiaobao, but he was wearing red kasaya, the apparel of an abbot. Next to him were many monks standing up. Wei Xiaobao realized that the little monk in the picture looked a lot like him, the more he looked, the more he was fascinated by it, unconsciously he broke into laughter.

The fourth drawing showed the little monk was kneeling on the ground, in front of a middle-aged monk. The middle-aged monk looked thin, it must be the Emperor Shunzhi who assumed the Buddhist name Xing Chi after leaving home.

Other than these four drawings, there were no other characters written on the secret edict. Turned out Kangxi was very adept at painting; knowing that Wei Xiaobao’s literacy was limited, he put the imperial decree in paintings. These four drawings could not be clearer, he wanted Wei Xiaobao to go to the Qing Liang Temple to be the head administrator and serve the Old Emperor.

At first Wei Xiaobao found it amusing, but his delight quickly disappeared; he groaned inwardly, “It’s alright for me to be a little monk, but now he wants me to be an old monk; that’s very bad!”

Hui Cong smiled and said, “Congratulations Shidi, His Majesty is sending you to be the head monk of Qingliang Temple. Qingliang Temple is a distinguished ancient temple, it was established during the reign of Emperor Xiao Wen of Northern Wei Dynasty, a lot earlier than Shaolin Temple. Being the head of a large monastery, Shidi will have great opportunity to proclaim Buddhist teachings, helping all living beings to cross over and help our religion to flourish.”

Wei Xiaobao shook his head and said with a forced smile, “I can’t be a head administrator of a temple, I will definitely make ridiculous mistake and will collapse in confusion.”

Hui Cong said, “It is clear from the drawing in the imperial edict that Shidi is to lead a group of our Temple’s monks to accompany you going there. Shidi may choose whoever you want. Everybody is your younger generation whom you know well, they will support you with all their hearts, absolutely no one will let you be careless. Shidi may set your heart at ease.”

Wei Xiaobao was staring blankly for half a day before it suddenly dawned on him: the young emperor had meticulously planned everything. When he was sent to Shaolin Temple to be a monk, the Emperor had already arranged today’s matter. The Emperor let him live in Shaolin Temple for about half a year, so that he could get to know the monks well, in order for him to select desirable monks to accompany him to Qingliang Temple. Since the Old Emperor had left home, certainly he did not want to have any Imperial Bodyguards to guard him; perhaps he would even leave and henceforth could not be found anymore.

Shaolin monks had outstanding martial art, plus it was Wei Xiaobao who personally led them, they would be a lot more dependable than the officers of Imperial Bodyguards. Besides, this matter was a huge secret, if the Emperor sent the officers and men of the Imperial Bodyguards to guard an old monk on Mount Wutai, it would be bound to create sensation and then the whole world would know. There must be someone in the Imperial Bodyguards who would recognize the Old Emperor. To have a Shaolin monk entering Qingliang Temple to be the

head monk was actually very ordinary. The former head monk of Qingliang Temple, Cheng Guang, was one of Shaolin Temple's Eighteen Luohan anyway.

Wei Xiaobao also thought, "If Xiao Huangdi [young emperor] sent me to be a monk at the Qingliang Temple, it would be too conspicuous, but by coming to Shaolin Temple first and then take a turn, nobody will suspect anything." Thinking to this point, he could not help but was full of admiration to Kangxi's planning ability.

Returning to his meditation room, he took out six thousand taels and instructed Zhang Kangnian to distribute the money to the Imperial Bodyguards. Zhang and Zhao, two people did not expect after becoming a monk Wei Xiaobao was still this generous; they were pleasantly surprised. "Since ancient times," they praised, "There has never been any monk who gives money to the Imperial Bodyguards, except you, Wei Daren, one person. It is indeed unprecedented and will never be duplicated. There has never been a person from the ancient time, there will never be a person from the future generation."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "There has never been a monk from the ancient time, there will never be a monk from the future generation."

Zhang Kangnian lowered his voice and said, "Wei Daren, we do not dare to ask what business His Majesty is sending you to attend to, but whatever it is, please do not hesitate to give your orders. Handling matters for you is the same as handling matters for His Majesty; all of us will strive to do our best all the same."

Zhao Qixian said, "If Wei Daren needs to do something but for the time being is not convenient to do, perhaps we can strive a little and make insignificant contribution. For instance … for instance, if Wei Daren needs to fetch a martial art manual from Shaolin Temple, we can set the monastery on fire, so that in the confusion, Wei Daren may seize the opportunity to make your move."

Zhang Kangnian cackled, and then said in a low voice, "That's right, this is called 'fishing in troubled water'."

Wei Xiaobao was startled, but understood immediately, “Right, they must be thinking that there must be a reason the Emperor sent me to Shaolin Temple to be a monk. Plus this time they came here to deliver a secret order without knowing what’s written inside. They knew the Emperor is fond of martial art; he sent me to be a monk in Shaolin Temple, naturally it is to steal a treasured martial art manual from the Temple.” He chuckled, and then also said in a low voice, “Gentlemen, don’t worry! This … I have already succeeded.”

Zhang and Zhao, two people were delighted, they bowed and paid their respect together, saying, “His Majesty’s flood of good fortune fills the heavens, Wei Daren is astute, capable and experienced. Congratulations for setting up this great merit.”

Zhao Qixian said, “Do you want us to smuggle it out for you? If the monks get suspicious, they might search Wei Daren’s clothes.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “That’s not necessary. Go back to His Majesty, report to him that his servant Wei Xiaobao has solemnly received the imperial edict, and will remember the drawings firmly in my heart. I will handle this matter diligently; His Majesty may set his heart at ease.”

“Yes,” the two people replied. Zhao Qixian thought for a moment, he understood, “Turns out this martial art manual is a diagram. Wei Daren looked at it and remembers the drawings firmly in your heart,” he said.

Zhang Kangnian also saw the truth, “That’s even better,” he said, “If the treasured manual was stolen, the monks of Temple would naturally find out, in the end … in the end the outcome would be worse. By memorizing it, the deities will not know, the ghosts will not realize. Fortunately by nature Wei Daren is extremely intelligent; if you are blunt like me, you won’t remember anything.”

Realizing that these two misunderstood the drawings he was talking about as Shaolin Temple’s martial art diagram, Wei Xiaobao was secretly amused. “Zhang

Xiong need not be too modest," he said, "By staying in the Temple and looking at it slowly, one or two days may be inadequate, but after several months I can finally remember everything."

The two of them expressed their agreement together; they both thought that after living in the Temple for more than half a year, you must have memorized not a few of Shaolin Pai's martial art manuals.

They took their leave. Wei Xiaobao remembered something; he asked, "The group of men you met outside the mountain gate just now, do you happen to know their background?"

"We don't," Zhang and Zhao replied.

"Quickly go and investigate for me," Wei Xiaobao said, "That group of people came to Shaolin Temple sneakily, evidently they also want to steal treasured martial art manuals from the Temple. That troop commander in particular, I wonder whom he is working for. He is acting as an imperially appointed official, yet has the audacity to spoil His Majesty's important matter; it is indeed treason and heresy, he wants to rebel intentionally. Go and investigate what kind of person is the man behind this, you will render an enormous service."

"That's easy," the two of them delightedly said, "They have not gone down the mountain too long, we will definitely able to catch up with them. That troop commander has a name and a surname, we will find out as soon as we investigate."

Wei Xiaobao knew perfectly well that that Commander Ma was Wu Sangui's subordinate, yet deliberately entrap him, pretending that he did not know his background, letting the Imperial Bodyguards to investigate and report to the Emperor so that they may take the credit. It would be a lot better compared to if he brought the false charge himself.

Wei Xiaobao added, "With this group of people, there is a young woman

disguised herself as a man. They are looking for another young girl, sixteen, seventeen years old, with beautiful face. These two girls are heavily involved in this big rebellion conspiracy. You try to verify in detail these two girls' names and family background. After finding out, report to me in a sealed envelope."

By saying those things, naturally he was trying to use official authority for private interests. He was sending the Emperor's personal bodyguards to trace his own sweetheart. They were seeking after monetary reward, they would undoubtedly make every effort to handle this matter. When the Imperial Bodyguards wanted to investigate a case, the government officials all over the world would follow their orders by sending their people to investigate. With this kind of 'pass like thunder and move like the wind' investigation, how can there be any information they would not be able to find?

Zhang and Zhao, two people patted their chests, guaranteeing that they would investigate until the truth comes to light. They promised to repay Wei Daren's graciousness, his kindness in recognizing their worth and employing them, his concern for their country, and for the generous reward he bestowed to them.

Chapter 24

The river of love dries up entirely from a thousand calamities, the sea of bitterness cannot be used to measure compassion.

(Translated by Foxs)

Several dozen buckets of cold water, one after another, were splashed onto the three of them. It happened so quickly that not only the three of them did not have time to light the fire to burn themselves, even if they did, the fire would be quickly extinguished by the pouring of the water.

After the Imperial Bodyguards left, Wei Xiaobao went to see the Abbot, telling

him that since he had the Emperor's order, he had to start the journey to Qingliang Temple the next day.

"So be it," Abbot Hui Cong said, "*Shidi* has the innate intelligence, you have an amazing comprehension of Buddhist truth. It's a pity that the days of our meeting are not many and now we have to part, we cannot learn from each other too much, to live the Buddhist law together. I suppose our destiny has brought us to this point of life. I wonder which fellow monks *Shidi* wants to take with you?"

"I want Head of Bo're Hall Cheng Guan *Shizhi*, and the eighteen masters of Luohan Hall," Wei Xiaobao replied. In addition, he also named more than a dozen more monks that he wanted to go with him, altogether there were thirty-six names.

Hui Cong did not have any objection, he summoned these thirty-six Shaolin monks, and told them that Hui Ming *Chanshi* was going to take over the head administrator position of the Qingliang Temple on Mount Wutai, he exhorted them to accompany him, to protect the Buddhist teaching and maintain orders, to obey Hui Ming *Chanshi*'s instruction, and not to go against him.

Early in the morning the next day, accompanied by thirty-six monks, Wei Xiaobao took his leave from the Abbot and the others. When they reach the foot of the mountain, he went alone to see Shuang'er.

Shuang'er had been boarding at a commoner's home, and had not seen him for more than half a year. At the first glance, she was both surprised and happy. Although she had heard from Zhang Kangnian that her master was becoming a monk in Shaolin Temple, and had cried for him countless times, when with her own eyes she saw his bald head and his monk robe, she could not bear not to cry again.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Good Shuang'er, why are you crying? You are upset because I have not come to visit you these many days, aren't you?"

“No … it’s not that,” Shuang’er replied, “You … you … *Xianggong* has left home …”

Wei Xiaobao pulled her right hand and lifted it up; he gently kissed the back of her hand. He laughed and said, “Silly girl, *Xianggong* did not become a monk for real.” Shuang’er was happy and bashful at the same time, even her ears had turned red.

Wei Xiaobao examined her face carefully; he noticed that she looked wan and sallow, she looked a lit thinner, but she had grown a bit taller, bringing out the grown-up gracefulness in her, she looked even more delicate and pretty. Wei Xiaobao smiled and said, “Did you lose weight? You were thinking about me every day, weren’t you?” Shuang’er blushed even deeper. She wanted to shake her head, but she lowered her head slowly instead.

“Alright,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Quickly change into your boy’s clothes and come with me.” Shuang’er was greatly delighted. Without asking any question she immediately changed into men’s clothing and disguised herself as a young attendant.

Their journey does not need to be narrated. One day they arrived at the foot of Mount Wutai. They were just about to climb the mountain when they saw four monks coming down to meet them. The old monk at the front put his palms together and asked, “Are you all *Shifu*s from Shaolin Temple?”

Wei Xiaobao nodded. The old monk said, “And I suppose you are the *Chanshi* whose Buddhist title is Hui at the top and Ming at the bottom?” Wei Xiaobao nodded again.

The four monks dropped down on their knees immediately and said, “Knowing that *Chanshi* is coming to administer Qingliang, the monks cannot contain our happiness and have been waiting at the foot of the mountain for many days.”

Since Cheng Guang had returned to Shaolin Temple, Qingliang Temple was administered by the old monk Fa Sheng. Kangxi had separately dispatch people to proclaim a secret imperial decree to Fa Sheng, transferring him to Ciyun Temple [lit. compassionate cloud] in Chang'an [modern day Xi'an] to be the head administrator there. He was to leave as soon as the Shaolin monks arrived. Ciyun Temple of Chang'an was a lot bigger than Qingliang Temple. Fa Sheng was very happy, he sent these four monks to wait at the foot of Mount Wutai.

When Wei Xiaobao and his party arrived at Qingliang Temple, Fa Sheng immediately performed the ceremony of handing over the administrator duty. All the monks came to pay their respect, only Yulin, Xing Chi and Xing Dian, three monks did not personally come. Yulin only wrote a short letter to pay their respect to the new head monk.

Fa Sheng went down the mountain the next day, heading west toward Chang'an. Now Wei Xiaobao was officially the head of Qingliang Temple. Fortunately there were Cheng Guan and the other monks who at any time gave him directions on all kinds of ceremonial protocol and compass and set square. As a little monk assuming the role of the Abbot, he must emulate the manner of an abbot, and must not make any mistake.

When Wei Xiaobao and Shuang'er drove off the enemies coming to attack Qingliang Temple the other day, they saved the lives of the monks in the Temple, all the monks knew it in their hearts. Now that he suddenly left home to become a monk, and came to Qingliang Temple to be the head monk, they were all baffled, yet since he had shown kindness to their Temple, everybody showed their gratitude by serving him. Wei Xiaobao ordered Shuang'er to live in a small hut outside the Temple, so that she would be just a shout away.

Since the most important mission for him in coming to be the head administrator of Qingliang Temple was to thoroughly protect the Old Emperor, he inquired from the monk on duty and found out that Yulin, Xing Chi and Xing Dian, three monks still lived in a small vihara behind the mountain. He did not go to disturb them, only after discussing it over with Cheng Xin *Dashi*, he sent

people to separately build four thatched hut about half a li on the east, west, south and north of the vihara, and assigned eight Shaolin monks to take turn on guard duty in the thatched huts.

All things were settled, the only thing he had to do was painstakingly waiting for Zhang Kangnian and Zhao Qixian's letter, he was dying to know that girl in green's name and surname, and her background. Yet after waiting for several months unexpectedly there was no news at all. In his loneliness, he sparred with Cheng Guan, treated the old monk as 'that female benefactor'. Occasionally he would slip out to the little cottage to talk and joke with Shuang'er, to stroke her small hands. Sometimes he thought, "I have taken Hong Jiaozhu's 'leopard embryo tendon altering pill'. If within a year I did not deliver a copy of sutra to the Divine Dragon Island, the poison might flare-up then it won't be fun. Come to think about it, only several months left. If I turn into an old and stupid man, I would look like Cheng Guan *Shizhi*. And then when that green-clothed wife of mine sees me, she would call me the 'oily-mouthed and smooth talker old monk'. Worse yet, she would cut a piece of green cloth from her skirt and have me wear it on my head as a hat, that won't be good at all!"[33]

One day he was overcome with boredom, so he went alone wandering about aimlessly on Mount Wutai; the only thing in his mind was that girl in green. He arrived at the bank of a mountain creek, and saw a weeping willow continuously swaying in the wind. "If this willow tree is that green-clothed wife of mine, naturally *laozi* would not show any politeness, I would step forward and hug her. She would definitely be unwilling, and use Kunlun Pai's move 'thousand rocks vying to be the most beautiful', sending me a succession of palm strikes. That's nothing, *laozi* will use the move 'going begging from door to door', to ward off her strike with poise. Cheng Guan *Shizhi* says that this move should be executed in such a way that the heavy will seem light, with the poise of famous, orthodox martial art school. *Laozi* lifts heavy stuff as heavy and light stuffs as light, why do I care about damn famous or secretive, orthodox or heretical sect? Once I launch this move, I will follow it up with 'holding the pearl of wisdom'; left hand grabs her left hand, right hand grabs her right hand, and firmly hold on to her, even if my head is chopped, I won't let her go …"

He was happily fantasizing, and thus his hands moved in the style he was thinking about, ‘puff, puff’, he grabbed two willow branches, one on each hand, and using all his strength he firmly hold on to the branches.

Suddenly he heard a deep and gruff voice of a man, saying, “Look at this little monk putting an act!”

Wei Xiaobao was startled; when he looked up, he saw three lamas wearing red clothes. They were walking toward him while gesticulating, chatting and laughing. Wei Xiaobao blushed, in that instant he thought that his heart’s content had been seen by those lamas. The Grand Abbot of majestic Qingliang Temple at a desolate, uninhabited part of the mountain was thinking of grabbing a beautiful girl, in all honesty it was too embarrassing. He turned around and left at once.

When he rounded a bend, he saw several more lamas walking straight toward him. There were so many temples of Tibetan Buddhism on Mount Wutai, Wei Xiaobao gave them no thought. Only because of what happened just now he was unwilling to meet with them. Turning his head around, he was pretending to enjoy the scenery, letting those lamas to pass behind him.

He heard one of the lamas said, “The order from above says that no matter what we must climb up Mount Wutai before *wushi* hour [between 11am-1pm]; it sounds so urgent. But there is nothing fun to do on Mount Wutai, could it be only a joke?”

Another lama said, “Our superior has made this arrangement, it must be for a reason. You just hate to part with that Datong town’s girl, don’t you?”

Wei Xiaobao took no notice; on the contrary, he had a favorable impression on them, he thought, “Those lamas drink wine and stroll around the pleasure house, at least they are not hypocrites. If *laozi* really want to leave home, I want to be a lama, not a monk.”

Back at Qingliang Temple, he saw Cheng Tong was waiting at the mountain gate. As soon as he saw Wei Xiaobao, immediately he met him and said in a low voice, "*Shishu*, I think something is going on."

Looking at his serious expression, Wei Xiaobao hastily asked, "What happened?"

Cheng Tong beckoned, asking him to follow him along several stone steps toward a small peak at the side of the Temple. Wei Xiaobao took a glance, and saw on the south side there were countless yellow dots all around. He focused his eyes and saw that the spots were actually lamas wearing yellow robes. If not a thousand, there were at least nine hundreds of them, forming groups of three to five, scattered around the bushes and mountain rocks.

Wei Xiaobao jumped in fright. "That many lamas!" he said, "What are they doing?"

Cheng Tong pointed to the west and said, "There are some more over there."

Wei Xiaobao quickly looked to the west. Sure enough, he saw thousands of lamas. They were either standing or sitting in groups. The sun was shining from east to west, white light flickered, those lamas were all bringing weapons. Wei Xiaobao was even more shocked. "They are carrying weapons," he said, "Could it be … could it be …" he looked at Cheng Tong.

Cheng Tong slowly nodded and said, "*Shizhi*'s guess is: it looks that way."

Wei Xiaobao turned his gaze to the north and then to the east; each sides had several hundreds lamas. When he looked more carefully, he noticed that in each group of lamas, there was one wearing deeper yellow kasaya; those must be the leaders. "His granny," Wei Xiaobao swore, "There must be at least four, five thousand men."

Cheng Tong said, "One hundred twenty five leaders, altogether there are three

thousand two hundred and eighty lamas."

"Good for you," Wei Xiaobao praised, "How did you count that clearly?"

"What should we do?" Cheng Tong asked.

Wei Xiaobao did not answer. Meeting difficulty face-to-face, lying and deceiving, slipping away from danger, Wei Xiaobao was an expert in all those things. But now the enemy had assembled more than three thousand men, surrounding them from every direction; evidently, it was the result of meticulous planning. As for how to handle them, he did not have the slightest idea. Hearing Cheng Tong's question, he asked back, "What should we do?"

Cheng Tong said, "It seems to me that the enemy's intention is to snatch away Xing Chi *Dashi*. Most likely they are waiting for the darkness, and then they will launch a four-way attack."

"Why are they waiting for the darkness?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Cheng Tong replied, "On Mount Wutai, the yellow monasteries of the lamas are always in good relationship with our green Central Plains' monasteries. Our green temples have many monasteries and many monks: the ten big monasteries on the platform's peaks, the big monasteries outside the platform[34]. Although the lamas of yellow monasteries are overbearing, they won't dare to push around. If they attack in bright day light, it will undoubtedly give rise to all green monasteries' support."

"In that case we'd better send people out immediately to notify the administrators of all the green monasteries," Wei Xiaobao said, "Ask them to send great number of monks, we will fight these lamas to the death. Tell them also: Monks of Mount Wutai to arm ourselves, the monks of green monasteries are in war with the lamas."

Cheng Tong shook his head and said, "About 80-90% of the monks of green

monasteries of Mount Wutai do not know martial art. Those who do, their skill are only so-so, I haven't heard about anybody with superior skill."

"So they are not willing to lend a hand?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

"I don't believe anybody will be unwilling," Cheng Tong said, "But I am afraid that they will only deliver their lives in vain."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Are you telling me that we just surrender like that?" His fighting spirit was not always strong, whenever he thought that he would not be able to defeat the opponent, he would immediately think about surrendering.

"Whether we are surrendering or not, it's not important," Cheng Tong said, "But Xing Chi *Dashi* will undoubtedly be captured by them."

Wei Xiaobao carefully considered, "I wonder if Shaolin monks know the real status of Xing Chi *Dashi*." Thereupon he asked, "They carried out a large-scale operation to capture Xing Chi *Dashi* previously, in the end, what was their intention? Several months ago they had come here once, it was fortunate enough that several good friends scared them off that they retreated. This time their number is actually much greater."

Cheng Tong hesitatingly said, "Xing Chi *Dashi* must be a person with a long history behind him. If he is not involved in the prosperity and decline of the Wulin world of Central Plains, then he must have a significant correlation with the struggle between the green and yellow monasteries. Cheng Xin *Shixiong* has never mentioned anything about the affairs of the Central Plains. Since *Shishu* does not know about it, much less we."

Wei Xiaobao remembered that he had with him the imperial note written with the Emperor's personal handwriting; he could dispatch civil and military officials. He said, "The matter at hand is urgent, although our Shaolin monks' martial art skill is superior, the few are no match for the many. How can our thirty seven monks fight more than three thousand lamas? I must go down the mountain to

seek for help."

"I am afraid distant water cannot quench nearby fire," Cheng Tong said.

"Then we escort Xing Chi *Dashi* to break through their encirclement," Wei Xiaobao said.

Cheng Tong nodded. "Looks like that's the only way," he said, "It's impossible for our thirty seven Shaolin monks plus *Shishu*'s attendant to ward off more than three thousand lamas; but to rush through a gap in their midst is actually not too difficult."

"My only fear is that Xing Chi *Dashi* and his *Shifu* Yulin *Dashi* are not willing," Wei Xiaobao said, "They said life and death are just the same, escape or not does not make any difference."

Cheng Tong frowned and said, "For that, we must ask *Shishu* to persuade."

Wei Xiaobao shook his head and said, "Persuading Xing Chi *Dashi*, I can still think of a way, but persuading that old monk Yulin, *laozi* admit defeat. It is called 'the cat pulling a tortoise', there's nowhere I can put my mouth at."

Looking down, he saw the lamas were scattered everywhere, seemingly in disorder and at random, but they were actually evenly distributed; the pathways up the mountain, down the mountain, were all packed with people. As soon as it was dark, these three thousand lamas would swarm up, the monks of Qingliang Temple could only cry out, "Buddha have mercy."

"Damn it," he mused, "Why did I become a monk? If I was a lama, won't I be joyfully satisfied right now, without the slightest bit of load on my mind? Not to mention eating meat and strolling the pleasure house in normal time."

As soon as he thought about 'strolling the pleasure house', it was as if a divine light flashing in his mind, he had an idea. Immediately he calmed down and said,

“I am going back to my meditation room to have some damn sleep.” Cheng Tong was stunned; he stared at him with eyes open wide. Wei Xiaobao ignored him, without saying anything he went down the peak and returned to the Temple into his room.

Not too long afterwards, Cheng Xin, Cheng Guan, Cheng Guang and Cheng Tong, four monks came to see him. Wei Xiaobao let the four of them into his room. He noticed that all four of them had alarmed and frightened expression. He stretched and yawned, before languidly asked, “Gentlemen, what is it?”

Cheng Xin said, “The lamas have gathered down the mountain, obviously they have ill-intention toward our Temple, I wish to hear *Fangzhang Shishu*’s [abbot martial uncle] plan on how to deal with them.”

“I have thought about it for half a day,” Wei Xiaobao said, “And have not come up with any good plan; therefore, I decided to go to sleep. We are all doomed anyway, we’d better resign to adversity. The blade comes, the neck receives. Other people’s blades chop down, we use our necks to meet them head on, we need to see whether their blades are sharp enough to chop into our necks.”

Cheng Xin and the others, three monks, knew that he was blathering nonsense, but Cheng Guan thought he was serious; he said, “Those lamas’ blades look really sharp, I don’t think our necks can withstand. *Shishu*, those who have left homes stand aloof from worldly affairs, resign ourselves to adversity; that is actually the truth. But ‘the blade comes, the neck receives’ is a bit too much. In the past, even Damo *Zushi* [ancestor master] did not teach us to suffer the blade without fighting back. Otherwise, why would we learn martial art?”

Wei Xiaobao nodded, “So in Cheng Guan *Shizhi*’s opinion, ‘the blade comes, the neck receives’ is incorrect?” he asked.

“It is,” Cheng Guan replied, “But if ‘the fist comes, the chest receives; the kick comes, the abdomen receives’, that’s still alright.” His internal energy was profound, when the opponent punched or kicked, he did not need to fight back,

all he needed to do was to direct his internal strength, and the opponent's fist or foot would bounce back.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Those lamas are carrying *jiedao* and *chanzhang*[35]; I wonder if there is a way for us to ward them off without using any weapon?"

Cheng Guan was taken aback. "I am afraid those lamas won't listen to reason," he said, "Asking them to lay down the butcher knife is not a 'dawn to dusk' type of merit."

"That's difficult," Wei Xiaobao said, "I wonder what excellent plan four *Shizhi* might have."

Cheng Xin said, "The only plan for now is that for everybody to protect Yulin, Xing Chi, Xing Dian, three men, and rush out by exploiting a loophole. Their only target is to capture Xing Chi *Dashi*, the rest of the monks in the Temple do not know martial art, surely those lamas will not harm them."

"Altright," Wei Xiaobao said, "Let's go talk to those three old monks." Leading the four monks, he went to the small vihara at the back of the mountain.

A young apprentice monk announced their arrival. As Yulin and the others heard that the head monk had arrived, they went out the door to receive them. When they saw him, Yulin, Xing Chi and Xing Dian were greatly surprised. The three monks only heard that the new head monk Hui Ming *Chanshi* was Shaolin Temple's Abbot Hui Cong's martial brother, a very young eminent monk, but they did not expect it to be him. Yulin and Xing Chi immediately understood that it must be the Emperor who arranged all these, with the purpose of protecting his father.

Buddhist's customs was very strict, the head monk was the master of the monastery, Yulin and the others immediately paid their respect. Wei Xiaobao respectfully returned the propriety, and then they all went into the meditation room together. Yulin invited him to sit on the middle *putuan*[36], while the

remaining monks stood on either side.

Wei Xiaobao was very happy in his heart, "*Laozi* sits in the middle, the Old Emperor stands at the side to wait upon me; even the young emperor does not have this kind of awe-inspiring authority." Trying hard to suppress his smiling face, he said, "Yulin *Dashi*, Xing Chi *Dashi*, please sit down." Yulin and Xing Chi sat down.

Yulin said, "*Fangzhang Dashi* is the head monk of Qingliang, for us *Xiao Seng* [little monk] to pay our respect to our superior, *Fangzhang* has to toil your honorable self to personally pay a visit, indeed our hearts are disturbed."

"You are too kind," Wei Xiaobao said, "*Xiao Na* [little cassock] knew that the three of you did not like others to disturb you, for this reason I have not come to see you thus far. If not for today we have an important matter, *Xiao Na* would still not come here." He often heard old monks referring to themselves as *Lao Na* [old cassock]; thinking that since he was young, he should refer to himself as *Xiao Na*. The other monks heard him having a weird idea, fabricating a way to refer to himself, they were secretly amused.

"Yes," Yulin said; but he did not ask what the important matter was.

"Cheng Guang *Shizhi*," Wei Xiaobao said, "Would you please tell the three gentlemen?"
Yulin knew that the knew head monk had a Buddhist title 'Hui Ming', and he knew that in Shaolin Temple, the 'Hui' generation was one generation higher than the 'Cheng' generation, yet he was still stunned to see that this young, cunning and glib monk addressed the former head monk of their temple, the stately and benevolent, virtuous old monk as 'martial nephew'.

Cheng Guang respectfully complied, and then explained the situation of their temple, how it had been heavily besieged by several thousand of lamas. Yulin closed his eyes to think for half a day; finally he opened his eyes and asked, "May I ask *Fangzhang Dashi*, what is your plan to deal with it?"

Wei Xiaobao said, “These lamas are either sitting down or standing up, they are merely enjoying the scenery, they have no other intention. The scenery here is clear and elegant, they come here on scenic tour [orig. roaming the mountain playing (on) the water], that is all.”

Xing Dian could not bear not to speak up, “If they are enjoying the beauty of nature, they can’t be surrounding our Temple, and did not leave for several hours. They must be here to capture Xing Chi *Shixiong*.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “*Xiao Na* thought that all the green and yellow temples under the heavens are disciples and family of our Buddha, if they wanted to invite Xing Chi *Dashi*, it must be because they are in admiration the three Dashi’s profound Dharma [the teachings of Buddha], and thus are inviting you to go to lama monastery to preach the sutra. Perhaps those lamas admire our Central Earth’s Dharma, perhaps they don’t want to be lamas anymore but to be monks; won’t that be an excellent opportunity?”

Xing Dian repeatedly shook his head, “Maybe not, maybe not,” he said.

“*Fangzhang Shishu*,” Cheng Guan said, “If that’s the case, why are they bringing weapons?”

Wei Xiaobao put his palms together and said, “They brought *chanzhang* and *jiedao*, looking so fierce and imposing, perhaps they want to kill the head of our Temple’s monks. Buddha said, ‘If I don’t go to hell, who would go to hell?’ We will have the attitude ‘the blade comes, the neck receives’, this is called ‘if I don’t let others chop my head, who would be chopped by others?’. No life no perishes, no disgrace no purity. When there’s life, there will be death, when there’s head, there will be beheading. Buddha has three virtues: great determination, great wisdom, great sorrow. The lamas came with blades, we do not hear we do not see, we do not care we do not know. This is the great determination. They raise their blade to chop, we regard their blades as emptiness, the emptiness as the blades. This is the great wisdom. The blades chop down, chopping all our bald

heads off, everybody perishes. This is the great sorrow." He had lived in monasteries for a long time, and had heard quite a lot of Buddhist sutra being preached, thereupon he talked nonsense unguardedly.

"*Fangzhang Shishu*," Cheng Guan said, "I am afraid the 'sorrow' of the Great Sorrow refers to merciful sorrow, not grieving sorrow."

Wei Xiaobao smiled and said, "*Shizhi* is right. Remember that our Buddha cut his own flesh to feed a hawk, giving his own life to raise a tiger; it was indeed great compassion and great sorrow. Although those lamas are fierce and uncontrollable, compared to vicious hawk and fierce tiger they are somewhat better. If we give our lives for the sake of those wicked lamas, we are also showing 'great compassion and great sorrow' intention."

Cheng Guan put his palms together, "*Shishu* is amazingly intelligent, I am full of admiration."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Yulin *Dashi* has once said, 'Those who have left homes stand aloof from worldly affairs, resign themselves to adversity, if Qing Liang Temple is really facing a misfortune, we'll leave it to fate to escape from calamity'. We will pass away together under the wicked lamas' blades, we will go together to the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss. It will be a lively journey, it must be very interesting."

The monks looked at each other in dismay. They all thought that although Wei Xiaobao's words sound reasonable, all in all he adhered to old ideas too much. Perhaps it was due to misinterpretation of the Buddhist doctrine. Cheng Xin and Cheng Tong felt that these words were completely incompatible with the way he usually talked. They suspected that he was simply making ironic remark; most probably he wanted to incite Yulin and Xing Chi to speak up, asking for help on their own accord. Cheng Guan was the only one who believed without any doubt; he sighed in admiration delightedly.

The monks were silent for half a day. Suddenly Xing Dian loudly said, "*Shifu* once

said that the Tibetan Lamas want to capture *Shixiong* because they want to oppress and harm common people, to take possession of our beautiful world. Our own life or death is not important, but millions of common people will be bullied and oppressed by them, won't it be an enormous guilt for us? *Shifu* once said that we must never let them commit outrages like that."

Wei Xiaobao nodded and said, "*Shixiong*'s words are very rational; compared to what *Xiao Na* has just said, you are one level higher. It's just that the lamas' power right now is too great, I am afraid we are heavily outnumbered."

Xing Dian said, "Protecting *Shifu*, *Shixiong*, we break through their lines. I believe those lamas won't be able to stop us."

Wei Xiaobao said, "I am afraid in the battle we will inevitably kill and injure those lamas. Amitabha, our Buddha is virtuous, saving one person's life is better than building a seven-floor pagoda; killing one life is like demolishing an eight-floor pagoda. Among various Buddhist monastic disciplines, the first one is abstaining from taking life. What should we do?"

Xing Dian said, "It is they who want to take life, we are compelled by circumstances and have to strive to defend ourselves. Naturally it would be best if we can avoid killing people, but we can't simply helplessly let our hands tied and waiting for death."

Suddenly there were footsteps outside the door, Shaolin monk Cheng Jue quickly walked in and said, "Reporting to *Fangzhang Shishu*: the crowd of lamas down the mountain has just gone uphill, they advanced for about a hundred *zhang* [approx. 1000ft/300m] and then stopped."

"Why did they advance halfway and then stopped?" Wei Xiaobao wondered, "Perhaps they suddenly received our Buddha's guidance that they repent and understood the truth about turning around and reach the shore."

"No, no," Xing Dian loudly said, "They are simply waiting for darkness; and then

in a spurt of energy they will break in." In the years past, he was a general of the Plain Yellow Banner, who had fought many battles when they were entering the Pass. He understood military strategy very well. Later on he became the commander [orig. *zong guan* – chief manager] of Shunzhi's Imperial Bodyguards.

Wei Xiaobao said, "When they enter our Temple's Hall of Great Strength and see our Buddha Tathagata's stately treasured image, they will suddenly hang … hang something and reining their horses, or something like that."

Xing Dian angrily said, "You, *Xiao Fangzhang*, you are really si … si …, ay, that's impossible." He was going to say 'really silly', but in the end thought that he should not be rude to the Abbot; the word was already at the tip of his tongue, but he was able to 'rein the horse at the edge of the precipice'.

All along Yulin had been silent, listening to the debate; seeing the bulging blue veins on Xing Dian's forehead, while his voice was getting louder, he smiled and said, "Xing Dian, you are the silly one; *Fangzhang Dashi* has already held the pearl of wisdom, he has the 'success bamboo' in his heart. Why are you worried too much?"

Xing Dian was startled. "Ah," he said, "Turns out *Fangzhang Dashi* already has brilliant scheme."

Showing a worried expression Wei Xiaobao said, "Brilliant scheme, that I do not have. The thirty-sixth stratagem: escape; since everybody agrees that we should break through, then let us break through! It's just that unless we do not have any choice, we must not harm people's lives too much." Xing Dian, Cheng Xin and the others voiced their agreement.

Wei Xiaobao said, "In that case, let us get ready; we'll wait for the dark, before they make their move, we'll dash down the mountain, toward the east to Fuping county seat. Even if these lamas were more vicious than this, they won't dare to attack the county seat openly." Again Xing Dian and the others voiced their approval.

Suddenly Xing Chi said, “I am the unlucky one. Last time several lives were lost for my sake. Even if this time we can escape disaster, they will never give up and put this matter down. There will be many more lives lost, there will be no end to this.”

“*Shixiong*,” Xing Dian said, “These evil lamas want to abduct you to cruelly devastate common people under the heavens.”

Xing Chi sighed and said, “I am the embryo of misfortune of the world; when they arrive here, I will set myself on fire, let them henceforth lose heart, and that’s the end.”

Xing Dian anxiously said, “Your … your … no, *Shixiong*, you must never do that. Let me burn myself on your behalf.” [He was going to say ‘your majesty’ – *huang shang*.]

Xing Chi smiled and said, “You want to burn yourself on my behalf? What’s the use? They only want me, to force me into submission. That’s all.”

The monks were silent for half a day. Yulin finally said, “*Shanzai, shanzai*[37]! Xing Chi has become aware of the Great Way. This is indeed the real meaning of what Buddha has said, ‘If I don’t enter the hell, who would enter the hell?’”

Wei Xiaobao cursed in his heart, “Stinky monk, so what he said is the real meaning, and what I said was the fake meaing?”

Yulin continued, “When those lamas arrive, *Lao Na* and Xing Chi will set ourselves on fire together. *Fangzhang Dashi* and numerous *Shixiong* must not stop us.”

Wei Xiaobao and the other monks looked at each other in dismay; they were all dumbstruck.

Xing Chi slowly said, “When we besieged towns and took over lands in the past, all living creatures were turned to coal; *Xiao Seng* should have been dead a hundred times to redeem the atrocity. Today I can give my life for the common people, it is merely to compensate the past sin. If for *Xiao Seng*’s sake the battle continues, many more lives are harmed, it will only add to my guilt. I have made up my mind, I am asking gentlemen to protect and support me to fulfill this destiny. If by doing this I can reform the lamas, transforming the wicked to virtue, this indeed is a good deed.” While saying that, he stood up, and bowed and put his palms together toward Wei Xiaobao and the other five Shaolin monks.

Looking at his expression, Cheng Xin and the others knew that his mind was firmly set, it would be difficult to persuade him; therefore, they had no choice but to take their leave and return to Wenshu[38] Hall. Wei Xiaobao summoned all thirty-six Shaolin monks to discuss this matter. All the monks agreed that they must not allow the two masters to set themselves on fire; if things had come to a head, they would have to use force to stop them.

“We are all in agreement that we must protect the three masters completely, are we not?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

“Yes!” all the monks replied.

Wei Xiaobao said, “That’s not difficult. Listen to me: all thirty-six of you rush out the Temple, attack the east side together, pretend that you want to break the siege and escape down the mountain, but since it is difficult, you have to retreat back to the Temple. However, while doing that, capture forty or fifty lamas and bring them up here.”

“I wonder if *Fangzhang* wants to use these lamas as hostage, so that they will not dare to act rashly,” Cheng Xin said, “If that’s the case, we might as well capture the lamas with high position; the higher the better.”

“I am afraid it won’t be easy to capture big lamas,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Inevitably

we will kill and injure too many people. Capturing several dozen lamas is enough." The monks were unclear of his intention, but since the Abbot had issued an order, they had to follow it and went out of the Temple.

Not too long afterwards, Wei Xiaobao heard loud commotion coming from the waist of the mountain. He stood on the drum tower to watch, and saw the thirty-six Shaolin monks were charging into the crowd of lamas. The blades flickered, the battle had begun.

These thirty-six monks were Shaolin Temple's martial art masters, naturally any regular lama was not their match. After rushing out for several dozen *zhang*, the number of lamas blocking their way was growing exponentially. Cheng Xin and the others moved their fists to punch, their feet to kick, their palms to slap, and their fingers to jab; in an instant they had overthrown several dozen men. In a loud voice Cheng Xin shouted, "The enemy is too powerful, we can't go through them, let's go back to the Temple for the time being and talk it over." His internal energy was deep, his voice travelled far and echoed on the valley.

Cheng Tong also called out, "We can't go through, what should we do?"

Cheng Xin shouted, "Everybody grab a lama and go back, we must teach them not to act rashly and randomly harm other people." The monks grabbed the lamas, some caught two by carrying them in their arms, some caught one by carrying them over their shoulders; together they retreated to the Temple. Cheng Xin and Cheng Guang brought up the rear, they sealed several more people's acupoints. They heard from the back of the lamas someone shouted an order in Tibetan. The crowd of lamas was shouting, yelling, cursing, but nobody ran after them.

Grinning from ear to ear, Wei Xiaobao ran to the gate to meet them. Upon counting the prisoners, he found that they had captured forty-seven lamas. Returning to Wenshu Hall, Wei Xiaobao said, "Strip these fellows naked, each one to have his eighteen acupoints sealed, and lock them up in the firewood shed at the backyard."

The monks all felt that their Abbot's order was a profound mystery. They stripped the forty-seven lamas naked, and sealed their acupoints, and locked them up inside the firewood room.

Wei Xiaobao put his palms together and said, "Everything in the world is empty, everything is nothingness, no self, no people, no monk, no lama. Emptiness is real, realism is empty. Monk is lama, lama is monk. All *Shizhi*, I want you to take off your cassock, and put on these lama robes!"

All the monks were stunned; they looked at each other in dismay. Wei Xiaobao called out loudly, "Shuang'er, come here. Help me dress as a young lama." Shuang'er had been waiting outside the hall, she immediately came in. Rummaging through the stack, she found the smallest lama's robe, and helped him to change. Wei Xiaobao was short; the robe he wore was still too big, so he pulled his dagger and cut a section each off the lower part of the robe and the sleeves. He tied his robe on the waist and forced a lama hat onto his head, and thus turned into a young lama. He said to Shuang'er, "You also have to dress as a young lama."

Cheng Guang asked, "*Shishu* wants us to dress as lamas, I wonder what your intention is."

Cheng Guan said, "Could it be that we are going to surrender to the lamas and join their yellow monasteries?"

"Absolutely not!" Wei Xiaobao said, "Everybody dresses as a lama, we go to the little vihara at the back of the mountain, and seize Yulin, Xing Chi and Xing Dian, three monks, and seal their acupoints. And then we force them to change into lama attire …"

Listening to here, Cheng Tong clapped his hands and laughed. He said, "Ingenious plan, ingenious plan! Several dozens of us, fake lamas, rushing down the mountain in the middle of the night, those lamas will have difficult time in

distinguishing the real from the fake, hence it will be difficult for them to stop us."

The rest of the monks also exclaimed in praise, immediately smile spread across their faces. Naturally nobody guessed that Wei Xiaobao's ingenious plan was merely a repeat of the trick he played the other day by disguising himself as a prostitute to escape the great disaster.

Cheng Xin said, "This way we can rush out without too much killing and injuring; this is the best plan."

Cheng Guang hesitantly said, "It's just that we are going to offend Xing Chi *Dashi* and the others, three masters; it is rather disrespectful."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Amitabha, saving three lives surpasses building a three by seven, twenty-one level Buddhist stupa. Tiny offense is better than burning themselves in a raging inferno."

"*Shishu* is right," Cheng Guang said.

Immediately the monks took off their monk robes and changed into lama attire. In all their lives, these monks had always adhered strictly to Buddhist monastic discipline, they always acted stern and dignified, yet this time they had to follow Wei Xiaobao fooling around. Seeing that after putting on lama clothing their appearances looked weird, they all could not bear feeling amused.

Wei Xiaobao said, "You all must wrap your monk robe into a bundle and carry it with you. We'll change back after we escape. After we dash out down the mountain, if we are separated, well meet again at the Jixiang Temple in Fuping County." He told Shuang'er to pack their money and other belongings, made it into a bundle and carried it on her back.

When the sky turned black, Wei Xiaobao said, "Let us smear some dust on our faces, and each one has to carry a bucket of water. Let's move!"

Hearing the religious edict, the monks received it happily, and execute the order to the letter: immediately they smeared dust onto their faces, took a bucket of water and his weapon, and rushed toward the back of the mountain.

Arriving outside the small vihara, the monks babbled loudly and charged into the vihara. Yulin, Xing Chi and Xing Dian, three men, had determined to burn themselves. They piled up firewood in the middle of the courtyard, and drenched themselves with sesame oil. They only waited for the lamas' arrival, to explain the purpose of their self-burning, and then they would ignite the fire. Who would have thought that the 'lamas' arrived so suddenly, without the least bit of forewarning? As soon as they heard the strange 'wulu wulu huacha huacha' shouts, which sounded like Tibetan, but not quite like Tibetan, dozens of lamas had already crashed into the vihara.

In a loud and clear voice Yulin said, "Gentlemen, please wait a bit, *Lao Na* has something to say …" Suddenly his head was drenched by a bucket of cold water, followed by several dozen buckets of cold water, one after another, were splashed onto the three of them.

It happened so quickly that not only the three of them did not have time to light the fire to burn themselves, even if they did, the fire would be quickly extinguished by the pouring of the water.

Shuang'er leaped to seal Xing Dian's acupoint first. Xing Chi did not know martial art; Yulin's martial art skill was not weak, but he was unwilling to fight back. In that confusion, their acupoints were quickly sealed. The monks quickly moved their hands and feet, they stripped the three monks, and put the lamas' robe on. Wei Xiaobao was thinking of pretending to speak Tibetan by uttering some gibberish words, but he was afraid Yulin might recognize his voice; thereupon he restrained himself. He pursed his lips toward Shuang'er to signal her, she fetched a candlestick and lighted the firewood piled in the middle of the courtyard. Wei Xiaobao saw Xing Dian's golden pestle lying on the floor at the corner of the room, he thought he would take it away, but to his surprise the golden pestle

was very heavy, unexpectedly he could not even lift it up. Cheng Tong reached down and picked it up. Wei Xiaobao waved his hand, the monks rushed down the mountain eastwards, with Xing Chi, three monks, protected in the middle.

They were rushing only for several dozen *zhang* when the black smoke and the blaze from the small vihara shot up to the sky. The big pile of firewood had also been drenched with sesame oil that it was so easy to catch fire.

Halfway up the mountain, the lamas had also seen the fire, they shouted and yelling in alarm, immediately there was confusion everywhere. The leader of the lamas sent his men to fight the fire. Under the flame light they saw Wei Xiaobao and the monks, but they thought they were their own people. In the confusion, who had the thought of stopping and interrogating these people?

The monks reached the bottom of the mountain. After leaving the lamas a great distance behind them, they turned their head around and looked up toward the mountain. They saw the blaze illuminated the sky, the small vihara had been burned to the top of its roof. Cheng Tong said, “Once the small vihara is burned down, they will never find Xing Chi *Dashi*. They must have thought that he was burned to death inside the vihara, and thus they will lose heart and will not come to create trouble anymore. This is a very good deed indeed.”

Cheng Guang nodded and said, “What *Shidi* has said is very true.”

Wei Xiaobao asked Cheng Guan to unseal Xing Chi and the other two monks’ acupoints. He said, “We have offended you too much, please do not blame us.”

Xing Chi and the others had their acupoints sealed, they were unable to move a single step, yet their eyes and ears were open. Seeing what was going on around them, they had already understood it was the Shaolin monks who came to their rescue. Xing Dian cheered loudly, saying, “Brilliant scheme, brilliant scheme! All of us escaped easily. *Fangzhang Dashi*, you have just saved our lives, we are grateful you did not come too late, who would want to blame you?”

Xing Chi was determined to disappear by committing suicide by fire. Xing Dian

was loyal and devoted, he had to accompany his master in death, but in his heart he was not really willing to die like this. Now that they escaped the great catastrophe, he was extremely delighted.

Xing Chi smiled and said, “We did not harm a single person in this matter, that is indeed remarkable.”

Suddenly they heard footsteps on the mountain road right in front of them, a large crowd of people were hurrying up the mountain. Cheng Tong said, “*Shishu*, a large group of lamas is coming to attack.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “We’ll continue walking forward, we’ll mumble some gibberish, and when we see them, show some smiling expression and point up the mountain. In short, do not fight with them.” The monks voiced their compliance, even Xing Chi and Yulin also nodded in agreement. In his heart Wei Xiaobao was very happy, “The Old Emperor is following my order, even the Old Emperor’s *Shifu* is also following my order.”

With Xing Chi in the middle, the crowd of monks rushed along the main road. They saw from the other side of a dip on the road a group of people was rushing their way. There were lanterns and torches in their hands; they were not lamas, but Buddhist pilgrims on their way to offer incense. There were yellow pouches hanging from their necks, on the pouches were written these characters: ‘devoutly submitting incense’ [or ‘going on pilgrimage devotionally’] and so on.

When the group of Shaolin monks came near, both sides were equally surprised. Cheng Tong and the others had already stopped talking, but Cheng Guan and some others whose brains were quick started mumbling some gibberish in ‘fake Tibetan’.

From among the pilgrims a man stepped out and shouted, “What are you doing here?”

This man was tall and powerfully built, his voice was loud and clear. As soon as

Wei Xiaobao saw him, he was greatly delighted, for he recognized the man as the Chief of the Imperial Bodyguards, Dolong. He rushed forward immediately and called out, “Duo *Dage* [in Chinese, Dolong is spelled 'Duo Long'], look here, do you know who *Xiao Di* [little brother] is?”

Dolong was startled; he took a lantern from someone by his side and lifted it up to illuminate Wei Xiaobao’s face.

Wei Xiaobao winked and him and burst into laughter. Dolong was surprised and delighted at the same time. “It’s … It’s Wei *Xiongdi*,” he said, “You … how come you are here? And dress as a young lama too?”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “And how come you are here?”

While they were talking, from behind Dolong a group of pilgrims rushed over, the leader of these pilgrims was actually Zhao Qixian. As soon as Wei Xiaobao saw them, he recognized the pilgrims to be imperial bodyguards in disguise; in fact, he knew most of these people. The bodyguards surrounded Wei Xiaobao, they talked and laughed in an intimate way.

In a low voice Wei Xiaobao asked Dolong, “Did His Majesty send you here?”

Dolong also replied in low voice, “His Majesty and Empress Dowager are going to Mount Wutai to burn incense; right now they are at the Lingjing Temple.”

Wei Xiaobao was pleasantly surprised. “His Majesty is coming to Mount Wutai?” he asked, “That’s wonderful! That’s wonderful!” While musing in his heart, “And what does that Old wh0re come here for? The Old Emperor can’t wait to kill her.”

Not long afterwards, a group of valiant cavalry troops arrived; all of them also dressed as pilgrims. Wei Xiaobao asked, “In total, how many pilgrims are coming from Beijing to Mount Wutai this time?”

In a low voice Dolong replied, “Apart from us, the Imperial Bodyguards, the Valiant Cavalry, the Vanguards, and the Personal Guards are accompanying the Emperor.”

“So there are about thirty, forty thousand troops?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

“More than thirty-four thousand troops,” Dolong replied.

“And who is in command of this Emperor-protector force?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

“It’s Prince Kang,” Dolong replied.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Another old friend.”

He beckoned Zhao Qixian. When he came near, Wei Xiaobao said, “Zhao *Dage*, please report to Prince Kang, I need to mobilize the troops for an important mission. This is urgent, there is not enough time to ask for instructions from him first.” Zhao Qixian obeyed the order and left.

Finally the Commander [orig. ‘du tong’, see previous note on Qing military] of Valiant Cavalry of Plain Yellow Banner, Chalju, also arrived. Wei Xiaobao said, “Duo *Laoge* [old brother], *Dutong Daren*, there are several thousand Tibetan lamas who found out about His Majesty’s pilgrimage. Just now they are surrounding Qingliang Temple with the intention to start a rebellion. I ask you, two gentlemen, to arrest these rebellious thieves. You are going to render an enormous service.”

The two of them were delighted; they thanked Wei Xiaobao, saying, “Wei *Daren* is handing us a great merit, how can we deserve it?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Everybody is devotedly working for His Majesty, why make any distinction between you and me? This is called ‘blessing we enjoy together, difficulty we bear together’.”

They issued the order immediately to guard all roads around the mountain, and send a group of elite cavalry to charge up the mountain. Wei Xiaobao called loudly, “The Holy Sage is benevolent and wise, he is also virtuous; you are to arrest the rebellious thieves only, you must not harm too many lives. Our Emperor is ‘raw bird fish soup’ [niao sheng yu tang], and not a bad Emperor.” The Imperial Bodyguards and the Emperor’s personal bodyguards acknowledged the order together.

Although Kangxi had explained briefly the four-word phrase ‘yao shun yu tang’ [see note 9 of Chapter 14], it was still very hard for Wei Xiaobao to understand; he always remembered the phrase as ‘niao sheng yu tang’. This bowl of soup is a very good soup, not a bad soup; every emperor who heard it would be extremely delighted.

Actually, he said those words for the benefit of the Old Emperor; he thought that today the old and the young Emperors, father and son, would meet, he needed to lick the Old Emperor’s behind, which he thought would be more effective that licking the young Emperor’s behind. He turned around and walked toward Xing Chi. “Three masters,” he said, “Our clothes are nondescript [orig. ‘neither fish nor fowl’], we need to go to Jing’e Temple ahead to change. We must find a peaceful and quiet place to rest, so that idle people will not disturb the three masters’ quiet meditation.” Xing Chi and the others nodded their approval.

They walked several more *li* and arrived at Jing’e Temple. As soon as he entered the gate of the monastery, Wei Xiaobao took out a thousand-*tael* banknote, which he handed it over to the head monk, saying, “We need to temporarily borrow your precious monastery to rest, you must not ask too much. If you ask one question, I will deduct ten *taels*; you do not ask any question, all these thousand *taels* are our offering. If you ask a hundred and one questions, you owe me ten *taels*. Fair and square, cheating neither young nor old.”

Seeing the huge sum of money, the head monk was surprised and happy at the same time; instantly he said ‘yes, yes’ repeatedly. “*Shixiong*,” he said, “You …” The words were at the tip of his tongue, suddenly he was startled and busily

changed his statement, “You must drink a cup of tea.” And he hurriedly went in to serve the tea.

Originally, he was going to ask, ‘*Shixiong*, you want to drink a cup of tea or not?’ but his mind was quick and he changed his statement, and thus saved himself ten *taels*.

Wei Xiaobao went out the monastery and secretly passed an order to have more than a hundred Imperial Bodyguards to guard Jing’e Temple all the way around, he also dispatched two Imperial Bodyguards to report to the Emperor: “Your servant Wei Xiaobao is under great responsibility, does not dare to leave without permission, waiting your gracious presence at Jing’e Temple.”

One of the Imperial Bodyguards said, “Reporting to Wei *Fu Zongguan* [deputy chief]: as subjects, we should go and kowtow in front of His Majesty, we cannot wait for the Emperor to see us.”

Wei Xiaobao spread out his hands, and said with a laugh, “Can’t be help. This time good or bad I have to break the rules and have a bad manner.”

The two Imperial Bodyguards complied. They turned around and left, while sticking out their tongues and thought, “What a nerve, he does not even want his life anymore.” Right away they rushed to report to the Emperor.

After changing their clothes, the monks sat down to rest. They heard the battle cry on the mountain shaking the earth, the Imperial Bodyguards and the Emperor’s personal guards were rounding up the lamas. The commotion continued for quite a while. Finally the noise gradually died down, until more than an hour later suddenly not a sound was to be heard [orig. ‘ten thousand pipes are still’], but they heard a few dozen men’s footsteps from the distance approaching, and stopped in front of the monastery. And then there were the heavy thumping sound of boots as a group of men entered the monastery.

Wei Xiaobao thought, “The young Emperor is here.” Pulling out his dagger, he

held it tight as he stood in front of Xing Chi's meditation room, while his face showed a determined expression to protect his master, the 'ten thousand deaths will not prevent me' look, one that would put Xing Dian's loyalty and brave sacrifice, to shame.

The sound of footsteps continued from the outside to the inside, about a dozen Imperial Bodyguards in civilian clothes came over in quick steps, with lanterns in their hands. And then they stopped and stood on either side of the pathway. One Imperial Bodyguard hissed, "Quickly take your knife away."

Wei Xiaobao retreated several steps, with his back against the door and the dagger in front of his chest, he struck a pose 'one man guards the pass, ten thousand men cannot enter', and shouted, "The masters are resting inside the meditation room, no one is allowed to come to create disturbance."

A young man wearing blue garment stepped out, it was none other than Kangxi. It was only then did Wei Xiaobao put the dagger back to its sheath; he rushed forward to kowtow, and said in a low voice, "Your Majesty, rejoice. The old … old *fashi*[39] is inside."

With a trembling voice Kangxi said, "You call … call [or 'announce'] for me." Turning around, he said, "All of you, get out!"

After the Imperial Bodyguards had left, Wei Xiaobao knocked twice lightly on the meditation room's door, he said, "Hui Ming desires to have an audience."

After a long time, there was still no response from inside. Kangxi could not bear not to rush ahead one step and knocked twice on the door. Wei Xiaobao shook his hand to him, signaling him not to speak. The cry '*Fu Huang*' [father emperor] was already at the tip of Kangxi's tongue, but he fought hard to swallow it back.

After a long time, they heard Xing Dian's voice from behind the door, "*Fangzhang Dashi*, my *Shixiong*'s spirit is exhausted, please forgive him not to grant audience. His body has entered the gate of emptiness, there is no more

earthly destiny. Please tell the outsider not to harm his peaceful cultivation."

"Yes, yes," Wei Xiaobao said, "Please open the door, we just want to see him one time."

Xing Dian said, "My *Shixiong*'s meaning is: this is Jing'e Temple, where we all are guests here, we are not required to accept *Fangzhang*'s religious edict, please don't blame us."

Wei Xiaobao turned his head to look at Kangxi, he saw his miserable expression and thought, "You said that I am not the Abbot here and thus cannot tell you to open the door. How about I call this temple's abbot to knock on your door? That will be too easy." He was about to turn around to call the Abbot, when Kangxi could not endure anymore and suddenly broke into a loud cry.

Wei Xiaobao thought, "If I have this temple's abbot telling you to open the door, that means I am forcing the old emperor. Beseeching him gently is better." Thereupon he beat his own chest several times and cried out loudly. He cried and wailed at the same time, "In this world, I am an orphan with no mother and no father, alone and forsaken, no one loves me. What joy is there to stay alive? It would be better for me to crash my head against the wall and be done with it." Faking a cry was the skill he had perfected since he was little, just by bawling a few more times, tears started to pour down like rain; it was exceptionally sorrowful.

Hearing him crying, at first Kangxi was startled, but then he could not bear his grief and cried out even louder.

Suddenly they heard a creaking noise, the meditation room's door opened. Xing Dian stood at the door and said, "*Xiao Shizhu* [young benefactor], please come in."

Kangxi was overwhelmed with mixed feelings of grief and joy; he rushed into the room and embraced Xing Chi's feet, while crying loudly.

Xing Chi gently stroked his head while saying, “Chi’er, Chi’er[40].” Tears also streamed down his face.

With bowed head Yulin and Xing Dian went out of the meditation room and closed the door behind them. Without even looking at Wei Xiaobao, who was standing outside the door, they walked straight outside. Xing Dian felt he was being rude, especially since he was grateful to Wei Xiaobao; so after walking about a dozen steps, he turned his head around and called, “*Fangzhang*.”

Wei Xiaobao was focusing his attention to listen to the conversation between Xing Chi and Kangxi, father and son, inside the room, he completely ignored Xing Dian. He heard Kangxi was crying, “*Fu Huang*, child misses you very much.”

Xing Chi said something, but from behind the door Wei Xiaobao was unable to hear clearly. Afterwards Kangxi stopped crying and started talking, but the two of them spoke in a very low voice that Wei Xiaobao could not hear anything. Although he was curious, he did not have the audacity to shove the door open even a crack; without any choice he had to wait outside with his ear against the door.

A moment later, he vaguely heard Kangxi mentioning ‘Empress Duan Jing’, four characters. Wei Xiaobao thought, “Last time when the Old Emperor told me to pass on his message to the young emperor, he did not want me to give the old wh0re any trouble; therefore, following his order, I did not mention these words at all. Perhaps now the Old Emperor changed his mind?”

Another moment, he heard Xing Chi said, “Today you and I met, it was a mistake; it harms my cultivation considerably. Later, you must not come again.” Kangxi did not make any noise. Xing Chi continued, “You sent someone to wait upon me. Although it came from your filial piety, those who have left their homes experience strong opposition from the evil spirit. Although your intention was proper, having someone to serve me was very thoughtful, but it is inappropriate …”

The two of them talked some more. Finally Xing Chi said, “You may go now. Take a good care of yourself, by cherishing the common people, you are fulfilling your filial duty toward me.”

Kangxi apparently was reluctant to part, he did not want to leave yet. At last Wei Xiaobao heard footsteps toward the door. Wei Xiaobao hastily took several steps back, and turned his eyes away from the door, looking toward the front courtyard. ‘Creak’, the door opened. Xing Chi walked out, holding Kangxi’s hand. Father and son looked at each other for a moment. Kangxi was holding his father’s hand firmly. Xing Chi said, “You are very good, you are much better than I was. I feel very relieved, you must feel the same!” Gently he pulled his hand from Kangxi’s grip, and withdrew back to the room and closed the door. A moment later, ‘click’, he put the latch on.

Kangxi threw himself to the door, while sobbing uncontrollably. Wei Xiaobao stood by his side, accompanying him shedding some tears.

Kangxi cried for a while. He knew his father would not open the door again, but he was unwilling to leave just like that. Pulling Wei Xiaobao’s hand, they sat side by side on the stone steps in front of the main hall. Taking out a handkerchief, he wiped his tears, and looked up at the white cloud in the sky. When he had calmed down, he said, “Xiao Guizi, *Fu Huang* said that you are very good, but he does not want you to wait upon him anymore. *Fu Huang* said although having the subjects to guard was very thoughtful, but it will make him, Senior, not like those who have left home.” While saying the words ‘those who have left home’, he shed tears again.

Hearing the Old Emperor did not want him to serve anymore, Wei Xiaobao was extremely delighted, yet his face did not show the least bit of happiness, he also did not dare to appear extremely ‘loyal, dashing on bravely with no thought of personal safety’, for fear that it would give him future trouble. He said, “There are too many people who want to harm the Old Emperor, Your Majesty have to think of a way to protect him in secret.”

“Definitely,” Kangxi said, “Those evil lamas, humph, his granny, what scheme are they playing?” Originally he could only curse ‘damn it’ [ta ma de – lit. his mother]; several months they did not see each other, he had learned one more cussing word, ‘his granny’ [ta nainai de].

“*Shifu*,” Wei Xiaobao said, “You have one more cuss word.”

There appeared a slight smiling expression on Kangxi’s face; he said, “It’s my *Meizi* [younger sister], she learned it from the Imperial Bodyguards. She and Empress Dowager came with me to the mountain …” his countenance sank, “*Fu Huang* does not wish to see them.” Wei Xiaobao nodded.

Kangxi continued, “Those lamas must want to kidnap *Fu Huang*, in an attempt to force me into submission, to put me under their control. Humph, they think it’s that easy? Xiao Guizi, you are very good, this time you saved *Fu Huang*, your merit is not small.”

“Your Majesty’s strategy is divine,” Wei Xiaobao said, “You have thought about everything early on, you sent your servant here to be a monk, it was exactly for this reason. Your servant does not have any merit, it does not matter who Your Majesty sent here, anybody can do it.”

“That is not necessarily so,” Kangxi said, “*Fu Huang* said you understood his wish not to harm anybody in your escape.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Your servant saw the Old Emperor was about to light the fire to burn himself, saying that no matter what he wanted to give up his life and vanish; it scared me that my soul was about to leave me, I nearly pissed in my pants.”

Kangxi was startled, “What do you mean lighting the fire to burn himself? To give up his life and vanish?”

With a lot more spice Wei Xiaobao told him everything so that Kangxi broke into cold sweat. Wei Xiaobao said, “In a moment of desperation, your servant drenched the Old Emperor with a bucket of cold water; it was greatly disrespectful.”

Kangxi said, “Your intention was to protect your master. Very good, very good.”

He was silent for half a day. Turning his head to take a glance at the meditation room’s door he said, “The Old Emperor told me to cherish common people, never to raise tax. You have already passed on this message to me, this time the Old Emperor personally exhorted me. Naturally I will never dare to forget.”

“What is ‘never raise endowment’ [yong bu jia fu]?” Wei Xiaobao asked[41].

Kangxi smiled and replied, “It’s ‘fu’ from ‘fu shui’ – taxation. Those emperors from the Ming Dynasty indulged in lives of luxury, deployed troops to go to war, never had enough money; therefore, they issued imperial decree for the common people to pay more taxes. Ming Dynasty’s government officials were extremely corrupt, the Emperor wanted to raise one million taels in tax, the government officials, big and small, extorted at least two million taels. The common people were already poor, the imperial court raised taxes this year, and raised duties the next, how could the common people still have enough rice to eat? The millet and wheat crops harvested from the fields were all taken by the government officials, very soon the common people’s entire family would die of starvation; they had no choice but to revolt. This is called ‘the government official drive the people to revolt’.”

Wei Xiaobao nodded. “I understand,” he said, “So the common people of the Ming Dynasty revolted because the Emperor and the government officials were bad.”

“Isn’t that so?” Kangxi said, “During the last years of Ming Dynasty’s Chongzhen, everywhere in the world the common people did not have rice to eat; therefore, rebellion arose in the east and in the west. The Henan rebellion was crushed,

Shanxi arose; Shanxi was suppressed, Sichuan arose. Those poor people migrated to the east and fled to the west just to scrape a living. The Ming Dynasty perished in these poor people's hands, the Han people say it was roving bandits' rebellion. Actually, those rebels and roving bandits were forced to existence by the imperial court."

"So that's what happened," Wei Xiaobao said, "The Old Emperor wants Your Majesty never to raise tax, then there won't be any roving bandits in the world. Your Majesty is 'raw bird fish soup', iron and barrels are like rivers and mountains, long live the Emperor!"

"*Yao shun yu tang*; isn't it easier said than done?" Kangxi said, "But we, Manchu people, came to be China's Emperor, we must strive to be better than those tyrannical and muddle-headed rulers of the Ming Dynasty; only then will we not let down the common people of the world."

Wei Xiaobao thought, "The people of Tian Di Hui and Mu Palace say that Manchurian Qing's Tatars occupy our Han people's rivers and mountains, there is no single person who does not hate them with clenched teeth. Yet the young emperor says that Ming Dynasty's emperors were no good, and that he, a Tatar emperor, is better. That's not strange, there are always people who like to praise themselves."

Kangxi added, "*Fu Huang* also told me that over the years he quietly cultivate Zen meditation, whenever he recalled our Manchu people's conduct and deeds in the years past, oftentimes he would feel so ashamed that cold sweats drenched his back. Chongzhen of Ming Dynasty was persecuted to death by Li Zicheng's roving bandits. Wu Sangui came to lend his troops to us, the Great Qing, and defeated Li Zicheng, and thus he avenged the Ming Dynasty emperor's great enmity. Yet not only the common Han people are not grateful to the Great Qing, they consider us as their enemy. Tell me, what kind of logic is that?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "I suppose they are muddle-headed. In fact, in this world, muddle-headed people are many, smart people are a few. Or perhaps they

simply forget favors and violate justice."

"That's not necessarily so," Kangxi said, "Han people say we are barbarians, ethnic minority from outside, who are taking possession of their beautiful rivers and mountains. When the Qing troops entered the pass, they killed and burned everywhere, they murdered countless common people; it was the reason they hate us, Manchus, to the bones."

Wei Xiaobao was actually a Han, but Kangxi bestowed him to be a Manchu person of the Plain Yellow Banner, when he talked to him, he always said 'we or us', treating him as a Manchu. Actually, speaking about national affairs, Wei Xiaobao did not understand anything. It's just that Kangxi was excited since he had just met his father. Thinking about his Father Emperor's earnest admonition, he discussed it with this little trusted aide.

Wei Xiaobao said, "When your servant was still in Yangzhou, I have heard people mentioning the tragedy of Qing troops massacring people."

Kangxi sighed. "Yangzhou's Ten Days, Jiading's Three Slaughters, people were killed that their number cannot be counted; those are enormously evil deeds that we, the Great Qing, committed. I am going to issue an imperial edict to exempt Yangzhou and Jiading of land tax for three years."

Wei Xiaobao thought, "Yangzhou people do not have to pay taxes for three years, everybody will be rich, Lovely Spring Courtyard's business will greatly flourish. How can I get the young emperor to send me to handle this matter for him in Yangzhou? I will tell Mama not to be a prostitute anymore, I will open three brothels for her, *laozi* will be the boss, and then I will be a banker, I will open a big gambling event for ten days, it will be another 'Yangzhou's Ten Days'. Afterwards, I will bring a lot of money to Jiading and damn it, I will gamble three days. It will be 'Jiading's Three Gambles'[42]."

He also thought, "Both the Old Emperor and His Majesty said that during Jiading's Three 'du' [see note 10 referred above] the number of people being

killed is too many, this is an enormous disaster. How could they kill a lot of people by gambling three times? I wonder what kind of place Jiading is. In that place, the people's gambling skill is very formidable, I must be very careful."

"Xiao Guizi, what do you think?" Kangxi asked.

"Good, very good," Wei Xiaobao busily replied, "That way, everybody will have rice to eat, have money … nobody will revolt." He was about to say 'have money to gamble', but as the word was about to come out, he withdrew it.

Kangxi said, "Although everybody has rice to eat and has money to be used, not necessarily nobody will revolt. When you left Beijing, you sent the Imperial Bodyguards to escort a man, whom you said was a rebel from Mount Wangwu. I personally interrogated him several times."

Wei Xiaobao was shocked in his heart; he stood up hastily and said, "Your Majesty ordered your servant not to meddle in other people's business; henceforth I did not dare to do that."

"Sit down," Kangxi said, "You managed this matter very well. It was not other people's business at all, in fact, from now on we must pay close attention to this matter."

"Yes, yes," Wei Xiaobao said, but in his heart he was unable to make head or tail of it.

Kangxi said in a low voice, "I sent those Imperial Bodyguards to rebuke you, it was to block the ears and eyes of the enemy, so that the rebellious thieves won't guard against me."

Wei Xiaobao was delighted. He sprang up, and then sat back down again and said in a low voice, "Your servant understands. Turns out Your Majesty are afraid this rebellious thief Wu Sangui would be alarmed."

“Whether Wu Sangui wants to rebel, it is still hard to say,” Kangxi said, “But since the beginning he did not have a loyal heart; he took advantage of my young age and did not have me in his eyes at all.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Your Majesty can always use little tricks here and there to let him know how formidable you are. Wu Sangui, his granny, what’s so great about him? Your Majesty only need to stretch out your little finger, you will sweep away a thousand army, high mountain flowing water.”

Kangxi smiled, “You did not use those two idioms correctly. You should say ‘stretch out your little finger, you will sweep away a thousand army, kill him to be utterly defeated[43]’.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Your servant has become a monk for several months, my literary knowledge did not make any progress; from now on I must serve Your Majesty more often, so that my usage of idiom will be like ‘sweeping away a thousand army’, so that people who hear it will be ‘utterly defeated’.”

Kangxi could not help but bursting in laughter, his melancholy was somewhat reduced. In a low voice he said, “That servant Wu Sangui is very good at military strategy, the number of fierce generals and elite troops under his command is indeed not a few. If he really wanted to rebel and allied himself with Geng Jingzhong of Fujian and Shang Kexi of Guangdong, the three forces would make a thorny problem indeed. We can only take our time, must make our move only after fixing our plan, so that once we move, we will make his granny Wu Sangui utterly defeated and piss in his pants in terror.”

Kangxi was diligent and studious, every day after he personally attended the government affairs, he would have members of Hanlin Imperial Academy to attend upon him, to explore classic books in Confucianism, poetry and literature. He learned a lot about the writings and poems of Confucius; therefore, to suddenly hear him saying phrases like ‘his granny’ or ‘piss in his pants in terror’, it was clear that he was really not happy.

Meeting with his father today, he was both delighted and grieved; but after only less than an hour of intimacy, he was already thrown out of the door without knowing if he would ever see him again in the future, he was deeply wounded emotionally. Luckily there was this Wei Xiaobao whose words were amusing, so that the melancholy in his heart was somewhat relieved. Moreover, speaking about major political affair like crushing rebellion and restoring order had aroused the lofty aspiration in his heart.

He stood up, took four piece of stones from the courtyard, arranged them on the ground, and said, “Of the four kings of Han army, the east side, the south side and the west side must be separated from each other, they cannot be allowed to ally with each other. Luckily that fellow Ding Nan Wang[44] Kong Yude has died, leaving behind a daughter, hence it will be easy to deal with her.” While saying that, he lightly kicked a piece of stone.

He said, “Geng Jingzhong is bold but not very astute, nothing to worry about. Only he must be prevented from making an alliance with the Zheng clan of Taiwan.” And he kicked another stone.

He said, “Shang Kexi, father and sons, do not get along well with each other. His two sons are like fire and water, they are always in conflict with each other, rendering him powerless.” And he also kicked the third stone away, leaving one stone left, the biggest one, to which he stared while seeming lost in thought.

“Your Majesty,” Wei Xiaobao asked, “Is that Wu Sangui?” Kangxi nodded. Wei Xiaobao cursed, “That treacherous bandit, he is old but refuses to die, yet he gives my lord of ten thousand years a big headache. Your Majesty, soak him with your pee.”

Kangxi burst out laughing; his childish heart was aroused, he really untied his pants and peed on that piece of stone. He said with a laugh, “Come, your turn.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud and peed on the stone. He said with a laugh, “This chapter is called, ‘Lord of Ten Thousand Years High Mountain Flowing Water,

Xiao Guizi … Xiao Guizi …’” He was going to say ‘sweeping a thousand army’, but thought that in this case this phrase was not appropriate. Suddenly he remembered the storyteller telling about the tale of Three Kingdoms, there was a chapter about ‘Guan Yunchang flooded seven armies with water’, thereupon he said, “Xiao Guizi flooded seven armies with water.”

Kangxi was amused even more. He tied up his pants and said with a laugh, “There will come a day we catch that stinky thief, then we will really pee on his body.”

Kangxi sat down on the stone steps again. They heard sound of footsteps outside; although nobody said anything, it was obvious that there were quite a number of people gathering outside. Wei Xiaobao said, “It looks like they have caught all those evil lamas. Your Majesty really have flood of good fortune filling the heavens; it was so fortunate that you have arrived just in time to catch all those evil lamas in one net.”

“Actually, that was not luck,” Kangxi said, “As soon as I received your secret report, I sent people to investigate. After I found out, I rushed here, but actually I was one step too late, so that those evil lamas have alarmed the holy sage. If not for your quick-wit, I will regret it for the rest of my life, and won’t escape from guilt.”

Wei Xiaobao was puzzled, “But your servant has never sent you any secret report,” he said.

Kangxi said, “When I sent the Imperial Bodyguards to Shaolin Temple to deliver the imperial edict, they said that they saw a Mongolian prince, several lamas, and several military officers; is that right?”

“That’s right,” Wei Xiaobao said.

Kangxi said, “You instructed them to investigate in secret, what were they up to, and what was their power. Under investigation, they found out that the

Mongolian prince was called Galdan. The military officer was Ma Bao, a commander under that servant Wu Sangui. They were conspiring with the lamas in rebellious scheme, something that would not be good to *Fu Huang*."

Wei Xiaobao slapped his thigh, "So that's what happened!" he exclaimed, "Your servant saw that they were sneaky, definitely not good people, I did not know they are Wu Sangui's people." Actually, he had known about those people's name and background, the reason he wanted Zhao Qixian and the others to investigate was to track down the girl in green, while bringing false charge against Wu Sangui. He did not think that it would lead the young emperor to catch up to Mount Wutai.

Kangxi said, "Later on those three groups went their separate ways. Imperial Bodyguard Zhang Kangnian followed the lamas. He heard that they were assembling a large group of manpower; they were going to Mount Wutai to kidnap an important person. He did not realize the significance of this matter. After following them for several more days, he returned to the Capital and presented a memorial to me. As soon as I heard it, how could I not be anxious? I wanted to set off at once; but when the Emperor leaves the Capital, there are so many formalities and rites that have to be performed. Although I issued an imperial decree to have everything conforms to simplicity, I was still one day late."

Wei Xiaobao said, "That rebellious thief Wu Sangui is so brazen, he dares to dispatch several thousand lamas to come and offend the Old Emperor. That … won't that be blatant rebellion?"

Kangxi sucked his breath. "Not too loud!" he hissed, "I only know that his officer was travelling together with those lamas. Whether he is rebelling or not, we can't say for sure for the time being."

"I am sure he is, I am sure he is!" Wei Xiaobao said, "If he was a good person, how could he send a general under his command to conspire with those evil lamas to secretly bring harm to the Old Emperor?"

“He is definitely not a good person,” Kangxi said. After hesitating for a moment, he slowly said, “It’s just that I am still too young, in deploying troops and fighting a battle, I am not his match. It would be best for us to wait several more years, wait till I grow up some more, and he grows older some more. When we fight that time, I am sure that victory will be within our grasp. Xiao Guizi, you need not be impatient, waiting one day longer will give us one day more advantage, while at the same time will give him one day more harm.”

Wei Xiaobao anxiously said, “What if he grows old and die? Won’t that be too easy for him?”

Kangxi smiled. “Then that is his luck,” he said. After a short pause he continued, “Just now *Fu Huang* admonished me: it would be best if I can not resort to arms and go to war; once we go to battle, it does not matter the outcome, soldiers will be dead and injured, that need not be mentioned, but the common people in all the world will suffer countless suffering. For that reason, if Wu Sangui died early and did not wait for me to take action against him, although it won’t be fun …”

While he paused for a moment, Wei Xiaobao interjected, “It’s definitely not fun at all.”

Kangxi laughed and said, “As far as common people and soldiers are concerned, war is not a good thing. Xiao Guizi, if you want something fun, I can take you to Liaodong (Peninsula) to hunt black bears, hunt tigers.”

Wei Xiaobao was delighted. “Wonderful, wonderful!” he called out.

Kangxi turned his gaze to the meditation room’s door and quietly said, “When I was six, *Fu Huang* took me to go hunting at Liaodong. And now …” Slowly he walked toward the door. His hand gently stroked the wooden door, while his throat choked and his eyes moist. After a while, he kneeled down and did obeisance several times, while saying in a low voice, “*Fu Huang*, take a good care

of yourself, Child's leaving." Wei Xiaobao also kneeled down and kowtowed.

Kangxi went to the Hall of Great Strength. Prince Kang, along with prominent military leaders such as Valiant Cavalry Commander Chalju, Imperial Bodyguards Chief Dolong, several top ranking officers who accompanied the Emperor such as Songgotu, the Vanguard Regiment Commander, the Personal Guard Commander, and the others, have been waiting in the hall. Seeing the Emperor's arrival, they all kneeled down to pay their respect. When the officers stood up, they took a furtive glance and noticed that the young emperor's eyes were red, obviously he had been crying; they were all surprised.

Although the Emperor was young, he had outstanding knowledge and experience, he had demonstrated wise judgment in handling matters; the court official's reverence to him was growing day by day, nobody dared to belittle him due to his age. Unexpectedly the young Emperor could cry; it was indeed an unusual happening. They also noticed the tearstains on Wei Xiaobao's face, and thought, "This kid Wei Xiaobao must have teased the Emperor to tears. Two youngsters, I don't know what kind of games they are playing."

Kangxi tightly concealed the fact that Shunzhi has left home on Mount Wutai, even the closest family member, his own little sister Princess Jianning was not aware, naturally the court officials were in the dark even more.

Prince Kang stepped forward to present a memorial, "Submitting a report to Your Majesty: We found several thousand lamas creating havoc and disturbing peace outside the Qingliang Temple with unknown reason. Right now all of them have been captured and been brought here, awaiting the imperial decree on how to deal with them."

Kangxi nodded. "Get the leader and bring him here," he said.

Chalju dragged three old lamas, they were all shackled and handcuffed. The three lamas did not know that Kangxi was the ruling Emperor, they maintained their obstinate behavior and mumbled and grunted incessantly. Kangxi suddenly

also mumbled and grunted. The officers were stunned; nobody expected that the Emperor could speak Tibetan. Actually, these lamas were Mongolian lamas, they did not come from Tibet at all. Kangxi was talking with them in Mongolians.

After talking for a while, the three lamas bowed their heads without saying anything; apparently they have surrendered. Kangxi said, “Take them to the side room, *Zhen* will investigate them confidentially.”

“Yes,” Dolong replied, and have the three of them brought to the scripture room [library] next to the main hall.

Kangxi beckoned to Wei Xiaobao, the two of them also entered the scripture room. Wei Xiaobao closed the door. Pulling his dagger, he continuously waved it in front of the lamas’ eyes, throats, noses and ears. Kangxi spoke several sentences loudly in Mongolian. Respectfully and submissively the oldest lama answered his questions one by one. The two of them were exchanging questions and answers for quite a while. As soon as Wei Xiaobao noticed that Kangxi raised his voice and had an angry look on his face, he drew his dagger threateningly. When he saw Kangxi’s expression turned gentle, he giggled while standing by the lama’s side, nodding his head in encouragement.

Kangxi’s interrogation lasted for more than an hour. Finally he ordered the Imperial Bodyguards to take the lamas away, and told Wei Xiaobao to close the door. “This is strange,” he muttered to himself.

Wei Xiaobao did not dare to interrupt his train of thought, he simply stood on the side without saying anything. Kangxi pondered for a moment, and then asked, “Xiao Guizi, how many people are aware that *Fu Huang* has left home and become a monk in here?”

“Other than Your Majesty and your servant,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “Those who know this matter include the Old Emperor’s *Shifu*, Yulin *Dashi*, and his *Shidi* Xing Dian *Dashi*. There was also a eunuch, Hai Dafu, but he is dead. The former head monk of Qingliang Temple, Cheng Guang *Dashi*, did not seem to know the

details, he only knew that the Old Emperor was a person of great background. Apart from these people, there is that old … old … that Empress Dowager."

Kangxi nodded, "That's right," he said, "Those who know this matter, in this world, including *Fu Huang* himself, and the two of us, are not more than six people. But when I interrogated that Mongolian lama just now, he said that they received the order of the Living Buddha, Dalai Lama of Lhasa, Tibet, to go to Qingliang Temple to invite a monk and take him to Tibet. I interrogate him in details, which monk in Qingliang Temple, what kind of person he is, why did the Living Buddha of Lhasa want to invite him? I repeatedly asked the questions, he definitely does not know. Finally he said that it seems that this monk understands a lot of tantra's religious chant and incantation, the Living Buddha wishes for him to teach these secret incantation, to help spreading the Dharma. Naturally it was all rubbish; but looking at his expression, I don't think he was lying. Most likely other people are deceiving him, yet he believes it was the truth."

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao said, "Whether that Tibetan Living Buddha knew the Old Emperor's real identity, it is difficult to know at this moment, but the person who instigated the Living Buddha to come and offend the Old Emperor, I am afraid … I am afraid he knew the inside information."

Kangxi nodded. Suddenly Wei Xiaobao was scared; he said, "Your Majesty, your servant will keep my mouth as tight as a … as something. I know this matter is of grave importance; even in my dream I won't divulge half a word."

"You won't say anything," Kangxi said, "I trust you completely. Naturally Yulin and Xing Dian also won't say anything. Even if Shaolin Temple's Abbot Hui Cong and Cheng Guang *Dashi* may have guessed something, they are virtuous eminent monks, they can't possibly reveal it to anybody. After thinking it over, there is only that … that old … old s1ut."

"Right! Right!" Wei Xiaobao said, "Must be that old … old …"

Kangxi muttered to himself, “She is concealing a man who dressed as a palace maid in the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful; indeed I have seen it with my own eyes. It’s only natural that she is afraid her secret would be revealed. She murdered Empress Duan Jing, *Fu Huang* hates her to the bones. Although *Fu Huang* has already left home, he still sent Hai Dafu back to the Palace to investigate this matter. You knew all the details, and you are always by my side. Humph, how could that old s1ut sleep well at night? She simply must do harm to *Fu Huang*. Only after conspiring to murder *Fu Huang,* conspiring to murder me, and killing you, will she feel safe.”

Wei Xiaobao thought, “The old wh0re has long had relationship with *Shen Long Jiao* [Divine Dragon Cult]. Since she knew the Old Emperor has not died yet, she must have reported it to Hong *Jiaozhu*. Apparently this lamas arrival on Mount Wutai is somehow related to Hong *Jiaozhu*.” However, he must not mention to Kangxi that he had become the White Dragon Envoy of Divine Dragon Cult.

Kangxi saw the change in his countenance. “What is it?” he asked.

Wei Xiaobao hastily said, “Your servant thought … thought … Your Majesty’s speculation is not the least bit wrong, it must be that old … the Empress Dowager who leak the secret. Other than she, there can’t be any other people.”

Kangxi stretched out his hand to slap the table heavily; gnashing his teeth, he said, “This s1ut murdered the Empress, my birth mother; she also caused *Fu Huang* to leave home, rendering me without a father or a mother. I … if I don’t make mincemeat of this s1ut, it will be difficult for me to purge the hatred in my heart; but … but *Fu Huang* clearly told me not to make things difficult for her. What should I do?”

Wei Xiaobao thought, “The Old Emperor does not allow you to kill the old wh0re, but he did not tell me not to. Even if he told me not to kill her, *laozi* is his Abbot, he is obligated to follow my order, I don’t have to listen to his order. However, if this matter is exposed, it may not be effective.”

“Your Majesty do not need to worry,” he said, “This Empress Dowager has committed all kinds of evil, she won’t have a good end. Your Majesty may open your dragon eyes wide, open your dragon ears, you’ll just wait and see.”

Kangxi was very keen; he had already understood his meaning, he fixed his eyes on him for half a day, finally he nodded and said, “That’s right, that s1ut has committed all kinds of evil, she won’t have a good end.”

He paced back and forth in the scripture room. “Right now we must find a way to prevent the lamas from offending *Fu Huang* again,” he said, “It would be best if we can send a trustworthy man to be the Tibetan Living Buddha. All the lamas throughout the world will be under his management, then there won’t be any future danger. It’s just that Tibetan Living Buddha is always the reincarnation of the previous one, I am afraid the one the Emperor sends won’t work. There must be a way …”

Listening to this, Wei Xiaobao was so scared that his soul flew away and scattered; he mused, “Today I dressed up as a young lama, I must not turn a fake into reality. As soon as the Emperor opens his golden mouth, it will be hard to take back, I must strike first.” Hastily he said, “Your Majesty, your servant absolutely do not want to be a Tibetan Living Buddha.”

Kangxi burst out laughing. He said, “You are quick. Actually, what’s not good about being a Tibetan Living Buddha? His jurisdiction is a lot wider than Wu Sangui’s Yunnan; being a Living Buddha means becoming the king of Tibet.”

Wei Xiaobao repeatedly shook his hand, he said, “I’d rather be an imperial bodyguard by your side. Once I become the Living Buddha, it will be hard for me to be with you. I don’t care if it is King of Xizang [Tibet, xi - west] or King of Dongzang [East Zang], even King of Dizang[45], I don’t want to be one.”

He was not lying. He had been with Kangxi for a long time, they were almost of the same age, they got along with each other well; although one was the young emperor, the other was a young imperial bodyguard, they were like best friends.

Neither one was willing to be separated from each other.

Kangxi laughed and said, “How can you make such a irresponsible remark about the Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva's name?” Shoving the door open, he walked out, and said to Chalju and Dolong, “The two of you have handled this matter well, *Zhen* wants to reward you.”

Chalju and Dolong were greatly delighted; they kowtowed to express their gratitude. Kangxi said, “*Zhen* respect and believe the Dharma. Sure enough, these last several years by the will of the Heaven and the blessing of the Bodhisattva, the country is safe and sound, the common people have peace and happiness. Wei Xiaobao is here as *Zhen*’s proxy, becoming a monk on my behalf, and has rendered a great merit.” Wei Xiaobao also kowtowed to express his gratitude.

Kangxi continued, “Now Wei Xiaobao’s time to be my proxy has been fulfilled, he will follow me returning to Beijing. It is Chalju’s turn to leave home for two years, but you won’t be a monk, rather, you will be the Great Lama of Mount Wutai. You may select 1000 competent officers and sergeants of Valiant Cavalry to be lamas with you, to be stationed on the ten major lama monasteries on the mountain. During your time leaving your homes, everybody’s pay will be doubled, and all of you will be generously rewarded.”

Chalju was startled; although he was not actually willing, he had no choice but thanking the Emperor for the kindness shown. Kangxi said, “If you are doing a good deed but announce it to the world, it won’t be really a good deed. You must tell everybody to guard his mouth like a closed bottle in this matter, no one is to reveal the secret, otherwise he will be dealt with according to the martial law, there won’t be any excuse. Dolong is to bring all Mount Wutai’s lamas back to the Capital, and have them locked up in detention. Send people to inform the Dalai Lama Living Buddha that the Emperor is inviting these lamas to Beijing to promote the Dharma, to make clear the mystery of the Buddhist doctrines. After seventy, eighty years, when the Dharma is flourishing, they will be sent back to Tibet.” For each sentence he said, Chalju and Dolong responded one time.

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted, "*Laozi* escapes the will of Heaven, henceforth I don't have to be a monk anymore." He also thought, "After seventy, eighty years, will these lamas still alive to return home? They brazenly offended the Old Emperor, His Majesty is being magnanimous by not chopping their heads. Imprisoned for life is a great convenience for them."

Kangxi continued, "Wei Xiaobao, I promote you to be the Commander [du tong] of the Valiant Cavalry Regiment of the Yellow Banner, while concurrently holding your present Deputy Chief [*fu zongguan*] position of the Imperial Bodyguards. Chalju, if you are performing your duty as the Great Lama well, when you return to the Capital, I will send you to another province to be the provincial governor." The two of them expressed their gratitude.

Wei Xiaobao did not care much; for him, being the commander or vice commander did not have any difference. On the other hand, Chalju was very happy; in Beijing, high-ranking officials were extremely numerous, it's just that Valiant Cavalry Regiment Commanders were the Emperor's trusted aide. He was only one Valiant Cavalry Regiment Commander; each one of the eight banners had one commander, a total of eight Valiant Cavalry Regiment Commanders. When they see the royal princes, the royal princes' children, the dukes and marquis[46], he must bend his knees and pay respects. Other than his soldier's pay, there was no extra income. If he was to be sent to other provinces and become the provincial governor, not only his prestige and authority would spread to eight directions, his financial resources would also increase tremendously.

In the meantime, it was daybreak. Kangxi give his order that he wanted to go to the Qingliang Temple to worship Buddha. When they reach the outside of the Temple, they saw sabers and spears scattered around, the grass and rocks were red with bloodstain. It was clear that the capture of lamas the previous night involved an intense battle; obviously they were fighting fiercely. Kangxi entered the Temple to worship the Tathagata and the Manjushri [orig. 'ru lai' and 'wen shu pu sa'], before he went to the back of the mountain to visit the small vihara

where Shunzhi sat in meditation. He saw charred wood and ruined bricks, the vihara had been burnt to the ground.

Kangxi was secretly scared, “If *Fu Huang* did not escape last night, he would be burned inside the temple. I … I …” He did not dare to continue his thought. He ordered Songgotu to donate two thousand *taels* of silver to reconstruct the vihara. He knew his father would not want to have this matter publicized; therefore, he did not dare to casually donate too much.

Returning to the Hall of Great Strength, the Shaolin monks came to see him. They saw this young benefactor had a lot of attendants, he carried an imposing aura around him; they thought he must be a person of great importance, perhaps he was one of the royal princes [*qin wang bei lei*]. Athough the monks did not curry favor with powerful people, they acknowledge the fact that this benefactor donated a large sum of money to reconstruct the small vihara, so they put their palms together to express their thanks. Cheng Tong and the others could also see that among those attendants disguised as pilgrims, there were quite a few who knew martial art.

Upon seeing the place where his father has left home, Kangxi was unwilling to leave so soon; he said, “I want to stay at your precious monastery for three, five days; I wonder if it is possible?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “*Da Shizhu* [great benefactor] graces us with your presence, it is something that we seek but fail to get …”

Suddenly there was a loud crashing sound, dust and dirt fell down, a hole appeared on the ceiling of the Hall of Great Strength. A white shadow flashed, a white object dropped down from the roof; it was a monk wearing white robe, with a long sword in his hand, which was thrust swiftly toward Kangxi. “Today I am taking revenge for the Son of Heaven of the Great Ming!” the monk called out.

Kangxi hastily retreated. Because they were in the presence of the Emperor,

Dolong, Chalju, Prince Kang, and the others did not carry any weapon. Greatly alarmed, they pounced on the monk. The monk swiftly flicked the left sleeve of his robe, a strong gust of wind swept Dolong and the others, seven, eight men, so that they could not hold their ground and were thrown down backward.

Cheng Xin, Cheng Guang and the others shouted together, “Must not harm people!” and moved to stop the monk.

The monk’s sleeve brushed away again. Each one of Shaolin Temple’s ‘Cheng’ generation monks used his own unique skill to parry, but these monks’ tiger claw, dragon claw, ‘picking flower *qin na*’ [grab and capture], ‘capturing dragon’ skill, and so on failed to seize the monk. The Shaolin monks were surprised, they all thought, “Unexpectedly there is such person in this world!”

The white-robed monk did not stop, his sword went straight toward Kangxi. Kangxi had his back against the sacrificial table in front of the image of Buddha, he could not retreat further.

Wei Xiaobao hastily leaped forward to block in front of Kangxi’s body. ‘Stab!’ the tip of the sword pierced his chest. The long sword bent, but unexpectedly it failed to enter Wei Xiaobao’s body. Wei Xiaobao felt severe pain on his chest. He had already had the dagger in his hand; by waving it randomly he managed cut the enemy’s sword into two pieces.

The monk in white was stunned. Cheng Guan called out, “Don’t hurt my *Shishu*!” His left palm flew toward the monk in white’s right shoulder. The monk in white threw his broken sword and turned around to meet Cheng Guan’s palm head on. Cheng Guan felt his blood bubbling up in his chest, while stars appeared in his eyes.

“Good skill!” the monk in white praised. Seeing that he was surrounded by martial art masters, while just a moment ago his sword failed to stab the little monk’s body, he was greatly shocked. No longer dare to prolong the fight, he stretched out his right hand to grab the back of Wei Xiaobao’s collar, and

suddenly his body flew up, he escaped via the hole on the roof of the hall.

This turn of events happened so quickly that although there were thirty-six Shaolin masters in the hall, unexpectedly nobody had enough time to stop him. Cheng Xin, Cheng Guang, and the others hurriedly follow the monk through the hole on the roof. They saw the white shadow flashing at the back of the mountain, the monk was already more than a dozen of *zhang* away. This person's *qing gong* [lightness skill] was amazing, it was indeed unbelievable.

The Shaolin monks realized they would not be able to catch up, but their Temple's abbot was being kidnapped, although they could not catch up with him, they still had to run after him. Shouting loudly, the thirty-six monks ran to give chase. In the blink of an eye the white shadow disappeared behind a dip on the mountain path.

Book note: The title of this chapter came from a Buddhist saying, the word 'jie' [which I translated as 'calamity'] is an extremely long period of time. The Buddhists believe that because human live is a sea of bitterness without boundary, which is difficult to break, even by relying on compassion and mercy.

Chapter 25

The crow flew over old exiled Emperor's child, the horse stored the red powder of weeping palace beauty[47].

(Translated by Foxs)

The nun in white was sitting steadily on the chair, the forefinger of her right hand pierced to the east and jabbed to the west, warding off the Empress Dowager's swift and fierce attacks one by one. The Empress Dowager abruptly advanced and abruptly retreated, she abruptly leaped up and abruptly crouched down with extreme speed; the wind from her palms forced the flame of the four candles to go out.

Wei Xiaobao was being carried while they were travelling swiftly; he felt as if they were soaring in the clouds or riding on the fog, the big trees swept pass his sides. He felt that they were climbing the mountain higher and higher, his heart was filled with unspeakable fear, “This bald thief failed to kill me with a stab of his sword, he must be quite upset. Now he wants to use different method, he want to see if by throwing me down from a ten thousand *zhang* high peak, I, this little bald thief, will die or not.” Sure enough, the monk in white suddenly released his grip and throw Wei Xiaobao down.

Wei Xiaobao screamed, but very soon his back touched the ground; it turned out that he was just being tossed to the ground. The monk in white looked at him coldly and said, “I heard Shaolin Pai has a divine skill to protect the body, so that saber and spear cannot penetrate. I did not expect a little monk like you have also mastered it.”

Wei Xiaobao heard that person’s voice to be clear and bright, carrying thirty percent gentleness and charms; he was rather astonished. When he looked up at the person’s face, he saw a snow-white melon-seed face, with curved eyebrows, and phoenix-like eyes filled with worry. Unexpectedly she was an extremely beautiful woman, roughly thirty years of age. Only her hair was shaved clean, with the incense-stick scar on her head; turned out she was a Buddhist nun. Wei Xiaobao was delighted, “Talking to nuns is always better than talking to monks,” he mused.

Hastily he wanted to sit up, but the pit of his stomach was very painful. Actually, when she stabbed him a moment ago, although the treasured clothes protected his body, so that the sword did not harm his skin and flesh, her internal power was too strong that he felt severe pain. “Aiyo!” he cried out and collapsed again.

The nun coldly said, “I thought there must be something amazing with Shaolin’s divine skill; turns out it is only like this.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Let me be honest to *Shitai*[48], from those thirty-six Shaolin monks in the Hall of Great Strength of Qingliang Temple, one was the Head of Damo Courtyard, one was the Head of Bo’re Hall … aiyo … aiyo … even the Shaolin Pai’s renowned Eighteen Luohan were there; each one was Shaolin Pai’s

first class martial art master. Yet all thirty-six men were not your match, one *Shitai*, alone … aiyo …"

After a short pause, he continued, "If I had only known, I would not enter Shaolin Temple. Aiyo … I'd rather do obeisance to you and take *Shitai* as my master; it would be a hundred times more superior."

There was a hint of smile appearing on the grave and stern face of the white-clothed nun. "What's your name?" she asked, "How long have you been training Shaolin Temple's unique skills?"

Wei Xiaobao pondered, "She tried to assassinate the Emperor, saying that she wanted to avenge the Great Ming's Son of Heaven, obviously she belongs to the 'overthrowing Qing restoring Ming' group. I just don't know if she is a friend or a foe of Tian Di Hui; I'd better not to tell her the truth." Thereupon he said, "I am an orphan from a Yangzhou poor family, my father was killed by Tatar soldiers, from childhood I was sent to the Imperial Palace to become a little eunuch, and was called Xiao Guizi. Later on …"

The nun in white muttered to herself, "Little eunuch Xiao Guizi? I seem to have heard your name. There was a big treacherous official in the imperial court called Oboi; I heard he was killed by a little eunuch, who killed him?"

Hearing the name 'Oboi' plus the words 'big treacherous official', Wei Xiaobao hastily said, "It was … it was me."

The nun in white was half believing, half doubting; she asked, "It was really you? That Oboi's martial art skill was very high; he had the reputation as the Number One Warrior of Manchuria. How did you kill him?"

Wei Xiaobao slowly sat up and narrated how they captured Oboi, how the young emperor gave the order to attack, how Wei Xiaobao unexpectedly managed to stab Oboi with a knife, how he scattered the incense ashes into Oboi's eyes, and how afterwards he stabbed Oboi's back in the prison. By this time Wei Xiaobao had already told this story many times, each time he retold the story, he always added a little bit more oil, salt, soybean sauce, vinegar and other spices.

The nun in white listened quietly until he finished. Finally she sighed and muttered to herself, "If it happened like that, those widows of the Zhuang family

must really thank you."

Wei Xiaobao delightedly said, "Did you, Senior, talk about the Zhuang family's Third Madame? She has already thanked me, and even gave me a servant girl by the name of Shuang'er. By this time she must have already died, she …"

The nun in white cut him off, "How did you know the people from Zhuang family?"

Wei Xiaobao told her the truth. Finally he said, "If you, Senior, do not believe me, you may ask Shuang'er."

The nun in white said, "You know the Third Madame and Shuang'er; that's enough. How did you become a monk?"

Wei Xiaobao thought that the matter of the Old Emperor left his home must be concealed; he said, "The Young Emperor sent me to be his proxy to become a monk at Shaolin Temple, and later on he sent me to Qingliang Temple. Shaolin Pai's martial art that I learned was really very few. In fact, even if I trained for several decades, and have mastered those Wei Tuo Palm, Bo're Palm, Picking Flower *Qin Na*, and so on, it won't be of any use in front of you, Senior."

Suddenly the nun in white's countenance sank; she sternly said, "You are a Han, why acknowledge the bandit as your father, risking your life to protect the Emperor? You were indeed born with a slave mentality!"

Wei Xiaobao's heart turned cold; this accusation was really not easy to respond. When the nun in white assassinated Kangxi, in a moment of desperation he thrust himself in front of Kangxi to shield him. In all honesty, he did not have any thought of flattering the Emperor; he was only thinking that Kangxi was the only person closest to him in this world, he was like a real brother to him, no matter what, he would never let anybody kill Kangxi.

The nun in white coldly said, "Manchurian Tatars came to take away our Great Ming's world, that may not be considered bad; what's really bad is Han people who 'act as accomplice to the tiger', those who for the sake of seeking their own glory, splendor, wealth and rank, they would do anything." While saying that, her eyes shot a piercing gaze on Wei Xiaobao's face. She said slowly, "I'll throw you down from this mountain peak. I want to know if your 'protecting body' divine skill can still be used or not?"

“Of course it can’t be used,” Wei Xiaobao loudly said, “Actually, you don’t even have to throw me down the mountain, you only need to lightly strike the top of my head with your palm, my skull will immediately shatter into seventeen, eighteen pieces.”

The nun in white said, “Then you were fawning on the Tatar Emperor, what good will it do to you?”

“I was not fawning on him,” Wei Xiaobao loudly replied, “The Young Emperor is my friend. He … he said that he will never raise taxes, that he will cherish the common people. We, Jianghu people, attach most importance to *yi qi*, we must also cherish the common people.” Actually, toward Kangxi he indeed have *yi qi*, but ‘cherishing the common people’, even in his dream he had never thought about it. Right now facing the matter of life and death, he had no choice but to lift up high his hat to defend himself.

There was a flash of hesitation on the nun in white’s face; she asked, “He said never to raise taxes and cherish the common people?”

“That’s right, that’s right,” Wei Xiaobao busily said, “I don’t know how many hundred times he said that. He said that when the Tatar Emperor entered the pass, he massacred the common people, which he never should have done. Those ‘Yangzhou’s Ten Days’, ‘Jiading Three Gamblings’, were practically things that are done by beast. In his heart he is restless; therefore … therefore he came to Mount Wutai to burn incense and worship Buddha, he will also issue an imperial decree to exempt Yangzhou and Jiading three years of taxes.” The nun in white nodded.

Wei Xiaobao continued, “That treacherous court official Oboi killed so many loyal and good subjects, the Young Emperor ordered him to stop doing that, he refused flatly. The Young Emperor was enraged, he ordered me to kill him. Good *Shitai*, if you killed the Young Emperor, the affairs of the imperial court will be taken over by the Empress Dowager. This old wh0re is desperately worse, if she came into power, she would do another ‘Yangzhou’s Ten Days’ or ‘Jiading Three Gamblings’. If you want to kill the Tatars, it would be better if you go and kill that old wh0re the Empress Dowager.”

The nun in white shot a glaring look at him; she said, “In front of me, you must

not speak any vulgar rude words."

"Yes, yes!" Wei Xiaobao said, "In front of you, Senior, in the next seventy, eighty years I will not mention even half a word of vulgar talk."

The nun in white looked up to the white clouds in the sky, ignoring him completely; after a while, she asked, "What's not good about the Empress Dowager?"

Wei Xiaobao thought, "The bad things that the Empress Dowager did have nothing to do with this *Shitai*, I must fabricate some wild accusation and heap it on her head." He said, "The Empress Dowager said that this is the Great Qing's world, she wanted to dig the Great Ming's seventeen, eighteen generations of emperors' grave, to see if there is any treasures in those graves. She also said that all Han people in the world with the surname of Zhu are no good, they should be executed along with their families unto the third generation, so that they won't snatch away the Great Qing's rivers and mountains …"

The nun in white was enraged, with her right palm she slapped a rock, instantly the rock shattered, fragments of rocks flew everywhere. With a stern voice she said, "That woman is so malicious!"

Wei Xiaobao said, "Isn't she? I advised the Young Emperor that those kind of things must never be done."

"Humph," the nun in white snorted and said, "What knowledge do you have? What argument can you give? Why would the Young Emperor listen to your advice?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "My argument was very reasonable. I said, 'Your Majesty, human being will definitely die. While it is true that the world of the living belongs to you, Manchu people, do you know if *Yanluo Wang* [King of Hell] of the underworld is Han man or Manchu man? What about Pan Guan [mythological underworld judge], the little demon, the ox head, the horse face, the Black Wuchang [ghost taking away soul after death], White Wuchang? Are they Han people or Manchu people? Each one of them is a Han. In the world of the living you oppress Han people, even if you live to a hundred years, there will come a day you will have to face the calamity.' The Young Emperor said, 'Xiao Guizi, how fortunate that you reminded me.' As a result, the Young Emperor did

not want to listen to a word the Empress Dowager was saying. On the contrary, he said that he would grant some money to restore the graves of the Great Ming's emperors, from Hongwu *Yeye* [grandfather] all the way to Emperor Chong Zhen. Ah right, there were some Fu Wang, Lu Wang, Tang Wang, Gui Wang [each 'wang' means 'king'], which I am not clear how many emperors in total."

Suddenly the nun in white's eyes reddened, and tears started to fall down, drops of tears rolled down from her robe to the grass. After quite a while, she stretched out her sleeve to wipe the tears; she said, "If it is really so, not only you are not disloyal, you have rendered great merit. If my … if the grave of my Great Ming's previous dynasty's emperors were dug by this … this evil woman …" Speaking to here, her voice turned into sobs, she was unable to continue. She stood up and walked toward an overhanging cliff.

"*Shitai*," Wei Xiaobao called out, "You … must not … must not be shortsighted." While shouting that, he rushed to pull her left arm. In this short period of time, he had developed a favorable impression toward this beautiful Buddhist nun; he felt that she was simple yet beautiful, lofty and elegant, refined and amiable; from among the women he had met in his life, no one could surpass her. As soon as he pulled, he felt that the sleeve was empty; only now did he realize that she did not have a left arm.

The nun in white turned her head around and said, "You are fooling around! Why would I be shortsighted?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "I saw how grieved you were, I was afraid you were not able to take a lighter view."

The nun in white said, "If I committed suicide, you would return to the Emperor, henceforth you will be very rich; won't that be better?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "No, no! I am a little eunuch, I was compelled by circumstances, the Tatars killed my papa, how can I acknowledge bandit as … as my father?"

The nun in white nodded; she said, "You still have conscience." From her pocket she took more than ten *taels* and gave it to him, saying, "Use it as your travel expense, go back to Yangzhou, to your native place."

Wei Xiaobao thought, “When I give money to others, if not two hundred *taels*, I would give at least a hundred *taels*, how can I be happy with your little bit of money? This *Shitai*’s heart is soft, I might as well exploit her goodness.” Without accepting the money, he suddenly fell to his knees and embraced her legs, while crying loudly.

The nun in white knitted her brows and said, “What are you doing? Stand up, stand up.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “I … I don’t want money.”

The nun in white said, “Then why are you crying?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “I have no father no mother, I never have anybody loving me. *Shitai*, you … you are like my mother. I often think that … that how nice would it be to have a mother who loves me dearly.”

The nun in white blushed, “Pei!” she spat softly and said, “Rubbish! I have left home …”

“Yes, yes!” Wei Xiaobao said. He stood up with tearstains across his face. Crying at will was one of his consummate skills.

The nun in white hesitantly said, “I need to go to Beijing anyway, in that case I’ll take you along. But you are a little monk …”

Wei Xiaobao thought, “Returning to Beijing? Nothing can be better than that.” Thereupon he hastily said, “I am a fake little monk. As soon as we are down the mountain, I’ll change clothes, then I won’t be little monk anymore.”

The nun in white nodded. Still not saying anything, she simply walked down the mountain peak with Wei Xiaobao following behind her. When they came across steep path, which was hard to pass, the nun in white grabbed his collar and lightly and nimbly jumped down. Wei Xiaobao praised her endlessly, saying that although Shaolin Pai’s martial art was well known throughout the world, it was not even close to hers. The nun in white simply turned a deaf ear, until Wei Xiaobao spoke seven, eight times, she said, “Shaolin Pai’s martial art has its own origin, little child is like a frog at the bottom of a well, you must not talk an idle talk. Just your divine skill of protecting your body, so that saber and spear cannot penetrate, I don’t have that kind of skill.”

On an impulse Wei Xiaobao said, “The divine skill of protecting my body is fake.” Untying his outer garment, he revealed his vest and said, “This is the vest that cannot be penetrated by saber and spear.”

The nun in white reached out to pull, while sending her strength to the tip of her finger. This pull was very powerful that even steel wire would be pulled apart, but unexpectedly the vest did not move the slightest bit. She smiled and said, “So that’s how it is. I was feeling strange, even if Shaolin internal energy is indeed marvelous, based on your young age, you would not have trained it to this level of maturity.”

Now that one suspicion in her heart was resolved, she was very happy. She laughed and said, “Child, you are indeed an honest person.”

Wei Xiaobao was secretly amused; in all his life, it was the first time somebody ever praised him to be honest, it was indeed rare. He said, “I am not that honest to anybody else, but I don’t know why, I just want to be honest to *Shitai*. Most likely because I consider you to be my … my mama …”

The nun in white said, “Later on you must not say those things, it is very unpleasant to hear.”

“Yes, yes,” Wei Xiaobao said, while in his heart he said, “You stabbed me on my chest, it is still very painful. I called you ‘mama’ several times, now we are even.” When he called someone ‘mama’, he was actually cursing that person as a prostitute. While he was feeling smug, he cast a glance toward the nun in white, and saw her lofty and magnificent aura, which he could not help but to revere; he felt quite regretful that he had called her ‘mama’ several times.

He stole a glance toward the nun in white again, and saw her eyes were brimming with tears, as if she was about to cry; he felt quite strange. Naturally he did not know that at the moment the nun in white was thinking, “I should have thought about that vest. Didn’t he … he also have something like that?”

The nun in white and Wei Xiaobao went down the mountain from the north side, heading eastwards. They arrived at a small town, Wei Xiaobao immediately went to buy some clothes, and turned himself into a young master of a rich family. Even when he was dressed up as a lama to protect Shunzhi leaving the Qingliang Temple, naturally the several hundred thousand *taels* of banknotes

had never left his body. Along the way he ordered the restaurant owners and innkeepers to prepare fine vegetarian cuisine. He was very attentive in attending to the nun in white. The nun in white was very particular toward the quality of the vegetarian dishes, as if she was coming from a very rich family; she was completely different from those Shaolin monks. Although she was not intentionally picky, but when the vegetarian dishes were exquisite, she would eat several chopsticks more.

Wei Xiaobao had a lot of money, as long as certain thing was available in the market, whether it was ginseng, swallow's nest, *fu ling*, white mushroom, 'money' mushroom, no matter how expensive, he would simply buy it. When he was in charge of the imperial kitchen, whenever the Empress Dowager and the Emperor were celebrating Buddha's birthday or Guanyin's birthday, they would want to abstain from meat dishes and would request vegetarian dishes; therefore, he was quite an expert in selecting vegetarian dishes. Sometimes the restaurant's chef did not know how to prepare certain dishes, he would then go to the kitchen to give directions. As a result, the dishes were seventy, eighty percent similar to those of the imperial kitchen.

The nun in white was habitually quiet; often times she did not speak a single word all day. Wei Xiaobao showed her utmost respect, he did not dare to talk nonsense at all. One day they arrived in Beijing. Wei Xiaobao looked for a large inn. As soon as he entered, he gave a ten *taels* tip. Although the innkeeper thought that for a nun to stay in an inn was somewhat too lofty, but this rich young master was very liberal with money, hence he gave a very attentive reception. The nun in white seemed to regard everything as it should be, she never questioned anything.

After lunch, the nun in white said, "I want to go to the Coal Hill."

"Coal Hill?" Wei Xiaobao asked, "That is the place where Emperor Chongzhen returned to Heaven. We must kowtow several times there."

Coal Hill was located next to the Imperial Palace, they were able to reach it in a very short period of time. Arrived at the hill, Wei Xiaobao pointed his finger at a big tree and said, "Emperor Chongzhen hanged himself on that tree."

The nun in white reached out to caress the tree, her arm did not stop

trembling, tears streamed down her face, suddenly she cried out and dropped on her knees.

Seeing her deep grief, Wei Xiaobao wondered, “Could it be that she knew Emperor Chongzhen?” His heart was moved, “Is it possible that she is just like Tao *Gugu*, a palace maid in Imperial Palace of the Great Ming? Perhaps she was Emperor Chongzhen’s imperial concubine. No, her age is not right, she looks younger than the old wh0re, she can’t be Emperor Chongzhen’s imperial concubine.”

He heard her cry was extremely sorrowful that she nearly could not breathe; he could not help but shedding some tears as well. He dropped on his knees and kowtowed to the tree several times.

The nun in white wept in sorrow for a long time. Finally she stood up to embrace the tree trunk. Suddenly her entire body trembled and she lost her consciousness, her body slowly slid down. Wei Xiaobao was shocked; hastily he held her up and called out, “*Shitai*, *Shitai*, wake up quickly!”

After quite a while, the nun in white slowly regained her consciousness. After calming herself down, she said, “Let’s go to the Imperial Palace to take a look.”

“Very well,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Let’s go back to the inn first. I’ll fix a eunuch uniform for me, Shitai also needs to change, I’ll take you into the Palace.”

The nun in white angrily said, “How can I wear Tatars’ eunuch uniform?”

“Yes, yes,” Wei Xiaobao said, “In that case … in that case … I got it, *Shitai* can be a lama. There are usually a lot of lamas going in and out of the Palace.”

“I don’t want to dress as a lama either,” the nun in white said, “I’ll just rush into the Palace like this, who can stop me?”

“Yes,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Even those Imperial Bodyguards are not able to stop *Shitai*. It’s just that … by doing this inevitably you will have to abandon the Buddhist monastic disciple against taking life. *Shitai* will be preoccupied with killing people, you won’t be able to quietly look at other things.” He was really unwilling to follow the nun in white breaking into the Palace just like that.

The nun in white nodded. “You are right,” she said, “Tonight I will take advantage of the darkness to break into the Palace. You wait for me in the inn,

so that you won't meet any danger."

"No, no," Wei Xiaobao said, "I am coming with you. If you enter the Palace alone, I won't feel at ease. I am very familiar with the Palace like my own home; I know the places, I know the people. Whichever place you want to go, I can take you there." The nun in white did not answer; she only stared blankly.

By the second watch that night [around 9-11pm], the nun in white and Wei Xiaobao left the inn and went to the Palace's wall. Wei Xiaobao said, "Let us circle to the northeast corner, the Palace wall on that side is rather low; that is where the *sula* and odd jobs workers live, no imperial bodyguards ever patrol there."

Following his direction, the nun in white went to the thirteenth row on the north side; grabbing the back of Wei Xiaobao's waist, she lightly leaped into the Palace. Wei Xiaobao said in a low voice, "This side is the *Le Shou* [lit. happy and long life] Hall and *Yang Xing* [mental/spiritual cultivation] Palace. *Shitai*, which place do you want to see?"

The nun in white muttered softly, "I want to see everything."

Going west from *Le Shou* Hall and *Yang Xing* Palace, winding around a long corridor, passing the *Xuan Qiong Bao Dian* [black/mysterious dome throne hall], the *Jing Yang Gong* [bright *yang*/positive Palace], *Zhong Cui Gong* [pure bell palace], they finally arrived at the imperial garden. Although it was dark, the nun in white was still walking very fast; winding and turning around the pathways, she did not have the slightest degree of hesitation. Whenever they came across the Imperial Bodyguards or the night watchmen on patrol, she simply hid behind a building's corner or behind the bushes.

Wei Xiaobao was greatly amazed, "How can she be this familiar with the Palace situation? She must have lived in the Palace before." Following her going over the imperial garden, they continued westward, going out of Kun Ning Gate, and arrived outside the Kun Ning[49] Palace.

The nun in white hesitated. "Doesn't the Empress live here?" she asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, "The Emperor is not married yet, there is no Empress. Previously the Empress Dowager lived here, but now she moved to the Palace of

Compassionate and Peaceful [Ci Ning]. Presently the Kun Ning Palace is unoccupied."

"Let's take a look," the nun in white said. Arriving just outside the Kun Ning Palace, she stretched out her hand to push the window frame. Exerting a little bit of strength, with a soft 'chi, chi' noise, the window latch broke easily. She pulled the window open and leaped inside. Wei Xiaobao crawled in to follow.

Kun Ning Palace was the Empress' personal quarter, Wei Xiaobao had never been there before. The Palace had been unoccupied for a long time, the smell of dust and mold assaulted their nostrils. Under the soft glimmer of the moonlight through the paper on the window, Wei Xiaobao vaguely saw the nun in white was sitting on the edge of the bed, without moving at all. After a while, he heard the dripping noise as her tears flowed onto the front piece of her robe. Wei Xiaobao thought, "Right, she is just like Tao *Gugu*; she must be a maid in the Palace who was serving the previous dynasty's empress."

He saw she was looking up at the beam of the roof. "Empress Zhou had … had killed herself in here," she said in a low voice.

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao replied. The doubt in his heart was gone; he asked in a low voice, "*Shitai*, would you like to see my *Gugu*?"

The nun in white was surprised. "Your *Gugu*?" she asked, "Who is she?"

"My *Gugu* is surnamed Tao," Wei Xiaobao replied, "Her name is Tao Hongying …"

"Hongying?" the nun in white cried out in shock.

Wei Xiaobao said, "That's right. Perhaps you know her. My *Gugu* was a former maid who served Princess Chang of Emperor Chongzhen."

"Alright, alright," the nun in white said, "Where is she? Quickly … quickly call her to see me." All along she had been cool and collected, ever since that day when she tried to assassinate Kangxi at the Qingliang Temple, even though she moved very fast, she had never lost her calm. But this time her voice unexpectedly appeared to be very anxious.

"I can't call her tonight," Wei Xiaobao said.

“Why? Why?” the nun in white asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, “My *Gugu* is very loyal to the Great Ming, one time she assassinated the Tatars’ Empress Dowager, unfortunately she did not die, hence she has to hide in the Palace. She will have to see my secret signal first, and then we can meet the next night.”

“Very good,” the nun in white said, “That girl Hongying has guts. What secret signal you have to make?”

“My *Gugu* and I have arranged it well,” Wei Xiaobao said, “I will have to make a pile of rock in the burning ground, and stick a piece of wood on it. She will know.”

The nun in white said, “Let us go make the secret signal then.” Leaping out the window, she pulled Wei Xiaobao’s hand, went out the Long Fu [grand happiness] Gate, passed Yong Shou [eternal long life] Palace, Ti Yuan [Primary Form] Court, Bao Hua [defending China] Court, and continued northward to the Burning Ground. Wei Xiaobao picked up a piece of wood charcoal and drew a sparrow on a piece of wood. He gathered some rocks and made a pile, and then stuck the piece of wood on the pile of rocks.

“Someone’s coming!” the nun in white suddenly said.

The Burning Ground was the place where the waste from the Palace was burned; it was very unusual that someone would come over here in the middle of the night. Wei Xiaobao pulled the nun in white’s hand and took her hiding behind a large earthen jar. They heard the intermittent sound of footsteps; somebody was hurrying over. The person stood still while scanning the area, and was slightly startled to see the wooden piece Wei Xiaobao stuck onto the pile of rocks. Immediately she came over and picked it up. As soon as the person turned around, the moonlight shone on her face. Recognizing her face, Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted to see that it was indeed Tao Hongying.

“*Gugu*,” he called out, “I am here,” and walked out from behind the earthen jar.

Tao Hongying rushed forward to meet him; holding her arms around him, she happily said, “Good child, finally you are here. Every night I come here to take a look, hoping that I may see your face earlier.

"*Gugu*," Wei Xiaobao said, "There's someone here who wants to see you."

Tao Hongying was slightly taken aback; releasing her embrace, she asked, "Who is it?"

The nun in white stood up and said in a low voice, "Hongying, you … do you still recognize me?"

Tao Hongying did not expect there was someone else behind the earthen jar; she was startled and retreated three steps back, her right hand reached to her waist to draw a dagger. "Who … who are you?" she asked.

The nun in white sighed and said, "Turns out you don't recognize me anymore."

Tao Hongying said, "I … I can't see your face; you … you are …"

The nun in white slightly turned her body sideways, so that the moonlight shone on half of her face. She said in low voice, "Your appearance has also changed a lot."

With a trembling voice Tao Hongying said, "You are … you are …" Suddenly she threw her dagger away and called out, "Princess, is it you? I … I …" Throwing herself forward, she embraced the nun in white's legs. Prostrating herself on the ground, she sobbed, "Princess, to be able to see you today, I … even if I have to die instantly, I … I will die happy."

As soon as he heard the word 'Princess', to say that Wei Xiaobao was mildly surprised was a gross understatement. But immediately he recalled the story Tao Hongying had told him: she was a palace maid serving the previous dynasty, and all along had been attending Princess Chang. When the Roaming King Li Zicheng broke into Beijing, with a sword in his hand Chongzhen wanted to kill Princess Chang, but chopped her arm instead. In that confusion Tao Hongying passed out. By the time she regained her consciousness, the Emperor and the Princess had disappeared.

Wei Xiaobao cast a glance toward the nun in white, thinking, "She lost an arm, and she is very familiar with the situation of the Palace, plus she wept at the Kun Ning Palace; I should have guessed it early on. She appears this noble, how could she be a palace maid? I realized it only now; I am really stupid."

He heard the nun in white asked, “Have you always lived in the Palace these days?”

Still sobbing, Tao Hongying replied, “Yes.”

The nun in white said, “This child says that you have assassinated the Tatars’ Empress Dowager; that’s very good. It’s just that … that you put yourself in trouble.” Speaking to this point, she could not stop the tears from streaming down her face.

Tao Hongying said, “Princess has a ‘ten-thousand gold body’, you must not stay in here. Let your servant escort you out of the Palace right away.”

The nun in white sighed and said, “I have not been a princess for a long time.”

“No, no,” Tao Hongying said, “In your servant’s heart, you are a princess forever, you are my Princess Chang.”

The nun in white let out a mournful laugh. Under the moonlight, the tears on her cheek glistened, making the laughter even more dismal. She said slowly, “Does anybody live in Ning Shou [peaceful long life] Palace nowadays? I want to take a look.”

Tao Hongying said, “Ning Shou Palace … nowadays is … is the residence of Tatars’ Princess Jianning. It’s just that these days, Tatars’ Emperor, Empress Dowager and the Princess are not in the Palace; I don’t know where they are. There are only several palace maids and court eunuchs remain in Ning Shou Palace; let your servant kill them all. Princess, please.” Ning Shou Palace was the princess’ personal quarter; it was precisely this Princess Changping of the Great Ming’s former residence.

The nun in white said, “You don’t need to kill anybody. We are only going to take a look.”

“Yes,” Tao Hongying said. She did not know that Princess Changping had mastered exceedingly good, arhat-like martial art; she thought that Wei Xiaobao brought her into the Palace in disguise. Having met her former master by accident, her heart was excited, she would not think twice about rushing onto a mountain of blades or going into a deep fryer for her, let alone only going to the Princess’ old residence.

Immediately the three of them went north, out of the Xi Tie [western iron] Gate, turned east passed the Shun Zhen [loyal] Gate, through Bei Wu Suo [northern five-building], the tea storehouse, arriving outside the Ning Shou Palace.

In a low voice Tao Hongying said, “Let your servant drive off the palace maids and the eunuchs.”

“No need,” the nun in white said. Stretching out her hand, she pushed the gate, the latch broke with only a light noise. The palace gate opened, the nun in white walked in.

Although the dynasty had changed, the Palace’s custom did not change at all. Since Ning Shou Palace was the nun in white’s old home, she knew very well where the palace maids and the court eunuchs were. Without waking up anybody, she sealed their acupoints one by one to make them lose their consciousness, before going to the princess’ bedroom.

Tao Hongying was pleasantly surprised. “Princess,” she said, “I did not expect your martial art skill to be this superb!”

The nun in white sat on the bed, thinking back of what had happened here more than twenty years ago, where once she drew a portrait of someone, and had shared the same pillow with this someone. And now the world was occupied by the Tatars, her own bedroom was occupied by a Tatar princess, while that someone was far away, in a remote area tens of thousand *li* away; this life, this age, it would be hard for them to meet each other again.

[Author’s note: for the story of Princess Changping of the Great Ming, please read my unworthy manuscript ‘Sword Stained with Royal Blood’.]

Tao Hongying and Wei Xiaobao waited on her on the side without making any noise. After quite a long time, the nun in white sighed and gravely said, “Light the candle.”

“Yes,” Tao Hongying said, and lit the candle.

They saw the wall, the table and chair, were full of sabers, swords, whips and other weapons, just like a room of a warrior; it did not look like a ‘golden branch, jade leaves’ princess’ bedroom at all.

The nun in white said, “Turns out this princess is also good at martial arts.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “This Tatar princess has a very strange character; not only she loves to beat people, she also likes people beating her. But her martial art skill is sloppy and ordinary, she can’t even beat me.” He cast a glance toward the bed, recalling the day when he hid underneath the Princess’ quilt, and was seized by the Empress Dowager. If not for the Five-Dragon-Command fell down from his pocket, right now he would be a little eunuch in the underworld, serving Yanluo Wang’s princess.

The nun in white said in a soft voice, “My paintings, my books; did she throw everything away?”

“Yes,” Tao Hongying replied, “I am afraid that barbarian woman only knows several characters, what does she know about paintings and books?”

The nun in white raised her left arm, her sleeve waved lightly, the candle light was extinguished immediately. She said, “Come with me out of the Palace.”

“Yes,” Tao Hongying replied. And then she remembered something, “Princess,” she said, “Your skill is this superb, if you catch the Tatar Empress Dowager, you could compel her to hand over those several copies of sutra, then you could break the Tatars’ dragon vein.”

“What sutra? What Tatars’ dragon vein?” the nun in white asked.

Thereupon Tao Hongying briefly narrated the origin of the eight copies of the Forty-two-chapter Sutra. The nun in white silently listened to the end, and then after thinking deeply for half a day she said, “If those eight copies of sutra really hide such a great secret, with which we can break the Tatars’ dragon vein, then nothing can be better than that. When the Tatar Empress Dowager returns to the Palace, we will come again.”

The three of them left Ning Shou Palace, went out the Imperial Palace via the same wall bordering the northern thirteen-row, [Anybody familiar with the Forbidden City please feel free to jump in and help me out with these names] and returned to the inn to rest. Tao Hongying and the nun in white stayed in one room. After being separated for more than twenty years, tonight unexpectedly she could share the same room same bed with her former master, Tao Hongying was delighted beyond measure; how could she fall asleep again for the rest of

the night?

Wei Xiaobao, on the other hand, was thinking, “I have five copies of sutra in my hands, one copy is in the Emperor’s hands, while the other two copies are unknown. This Princess *Shitai* wants to force the old wh0re to hand over the sutra; naturally she won’t be able to give her anything. I’d better in a few words urge Princess *Shitai* to kill her, and thus get rid of the nail in His Majesty’s and my eyes.”

For the next several days, the nun in white and Tao Hongying stayed in the inn without putting a foot outside. Every day Wei Xiaobao went out and asked around whether the Emperor had returned to the Palace. By the morning of the seventh day, he saw Prince Kang, Songgotu, Dolong, and the others leading a large group of Imperial Bodyguards, marching around several large sedan chairs, entering the Palace. Hence he knew the Emperor had returned. Sure enough, not too long afterwards, he saw parties of royal princes [qin wang bei lei] and ministers of various departments entering the Imperial Palace one after another, to pay their respects and wish the holy sage well.

Wei Xiaobao returned to the inn to report. “Very good,” the nun in white said, “I am going into the Palace tonight. Since the Tatar Emperor has returned, the security must be several times more strict than the last time. The two of you better stay in the inn and wait for me.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Princess *Shitai*, I am coming with you.”

Tao Hongying also said, “Your servant wishes to follow Princess. Your servant and this child is well-acquainted with the topography of the Palace, we won’t be in any danger.” Since she had been reunited with her former master, she was unwilling to part with her even for a single step, no matter what. The nun in white nodded, consenting to their request.

That night the three of them entered the Palace via the same route, and went straight to Ci Ning Palace [compassionate and peaceful] where the Empress Dowager resided. All around was extremely quiet, the nun in white led them circling around to the back of the palace. Grabbing Wei Xiaobao’s lower back, she leaped over the wall and landed without making any sound. When Tao Hongying leaped, the nun in white supported her waist with her left sleeve so

that when she landed, she also did not make any noise.

Wei Xiaobao pointed to the side window of the Empress Dowager's bedroom, indicating that that was where the Empress Dowager lived, and then he led them into the back garden. It was the dwelling place of Ci Ning Palace's palace maids. They saw pale yellow light from all three windows of the building. The nun in white peeked inside from a crack on the window and saw a dozen or so palace maids were sitting side-by-side on a bench, each one lowered her head and knitted her eyebrows, unmoving as if they were in meditation. The nun in white quietly lifted up the curtain and entered the Empress Dowager's bedroom. Wei Xiaobao and Tao Hongying followed her in.

Four red candles were shining on the table, but there was nobody inside. Tao Hongying said in a low voice, "Your servant has opened three suitcases and looked all-around the drawers, but did not even see the sutra's shadow; that's when the Tatar Empress Dowager and that fake palace maid walked in … Aiyo, somebody's coming!"

Wei Xiaobao gave her sleeve a tug and hastily he ducked behind the bed. The nun in white nodded, with Tao Hongying she also hid behind the bed. They heard a female voice outside the room, "Ma, I have completed the task you asked me to do, what are you going to give me as a reward?" It was Princess Jianning's voice.

And then they heard the Empress Dowager's voice, "Ma sent you to do a small task, and you are asking for a reward. How unreasonable is that?" While talking, the two of them entered the bedroom.

Princess Jianning said, "Aiyo, so that was a small task? If *Huangdi Gege* found out, he would know that I took it; he would definitely be raging mad."

The Empress Dowager sat down and said, "Just a Buddhist scripture, what's the big deal? We went to Mount Wutai to offer sacrifice, it was for the purpose of asking the Bodhisattva to bless and protect. When we return to the Palace, we must continue chanting the sutras and praying to Buddha, only then will the Bodhisattva be happy."

The Princess said, "If it's not a big deal, then I can tell *Huangdi Gege* that you sent me to get his Forty-two-chapter Sutra, to be used for chanting the sutras

and praying to Buddha, to ask the Bodhisattva to bless and protect his country so that it prospers and the people at peace, and *Huangdi Gege* will live a long, long live."

Wei Xiaobao was delighted. "Wonderful," he mused, "Turns out you sent the Princess to steal the sutra." But then he realized that his luck was not good; if he did not come with the nun in white this time, most likely the sutra will fall into his hands, but now he had no hope.

The Empress Dowager said, "You have agreed. If the Emperor came to ask me, I will deny everything. Little child babbling nonsense, which one he will believe?"

Princess Jianning said, "Aiyo, Ma, you want to renege on your words? The sutra is obviously in here."

The Empress Dowager sneered and said, "That's easy. I will simply toss it into the stove and have it burned."

The Princess laughed and said, "Alright, alright. I always say that I can't win against you. Stingy mother, if you don't want to reward me, then so be it; why did you bully your daughter?"

"You already have everything, what reward might you want from me?" Empress Dowager asked.

"I have everything, only one thing's lacking," the Princess replied.

"What's lacking?" Empress Dowager asked.

"I lack a little eunuch to accompany me playing," the Princess said.

The Empress Dowager laughed. "Little eunuch," she said, "There are hundreds of them in the Palace; if you are lacking one who can accompany you playing, just send for one; and you are still dissatisfied?"

"No," the princess said, "Those little eunuchs are extremely stupid, they are not fun at all. I want the little eunuch who's serving *Huangdi Gege*, Xiao Guizi …"

Wei Xiaobao's heart was shaken, "Unexpectedly this dead girl still remembers me," he mused, "Accompanying her playing is not an easy task. Once I am not careful, *laozi* will deliver my old life."

He heard the princess continued, "I asked *Huangdi Gege*, he said that he had

sent Xiao Guizi out of the Capital on a mission. But it's been so long and he is not back yet. Ma, go talk to the Emperor, tell him to give Xiao Guizi to me."

Wei Xiaobao cursed her in his heart, "Demon girl, she wants to get me. If *laozi* fell into your hands, if in a day I don't have seventeen, eighteen cuts and bruises, *laozi* will change my surname to yours. Aiyo, what's the Princess' surname? Princess has the same surname as the young emperor, what's the Emperor's real surname? *Laozi* is really muddle-headed, I don't know these things."

The Empress Dowager said, "The Emperor sent Xiao Guizi on a mission; how did you know? What mission?"

"I actually know this one," Princess Jianning said, "I heard the Imperial Bodyguards said that Xiao Guizi is on Mount Wutai."

"Ah!" the Empress Dowager cried out softly, "He … he is on Mount Wutai? How come we did not see him this time?"

The Princess said, "It was only after we were back at the Palace that I heard the Imperial Bodyguards mentioning about it, but I don't know what mission *Huangdi Gege* was sending him for. I heard the Imperial Bodyguards were saying that *Huangdi Gege* has given him another promotion."

"Hm," the Empress Dowager was silent for half a day. "Very well," she said, "As soon as he is back at the Palace, I will talk to the Emperor." She sounded indifferent, apparently she did not really mean what she said. "It's late," she said, "Go back and sleep."

"Ma," the Princess said, "I am not coming back, I want to sleep with you."

"You are not a baby," the Empress Dowager said, "Why don't you want to go back to your room?"

"My room is haunted," the Princess said, "I am scared!"

"Nonsense!" the Empress Dowager said, "What do you mean haunted?"

"Ma, really," the Princess said, "My palace's palace maids and eunuchs all said that a few nights ago everybody was bewitched; when they went to sleep, they slept straight to midday of the second day before they finally woke up, and everybody had a nightmare."

“How can there be such thing?” the Empress Dowager said, “Don’t listen to the servants’ nonsense. When we are not in the Palace, the servants are scared, hence they are terribly suspicious and fearful [orig. ‘suspect the gods and suspect the ghosts’]. Quickly go back.” The Princess did not dare to say anything else; she wished her well and then withdrew.

The Empress Dowager sat by the table with her cheek resting on her palm. She stared blankly at the candle flame, lost in thought. After a long time, she turned her head around and saw two shadows on the wall; the shadows were dancing following the flickering candle light. She thought it was due to her dimmed vision. But when she focused her attention, she still saw two shadows; one was her own, the other shadow was right next to her own. Her shock was not a small matter; thinking that she had killed many people, she could not stop the hair on her body to stand up. Although she knew martial art, unexpectedly she did not dare to turn her head around.

After quite a while, she thought, “Ghosts do not have shadow, if it has shadow, it is not ghost.” But when she held her breath to listen, to her surprise, she did not hear the second person breathing by her side. She was so scared that her hands and feet went weak, she was unable to move a single step. Staring at two shadows on the wall, she almost fainted.

Suddenly she heard a faint breathing behind the head; she was delighted, and instantly turned her head around. She saw a nun wearing white clothes was sitting on the table opposite to her, her pair of beautiful eyes was staring at her, her appearance was delicate and pretty, but her expression was wooden; momentarily she could not tell whether this nun was a person or a ghost.

With a trembling voice the Empress Dowager said, “You … who are you? Why … why are you here?”

The nun in white did not answer. A moment later, she coldly said, “Who are you? Why are you here?”

Hearing her speaking, the Empress Dowager’s fright diminished somewhat. “This is the inner courtyard of the Imperial Palace,” she said, “You … how dare you?”

The nun in white coldly said, “You’re right, this is the inner courtyard of the

Imperial Palace. What ‘thing’ are you? How dare you come in here?”

The Empress Dowager angrily said, “I am the Empress Dowager; a witch from what place are you?”

The nun in white reached out and placed her right hand on the Forty-two-chapter Sutra in front of the Empress Dowager, and slowly took it. “Take off your hand!” the Empress Dowager shouted. ‘Whoosh!’ she sent a strike toward her face.

The nun in white flipped her right hand and met her palm head-on. The Empress Dowager staggered, she was forced to leave her chair and stand up. “Good,” she hissed, “Turns out you are a Wulin martial art master.” Since she now know that the opponent was a human and not a ghost, her fear was gone. ‘Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!’ she sent out four palm strikes in succession.

The nun in white was still sitting on the chair; without standing up, she calmly put the sutra in her pocket first before lifting up her palm to neutralize the Empress Dowager’s four attacks one by one. Seeing her taking the sutra, the Empress Dowager was alarmed and angered at the same time. Increasing the strength of her palm, successively she sent out seven, eight more moves rapidly. The nun in white parried the attacks one by one, but all along she did not counterattack. The Empress Dowager reached down along her right leg, a short blade, glittering like frost and snow suddenly appeared in her hand.

Wei Xiaobao was watching with rapt attention; he saw the blade in the Empress Dowager’s hand was the platinum steel alloy Emei Sting with which she killed Hai Dafu the other day. With the weapon in her hand, her courage soared, she repeatedly stabbed the nun in white. A series of whooshing noise was heard, the palm hacked, the sting stabbed, the bedroom was filled with flickering white lights. Wei Xiaobao said in a low voice, “Let me get out to warn her not to harm *Shitai*.”

Tao Hongying pulled him down and said in a low voice, “No need!”

They saw the nun in white was still sitting steadily on the chair, the forefinger of her right hand pierced to the east and jabbed to the west, warding off the Empress Dowager’s swift and fierce attacks one by one. The Empress Dowager

abruptly advanced and abruptly retreated, she abruptly leaped up and abruptly crouched down with extreme speed; the wind from her palms forced the flame of the four candles to lean backward. Suddenly the room darkened, from four candles, two went out. A few more stances later, the other two also went out.

In the darkness, the sound of palms seemed louder, intermingled with the Empress Dowager's heavy breathing. Suddenly they heard the nun in white's cold voice, "You are the Empress Dowager, where did you learn martial art from?"

The Empress Dowager did not answer, but still doing her utmost to attack. Suddenly 'slap, slap, slap, slap', there were four ringing slapping noise, apparently the Empress Dowager was slapped on her face four times; followed by an 'Ah!' as she cried out with a voice brimming with fury mixed with panic. After this sudden burst of noise, the room went completely silent.

In the darkness, suddenly there was a spark, as the nun in white lighted the flint [orig. 'fire booklet'] in her hand. The Empress Dowager kneeled stiffly in front of her, unmoving. Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted, "The old wh0re must be killed today," he thought.

They saw the nun in white lightly tossed the flint upward, the flame flew several *chi* up, her left sleeve waved, the flint was carried by the wind generated by the sleeve, it flew slowly toward the candle, unexpectedly the four candles were lighted one by one, as if an invisible hand was holding the flint. The nun in white waved her sleeve inward, a burst of puling force sucked the flint back to her, which she received with her right hand. After gently blowing off the fire, she put the flint back into her bosom. Wei Xiaobao was dumbstruck in watching this; in his heart he was prostrating himself in admiration.

The Empress Dowager's acupoints were sealed that she was kneeling on the floor, her face alternated between swollen-colored purple and deathly pale as she said in a low voice, "Just kill me quickly; torturing others like this is not the conduct of a martial art master."

"That's strange," the nun in white said, "Your martial art skill is from the Snake Island. How can a person with such a noble rank deep inside the Palace have any relationship with the *Shen Long Jiao* [Divine Dragon Cult]?"

Wei Xiaobao was secretly amazed; he thought that this Shitai did not seem to know anything, but next time he lied to her, he must be extra careful.

The Empress Dowager said, “I don’t know anything about *Shen Long Jiao*. My negligible martial art skill was taught by a eunuch in the Palace.”

“Eunuch?” the nun in white said, “How can a eunuch in the Imperial Palace have any relation with *Shen Long Jiao*? What’s his name?”

“He is called Hai Dafu,” the Empress Dowager replied, “He has died a long time ago.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed heartily in his heart; he mused, “The old wh0re talks utter rubbish; if she knew that I am hiding in here, she would not dare to broadcast such a gargantuan lie.”

“Hai Dafu?” the nun in white muttered to herself, “I have never heard of such character. Just now you attacked me with seven palm strikes in succession, the power behind your palm was dark and sinister; what kind of palm technique was that?”

The Empress Dowager said, “According to my Shifu, it was Wudang Pai martial art; it is called … it is called the Soft Cloud Palm.”

The nun in white shook her head. “No, it’s not,” she said, “It was the ‘Transforming Bones Soft Palm’. Wudang Pai is a prestigious upright sect, how can they have such a sinister and ruthless skill like that?”

“*Shitai* is right,” the Empress Dowager said, “It was what Shifu told me. I … I did not know that.” Seeing the nun in white’s profound martial art skill and her extensive knowledge, the reverence in her heart grew; the way she talked was also more polite.

The nun in white asked, “Using this kind of palm technique, how many people have you harmed?”

The Empress Dowager replied, “I … junior has always been deep in the Palace; training martial art is only to strengthen my body, I have never injured a single person.”

“Shameless,” Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, “Blowing your horn loudly does

not need any capital."

He heard she continued, "*Shitai*, please understand, junior has always had others to protect me, in all my life I have never fought anybody. Fighting against *Shitai* tonight was the very first time. The martial art that junior learned has never been used the least bit."

The nun in white smiled and said, "Your martial art skill can be considered not bad at all."

The Empress Dowager said, "Junior is a frog at the bottom of a well; if I did not see *Shitai*'s exceptional divine skill, how would I know that the world is so big?"

"Oh," the nun in white said, "That eunuch Hai Dafu, when did he die? Who killed him?"

The Empress Dowager said, "He … he passed away many years ago, he died of illness because of his age."

The nun in white said, "Although you yourself have not done any evil, but you, Manchurian Tatars occupy our Great Ming's rivers and mountains, you have caused the death of our Great Ming's Son of Heaven. You are the first Tatar Emperor's wife, the second Tatar Emperor's mother; I can't spare you."

The Empress Dowager was shocked; with a trembling voice she said, "*Shi … Shitai*, junior did not give birth to the current Emperor. His birth mother was Empress Xiao Kang, who had died a long time ago."

The nun in white nodded. "So that's how it is," she said, "But as Shunzhi's wife, when he massacred thousands upon thousands Han people, why didn't you persuade him even for one sentence?"

The Empress Dowager said, "*Shitai*, please understand, the former Emperor only doted on that foxy charmer Imperial Concubine Dong'e [Donggo]; it was difficult for junior to even see the Emperor. It is truly beyond my ability to persuade him."

The nun in white silently contemplated for a while; and then she said, "What you said is not without reason. I won't kill you today …"

The Empress Dowager said, "Thank you very much *Shitai*, for your kindness in

not killing me. From now on junior will surely chant the sutra and pray to Buddha daily. That … that Buddhist scripture, would *Shitai* return it to me?"

"What do you want that copy of Forty-two-chapter Sutra for?" the nun in white asked.

The Empress Dowager said, "Junior will reverently worship Buddha, from now on, for the rest of my years, I will chant the sutra day and night."

The nun in white said, "Forty-two-chapter Sutra is a very common scripture, no matter which temple or monastery you go, you will find at least ten or eight copies; why do you insist on having this copy?"

The Empress Dowager said, "*Shitai* did not know it. This sutra was the one the late Emperor read aloud every day and evening in the past; junior do not forget old affection, I regard this sutra as the late Emperor."

"That's not right," the nun in white said, "When you are chanting the sutra to worship Buddha, your heart and mind must be empty, you must not have the slightest degree of entanglement with predestined love. When you are chanting the sutra while remembering your deceased husband, what good will that bring?"

"Thank you *Shitai*, for giving directions," the Empress Dowager said, "It's just that … it's just that junior is simple-minded, I cannot break away from old entanglement."

A mysterious gleam suddenly appeared in the nun in white's eyes; she asked, "What exactly is the strange thing about this sutra? Tell me truthfully."

The Empress Dowager said, "Really … really it is junior's infatuation. Although the Late Emperor did not treat junior well, but all along I cannot forget him. Seeing this sutra every day somewhat eases up the pain of missing him."

The nun in white sighed and said, "Since you persist in your own wrong doings and unwilling to tell the truth, it is entirely up to you." Her left sleeve flicked, the tip of the sleeve struck the Empress Dowager's body, the sealed acupoints immediately opened.

The Empress Dowager said, "Thank you Shitai for showing mercy!" And she kowtowed before standing up.

The nun in white said, “I did not show any mercy. After your ‘Transforming Bones Soft Palm’ hit someone, then what happen?”

The Empress Dowager said, “That eunuch had never told me, he only said that this palm technique is very fierce, not too many people in the world can resist it.”

“Hm,” the nun in white said, “Just now you attacked me with seven palm strikes, I did not resist it at all; I only return the palm power of those seven ‘Transforming Bones Soft Palm’. Where it came from is where it would return. Since the palm power came from you, then it returned to you. This matter is your own doing, you are reaping what you have sown, you must not blame anybody else.”

The Empress Dowager could not stop her soul from flying out of her body. Naturally she knew very well the fierceness of this ‘Transforming Bones Soft Palm’; when one was hit with this palm power, all the bones in one’s body would turn soft, the bones would break into one *cun* segments [approx. 1 inch], until finally the entire body would be like silk floss, so that one could not even lift one finger. She had struck Imperial Concubine Dong’e, her sister, and Imperial Concubine Dong’e’s son, Prince Rong, with this palm power. She had witnessed with her own eyes the miserable condition of these three people at the point of their death. This nun in white’s martial art skill was this superb, plus the ability to return the enemy’s palm power to the enemy’s body was quite common in the martial art study, so her statement must not be false. This kind of person would indeed be able to return the seven palm strikes of ‘Transforming Bones Soft Palm’ onto her body.

When she attacked just now, for fear that her power was not fierce enough, she had exhausted her entire strength. Just one palm strike would be unendurable, much less seven palm strikes in a row? In that instant she was extremely frightened; dropping on her knees, she called out, “*Shitai*, please save my life.”

The nun in white sighed and said, “You have brought it upon yourself, you must resolve it yourself, other people are powerless.”

The Empress Dowager kowtowed and said, “I am still hoping for *Shitai*’s mercy,

please give me direction to the bright road."

The nun in white said, "You conceal everything, you are unwilling to tell the truth. The bright road is right in front of your eyes, yet you are unwilling to take; who are you going to blame? Even if I have mercy in my heart, it is only for my fellow Han people. You are a Tatar Manchu woman, there is a deep enmity between you and me; by not killing you with my own hand, I have already shown you extreme mercy." Finished speaking, she stood up.

The Empress Dowager knew the opportunity was fleeting; as soon as this person left, the several days before her own death would be unspeakably unbearable. In that split second, the sight of Imperial Concubine Dong'e and her sister's ten thousand anguish at the death's door, where they were tossing about on the bed in excruciating pain, appeared in her eyes. She could not help but shivering all over. "*Shi … Shitai*," she called out, "I am not a Tatar, I am … I am …"

"You are what?" the nun in white asked.

The Empress Dowager said, "I am … I am … a Han."

"Up to this point you are still spouting nonsense," the nun in white said, "How can a Han fill the post of Tatar Empress?"

"I am not talking nonsense," the Empress Dowager replied, "The current Emperor's birth mother came from Tong Jiashi, her father Tong Tulai was from Han army banner, he was a Han."

The nun in white said, "She was a nobility because of giving birth to a son; I heard that she was originally an imperial concubine, not the Empress at all. She had never been an empress, it was after her son became the Emperor that she was granted the posthumous title as the Empress."

With bowed head the Empress Dowager said, "Yes." Seeing the nun in white took a step to leave, she anxiously said, "Shitai, I am really a Han; I … I hate the Tatars to the bones."

"And why is that?" the nun in white asked.

The Empress Dowager said, "This is a very big secret, I … I shouldn't say it, but … but …"

The nun in white said, “Since you shouldn’t say it, then don’t say it.”

At this very moment the Empress Dowager was like having the fire burned her eyebrows; if she blew this matter, the rest would not matter anymore. Clenching her teeth, she said, “I am a fake Empress Dowager, I … I am not the real Empress Dowager!”

As soon as she said that, no doubt the nun in white was shocked, but Wei Xiaobao who was hiding behind the bed was even more shocked. The nun in white slowly sank back down into the chair and asked, “What do you mean you are a fake?”

The Empress Dowager said, “My father and mother were harmed by the Tatars, I have mortal hatred toward the Tatars. I was forced to enter the Palace to be a palace maid, to serve the Empress. Afterwards … afterwards I impersonated the Empress.”

The more Wei Xiaobao listened, the more he was amazed, he thought, “This old wh0re courage in telling lies is indeed not small, she even dares to speak this kind of ridiculous talk. Blabbering nonsense like that, the old wh0re has not even entered my White Dragon Gate, yet she has completely mastered the *Zhangmenshi* [emissary to the sect leader, see Chapter 20] Little White Dragon’s consummate skill in blowing his horn. I entered the Palace posing as a little eunuch, could it be that she really entered the Palace posing as the Empress Dowager?”

He heard the Empress Dowager said, “The real Empress Dowager is a Manchu, her surname is Borjigit [bo’er ji ji te], the daughter of Horqin [ke’er qin] Beilei [royal prince]. Junior’s father is surnamed Mao, he was a Han from Hangzhou, Zhejiang, a Great General of the Great Ming, Mao Wenlong. Junior’s name is Mao Dongzhu [lit. eastern pearl].”

The nun in white was startled. “You are Mao Wenlong’s daughter?” she asked, “The Mao Wenlong who guarded the Pi [lit. leather/skin/fur] Island?”

“Exactly,” the Empress Dowager replied, “My father fought the Tatars for many years; later on he was killed by the Great Commander Yuan Chonghuan. Actually … actually it was due to the Tatars’ stratagem of sowing dissension.”

“Oh,” the nun in white said, “This is indeed a fantastic story. How can you

impersonate the Empress Dowager for many years without anybody discovering it?”

The Empress Dowager said, “Junior has served the Empress for many years. I managed to learn her speech intonation, her expressions and mannerism rather well. This facial appearance of mine is also fake.” While saying that, she walked to the bedside desk and picked up an embroidered handkerchief, which she then soaked it with the water inside a golden case; and then she wiped her face rigorously. She also peeled off two pieces of human-skin-like substance from her cheeks. Her facial appearance immediately changed completely. Originally her face was round and rather plump, suddenly it turned into melon-seed shape and quite thin, her eye sockets were rather deep.

“Ah!” the nun in white exclaimed; she was very shocked. “Indeed your appearance is greatly different.” After hesitating for a moment, she asked, “But impersonating the Empress was not an easy matter after all. Are you saying that even the palace maids who were very close to the Empress did not recognize you? What about your husband?”

“My husband?” the Empress Dowager said, “The late Emperor only doted on that foxy charmer Imperial Concubine Dong’e, one person. In the last several years, he had never spent even one night in the Empress’ place here. He had never given the real Empress a look, naturally he did not give the fake empress any look at all.” Her voice was filled with bitterness and pain; she also said, “Let’s not mention that I impersonated her really well, even if my look was completely different, how could he know?”

The nun in white nodded slightly; she asked, “So those palace maids and court eunuchs who served the Empress also did not recognize you?”

The Empress Dowager said, “As soon as junior has the Empress under my control, I had her to change all the palace maids and court eunuchs of the Ci Ning Palace with the new ones. I very seldom went out, when I occasionally had to, according the Palace’s regulations, palace maids and court eunuchs would not dare to look at me directly. Even if they stole a look from a distance, how could they tell the fake from the real?”

The nun in white suddenly remembered something. “That’s not right,” she

said, “You said the Old Emperor had never paid attention to you, but … but you gave birth to the Princess.”

“That girl is not the Emperor’s,” the Empress Dowager said, “Her father was a Han; sometimes he would sneak into the Palace to see me, dressed as a palace maid. This man … not too long ago he met a misfortune … unfortunately he died of illness.”

Tao Hongying pinched Wei Xiaobao’s palm; they both thought, “There was indeed a man who dressed as a palace maid, but he did not die of illness.”

Wei Xiaobao also thought, “No wonder the Princess is so barbarous in creating trouble, turns out she is a b@stard daughter of that fake palace maid. The Old Emperor is benevolent and gentle, his daughter cannot have that kind of manner.”

The nun in white thought, “You suddenly got pregnant and gave birth to a daughter, if the Old Emperor did not have any sexual intercourse with you, how could he not grow suspicious?” It’s just that it was kind of private question, plus she left home to be a nun when she was still virgin, so she could not ask the question. She considered further, “Since this woman has been deliberately and methodically thinking it through to impersonate the Empress, as soon as she found out that she was pregnant, she would find a way to cover it up; I need not examine her in details.” Shaking her head, she said, “All along you have not been telling the truth.”

The Empress Dowager anxiously said, “Senior, even in a shameful matter like that I have told you the truth, what else do I dare to conceal from you?”

The nun in white said, “If that’s the case, then you must have killed the real Empress. Your hands must be reeking with quite a bit of blood.”

The Empress Dowager said, “Junior chants the sutras and worship Buddha; although I harbor deep hatred toward the Tatars, I do not dare to kill people carelessly. The real Empress Dowager is still alive and well.”

This statement was completely beyond the three people’s, in front and behind the bed, anticipation. “She is still alive?” the nun in white asked, “Aren’t you afraid she might reveal your secret?”

The Empress Dowager walked to the front of a big hanging rug. She pulled a woolen cord next to it, the hanging rug slowly rolled up, revealing two-leaved wardrobe door. From her bosom the Empress Dowager fished a golden key, and opened the lock of the wardrobe door. When she opened the wardrobe door, everybody could see a woman was reclining inside, her body was covered in embroidered quilt.

The nun in white softly exclaimed in shock. “She … she is the real Empress Dowager?” she asked.

The Empress Dowager said, “Senior, please look at her appearance,” while fetching a candle-holder and let the candlelight illuminating the woman’s face.

The nun in white saw that the woman’s countenance was extremely wan and sallow, there was not the least bit trace of blood on it, but her facial features were extremely similar to the fake Empress Dowager before she took off her disguise.

The woman slowly opened her eyes, but immediately closed them again. She said in a low voice, “I won’t tell you. You … you kill me quickly.”

The Empress Dowager said, “I have never killed anybody, how can I kill you?” While saying that, she closed the wardrobe door and let down the hanging rug.

“You have her locked up in here for many years?” the nun in white asked.

“Yes,” the Empress Dowager replied.

“What do you press her to tell you?” the nun in white asked, “It is because she firmly refused to tell you that you have kept her alive until today. As soon as she tells you, you will immediately kill her, will you not?”

“No, no,” the Empress Dowager replied, “Junior knew that Buddhist teaching admonishes against taking life. I often fast and eat vegetarian dishes, I can’t possibly harm her life.”

“Humph,” the nun in white snorted, “You think I am a three-year-old child that doesn’t understand your thought? This woman is locked up in here, she poses a danger to you at all times, you did not kill her, there must be an important scheme here. If she shouted from inside the wardrobe, won’t your plot fall through and stand exposed immediately?”

“She won’t dare to shout,” the Empress Dowager said, “I told her that if this secret was leaked, I would kill the Old Emperor first; and then when the Old Emperor died, I told her I would kill the young Emperor. This Tatar woman is really loyal and devoted to those two Emperors, she won’t let them receive any harm.”

“What is it exactly that you wanted her to tell you?” the nun in white asked, “She did not want to speak, why didn’t you use the Emperor’s life to threaten her?”

The Empress Dowager said, “She told me that if I harmed the Emperor, she would immediately go on a hunger strike to kill herself. She does not stop eating only because I promised her I won’t harm the Emperor.”

The nun in white considered this matter carefully: these two real and fake Empress Dowager, one threatens by killing herself by going on a hunger strike, the other threatens by harming the Emperor, both are afraid of the other, they are locked in a stalemate for many years; it is indeed a deadlock. It is reasonable to say that the real Empress Dowager is also a dangerous character, nothing of her should be allowed to remain, after she is killed, her corpse must be burned to ashes, so that she won’t leave even half a trace. Unexpectedly she is still allowed to live in the Palace, it must be because she is still holding on to a big secret, which all along she refuses to tell. It is obvious that this secret must be very important. She asked, “My original question to you, you keep talking about this and that, but never give me a straight answer. What exactly did you force her to tell you?”

“Yes, yes,” the Empress Dowager said, “This big secret concerns the rise and fall of the Tatars. The Tatars’ dragon flourished in Liaodong (Peninsula); they managed to occupy our Great Ming’s world because their ancestors’ *feng shui* was exceedingly good. Junior found out that on the Changbai Mountain of Liaodong Peninsula, there is a dragon vein of the Aisin Gioro[50] Clan. By digging and breaking this dragon vein, not only we can recover the Han family’s mountains and rivers, everything that the Tatars have inside the pass will be destroyed as well.”

The nun in white nodded; thinking that this story corresponds with what Tao

Hongying had told her earlier. She asked, “Where is the location of this Dragon Vein?”

“That is exactly the big secret,” the Empress Dowager replied, “When the late Emperor died, the young Emperor was still little, he did not understand anything, while Imperial Concubine Dong’e, whom he most doted on, had already died before him; therefore, he told this big secret to the Empress, telling her to wait until the young Emperor grew up, and then she is supposed to inform him. At that time junior was the palace maid serving the Empress, I overheard the late Emperor and the Empress’ conversation, but I was unable to hear the whole thing. I only want to ascertain this matter, and then assemble a group of warriors with aspiration, to go to Changbai Mountain to break the dragon vein, and then my Great Ming’s world might recover.”

The nun in white said doubtfully, “The matter of *feng shui* and dragon vein is vague, with nothing to support it; it is very difficult to believe. Our Great Ming lost the world because the successive dynasties’ administration was bad, they treated the common people harshly, to such an extent that the government official drove the people to revolt. I understood this truth clearly only after I travelled to the four winds these past several years.”

“Yes,” the Empress Dowager said, “*Shitai* understands this affair thoroughly, although it is beyond junior’s reach. However, in order to recover our Great Ming’s world, I would rather believe the matter of *feng shui* and dragon vein than not believe it at all. If we can dig the dragon vein, the worst that can happen is that we don’t do the Tatars any damage. However, if this matter is effective for real, won’t we be able to save the thousands upon thousands common people throughout the world from the deep water and scorching fire?”

The nun in white appeared emotionally moved; she nodded and said, “What you said is true. Whether this matter is real or not, we cannot know it now. Even if it is useless, there won’t be any harm done. We only need to make this matter known all over the world, the Tatars ruler and his ministers firmly believe in this dragon vein, their hearts would be discouraged first, and if that time we conspire to recover the nation, everybody will have an additional layer of confidence. So the thing you press the real Empress Dowager is actually this big secret?”

“Precisely,” the Empress Dowager said, “But this s1ut understands that this

matter correlate with her offspring's foundation, she would rather die than disclosing it. No matter how junior tried to swindle her gently or threaten her with force, I have exhausted everything, yet all along she would rather die than talking."

The nun in white took out the Forty-two-chapter Sutra from her bosom and said, "You must ask her, where are the other copies of this sutra?"

The Empress Dowager jumped in fright; she retreated two steps back, and said in a trembling voice, "You … you knew?"

The nun in white said, "The big secret is hidden in this sutra. How many copies do you have in your hands?"

The Empress Dowager said, "*Shitai*'s magical power is remarkable, nothing escape your knowledge, junior does not dare to conceal anything. Originally I had three; the first was given by the Late Emperor to Imperial Concubine Dong'e. After she died, junior had it in here. The other two were taken from the home of the treacherous court official Oboi. But one night there was an assassin in the Palace, my chest was stabbed, and those three copies were stolen. *Shitai* may see it for yourself." While saying that, she untied her outer garment, undergarment and *dudou*[51], to reveal an enormous scar on the pit of her stomach.

Wei Xiaobao's heart was pounding. "If this interrogation continues, I am afraid *Shitai*'s suspicion will fall on me," he mused.

He heard the nun in white said, "I know who tried to assassinate you, but this person did not take those three copies of sutra at all." She thought that if those three copies of sutra were taken by Tao Hongying, she could not possibly conceal it from her.

The Empress Dowager was startled. "The assassin did not steal the sutra?" she asked, "Then who stole those three copies of sutra? This … this is really strange."

"You want to speak up or not, it's entirely up to you," the nun in white said.

The Empress Dowager replied, "*Shitai* hates the Tatars to the bones, you also have remarkable magical power, if this big secret can be handed over to you, the Senior can take charge of this situation and dig the Tatars' dragon vein. It is

something that I always seek but fail to achieve. How can junior hide it from you? Besides, all eight copies of the sutra must be obtained before the location of the dragon vein can be found. Right now there is one copy already in *Shitai*'s hand; even if junior have three copies, what good would that bring?"

The nun in white coldly said, "Whatever scheme you have in your heart, I don't need to take the trouble to guess. Since you are the daughter of Mao Wenlong of Pi Island, you must have a deep relationship with Shen Long Jiao."

With a trembling voice the Empress Dowager said, "No, I … I don't. Junior … has never heard of Shen Long Jiao."

The nun in white stared at her for a moment; and then she said, "I am going to teach you a formula to disperse the power in your body. Every day, morning, noon and night, three times you must strike a tree according to this method. Each time nine by nine, eighty-one strikes; perhaps the sinister palm power of the 'Transforming Bones Soft Palm' in your body will be dispersed."

The Empress Dowager was greatly delighted; she kneeled down and kowtowed again to express her gratitude. Right away the nun in white passed on the theory; she said, "From now on, as soon as you use your internal strength trying to harm someone, the bones in your body will immediately break to pieces, then nobody can save you."

"Yes," the Empress Dowager replied in a low voice; she looked dejected.

Wei Xiaobao was bursting with joy; "When I see the old wh0re hereafter, even if I do not have the Five Dragon Command, I don't need to be afraid of her."

The nun in white brushed her sleeve to seal her consciousness acupoint; immediately the Empress Dowager's eyeballs rolled back until only the white was visible, she fell backward and fainted. "Come out," the nun in white said in a low voice. Wei Xiaobao and Tao Hongying came out from behind the bed.

Wei Xiaobao said, "*Shitai*, this woman speaks three parts the truth, seven parts lies. You must not believe her."

The nun in white nodded and said, "The secret hidden in the sutra concerns not only the Tatars' dragon vein, but money and treasures as well, which she intentionally did not mention."

“Let me look around,” Wei Xiaobao said. He pretended to look to the east and search to the west, he uncovered the beddings, and saw the copper ring on the wooden board covering the secret compartment. “The sutra’s here!” he said in a low voice.

Pulling the wooden board up, he saw the secret compartment was hiding not a few of jewels and banknotes, but there was no sutra. He sighed and said, “No sutra! What good does these jewels for?”

“Take the jewels,” the nun in white said, “We will need the money for the future uprising.”

Tao Hongying took all the jewels and money and put them inside an embroidered bundle, which she then handed over to the nun in white. Wei Xiaobao thought, “This time the old wh0re is really bankrupt.” He thought further, “How come there was no jewels or banknotes in the secret compartment last time? Ah right, last time I only had my eyes on the sutra and did not see other stuffs. What a pity, what a pity!”

The nun in white said to Tao Hongying, “This woman impersonated the Empress Dowager, most likely she has other scheme. You hide in the Palace and make a thorough investigation. Luckily she has lost her martial art skill, there is nothing to fear.”

Tao Hongying complied. Actually, after meeting her former master only for a short time, and now they had to part, she was really reluctant to leave.

The nun in white took Wei Xiaobao leaping over the wall and returning to the inn. She took the sutra out to examine it. This copy of sutra had a yellow silk envelope, it was precisely the one Emperor Shunzhi ordered Wei Xiaobao to take to Kangxi. The nun in white opened the cover and saw on the first page four large characters ‘never raise taxes’ [yong bu jia fu]. She nodded and said to Wei Xiaobao, “You said that the Tatar Emperor will ‘never raise taxes’, those four characters are indeed written in here.”

She flipped the book page by page. The Forty-two-chapter Sutra was a very short scripture, each chapter only has several lines, but the characters were very big, so that each chapter filled one or sometimes two pages. She knew this scripture like the back of her hand; after reading every word from top to bottom

one time through, she did not find anything different from the one she was already familiar with. Holding it near the candlelight, she did not see any writing between the lines. After pondering over it for a long time, she noticed that the inside was only several dozen pages, but the front and back covers were actually a lot thicker than the inside. Suddenly she remembered how Yuan Chengzhi obtained the 'Golden Serpent Manual' in the past. Immediately she use fresh water to moisten the outer skin of the cover, and gently peeled it off. She saw the inside was actually two layers of sheepskin, sewed together on all four sides with silk yarn. When she disassembled the silk thread, she saw more than a hundred cut pieces of extremely thin sheepskin.

Wei Xiaobao called out delightedly, "That's it, that's it! This is the big secret."

The nun in white spread the pieces on the table. She saw some of the pieces were big some were small, some were square some were round, some were triangular in shape, some were diamond-shaped. On some of the pieces, a lot of red curvy lines were drawn; on some others, Manchurian characters were written in black ink. However, all the drawings and characters were cut, nothing was complete, the more than a hundred pieces did not match with each other, so that it was hard to put together.

Wei Xiaobao said, "It looks like each copy of the sutra hides pieces of leather, only when all eight copies are obtained will we be able to put together a complete map."

"I think so," the nun in white said. She put all the pieces together back into the original two layers of sheepskin envelope, wrapped it securely in embroidered cloth, and put it into her inner pocket.

The next day the nun in white took Wei Xiaobao leaving the Capital heading west. They arrived at the graveyard on Mount Jinping in Changping County. It was where the Emperor Chongzhen was buried. In front of the tomb, wild grass was growing very thick, making the grave looked very desolate. Along the way the nun in white did not utter a single word, but now she was unable to show restraint anymore; she threw herself in front of the grave and cried out loudly.

Wei Xiaobao also kneeled down and kowtowed. Suddenly he felt that the tall grass by side was moving. Turning his head around, he saw green skirt. It was the

green skirt that Wei Xiaobao thought about millions of time during the day, the green skirt that he had dreamt about thousands of time during the night. As he suddenly saw the skirt this moment, his heart jumped. He was afraid it was just a dream, hence temporarily he did not dare to look.

He heard a tender and delicate voice calling out something, and then he heard, “Finally you are here; I … I have been waiting in here for three days.” And then she sighed and said, “But you must not grieve too much.”

It was precisely the girl in green’s voice. As soon as this gentle, tender voice entered his ears, Wei Xiaobao immediately felt as if the sky spins, the earth goes round, he felt his entire body was about to burst into pieces just like the pieces of leather inside the Forty-two-chapter sutra; some were big some were small, some were square some were round, some were triangular in shape, some were diamond-shaped.

“Yes, yes,” he said, “You have been waiting for me for three days, thank you very much, thank you very much. I … as soon as I heard your voice, I am not grieving anymore.” While saying that, he stood up, and in a glance saw that it was indeed the lovely countenance of that green-clothed girl, whose gracefulness was beyond compare; only her gentle and soft expression suddenly turned into astonishment, and then turned into anger.

Wei Xiaobao said with a laugh, “I also miss you very much …” Before he could finish, there was a sharp pain on his lower abdomen, his body flew more than a *zhang* backward and he fell heavily on the ground; because he was kicked by the girl.

He saw the girl raised her willow-leaf saber and hacked it down on his head. Hastily Wei Xiaobao rolled away, ‘whack!’ the saber struck the ground. Before the girl could chop again, the nun in white shouted, “Stop!”

“Wah!” the girl broke in cry, she dropped her saber off and threw herself into the nun in white’s bosom, while crying, “This evil man, he … he always bullies me. Shifu, quickly kill him for me.”

Wei Xiaobao was startled, delighted, but also embarrassed; he mused, “Turns out she is *Shitai*’s disciple. Those two sentences she spoke a moment ago were not directed to me.” Sullenly he sat down slowly, thinking, “Things have come

this far, I can only try my best to be a good person. It would be best if I could swindle *Shitai*, invoking her great mercy so that she would make the decision to join her with me as my wife."

Thereupon he stepped forward, bowing deeply toward the girl with cupped fist and said, "*Xiaoren* has unintentionally offended Miss. I am asking for Miss to show magnanimity by not hold it against me. If Miss wants to hit me, please go ahead and do it; I only hope Miss would spare *Xiaoren*'s life."

The girl was hugging the nun in white with both hands; without turning around, she kicked backward, her heel hit Wei Xiaobao's lower jaw. "Ah!" Wei Xiaobao cried out and was thrown backward. Groaning and moaning, temporarily he was unable to get up.

The nun in white said, "Ah Ke, how can you disregarding propriety and kicking someone you just met two times?" The tone of her voice carried a reprimanding meaning.

As soon as Wei Xiaobao heard her, he was ecstatic. "Turns out your name is Ah Ke [jade-like stone]. Finally I know it," he thought.

He had accompanied the nun in white for many days that he knew she like people being respectful, serious and modest. In her presence, the more he suffered some losses, the more beneficial it was for him. Hastily he said, "Shitai, Miss' two kicks are well-deserved; it was I who was in the wrong, no wonder Miss is very angry. Even if she kicks me a thousand times, ten thousand times, it is really *Xiaoren* that deserves to die." He crawled up with both hands cradling his lower jaw, the pain made his tears flowed down. This time he was not pretending, the kick was really not light.

Sobbing and sniffling, Ah Ke said, "Shifu, this little monk really deserve to die, he … he bullied me."

"How did he bully you?" the nun in white asked.

Ah Ke blushed. "He … he has bullied me many … many, many times," she said.

"*Shitai*," Wei Xiaobao said, "In short, it was I who was muddle-headed, plus my martial art is lacking. That day Miss went to play at the Shaolin Temple …"

"You went to Shaolin Temple?" the nun in white asked, "How can a girl go to

Shaolin Temple?”

Wei Xiaobao was delighted in his heart, “Turns out she went to Shaolin Temple not instructed by *Shitai*, that’s even better.” He said, “It was not she who wanted to go, it was her *Shijie* who wanted to go. Miss could not disobey her, hence she had no choice but to come with her.”

“How do you know?” the nun in white asked.

Wei Xiaobao replied, “At that time I was ordered by the Tatars’ Young Emperor to be his proxy to be a monk in Shaolin Temple. I saw another Miss came to Shaolin Temple, this Miss was following behind her, apparently she did not wish to come.”

The nun in white turned her head and asked, “Was it Ah Qi who take you there?”

“Yes,” Ah Ke replied.

“And then what happened?” the nun in white asked.

Ah Ke said, “Those Shaolin Temple monks were very vicious; they said that their Temple’s rule did not allow women to enter the Temple.”

“Yes, yes,” Wei Xiaobao said, “That is an unacceptable rule; why can’t *nu shizhu* [female benefactor] enter the Temple? Bodhisattva Guanyin is a woman.”

“And then what happened?” the nun in white asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, “Miss said, since they were not allowed to enter the Temple, they would better go back. But those four Shaolin Tempe monks in charge of receiving the guests did not have any manners; they babbled nonsense and thus offended the two ladies, while their martial art skill is very disappointing.”

The nun in white asked Ah Ke, “Did you fight with them?”

Wei Xiaobao barged in, “It was entirely the welcoming monks’ fault, I saw it with my own eyes. They stretched out their hands to push the two ladies. *Shitai*, just think, the two ladies have ‘thousand gold’ bodies, how could they let the four monks’ filthy hands touching them? Naturally the two ladies moved sideways to evade; the four monks were careless, they bumped their own limbs on the mountain pavilion’s pillars, inevitably they were slightly hurt.”

“Humph,” the nun in white snorted, “Shaolin Temple’s martial art is the leader in Wulin world, how could it be that bad? Ah Ke, when you made your move, which stances did you use?”

Ah Ke did not dare to conceal anything; she lowered her head and told her in a low voice. The nun in white asked, “You two knocked down four Shaolin Temple monks?”

Ah Ke cast a glance toward Wei Xiaobao, and hatefully said, “Five, including him.”

“You have quite a nerve, going to Shaolin Temple and beat five Shaolin Temple monks that their hands and feet were dislocated.” With eyes like lightning she looked at her up and down. Ah Ke was so frightened that her face turned even paler.

The nun in white saw the red scar across her neck. “That blade wound, was it the Temple’s martial art master who injured you?”

“No, it was not,” Ah Ke replied, “He … he …” She looked up and shot Wei Xiaobao a glowering look; suddenly her cheeks blushed, while tears streamed down on her face. “He … he humiliated me so much, disciple … disciple slashed my own saber across my neck, but … but I did not die.”

When she first heard about her two disciples went up Shaolin Temple to create trouble, the nun in white was furious, but seeing the scar on her neck was really long, she felt sorry for her; she asked, “How did he humiliate you?”

“Wah!” Ah Ke cried.

Wei Xiaobao said, “Indeed, it was me who was being greatly inappropriate, I spoke without manners, I did not act with propriety. Miss was only grabbing me, scaring me to death, telling me that she was going to dig my eyeballs, but she did not really mean it. Indeed it was me who was a coward and useless; I was scared out of my wits that with both hands I randomly hit and grab backward, and in my carelessness had touched Miss’ body. Although it was unintentional, I wouldn’t wonder that Miss was so angry.”

Ah Ke was so embarrassed that her beautiful face turned completely red, but her eyes was filled with resentment, anger and pain.

The nun in white asked further about the several stances Ah Ke was using when they fighting. After gaining a clear understanding, she said, “It was unintentional, you don’t need to take it seriously.” Gently patting Ah Ke’s shoulder, she said in a tender voice, “He is only a little child, and … and a eunuch too, it’s not a big deal. You have already used the ‘young swallow returning to the nest’ to break his arms; you have punished him enough.”

Ah Ke’s tears did not stop rolling down; in her heart she said, “He is not a little child at all, he went to the brothel to do bad things.” But she did not dare to say it out loud, for fear that Shifu would investigate, and then she would know that Ah Ke had followed her older martial sister to a brothel and beat people there. Her heart was dismayed, she cried even louder.

Wei Xiaobao kneeled down on the ground, kowtowed again and again, while saying, “Miss, you are upset, please kick me several more times to vent your anger.”

Ah Ke stomped her feet and cried, “I simply won’t!”

Wei Xiaobao raised his palm, ‘whack, whack, slap, slap!’ he slapped his own face several times. “I deserve to die, I deserve to die!” he said.

The nun in white knitted her eyebrows and said, “It can’t be considered your fault in this matter. Ah Ke, we can’t bully people too much.”

Sobbing and sniffling, Ah Ke said, “It was he who bullied me, he kidnapped me and locked me up in the Temple and did not let me go.”

The nun in white was startled. “Is that so?” she asked.

“Yes, yes,” Wei Xiaobao said, “I know I was wrong. Because I wanted to win Miss’ favor, I invited her to the Temple. I thought that since Miss has always wanted to tour the Shaolin Temple but the monks did not allow her to enter the Temple, no wonder Miss was angry. And thus … and thus gathering my courage, I invited Miss to go and play at the Bo’re Hall; I also asked an old monk to accompany Miss to chat and relieve her boredom.”

“Fooling around, fooling around,” the nun in white said, “Both children are fooling around. Which old monk?”

“It was the Head of Bo’re Hall, Cheng Guan *Dashi*,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “He

was the one exchanging palm strikes with *Shitai* in Qingliang Temple."

The nun in white nodded. "That *Dashi*'s martial art skill is superb," she said. She patted Ah Ke's shoulder again and said, "Alright, that's enough. Not only this Dashi's martial art skill is high, he is also an old man. Xiaobao asked him to accompany you, he cannot be considered ill-treating you. Let's not talk about this matter further."

Ah Ke said in her heart, "This little evildoer is really bad; only, there are many things that are not convenient to say, otherwise, if Shifu investigated, *Shijie* and I would ended up being blamed for many things." She said, "Shifu, you don't know, he … he …"

The nun in white no longer paid any attention to her; she was looking at Chongzhen's grave as if she was entranced. Wei Xiaobao stuck out his tongue at Ah Ke and made a face. Ah Ke was furious, she shot him a vicious look. Wei Xiaobao felt that although she was extremely angry, she was still unspeakably beautiful; his heart was very happy. He sat on the side, unable to take his eyes off her, admiring her features. He saw that from her head to her toe, her hair, her eyebrows, even the tip of her little finger, everything on her was extremely beautiful.

Ah Ke cast him a sidelong glance, and saw that he was staring blankly at her, she blushed, pulled the nun in white's sleeve and said, "Shifu, he … he is looking at me."

"Mmm," the nun in white simply grunted. She was recalling the scene from the past, when she was at the Palace. Ah Ke's words did not enter her ears at all.

Sitting until the sun was leaning to the west, the nun in white was still unwilling to leave her father's grave. Wei Xiaobao wished that she would sit like this for ten days or half a month, as long as he could look at Ah Ke, even if he did not eat, he would not mind. Ah Ke, on the other hand, was feeling quite uncomfortable being the object of his stare. Although she did not turn her head to look at him, she knew his eyes were fixed on her. She was feeling bashful, fretful, and also furious; she thought, "This little evil person is full of graceful words, flowery speech; I don't know what lie he told Shifu so that she always protected him. As soon as Shifu is not around, I must kill him. Even if Shifu will

punish me harshly for this, I simply can't let him humiliate me like this."

More than two hours later, the sky was gradually turning dark. The nun in white heaved a long sigh, stood up, and said, "Let's go."

That night the three of them lodged in a peasant family home. Wei Xiaobao knew that the nun in white love cleanliness, so before dinner he rubbed and washed the two women's bowls and chopsticks in hot water, he also wiped the stools, the dinner table where those two women would be sitting, until there was not a speck of dust on it. He also wiped the bed and swept the floor, making sure that wherever the two women sit or sleep on would be immaculate. He had always been lazy; hence in all his life he had never strained himself working as hard as that.

The nun in white nodded in secret; she thought, "This child is hardworking. Having him during our travel will be much more convenient." Before she turned fifteen, she had always lived deep in the Palace; since childhood she was accustomed to have palace maids and court eunuchs taking care of her. After having the misfortune of her country changed its master, she wandered destitute in Jianghu; the daily food and drink was completely different.

Wei Xiaobao was accustomed to be a eunuch, plus he did not spare any effort to get what his heart desired, he went as far as making her enjoying the happiness of the former days when she was still a princess in the Palace. The nun in white had left home and devoted herself to religious practice, she did not care about the luxury of the past, yet how one spends one's childhood will be imprinted in one's heart and mind, and will forever stay and can never be erased. She was not looking to be a princess, but Wei Xiaobao was treating her like a princess; she was touched and was delighted.

After dinner, the nun in white asked Ah Qi's whereabouts. Ah Ke said, "I have not seen *Shijie* since that day when we were separated outside the Shaolin Temple; perhaps … perhaps she was killed by him." While saying that she cast a sidelong glance toward Wei Xiaobao.

"How can there be such thing?" Wei Xiaobao busily replied, "I saw Miss Ah Qi was with Mongolian Prince Galdan, and several lamas, and an army commander under Wu Sangui's command."

As soon as the nun in white heard Wu Sangui's name, her expression looked very angry. "Why did Ah Qi hang around with people we have no relation with?" she angrily asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, "When those people arrived at the Shaolin Temple, probably they came across Miss Ah Qi by accident. *Shitai*, if you want to find her, let me come with you, I am sure she will be very easy to find."

"Why is that?" the nun in white asked.

Wei Xiaobao replied, "I still remember the appearance of those Mongolians, Lamas, and military officers from Yunnan. We only need to find one, the rest will be easy to deal with."

"Very well," the nun in white said, "In that case you'll come with me, we'll look for her together."

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted. "Thank you very much *Shitai*," he said.

The nun in white was puzzled, "You are helping me to do this matter, I should be thanking you, why did you thank me instead?" she asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Nothing delights me more than to be with *Shitai* every day; it would be best if I could be by *Shitai*'s side forever. If I cannot, then being with *Shitai* one more day means happiness for one more day."

"Is that right?" the nun in white asked. Although she had received Ah Qi and Ah Ke, two girls to be her disciples, usually she treated her disciples coldly. The two girls revered her very much, they had never dared to tell her what's in their hearts; how could they act like Wei Xiaobao with his graceful words and flowery speech, sweet mouth and honeyed tongue? Although her personality was strict and cold, those words were really pleasing to her ears; she could not stop a smile from appearing on the corners of her mouth.

Ah Ke said, "Shifu, he … he does not …" She was fully aware that Wei Xiaobao's enthusiasm to help them find her *Shijie* was just a ruse to be with her. Those 'Nothing delights me more than to be with *Shitai* every day; it would be best if I could be by *Shitai*'s side forever' and so on was actually the real desire of his innermost being, only the word '*Shitai*' should be changed to 'Ah Ke'.

The nun in white stared at her, "Why not?" she asked, "How do you know the

content of other people's heart? I have often told you before, in Jianghu, the people's hearts are sinister and deceitful, their words cannot be trusted. But this child has followed me for many days, there was no pretense in him, I know he can be trusted. He is only a little child, how can you lump him together with those Jianghu men?"

Ah Ke did not dare to say anything anymore, she bowed her head and mumbled, "Yes."

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted; he said in his heart, "Ah Ke, my good wife, naturally your husband stands out from the masses, how can you lump him together with those Jianghu men? Just listen to your Shifu, I guarantee you won't suffer any losses. The worst that can happen to you is that you will be given in marriage to me. Do you think I will be willing to part with you and don't want you anymore? Just set your hundred and twenty heart at ease."

Book note: the Emperor's child is a reference to the Emperor's daughter, it usually refers to the Princess. In the 'Nine Songs, Madame Xiang' of the Songs of Chu [ancient book of poems, c. 500 BC]: 'The Emperor's child fell north of the islet'. The Emperor's child here was the Emperor Yao's daughter. In the poem 'Escorting the Golden City Princess to the Western Foreign Land', Ma Huaisu wrote: 'Where is the Emperor's child now? She is engaged to be married in a strange land.'

Chapter 26

Grass and trees join Man and Heaven's white bones, fortresses and mountains along the Pass fill the eyes with the red of the setting sun.

(Translated by Foxs)

Wei Xiaobao took off his cap and said, "The more I train, the shorter will my hair be. By the time I train until not a single hair on my head remains, my chest won't be afraid of your saber chop as well." The lama saw his head, and believed several points.

The next day the three of them continued their journey southwards, while

asking people along the way of Ah Qi's whereabouts. During the trip Wei Xiaobao was very attentive in attending the two women's needs. Although in his heart he was dying to seduce Ah Ke, yet he did not dare to show the least bit of frivolity. He thought that if the nun in white found out about his real intention, he would be in a really deep trouble. Ah Ke had never had a single nice word to say to him, often times she took advantage of when the nun in white was not looking to punch or kick him to vent her anger. To Wei Xiaobao, as long he could be with her, the joy in his heart would be unspeakable, occasionally he simply endured everything; when the punch came, he received it with his body, when the kick arrived, he received it with his buttocks. When he lay down in his bed at night, he would quietly reflect on her kick and her punch, and the delight in his heart was inexhaustible.

One day they arrived in Cangzhou [prefecture level city, Hebei]. The three of them lodged in a small family inn. Early in the morning the next day, Wei Xiaobao went out to the street to buy fresh vegetables, which he wanted to give to the innkeeper to be cooked for the nun in white's breakfast. Excitedly he hurried back from the street carrying two catties of Chinese cabbage [bok choi], half a catty of 'rotten skin' [tofu skin, courtesy of CFT], two catties of kuomo [Saint George's mushroom/Tricholoma mongplicum], and saw Ah Ke was standing at the inn's door gazing idly outside. Immediately he came over to her with a smile, he took out a package of rose pine-nut candy from his pocket and said, "I bought a package of candy for you at the street. I did not expect a small town like this would have such a good candy."

Ah Ke did not accept it, she shot him a malicious look and said, "The candy you buy is stinky, I don't want to eat."

"Just take one and try it," Wei Xiaobao said, "The taste is really not bad." He had noticed early on that Ah Ke loved to nibble snacks, it's just that the nun in white did not have extra money to give to her as incidental expenses; occasionally she purchased a small packet of sugared beans, which she ate with delight; therefore, he bought a packet of candy to make her happy.

Ah Ke received it and said, "Shifu is meditating in her room, I feel so stifled. I wonder if there is any good scenery around here, a secluded place where no one is around. I want you to come with me."

Wei Xiaobao could not believe his own ears; immediately the blood in his entire body was boiling, his face was flushed, “You … you are not going to wrong me?” he asked.

“What do I wrong you for?” Ah Ke replied, “If you don’t want to come with me, I’ll just go alone.” Finished speaking, she walked toward a small lane to the east.

“I am coming, I am coming,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Why would I not willing to come? Even if Miss wants me to go through water and tread on fire, I won’t knit my eyebrows.” And hastily he ran after her.

The two of them went out of the small town, Ah Ke pointed to a small hill several *li* to the east and said, “Playing over yonder won’t be too bad.”

“Yes, yes,” Wei Xiaobao said. The two of them followed the mountain path to go to the top of the hill. The hill was densely packed with pine trees, indeed it was secluded and no one else was to be seen, but the scenery was nothing to look at. Yet at this moment, in Wei Xiaobao’s eyes even the ugliest scenery between the heaven and the earth would be extraordinarily amazing; much less that he did not have any taste in differentiating any good or bad scenery anyway. Immediately he raved, “The scenery is incomparably beautiful.”

Ah Ke said, “What’s so good about it? There are only rocks and trees crowded together. It’s so ugly.”

“Yes, yes,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “The scenery is not so good.”

“Why did you say that scenery here is incomparably beautiful?” Ah Ke asked.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “The scenery is originally not so good, but your beauty shines on it, it becomes incomparably beautiful. This hill does not have any flower, but your appearance in more beautiful than ten thousand fresh flowers. This hill does not have any bird singing, but your voice is a lot more pleasant to the ears than a thousand black-nape orioles singing together.”

“Humph,” Ah Ke snorted, “I want you to come here not to listen to you babbling nonsense, but to tell you to get away from me immediately, the farther the better. From now on, I don’t want you to see my face ever again. If you do, I will definitely dig your eyeballs out.”

Wei Xiaobao’s heart immediately sank, with a dejected expression he said,

“Miss, I will never dare to offend you anymore, please forgive me.”

“I have already forgiven you,” Ah Ke said, “By not taking your life today, I am forgiving you.” While saying that, ‘shua!’ she pulled the willow-leaf saber from her waist, and continued, “When you are with me, your heart always harbor bad thoughts toward me, do you think I did not know it? You humiliate me like this, I … I’d rather have Shifu punish me by flogging me a thousand times, ten thousand times, but I simply must kill you.”

Seeing the flickering saber and her staunch personality, Wei Xiaobao knew she was not uttering empty words. “*Shitai* asked me to help her find Miss Ah Qi,” he said, “After she is found, I will not follow you anymore.”

Ah Ke shook her head and said, “No you won’t! We’ll find her without your help. Even if we can’t find her, my *Shijie* is not a three-year-old girl, do you think she cannot go home by herself?” Raising her saber high, she brandished it in the air, creating ‘whoosh, whoosh’ sound, and sternly said, “If you don’t leave, don’t blame me for being heartless!”

Wei Xiaobao said with a laugh, “You have always treated me heartlessly anyway, it’s not a big deal.”

Ah Ke was furious; she shouted, “Up to this moment you still dare to speak nonsense to me?” Jumping forward, she raised the saber to chop on the top of Wei Xiaobao’s head.

Wei Xiaobao was greatly shocked; hastily he leaped to evade. Ah Ke shouted, “Are you leaving or not?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Even if you cut me into ten thousand pieces, and turn me into a ghost, I will still follow you.”

Ah Ke was raging mad; she raised her saber and attacked ‘Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!’ three times. Luckily she had already used these moves at the Bo’re Hall of Shaolin Temple, Monk Cheng Guan had figured out the technique to neutralize them. Wei Xiaobao had received the instruction, and therefore, he was able to evade one by one.

Failing to chop Wei Xiaobao, Ah Ke was growing angrier and angrier, she brandished her willow-leaf saber more and more viciously. Several moves later,

Wei Xiaobao found it to be more and more difficult to evade; he had no choice but to draw his dagger. ‘Dang!’ her willow-leaf saber was cut into two pieces. Ah Ke was angry and shocked at the same time; she brandished the lower half of her saber furiously, trying to hack down his head.

Seeing her saber suddenly turned short, Wei Xiaobao did not dare to use his dagger to defend himself; his martial art skill was mediocre, if he did not restrain himself and carelessly waving his dagger around, the sharp blade only had to scrape her body a little bit, her life would be gone just like that. Consequently, after evading several times, he did not have any choice but to run away down the hill.

Ah Ke chased him off, brandishing her broken saber and calling out, “Just go away as far as possible from me, I won’t kill you.” However, seeing that he was running toward the small town, she was greatly anxious, “If this little evil-doer is complaining to Shifu, I will be in trouble,” she thought. Therefore, hastily she urged herself to run after him, trying to intercept him. But the nun in white only taught her some martial art stances and styles; she had never passed on the internal energy cultivation technique. Therefore, her internal energy was not too different [orig. ‘half a catty eight *taels*’ or ‘half a pound eight ounces’] from Wei Xiaobao’s; from beginning to the end she was unable to catch up with him, and saw that he was rushing into the inn. She was so anxious that she almost broke into crying; thinking, “If Shifu blames me, I will tell her everything he said to me, how he harassed me and took liberties with me.” With a raised broken saber, she slowly entered the inn.

As soon as she set foot into the inn, she felt a burst of amazingly strong force like a gust of gale coming out from the door against her, instantly pulling her off her feet and throwing her three steps back, and she fell sitting down on the ground.

Ah Ke felt that she was landing on a soft object, actually she sat on someone’s body. Hurriedly she wanted to stand up, but when she reached back to prop herself, her right hand landed on the person’s face. In that difficult situation she did not have time to consider her option; she continued pressing down to push herself up. Only after standing up did she turn around to look, and realized that the person was none other than Wei Xiaobao.

She was shocked, and harshly shouted, “What are you d …” Before she could finish, however, her knees went weak, she was unable to stand and fell down toward Wei Xiaobao. This time, however, she fell face down. “No, No …” she cried out in fear, but it was too late; she landed on Wei Xiaobao’s bosom. Her eyes met with his, the distance between them was no more than a few *cun*.

Ah Ke panicked; she was afraid this little vile creature would take the opportunity to kiss her; she struggled as hard as she could to stand up quickly, but somehow her entire body was devoid of any strength. She had no choice but look away from him and anxiously said, “Quickly help me up.”

“I don’t have any strength either,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “What shall we do?” With this ‘thousand-time cute a hundred-time charming’ beautiful woman leaning against him, his heart was so delighted that he felt he was going to go crazy. He said in his heart, “Forget that I do not have any strength, if right now I have ten-thousand-catty strength within me, I won’t help you up for sure. You were the one who throw yourself on me, how can you blame me?”

Ah Ke anxiously said, “Shifu is being besieged by the enemy, quickly think of something to help her.” Turns out when she entered the door just now, she saw the nun in white was sitting cross-legged on the floor, her right hand was sending out palm strikes, her left sleeve was flicking away in her effort to resist the enemy. As for who the enemy was, she did not see it clearly; she only knew that the enemy was more than one person. She was about to look when the strong gust of wind from the internal energy battle inside the room threw her out.

Wei Xiaobao actually arrived several steps before she did, but he was met with the same fate as she did; he was just about to step across the threshold when the strong wind threw him backward and he fell to the ground. Ah Ke was also rushing in and happened to fall onto his body. Although Wei Xiaobao fell down quite hard that his buttocks were very painful, plus when Ah Ke fell from the air, she was crushing his chest and abdomen and hurt him very much, but in his heart he was exceedingly happy, he was wishing that this beautiful woman would lie down on his bosom forever, and would not stand up again. As for the nun in white was fighting with what kind of enemy, he did not give it the least bit of care; he expected her skill was so divine that even more formidable enemy

would not be able to do anything to her.

Ah Ke used her right hand to prop herself against Wei Xiaobao's chest; slowly she straightened her back, took a deep breath, and finally she was able to stand up. "Why are you lying in here?" she said in an annoyed voice, "You wanted to trip me?" She was fully aware that Wei Xiaobao met the same fate as she did, he had no control over himself, but she was simply too embarrassed just now, hence she could not help but lashing it out on him.

"Yes, yes," Wei Xiaobao said, "I knew you were going to fall on the ground, so I should have crawled three *chi* away. No, three *chi* is not enough; if I only crawled three *chi* away, then I would lie side by side with you, it won't look too good."

Ah Ke spat, but she was more concerned over her Shifu, so she turned her gaze toward the room. She saw the nun in white was still sitting on the floor, striking with her palm and flicking her sleeve to repulse the enemy. In a glance she could see that altogether there were five enemies besieging her, they all wore red lama clothes, each one moved extremely fast, sending palm strikes and punches, but the nun in white's palm power held them off, forcing them away so that their backs were pressed tightly against the wooden partition and were unable to get close to her.

Ah Ke took a step closer, she wanted to see if there was anybody else other than these five people, but as she took a step forward, she felt strong gust of wind pressing her body that she was unable to breathe easily. She had no choice but to withdraw two steps back, kicked Wei Xiaobao and said, "Hey, aren't you going to stand up? Look at the enemy; do you know their background?"

Wei Xiaobao reached back to support himself against the wall. He stood up and looked into the room, he said, "Those six lamas are all bad people." He was standing to Ah Ke's side, hence he was able to see one more Lama.

"Rubbish!" Ah Ke said, "Naturally they are bad people; do I need you to tell me that?"

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "They are not necessarily bad people. Take me for example: I am clearly a good person, yet you keep saying that I am a bad person. These six lamas have the audacity to attack *Shitai*, they are a lot worse than I am."

Ah Ke glanced sideways at him. “Humph,” she snorted, “I’ll say you are one of them; you brought these six lamas to harm Shifu.”

Wei Xiaobao replied, “I have a deep respect toward Shitai, I revere her just like I revere the Bodhisattva; I have deep respect toward Miss, just like I respect the deities, why would I want to harm you?”

Ah Ke looked inside with rapt attention; suddenly she cried out in alarm. Wei Xiaobao looked into the room, he saw all six lamas now had *jiedao* [Buddhist knife] in their hands, ready to pounce and make a kill, but the power of nun in white’s sleeve and the wind from her palm held them at bay so that they were unable to get closer. However, the top of the nun in white’s head emitted a thin streak of white steam; apparently she was using all her strength.

With only one arm she had to fight a life and death fight against six fully armed lamas; if this battle continued, perhaps it would be difficult for her to withstand the enemy. Wei Xiaobao wanted to go forward and help her, but he realized his own martial art skill was almost non-existent; he could not even step over the door, if he crawled in, inevitably he would distract the nun in white, and then instead of helping her, he would bring her harm. In his angst, he suddenly saw a broom leaning against the corner of the wall; immediately he picked it up and positioned himself by the door. Stretching out the broom, he poked it randomly at a lama’s face, hoping that he would distract his attention, so that his internal energy might not be pure anymore, then the nun in white’s palm power might be able to shake him dead.

The broom was barely stretched out, he heard a shout, the broom handle in his hand suddenly felt lighter because the head of the broom was truncated by the lama, followed by the strong wind as the head of the broom flew out of the room, brushing the side of his face, creating several thin lines of blood that felt hot and painful.

Ah Ke anxiously said, “You are just making trouble, that … that won’t work.”

Wei Xiaobao was leaning against the wooden partition, he felt continuous vibration, as if all around the inn, the wooden partitions were about to be knocked down by the wind of the sabers and the power of the palm. Suddenly he had an idea; after looking clearly the six lamas’ position, he walked toward the

back of the lama who cut off his broom, pulled out his dagger, and thrust it through the wooden partition.

The dagger was incomparably sharp, the wooden partition was less than a *cun* thick, as the dagger went in, it penetrated the wood as if it was a piece of *tofu* [bean curd], and straight into the lama's back. The lama cried out loudly, his body went limp, he slid slowly along the wooden partition, until finally he sat on the floor.

Hearing the cry, Wei Xiaobao knew he had succeeded. Walking toward the second lama's back, he thrust his dagger again. In a flash he had killed four lamas in succession. The blade of the dagger was short, as it was thrust on the lamas' bodies, it did not go through to the front of the torso. As each lama fell sitting down, nobody in that room knew how they actually died.

The other two lamas were greatly shocked, they scrambled toward the door, trying to escape. The nun in white leaped with her palm extended, striking the back of a lama, sending a jolt through his body that he spurted a mouthful of blood and died instantly. With a brush of her left sleeve the nun in white blocked the other lama, and then as swift as the wind the finger of her right hand sealed five acupoints on the lama's body. The lama fell and lay paralyzed on the floor, unable to move a single step.

The nun in white kicked the bodies of the four lamas, and saw the blade wound on their backs, she also noticed the holes on the wooden partition, and immediately understood what had happened. She turned toward the immobilized lama and shouted, "You … who are you …?" Suddenly her body swayed and she fell sitting down, spurting blood from her mouth.

Those six lamas were martial art masters; by fighting one against six, she had exhausted her internal energy. By brushing her sleeve to block and striking the last lama down, she had used up the last ounce of her strength that she was unable to stand anymore.

Ah Ke and Wei Xiaobao were greatly alarmed; they rushed forward to support her. "Shifu, Shifu!" Ah Ke repeatedly called out.

The nun in white's breathing was very weak, she closed her eyes and did not say anything. When Wei Xiaobao and Ah Ke, two people lifted her up onto the

kang [heatable brick bed], she vomited another mouthful of blood. In her panic, Ah Ke's limbs turned weak; she could only burst into tears.

As soon as they saw the fight, the innkeeper, the waiters, and the others went into hiding far away. Now that the sound of fighting had ceased, they came back and stuck their heads out and looked around. Seeing blood all over the floor and dead bodies scattered around, they all cried out in fear. Wei Xiaobao picked two *jiedao* with both hands and shouted, "What are you crying for? Quickly shut your beaks, otherwise I'll give you each one chop and kill you all."

Seeing the flickering *jiedao*, they were frightened and repeatedly said 'yes, yes'. Wei Xiaobao took out three ingots of silver, worth five *taels* each, and gave them to a shop attendant and shouted, "Quickly hire two large carriages; the other five *taels* is for you." The shop attendant was startled but happy; he dashed out and was back almost immediately with two hired carriages.

Wei Xiaobao took out forty more *taels* and handed it over to the innkeeper; he said in a loud voice, "These six wicked lamas fought with each other; you kill me, I kill you. All of you have seen it with your own eyes, haven't you?" How could the innkeeper dare to say 'no'? He could only nodded. Wei Xiaobao said, "This forty *taels* is for the room and board."

Together with Ah Ke, they lifted the nun in white onto a large carriage. He also took the quilt from the *kang* to cover her. Furthermore, he ordered the shop attendants to lift the lama whose acupoints were sealed onto the other carriage. Wei Xiaobao said to Ah Ke, "You go with Shifu, I'll go with him."

They boarded the carriages. Wei Xiaobao ordered the driver to follow the main road going south. He thought, "*Shitai* is seriously injured, if those lamas attack again, it will be terrible. We must find a remote place for *Shitai* to recover from her injury." For fear that the lama's acupoints would be opened, while he was not his match, he fetch a roll of rope and tightly bound his hands and feet.

After traveling for about the *li*, Ah Ke suddenly shouted, "Stop!" She leaped down from her carriage and rushed toward Wei Xiaobao's; with an extremely frightened expression she said, "Shifu's breathing is getting weaker and weaker; I am afraid … I am afraid …"

Wei Xiaobao was startled; hastily he stepped down the carriage to take a look.

The nun in white's breathing was very weak and shallow. Ah Ke cried and said, "If only we had miracle drug. We'd better find a doctor quickly; it's just that this place …"

Wei Xiaobao suddenly remembered that the Empress Dowager had given him thirty pills called 'snow ginseng jade toad pill' or something like that, which was part of the tribute from the King of Korea; she said that the pills would make one's body strong and healthy, it would neutralize poison and heal injuries, its efficacy was out of the ordinary. Of those thirty pills, he was supposed to give twenty two to Cult Leader and Madame Hong. Immediately he took out the jade bottle from his pocket and said, "Actually, I have miracle drug to heal injuries here with me."

Taking out two pills, he fed the pills into the nun in white's mouth. Ah Ke took the water gourd and helped Shifu drink two mouthful. Wei Xiaobao seized that opportunity to sit in the nun in white's carriage, sitting face to face with Ah Ke; he said, "I don't know what will happen after *Shitai* take the drug; I must keep watch over her all the time." He ordered both carriages to continue their journey.

After the time needed to drink a cup of tea later, the nun in white suddenly took a very deep breath, and slowly opened her eyes. Ah Ke was greatly delighted. "Shifu," she called out, "Do you feel better?" The nun in white nodded her head.

Wei Xiaobao busily took out two more pills and said, "*Shitai*, these pills are effective, take two more."

The nun in white slightly shook her head and said in a low voice, "Today … it's enough … I must circulate my *chi* to convert the drug's power … Stop … stop the carriage."

"Yes, yes," Wei Xiaobao said; he ordered the carriages to stop. The nun in white instructed Ah Ke to help her get up. Sitting cross-legged, she closed her eyes and circulated her strength. While Ah Ke could not take her eyes off her master, Wei Xiaobao could not take his eyes off her. He saw that at first there was a worried expression on her face, but gradually her graceful eyebrows began to relax, her eyes started to shine.

Another moment passed, a smile began to form on the corners of her mouth. Wei Xiaobao did not need to look at the nun in white to know that her effort to circulate her strength to heal her body had given its desired effect. A few moments later, he saw Ah Ke's expression was growing happier and happier. Wei Xiaobao thought, "If only there was no *Shitai* in this carriage, only me and this little beauty, two people, plus her expression always looks this happy, I can really die happy."

Suddenly Ah Ke looked up and saw him staring blankly at her; immediately her cheeks blushed. She wanted to scold him, but was afraid she might agitate Shifu and disturb her internal energy cultivation; hence the word was already at the tip of her tongue, but she swallowed it back, and only hatefully shot a malicious look at him. Wei Xiaobao smiled at her. Following her gaze, he looked at the nun in white, and notice that her breathing was even.

The nun in white blew out a mouthful of air, and opened her eyes. "We can continue," she said in a low voice.

"Resting for a bit longer is not a big deal," Wei Xiaobao said.

"No need," the nun in white said.

Wei Xiaobao took out five *taels* and gave the money to the drivers, telling them to continue the journey. At that time, hiring a large carriage only cost a *qian* and a half a day. Seeing how generous he was with the money, the two carriage drivers were overjoyed; they expressed their thanks repeatedly.

The nun in white slowly said, "Xiaobao, what kind of medicine did you give me?"

"It's called 'snow ginseng jade toad pill'," Wei Xiaobao replied, "It was the tribute of the King of Korea to the young emperor."

A delighted expression flashed on the nun in white's face; she said, "Snow ginseng and jade toad are two miracle drugs with great healing power; they can almost raise people from the dead. Who would have thought that unexpectedly I could come across it? My life is not meant to be cut short yet." After suffering such a heavy injury, unexpectedly by this time her voice was very steady, there was no hint of her internal power was lacking.

Ah Ke happily asked, “Shifu, are you, Senior, completely healed?”

“I won’t die,” the nun in white replied.

“I still have twenty-eight more here,” Wei Xiaobao said, “*Shitai* may take and use them all.” While saying that, he handed over the jade bottle.

The nun in white did not accept, she said, “At most I only need two or three more pills, that will be enough. I have no use for that many.”

Wei Xiaobao was generous by nature, he thought, “What’s so big of a deal if you take all thirty pills? The old wh0re must have some more over there.” So he said, “*Shitai*, your body is important, since these pills are beneficial to you, next time I see the young emperor, I will just ask him some more.” And he pushed the jade bottle into her hand. The nun in white nodded, but she still gave the bottle back to him.

After traveling for some time, the nun in white said, “Find a secluded place and tell the drivers to stop; we need to question that lama.”

“Yes,” Wei Xiaobao complied. He ordered the carriages to enter a valley, and told the drivers to get the lama to the ground. He also told them to have the mule grazing at the back of the mountain. “If you do not hear me call, don’t come over here,” he said. The drivers complied and pulled the mules away.

The nun in white said, “You question him.”

Wei Xiaobao pulled the dagger, ‘swish!’ he cut a strip of tree branch, and easily pared the small twigs that shortly thereafter the tree branch turned into a stick. “*Laoxiong* [old chap],” he said, would you like to be a human stick?”

The lama could see that the dagger was very sharp, hence he was already frightened. “May I ask *Xiaoye* [little master], what do you mean by a human stick?”

Wei Xiaobao replied, “I’ll have your arms cut off; your ears, your nose will also be scraped, anything that is sticking out of your body will be pared flat, that’s a human stick. It’s very fun, do you want to try?” While saying that, he waved his dagger several times in front of the lama’s nose.

“No, no,” the lama said, “*Xiaoseng* [little monk] does not want to be a human

stick.”

“I am not lying to you,” Wei Xiaobao said, “It’s very fun, there is no harm in you being one this time.”

“I am afraid it’s not fun,” the lama said.

“You have not been one, how do you know it’s not fun?” Wei Xiaobao said, “Let’s try it first, then we’ll talk later.” While saying that, he ran the dagger back and forth on the lama’s shoulder.

“*Xiaoye*, please spare my life,” the lama begged, “*Xiaoseng* was too brazen to offend *Shitai*; I should not have done that.”

“Alright,” Wei Xiaobao said, “I ask you a question, you give me an answer; if you give me even half a sentence of lie, I will immediately make you a human stick. I will plant you here, put some manure on you, and water you some; perhaps after ten days or half a month, you will grow some arms, ears and nose.”

“No, no,” the lama said, “*Xiaoseng* will definitely give you honest answers.”

“What’s your name?” Wei Xiaobao started, “Why did you offend *Shitai*?”

The lama said, “*Xiaoseng*’s name is Hubayin, a Tibetan Lama. I received our *Da Shixiong* [first martial (older) brother] Sangjie’s order to … to capture this *Shitai* alive.”

Wei Xiaobao remembered that he had heard the name Sangjie on Mount Wutai. He asked, “This *Shitai* is perfectly all right, she has never offended your stinky *Shixiong*; why did you take such a brazenly rash action?”

“*Da Shixiong* says that our Living Buddha has eight copies of treasured sutra, which this *Shitai* stole … no, not steal, she borrowed,” Hubayin said, “We want to ask her to return it.”

“What treasured sutra?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

“It’s Cha Yan Gu Tu Wu Sutra,” Hubayin replied.

“Rubbish,” Wei Xiaobao said, “What Ji Li Gu Lu Wu sutra?”

“Yes, yes,” Hubayin said, “It’s in our Tibetan language. In Chinese tongue, it is

called ‘Forty-two Chapter Sutra’.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “How did you stinky *Shixiong* know that *Shitai* has taken the ‘Forty-two Chapter Sutra’?”

“I really don’t know,” Hubayin replied.

“You don’t know?” Wei Xiaobao said, “What good is your tongue then? Stick it out.” While saying that, he raised his dagger.

How could Hubayin dare to stick his tongue out? He begged, “*Xiaoseng* really does not know.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Your stinky *Shixiong* is in Tibet, how could he send you out so quickly?”

Hubayin said, “*Da Shixiong* and some of us were originally in Beijing, so we pursued from Beijing to this place.”

Wei Xiaobao nodded, he understood what had happened, “Naturally it was the old wh0re who sent them the news.” He asked, “From your stinky lama companions this time, how many have higher, or almost the same, martial art skill?”

Hubayin said, “This time there are thirteen of us, martial brothers, *Shitai* has killed five, there are eight people left.”

Wei Xiaobao was secretly alarmed. “What do you mean ‘eight’?” he shouted, “Can you still be considered one of them? Sooner or later you’ll be a human stick.”

Hubayin said, “*Xiaoye* has promised not to make *Xiaoseng* a human stick.”

“Those remaining seven human sticks,” Wei Xiaobao asked, “Where are they now?”

Hubayin said, “Our *Da Shixiong*’s skill is very superior, he won’t change into a human stick.”

Wei Xiaobao kicked the small of his back heavily while cursing, “Stinky thief, death is at hand, you still dare to blow your horn really loud. Even if your stinky *shixiong*’s skill was higher, I will still make him into a human stick and show it to you.”

“Yes, yes,” Hubayin said; but it was obvious from his expression that he thought otherwise.

Wei Xiaobao continued the interrogation for quite a long time, but no longer gained any useful information, thereupon he returned to the large carriage, put the carriage screen down, and in a low voice passed on what Hubayin had said. He added, “*Shitai*, there are still seven lamas left. If all of them catch up with us at the same time, they won’t be easy to deal with. Normally *Shitai* won’t have any problem, but right now you are not feeling very well …”

The nun in white shook her head and said, “Even if I were well without any injury, I would have a hard time fighting one against six, much less they have their *Da Shixiong*, whose martial art skill far surpasses his fellow disciples of the same generation. I heard Sangjie is the number one martial art expert of the Tibetan Tantra; his ‘Big Hand Print Divine Skill’ has been trained to almost perfection.”

“I have an idea,” Wei Xiaobao said, “It’s just that … it’s just that *Shitai*’s prestige would be lowered too much.”

The nun in white sighed and said, “What prestige there is left to be said for those who have left home? What’s your idea?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “We go to a remote place, find a peasant family home to temporarily hide. I am asking *Shitai* to change into peasant woman’s attire, and sleep on the bed to heal your injury. Miss Ah Ke and I will change into peasant girl and boy’s clothing, we can pose as … as *Shitai*’s son and daughter.”

The nun in white shook her head. Ah Ke said, “You are bad, your idea is naturally bad. Shifu is a martial art master of the present age, how could she hide? Won’t that mean she is scared of others?”

The nun in white said, “We can follow your idea. The two of you can be my nephew and niece.”

“Yes, yes,” Wei Xiaobao happily said, while saying in his heart, “It would be best if we can be your nephew and nephew’s wife.”

Ah Ke shot him a malicious look; she was really unhappy Shifu had accepted his idea.

Wei Xiaobao said, “If we leave this lama’s mouth alive, I am afraid he might reveal our secret; we’d better bury him alive here, so we won’t leave any trace.”

The nun in white said, “When I fought them earlier, I was already acting against my will, it was hard for me to accept it in my heart. This lama is powerless to defend himself, to kill him would inevitably be too vicious. However … however, we can’t let him go either. We’ll have to take him for the time being, and think about another plan later.”

Wei Xiaobao complied. He called the drivers, told them to get Hubayin back onto the carriage, and ordered them to continue the journey.

Along the way, they actually did not see any peasant homes; afraid that Sangjie would catch up, they were thinking that as soon as they saw a small path, they would make a detour. However, all the side roads along the way were simply too narrow for a large carriage to pass.

While continuing along the main road, suddenly they heard sound of hooves from behind; several dozens of riders were galloping toward them. Wei Xiaobao groaned inwardly, “Doomed, we are doomed! Turns out there are dozens of stinky lamas.” He ordered the carriages to run faster. The two drivers urged their mules verbally and with their whips, but the pursuing riders were getting closer and closer; not too long afterwards, they were already behind the carriages.

Wei Xiaobao took a peek from a crack on the wooden partition of the carriage’s compartment, immediately he heaved a deep sigh of relief; turned out these several dozen riders were men wearing dark green clothes, they were not lamas at all. In no time at all the riders passed swiftly by the side of the carriages, and soon afterwards they were already ahead of the carriages.

Ah Ke suddenly called out, “Zheng … Zheng *Gongzi*!” [young master]

One of the riders immediately reined in his horse and waited on the side. When the carriage caught up, he rode alongside the carriage. “Is it Miss Chen?” he called out.

“That’s right,” Ah Ke replied, “It’s me.” She sounded very happy.

The rider raised his voice, “It’s a surprise to see you here. Are you with Miss Wang?”

“No, I am not,” Ah Ke replied, “My *Shijie* is not here.”

“Are you going to Hejian Prefecture?” the rider asked, “We can travel together.”

“No,” Ah Ke replied, “We are not going to Hejian Prefecture.”

The rider said, “Hejian Prefecture is very exciting, you should go.”

While they were talking, the carriages and the horses were still proceeding forward. Wei Xiaobao saw Ah Ke’s cheeks were blushing, her eyes were shining, she looked so happy, as if she was seeing the closest person to her in the world. In that instant, Wei Xiaobao felt as if his heart was heavily struck by a large hammer, again and again. He thought, “Could it be that her sweetheart has arrived?” He said in a low voice, “Finding shelter is more important, don’t talk to someone who has nothing to do with us.”

But Ah Ke did not seem to hear him; she asked, “What’s so exciting about Hejian Prefecture?”

“Don’t you know?” the man said. The carriage’s screen was lifted up, a face looked in.

The man had a handsome face, he was about twenty-three, twenty-four years of age, he looked delighted when he said, “There will be a ‘Turtle-slaying Assembly’ at Hejian Prefecture, all heroes and warriors under the heavens will participate; it’s going to be very exciting.”

“What is a ‘Turtle-slaying Assembly’?” Ah Ke asked, “Are you going to kill a big turtle? What’s so exciting about that?”

The man laughed and said, “We are going to kill a big turtle alright, but not a real turtle, it’s a big criminal. His name has a ‘turtle’ character [gui] in it.”

Ah Ke laughed, “How can someone use a ‘turtle’ character in his name?” she asked, “You must be joking.”

The man laughed. “It’s not the ‘gui’ character of ‘wu gui’ [turtle/tortoise],” he said, “The characters sound alike, it’s the ‘gui’ character of ‘gui hua’ [cassia/laurel flower]; why don’t you guess who’s that person?”

Wei Xiaobao jumped in fright; he mused, “Someone with the ‘gui’ character of

‘gui hua’ in his name; are they going to kill me, Xiao Guizi?”

But he heard Ah Ke clapped her hands and said with a laugh, “I know it! It’s the big traitor to China, Wu Sangui.”

The man laughed and said, “Exactly. You are so smart, just one guess and you got it.”

“Have you captured Wu Sangui?” Ah Ke asked.

“That, we have not,” the man replied, “But we are going to discuss how we are going to kill that big traitor to China.”

Wei Xiaobao let out a breath; he thought, “So that’s it. Come to think about it, I, Xiao Guizi, am a little child, they can’t possibly want to kill me. Even if they did, they won’t need any ‘Turtle-slaying assembly’. Damn it, even in posing as someone else, *laozi* can be considered as having a bad luck; why did I impersonate someone with a ‘gui’ character in his name?”

He saw that the man was looking at Ah Ke with a smile on his face, yet the sound of hoof and the carriage did not stop at all. The man was riding a horse, but he leaned over and looked into the carriage; indeed he had an extremely fine horsemanship.

Ah Ke turned toward the nun in white and said in a low voice, “Shifu, are we going or not?”

Although the nun in white’s martial art was very high, she lacked the ability to adapt to changes. She had frequently hoped to participate and had heard about Wulin heroes jointly discussing the plan to kill Wu Sangui. However, Sangjie and the other lamas might catch up with them very soon, the situation was very urgent. After hesitating for a short moment, she asked Wei Xiaobao, “What do you think?”

Seeing Ah Ke’s expression and mannerism toward the young man, Wei Xiaobao’s heart was filled with unspeakable hatred, he simply did not want to let Ah Ke be together with him; thereupon he hastily said, “When those wicked lamas arrived, we won’t be able to deal with them. We’d better get away from them as quickly as possible.”

“What wicked lamas?” the young man asked.

“Zheng *Gongzi*,” Ah Ke said, “This is my Shifu, we ran into a group of wicked lamas on our journey, they injured my Shifu. She, the Senior, received a serious injury. There are seven other lamas pursuing behind us.”

“Yes!” the young man said. Turning around, he let out several whistles; the group of riders halted, the two large carriages also stopped. The young man leaped down from the horseback, rolled up the carriage’s screen, bowed and said, “Junior Zheng Keshuang pays his respect to Senior.” The nun in white nodded.

Zheng Keshuang said, “Please don’t worry about seven or eight lamas, junior will take care of them, just leave it to us.”

Ah Ke was pleasantly surprised, but was also a bit worried; she said, “Those wicked lamas are very formidable.”

Zheng Keshuang said, “These companions I brought with me are all highly skilled in martial art, we can handle it. Not to mention we can fight them many against a few, even if we have to fight them one-on-one, we have nothing to be afraid of those seven, eight lamas.”

Ah Ke turned her head toward her Shifu with a questioning look; actually, it was more like hoping than asking.

“That won’t work,” Wei Xiaobao said, “*Shitai* whose martial art skill is this profound still received injury; what good are twenty-something people like you?”

Ah Ke angrily said, “I did not ask you, why do you talk too much?”

“I am concerned about *Shitai*’s wellbeing,” Wei Xiaobao said.

Ah Ke said, “You are scared of death, yet still say that you are concerned about Shifu. You are a little evil person, all you can do is evil thing, how can you possibly have any good intention?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “This man surnamed Zheng, is his skill great? Is he stronger than *Shitai*?”

Ah Ke said, “He brings more than twenty men, each one is exceptionally skillful in martial arts. Are you saying that these more than twenty men are afraid of seven lamas?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “How do you know each one of these men is exceptionally skillful in martial arts? I’ll say they all have low and weak martial art skill.”

“Of course I do,” Ah Ke said, “I have seen them in action; each one of them is equal to a hundred of you.”

The nun in white was deep in thought without saying anything; Wei Xiaobao wanted her to dress as a peasant woman to hide from the lamas. This matter had already been decided, but it was actually against her deepest wish. To have these two children know about it was not a big deal, but in front of these twenty, thirty Jianghu warriors, she would rather die than letting them know that she was going to assume a disguise to avoid disaster. She slowly said, “Those lama took me, one person, by surprise. Zheng *Gongzi*, thank you for your good intention. Please lead the way.”

“Why would *Shitai* say such thing?” Zheng Keshuang said, “When the road is rough, we must pull our blades to help each other. Much less … much less *Shitai* is Miss Chen’s Shifu, for junior to spend a tiny effort is not a burden at all.”

Ah Ke blushed and bowed her head, but she seemed to be very pleased.

The nun in white nodded and said, “Very well, in that case we will go to Hejian Prefecture together to take a look. But you don’t need to mention me to other people. My natural disposition is indolent, I don’t like meeting other people.”

“Yes, yes,” Zheng Keshuang happily said, “Junior will respectfully obey Senior’s instruction.”

The nun in white said, “Which school Zheng *Gongzi* belong to? Who is your revered master?” Asking about the school he learned his martial art from, was the same as examining his martial art skill.

Zheng Keshuang said, “Junior has received martial art instruction from three Shifu. The teacher who has awakened me from ignorance was surnamed Shi, a martial art expert from Wu Yi Pai[52]. The second Shifu was surnamed Liu, a martial art master, lay person disciple from Shaolin Temple, Putian Prefecture, Fujian.”

“Um, what is that Liu Shifu’s great name?” the nun in white asked.

Zheng Keshuang replied, “His name is Liu Guoxuan.”

Hearing him blurting his Shifu’s name without any respect, the nun in white felt a bit strange. Immediately she remembered someone, she said, “Isn’t that the same name of the Great General Liu of Taiwan?”

Zheng Keshuang said, “He is precisely the provincial governor Liu Guoxuan, Great General Liu under the Yanping Junwang[53] of Taiwan’s banner.”

“So Zheng *Gongzi* belongs to Yanping Junwang’s family?” the nun in white asked.

“Junior is Yanping Junwang’s second son,” Zheng Keshuang replied.

The nun in white nodded. “So you are the descendant of loyal subjects.”

Zheng Chenggong [Koxinga] seized Taiwan from the Dutch. King Gui bestowed the title ‘Yanping Jun Wang’, and allowed him to recruit great generals. Zheng Chenggong passed away in the fifth month of Yongli’s sixteenth year (i.e. Kangxi’s first year). In the meantime, his heir apparent Zheng Jing was guarding Jinmen and Xiamen, while Zheng Chenggong’s younger brother Zheng Xi was in command over Taiwan. Zheng Jing led Zhou Guanbin, Chen Jinnan, and other generals with their troops back to Taiwan to support Zheng Xi’s army and established the position Yanping Junwang.

Counting from Zheng Chenggong’s father Zheng Zhilong, Zheng Jing’s oldest son Kezang [? – can’t even find it in the dictionary], and second son Keshuang were the fourth generation of the Zheng family. For generations Yanping Junwang has unyieldingly been using their military power to resist the Manchurian Qing, alone across the sea, just like when they first received the order from the Great Ming; no man with vision under the heavens did not highly esteem them. When Zheng Keshuang revealed his status, he presumed that this nun would definitely feel deep veneration toward him; who would have thought that this nun in white was only nodding her head and said one sentence, ‘So you are the descendant of loyal subjects’, and said nothing else? He did not know that the nun in white was the Emperor Chongzhen’s Princess. His Shifu Liu Guoxuan was his father’s subordinate, hence he did not hold him in such a high regards. Yet in the nun in white’s eyes, Zheng Jing was no more than a ‘loyal subject’.

In his heart Wei Xiaobao did not stop cursing, “Damn it, what’s so special about it? What’s so amazing about Yanping Junwang anyway?” Actually, he knew very well that Yanping Junwang was a great man; his Shifu Chen Jinnan was Yanping Junwang’s subordinate. The more he thought about it, the more he knew that the turn of events was far from good. He saw Zheng Keshuang’s expression, which showed clear interest in Ah Ke; he was someone in command of powerful army, the magnificent son of a Junwang who really reigned over a region, even the Mu Palace people who wandered destitute in Jianghu could not be compared to them. Moreover, this man’s appearance was ten times more elegant than Wei Xiaobao, his style of conversation was a hundred times more sophisticated, his age was also a lot older. Granted that his martial art skill was still unknown, it seems that if it was not ten times superior than his own, it must be at least seven, eight times.

Ah Ke admired him whole-heartedly, even a blind person could see that. If her Shifu found out that Wei Xiaobao was vying over Ah Ke with this young master Zheng, even without the young master Zheng’s bidding, perhaps she would send a palm strike to kill him herself. Shitai had also praised him as a ‘descendant of loyal subjects’, whose descendant was Wei Xiaobao anyway? He was nothing more than a descendant of a prostitute.

The nun in white cast a glance toward Zheng Keshuang and slowly asked, “Then your first Shifu was Shi Lang, who surrendered to the Manchurian Qing?”

“Yes,” Zheng Keshuang replied, “This man is without any sense of shame and has forgotten righteousness, junior has long ago not regarded him as my Shifu. If we ever see each other in the battlefield, I will definitely kill him with my own hand.” His voice was vehement and full of righteous indignation.

Wei Xiaobao mused, “Turns out your Shifu has surrendered to the Tatars. I must pay attention when I see this Shi Lang next time.”

Zheng Keshuang continued, “For the last ten years or so, junior has been training under Feng Shifu. He is Kunlun Pai’s number one martial art master; he is known as the ‘One Sword Without Blood’. I presume Shitai has heard about him.”

The nun in white said, “Um, that must be Feng Xifan, Feng Shifu. Only I did not

know the origin of his nickname."

Zheng Keshuang said, "While it's true that Feng Shifu's swordsmanship is extremely high, his *qigong*[54] is especially superb. With the tip of his sword he sealed people's death acupoint, the victim's skin was not harmed, he died without shedding any blood."

"Oh," the nun in white said, "In the present age, the number of people who have trained their *qigong* to this state, able to use sharp object instead of blunt, is not too many. How old is Feng Shifu, approximately?"

Zheng Keshuang was very proud when he said, "Come winter this year, junior will arrange a fiftieth birthday banquet."

The nun in white nodded. "He is not even fifty yet, his internal energy has already reached this 'pure' state, it is indeed very rare," she said.

After a short pause, she asked, "Those attendants of yours, are their martial art skills acceptable?"

"Shitai, don't worry," Zheng Keshuang said, "They are martial art masters, handpicked among the guards in junior's palace."

Wei Xiaobao suddenly said, "Shitai, actually, how many martial art masters are there in the world? This Zheng *Gongzi*'s first Shifu was a foreign school's martial art master, his second Shifu was Fujian Shaolin Pai's martial art master, his third Shifu is Kunlun Pai's martial art master, the attendants he brought along are all martial art masters, presumably he is also a martial art master."

Hearing his sarcastic remark, Zheng Keshuang was angry; however, he did not know this kid's background. He only saw that the kid was traveling in the same carriage with the nun in white and Ah Ke, presumably he was related to them somehow; thereupon he strived to repress his anger.

Ah Ke said, "As the saying goes, 'Great Teacher will produce Brilliant Student'; since Zheng *Gongzi* has had three great teachers training him, naturally his martial art skill is superb."

"What Miss has said is very true," Wei Xiaobao said, "I have not seen Zheng *Gongzi*'s martial art; therefore, I have inquired thoughtlessly. If Miss is compared

to Zheng *Gongzi*, I wonder whose martial art is a bit stronger?”

Ah Ke cast a quick glance toward Zheng Keshuang and said, “Naturally he is a lot stronger than me.”

Zheng Keshuang laughed and said, “Miss is too modest.”

“So that’s how it is,” Wei Xiaobao said, “You said that ‘Great Teacher will produce Brilliant Student’, so your martial art skill is not high because your Shifu is a ‘low hand’[55], an obscure master, a far inferior master compared to Zheng *Gongzi*’s three great martial art master teachers.” In term of debate, how could Ah Ke be his match? With just one sentence he was able to turn the table around.

Ah Ke’s entire little face turned beet red as she hastily said, “I … when did I say that Shifu was a ‘low hand’, an obscure master? You are the one who speak nonsense here.”

The nun in white smiled and said, “Ah Ke, you will never win a squabble against Xiaobao. Let us go.” The large carriage lowered its curtain, the vehicles and horses continued their journey westward. Zheng Keshuang rode his horse alongside the large carriage.

The nun in white asked Ah Ke in a low voice, “This Zheng *Gongzi*, how did you know him?”

Ah Ke blushed as she replied, “*Shijie* and I met him at Henan’s Kaifeng Prefecture. That time … that time we were dressed as men, he thought we were men, hence at the restaurant he invited us to come over and drink some wine.”

“You have quite a nerve, huh?” the nun in white said, “Two big girls going to the restaurant to drink wine.”

Ah Ke lowered her head. “We did not drink the wine for real,” she said, “We only pretending to; it was fun.”

“Miss Ah Ke,” Wei Xiaobao said, “You have such a beautiful appearance, even when you are wearing men’s clothes, anybody could see that you are a beautiful girl. I think that Zheng *Gongzi* was harboring a malicious intention.”

Ah Ke angrily said, “You are the one who harbors malicious intention! We

dressed as men, he did not suspect us the least bit. Afterwards *Shijie* told him, and he apologized repeatedly. Other people are refined and courteous gentlemen, unlike you …"

Shortly before noon the party reached Feng'er Zhuang ['zhuang' means village], a large town in western Hebei. They all stopped for lunch in a restaurant. Wei Xiaobao stepped down the carriage, and noticed that Zheng Keshuang was a tall and handsome, straight and impressive looking man, at least half a head taller than Wei Xiaobao; he could not help but feeling inferior even more. He also noticed his luxurious clothes and ornaments, the sheathe of the sword hanging on his waist was inlaid with pearls, jades and precious stones, which sparkled brilliantly under the sun. From among the twenty-some men accompanying him, some were tall and sturdy, some looked energetic, heroic, tall and straight. They all carried sabers and swords, each one of them looked completely spirited.

As they entered the restaurant, Ah Ke wiped the table where the nun in white was going to sit before she took a seat next to her. Hence she and Zheng Keshuang were sitting on adjacent tables to keep each other company. Wei Xiaobao was about to sit down on a table opposite the nun in white, Ah Ke shot him a malicious look and said, "There are plenty of seats over there, can you not sit over here? When I see you, I can't eat my meal."

Wei Xiaobao was furious, instantly his entire face turned deep red; he thought, "With this Zheng *Gongzi* accompanying you, you will be able to eat several more bowls. Damn it, I hope you, this 'little mother skin' [小娘皮 - xiao niang pi] will die of bloating."

"Ah Ke," the nun in white said, "Why are you always that rude to Xiaobao?"

Ah Ke replied, "He is a bad person who won't shrink from any crime. Shifu said I must not kill him, otherwise …" Speaking to this point, she shot another malicious look toward him.

In his heart Wei Xiaobao was bitterly angry, he walked away toward a table at the corner of the hall; he thought, "You are bent on marrying this damned stinky Zheng *Gongzi* and be his wife; how can I, Wei Xiaobao, be willing to give up easily? You want to kill me? It won't be easy. *Laozi* will come up with a scheme: I will kill the husband in your mind first, so you won't have anybody to marry, you

will be a widow first, in the end you will have no choice but to marry *laozi*. *Laozi* will not consider you a widow to be remarried, you are but a 'little mother skin'!"

The waiters delivered the meals, the attendants of the Zheng Family immediately wolfed down their food. Wei Xiaobao took seven, eight steamed buns to feed Hubayin, who was still tied on the carriage. He felt that this Hubayin was more amiable than those men from the Zheng family. Returning to his own table, he looked across several tables and saw Ah Ke's face was glowing, as she was chatting and laughing with Zheng Keshuang, seemingly very intimate with him. Wei Xiaobao was so angry that he nearly choked, "Killing this Zheng *Gongzi* is not going to be easy," he pondered, "I must not leave the least bit of trace; otherwise if Ah Ke knew it was me who killed him, she would definitely kill her own husband to avenge this 'male adulterer'."

Suddenly they heard hooves beat, several people on horses were rushing into the town. They dismounted and walked into the inn, they were precisely seven lamas. Wei Xiaobao's heart was pounding, but there was a little bit of delight in his heart, thinking that other people would soon meet misfortune. He thought, "That Zheng *Gongzi* was tooting his horn really hard just now, saying that he had trained under three martial art masters. Let them have a big fight, *laozi* will watch with folded arms; it's going to be wonderful!"

As soon as those seven lamas saw the nun in white, their countenance changed greatly, and they broke into some mumbling and grunting among themselves. One of them, a tall and thin lama spoke several sentences, he seemed to be issuing some order. The seven of them sat around a table nearby the door, and then they called for food. Each one was staring at the nun in white with angry expression. The nun in white acted as if she did not see anything, she kept on eating her meal slowly.

A moment later, a lama stood up and walked toward the nun in white. "Bald nun," he said in a loud voice, "Did you kill several companions of ours?"

Zheng Keshuang stood up and in a clear voice said, "What do you think you are doing? Making a big fuss in here and acting very rude?"

The lama angrily said, "What kind of 'thing' are you? We are talking to this nun, it has nothing to do with you. Get lost!"

There were several ‘whoosh, whoosh’ noise as four of Zheng Keshuang’s subordinates leaped over, trying to arrest the lama. The lama raised his right hand to block two men; his leg flew out and kicked an attendant, sending him rolling out of the inn’s door, and then he sent a punch straight ahead toward the bridge of another attendant’s nose, hitting him so hard that the attendant fainted immediately.

The rest of the attendants shouted, “Let’s go together!” Taking out their weapons, they charged toward the lama.

The other five lamas also pulled their *jiedao* and rushed forward to meet the attack, only the thin and tall lama sat motionless on his chair. In an instant the dining hall was full of ‘bing, bing, bang, bang’ noise; the sound of fighting was very loud. At the start of the fight, the restaurant workers and the other diners ran out of the restaurant. Zheng Keshuang and Ah Ke pulled their swords and stood in front of the nun in white. In the dining hall the bowls and cups were flying everywhere, the tables and chairs were thrashed. Each lama fought four or five of Zheng Mansion’s guards.

Suddenly there was a ‘whoosh’ sound, a single-blade saber flew upward and landed on the beam. Wei Xiaobao looked up, white light flashed, two more sabers flew up and stuck to the beam. And then three, four more swords also flew up. The Zheng Mansion’s guards cried out in alarm one after another as they leaped sideways and back to evade, without any weapon in their hands. A series of whooshing noise was heard, one by one their weapons flew up; they all stuck onto the beam and the rafters, and did not fall back down. Only some steel whips, iron cudgels, and other heavy weapons flew through the roof and landed on the roof tiles outside.

In less than the time needed to burn half of an incense stick, more than twenty Zheng Mansion’s guards had lost their weapons. Wei Xiaobao was startled, but delighted as well; in fact, his delight was several degrees higher than his astonishment.

The lamas shouted, “Quickly kneel down and surrender; if you are one step late, all your melon heads will be chopped down.”

Although their weapons were gone, the Zheng Mansion’s guards did not lose

their courage; either barehanded or lifted up benches as their weapons, they charged toward the six lamas again. The six lamas yelled, waved their sabers and tossed them away. 'Pop!' all six *jiedao* landed on the table in front of the tall and thin lama, neatly forming a circle. And then all six of them charged into the crowd. Cries of 'Aiyo, aiyo' were heard, mixed with unending 'crack, crack!' as just in a short time more than twenty men had their thighbones broken; they all fell down on the ground, scattered around the dining hall.

By this time the fear in Wei Xiaobao's heart had surpassed his delight; he groaned in his heart, "Very soon they are going to give *Shitai* and us, pretty people, some trouble; what should we do?"

The six lamas put their palms together while mumbling and grunting; apparently they were chanting some sutra. They returned to their table, pulled their *jiedao*, and hang them on their waists. The tall and thin lama called out, "Wine! Bring the wine out!"

After he called several times, the restaurant workers looked from the distant, how could the dare to come over? A lama cursed, "Damn it, if you don't bring food and wine, we'll burn down your 'black inn'."

As soon as the innkeeper heard that they were going to burn the inn, he replied, "Yes, yes! Food and wine will be served immediately. Quickly get the food and wine for these Buddha masters."

Wei Xiaobao looked at the nun in white, he wanted to know how she was going to deal with this situation. But he only saw her with a cup of tea in her right hand, slowly sipping the tea; her sleeve did not move at all, her face looked indifferent. Ah Ke, on the other hand, was deathly pale, with terror in her eyes. Zheng Keshuang's face alternated between deep green and white, his hand on the hilt of his sword, his arm trembled continuously, not knowing what to do, whether he should go forward and attack or not.

The tall and thin lama let out a cold laugh, stood up and walked toward Zheng Keshuang. Zheng Keshuang jumped sideways to evade, while pointing his sword to the lama and shouted, "You … you … what do you want?" Not only his voice was hoarse, it was trembling too.

The lama said, "We have some business with this nun, it has nothing to do with

other people. Are you her disciple?”

“I am not,” Zheng Keshuang replied.

“Very well!” the lama said, “Be sensible, get out quickly.”

“Sire … who are you, Sire?” Zheng Keshuang asked, “Please leave behind your ‘ten-thousand’ name, someday … someday I will …”

The lama tossed his head back and let out a long laugh. Wei Xiaobao’s ears were buzzing, immediately he felt dizzy and light-headed. Ah Ke was unable to stand, she sat down on the stool and bent her head over the table.

The lama laughed and said, “My name in religion is Sangjie, the Great Dharma Protector of the Tibetan Dalai Lama Living Buddha. Someday you will what? You want to find me for revenge, don’t you?”

The hair on Zheng Keshuang’s head stood up; he said with a trembling voice, “Ex … exactly!”

Sangjie laughed aloud. His left sleeve brushed toward Zheng Keshuang’s face. Zheng Keshuang raised his sword to block. Sangjie flicked the middle finger of his right hand, ‘Clang!’ the sword flew up and stuck on the beam. Sangjie’s left hand grabbed the back of Zheng Keshuang’s neck, lifted him up, and threw him heavily onto the wooden bench. He laughed and said, “Sit down!”

As the back of Zheng Keshuang’s neck was grabbed by Sangjie, his ‘da zhui’ [big spine] acupoint was sealed; it was the meeting point of the three *yang* passages of the hands and feet, consequently, his entire body was paralyzed. Sangjie let out a ‘hey, hey’ cold laugh before returning to his table and sat down.

“What are they waiting for?” Wei Xiaobao mused, “Why don’t they fight *Shitai*? Are they waiting for other helpers?” Looking around the dining hall, he noticed that all four walls were made of bricks, he could not use the same trick again, *i.e.* using his dagger to stab the enemies from behind wooden partition. Suddenly he remembered Hubayin, who was still on the large carriage outside. “Bad!” he thought, “As soon as they rescue Hubayin, they would immediately know that *Shitai* and I are of the same group; perhaps they will also find out that those four lamas were killed by me. If that happens, perhaps it would be difficult for Wei Xiaobao to go directly to the underworld to be together with the four

lamas, I am most afraid they would trim me into a human stick first; after all, it was my idea."

Thinking that they would seize his dagger and trim him into a human stick, he could not restrain the hair on his body from standing on its end. Turning his head to look at Sangjie, he noticed that there was a hint of anxiety, restless feeling on Sangjie's serious expression. Suddenly it dawned on him, "Ah, right! He did not know *Shitai* is seriously injured; he is scared of Shitai's superb martial art. Right now he is still not sure how to make his move."

In the meantime the waiter was delivering the food and wine. He poured half a bowl in front of each lama, and his pot was already empty. A lama slapped the table and cursed, "This little bit of wine is not enough for one Buddha master alone to drink." The waiter was already shaking all over, right now he was even more terrified; he turned around to fetch some wine.

Wei Xiaobao had a sudden inspiration; he followed into the kitchen. He was a small kid, nobody paid him any attention. He saw the waiter took a ladle to fill the wine pot from a big earthen jar. His hand was shaking so bad that he splash wine on the ground, on the table and around the earthen jar. In fact, the area around the wine pot was wet with wine. Wei Xiaobao took out a small ingot of silver and handed it to him, saying, "Don't be afraid. This is to pay for my food, you may keep the change. Let me help you pouring the wine." While saying that, he took the ladle away from his hand.

The waiter was overjoyed at this unexpected good fortune; he had never expected that there was such a good person in the world. Wei Xiaobao said, "Those lamas are very vicious; go take a look: what are they doing now?" The waiter complied; he walked toward the kitchen door and peeked into the dining hall.

Wei Xiaobao took a package of knockout drug from his bosom, opened the paper wrapper, and shook everything into the wine pot; and then he raised the pot several times while giving it a vigorous shaking. The waiter turned around and said, "They are drinking, they are not … not doing anything!"

Wei Xiaobao handed over the wine pot to him, saying, "Get it quick, they are hot-tempered, don't let them burn this inn for real."

The waiter did not stop thanking him; with both hands he received the pot and brought it out, while his mouth was still muttering, “Thank you very much, thank you very much, ay, such a good person, may Bodhisattva bless him.”

The lamas snatched the wine out and poured half a bowl each. “Not enough,” they shouted, “Get more wine!”

Wei Xiaobao saw the seven lamas did not suspect anything, they drank the drugged wine clean; he was greatly delighted and mused, “These stinky lamas are so proud of their superior martial art that they do not even guard against this little bit of shallow Jianghu trick; it is really laughable.”

He did not realize that Sangjie and the other had seen the violent death of their five companions with their own eyes, one of them died with all his ribs, front and back, broken from a palm strike. They knew that an enemy with such a very high level of martial art skill was really rare. Sangjie speculated that if he had to fight this person, most probably he would be defeated. In the inn he saw that the nun in white remained calm and composed throughout, which was indeed the manner of an expert. All seven of them had their attention focused at her every move; they were fully on-guard against a martial art expert, whose skill had reached the great heights of achievement, how could they still divide their attention to guard against such a lowly trick involving some knockout drug? Although their mouths were drinking the wine, actually they were completely oblivious of its taste. Recalling the circumstances around the tragic death of their five martial brothers, their hearts were already trembling with fear. If there was no nun in white calmly sitting in front of them in the inn, with such a large quantity of knockout drug in the wine, as soon as it entered their mouths, they would not necessarily not taste the difference.

One of the lamas, a plump one, was a lecher. As soon as he saw Ah Ke’s beauty, he had already indulged the idea of stepping forward and run his hands and feet all over her body. It’s just that he was scared of the nun in white that he did not dare to be rude. But as the first half a bowl of wine entered his belly, he lost all self-control; and then a moment later, the drugged wine also flared-up, his mind turned murky, he did not have any care anymore. Standing up, he giggled and said, “Little Miss, are you married?” Stretching out his big hand, he caressed Ah Ke’s cheek.

Ah Ke was so frightened that her body shook. “You … you …” she said, while brandishing her saber in a chopping movement.

The lama reached out and grabbed her wrist; with a simple twist the saber in Ah Ke’s hand fell to the ground. The lama laughed aloud and pulled her into his embrace. Ah Ke screamed and struggled with everything she had; but the lama’s bulky arms were like a pair of iron hoops, tightly encircled her body, how could she struggle to free herself?

The nun in white originally looked calm and composed, but this time her countenance also underwent a great change; she thought, “It’s not a big deal if this wicked lama killed me, but if he is being rude in public like this, even if I died, I won’t die with closed eyes.”

With both hand Zheng Keshuang propped himself against the table; he stood up and called out, “You … you …” The big fat lama sent a straight left punch. ‘Bang!’ he sent Zheng Keshuang rolling on the floor, twice.

Seeing his beloved was being humiliated, Wei Xiaobao was very anxious, “Why haven’t the drug showed its effect? Could it be that these stinky lamas have some kind of strange skill that they are impervious of knockout drugs?”

Seeing the lama puckered his lips and randomly kissed and sniffed Ah Ke’s face, he could no longer care about the danger; concealing the dagger in his sleeve, he stepped forward with a giggle. “Big monk,” he said with a laugh, “What are you doing?” His right hand slapped the left side of the lama’s back, he flipped his wrist and thrust the dagger from within his sleeve into the lama’s heart. “Big monk,” he said with a laugh, “What kind of trick are you playing?” Hastily he stepped sideway to the left to guard against a counterattack.

The dagger was incomparably sharp, it entered the flesh without any noise; it cut through the lama’s body straight into his heart, which immediately stopped beating, and thus he stopped moving altogether, but his hands are still holding on to Ah Ke. Ah Ke did not know that he had already died; she was still screaming in fear.

Wei Xiaobao stepped forward and pried open the lama’s arms, he pushed the lama’s chest while saying in a low voice, “Ah Ke, quickly follow me.” With one hand pulling her hand, with the other hand he helped the nun in white, together

they walked out of the restaurant.

As soon as the big fat lama left Ah Ke's body, he slowly slid down. The rest of the lamas were shocked; they rushed forward together. Wei Xiaobao called out, "Halt! My Shifu's divine skill is fantastic. This lama was impolite, she punished him with death. Whoever takes a step forward will be put to death immediately."

The lamas were stunned. Suddenly 'bang, bang!' two lamas fell down to the floor. A moment later, two other lamas fell down. Sangjie's internal energy was deep, temporarily the knockout drug was not able to knock him out; but he also felt his head was dizzy, his body swayed, his feet felt light. He thought the nun in white possessed some kind of strange magic; his mind was confused, his conscience blurry, how could he guess that he had been hit by a knockout drug?

Ah Ke called out, "Zheng Gongzi, quickly follow us!"

"Yes," Zheng Keshuang said. He crawled up and scrambled out.

Wei Xiaobao helped the nun in white out. Sangjie rushed after them, but he only took two steps, his body swayed, he tumbled over a table. 'Crash!' the table collapsed. Wei Xiaobao saw the drivers were gone; without waiting for them, he helped the nun in white onto the carriage. He saw Hubayin was surprisingly still in the carriage. Afraid that Sangjie would catch up with them, as soon as Ah Ke and Zheng Keshuang boarded the carriage, he jumped onto the driver's seat and cracked his whip to get the mule going.

In one breath they rushed for about ten *li*, and only after the mule was weary did he ease up and let the mule walk. Right this moment they heard faint sound of hooves, several horses were pursuing them.

Zheng Keshuang said, "Ay, too bad we are not riding horses; otherwise, our steeds can run fast, the wicked lamas won't be able to catch up."

"How could Shitai ride a horse?" Wei Xiaobao said, "I did not ask you to board the carriage." Finished speaking, he yelled and cracked his whip to urge the mule to run.

Zheng Keshuang knew he had made an indiscreet remark, but he was a young master of a prince's mansion, hence he was used to people fawning on him. With only one or two scolding from other people, immediately his face showed an

angry look.

But he heard the hoof beats were getting closer and closer. Wei Xiaobao said, “Shitai, we must get down the carriage and hide.” Looking around, he did not see any house or building, there were only several barley haystacks on the field. “Alright,” he said, “We’ll hide in the barley haystacks.” While saying that, he pulled the reins to stop the mule.

Zheng Keshuang angrily said, “Hiding in the haystacks, if people find out, my Yanping Palace’s prestige will go down the drain.”

“Right!” Wei Xiaobao said, “The three of us will hide in the haystack, *Gongzi* may continue driving the carriage to lead the pursuing troop away.” Immediately he helped the nun in white to get down the carriage.

Ah Ke temporarily could not make up her mind. “Ah Ke,” the nun in white called, “You come with us!”

Ah Ke beckoned Zheng Keshuang and said, “You come and hide with us too.” Seeing the three of them crawled into a haystack, Zheng Keshuang hesitated for a moment, and then crawled into the haystack.

Wei Xiaobao suddenly remembered something; hastily he crawled out of the haystack, climbed onto the carriage, pulled his dagger and stabbed Hubayin to death. Suddenly he had a brainwave; he cut Hubayin’s right hand from the wrist, and jabbed the mule’s buttock with his dagger. The mule cried out in pain, and ran away wildly, pulling the large carriage with it. Hearing the pursuing riders getting closer, hurriedly he crawled back into the haystack.

He inserted the dagger into his boot, while holding the dead man’s hand with his right hand, thinking that he would scare Ah Ke with it. With his left hand he groped around, and happened to touch a braid, so he knew where Zheng Keshuang was. He continued groping around, this time he touched a slender soft waist, so he knew it was Ah Ke. He was greatly delighted. He pinched several times as hard as he could and called out, “Zheng *Gongzi*, why did you rub my buttocks?”

“I did not,” Zheng Keshuang said.

“Humph,” Wei Xiaobao said, “You thought I was Miss Ah Ke, didn’t you?

Groping around like that, it's very rude."

"Nonsense!" Zheng Keshuang cursed.

Wei Xiaobao pinched Ah Ke's chest hard with his left hand and immediately pulled his hand back, while calling out, "Hey, Zheng *Gongzi*, you are still groping around!" And then he placed Hubayin's hand on Ah Ke's face to caress her a little bit, before moving the hand to stroke her chest.

Previously, when he groped Ah Ke's waist and chest while making a big fuss over it, Ah Ke thought it was really Zheng Keshuang who took the opportunity to be impolite to her; she could not help but feeling ashamed and anxious. This time she felt an ice-cold and big hand caressing her face, she knew Wei Xiaobao's hand was not this big, she had no doubt that it was Zheng Keshuang's hand. She was about to scream, but then felt that it would be kind of indecent if her Shifu and Wei Xiaobao hear about it; thereupon she turned her head around to evade. The big hand then went down to her chest; she thought, "This Zheng *Gongzi* is such a scoundrel." She could not help but feeling enraged; she turned her body to the right to evade.

Wei Xiaobao used his left hand to slap Zheng Keshuang's face heavily while shouting, "Miss Ah Ke, that was a good strike. This Zheng *Gongzi* is a lecher. Aiyo, Zheng *Gongzi*, you caressed me again; you got the wrong person."

Zheng Keshuang thought it was Ah Ke who slapped him; he angrily said, "You are the one who caressed her, but you blame me … blame me …"

Ah Ke thought, "That hand was clearly a big one; it can't be the little evil man."

Holding Hubayin's hand, Wei Xiaobao stroked the back of Ah Ke's neck.

Right this moment, the sound of hooves beat was getting closer. What happened was that when Sangjie saw the nun in white and the others went out of the inn, he wanted to run after them, but his entire body was devoid of any strength. His internal energy was very profound, after drinking the drugged wine, he did not lose his conscience. After taking two deep breaths, he felt that his *chi* was not harmed, only he was dizzy and his vision blurred. Immediately he understood what was going on. "Fetch cold water," he called, "Quickly fetch cold water!"

The waiter fetched a bowl of cold water. Sangjie called out, “Pour it on my head.” But how could the waiter dare to do that? He hesitated and stayed motionless.

Sangjie was still thinking that the knockout drug was administered by this restaurant. Since he was unable to lift his hands, he took a very deep breath and smashed his head against the bowl of cold water. As soon as the cold water splashed onto his head, his brain cleared up somewhat. “Cold water,” he cried, “The more the better. Quick, quick!”

The waiter fetched two more bowls of cold water. Sangjie dumped the water onto his own head, and ordered the waiter to bring a barrel of cold water over, to awaken the rest of the lamas. No matter what they did, however, the big fat lama did not wake up. Then they saw blood on his back from the blade wound, and realized that he had died. The six lamas did not have time to burn the inn down; they rushed onto their horses and with loud yelling and shouting they gave chase.

Ah Ke felt the big hand stroking her neck; she could not take it anymore. “Please don’t!” she called out. Wei Xiaobao turned his hand around.

Inside the haystack, Zheng Keshuang could not see anything, he was unable to dodge, and had to suffer another slap on his face. “It wasn’t me!” he shouted.

With these two shouts, their trace was discovered. Sangjie called out, “They are here!”

One lama jumped down the horse and rushed toward the haystack. He saw Zheng Keshuang’s one leg was sticking out of the stack. Grabbing his heel, he pulled Zheng Keshuang out of the stack. Afraid of Zheng Keshuang’s counterstrike, he flung him out, throwing him several *zhang* away.

The lama then reached into the stack, trying to catch the other. Wei Xiaobao curled his body as small as he could. By this time the lama had already pulled the stack open; suddenly he saw a large hand coming toward his face. In a moment of desperation, he grabbed Hubayin’s hand with both hands. Feeling that he had someone’s hand in his own, he pulled the hand out as hard as he could, thinking that he was pulling someone out of the stack and was going to fling that person away as well. Who would have thought that he was pulling an empty air?

He had exerted all his strength, but only pulled a severed hand; his own strength had thrown him back that he fell sitting down on the ground. By the time he saw clearly that what he had pulled was a dead man's palm, he felt the *chi* and blood inside his chest welling up, making him feel an unspeakable discomfort.

The force he exerted was intended to pull a man and fling him out of the haystack. Zheng Keshuang weighed approximately a hundred and twenty or a hundred and thirty catties; the lama estimated that the second person would weigh approximately the same. Hence this pulling force was at least two hundred catties, not to mention that this time he was not pulling an ankle, but a hand. He was afraid that if his pulling force was insufficient, he would be pulled into the haystack instead; therefore, he put a lot more effort in this one pull. Who would have thought that the enormous effort he exerted was only pulling a severed hand weighed only several *taels*? The entire force came back to him; it was no different than if he received a heavy blow with a force of more than 200 catties.

Seeing the lama fell down, Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted; he threw a bunch of straw onto the lama's face. The lama stretched out his hand to brush the straw off. Suddenly he felt a stabbing pain on the pit of his stomach; his body twitched several times, then he stayed still. Actually, Wei Xiaobao took the opportunity while the lama's vision was obstructed by the straw to jump forward and thrust his dagger into the pit of the lama's stomach.

He had just pulled the dagger out when he heard all around him people were shouting loudly in Tibetan; he could not help but groaning inwardly. Expecting the worst, he had no choice but to conceal the dagger inside his sleeve, while slowly stood up. He looked up and saw Sangjie and the other four lamas were already standing in the barley field, about three *zhang* away from the haystack.

The lama's body was covered in pile of straw, Sangjie and the other did not know how he died, they assumed it was the nun in white who had displayed her divine skill by striking him dead. They stood far away and did not dare to come near the haystack. "Little Nun," Sangjie called out, "You have successively killed my eight *Shidi*, the enmity between you and me is as deep as the ocean. You are hiding in a haystack and do not dare to come out; what kind of hero are you?"

Wei Xiaobao mused, “Why did he say she has killed eight of his *Shidi*?” But after a quick calculation, he realized that indeed they had killed eight lamas, although only one died in the nun in white’s hand. After hearing Sangjie said those words, he took two steps backward; obviously he was scared. He could not bear not to shout, “My Shifu’s martial art skill has reached perfection, there is no one in the world can be compared with her. But she, the Senior, has a merciful heart, and she is very virtuous. It was by accident that she has killed people. She, the Senior, has said that she is going to spare you, five lamas. Just leave us quickly.”

“How can it be that easy?” Sangjie said, “Little Nun, just hand over the ‘Forty-two-chapter Sutra’ nicely, your Buddha master will let you go. Otherwise, even until the ends of the earth, your Buddha master will not give up.”

“So you want the ‘Forty-two-chapter Sutra’?” Wei Xiaobao said, “This sutra is available in all temples and monasteries everywhere; what’s so strange about it?”

Sangjie said, “We want the one in the Little Nun’s possession.”

Wei Xiaobao pointed to Zheng Keshuang and said, “That copy of sutra has been given by my Shifu to him long ago. Why don’t you ask him?”

Zheng Keshuang was just crawling up from the ground, he had not stood firm yet. A lama pounced on him and grabbed his arms. Another lama pulled his clothes apart, ‘rip, rip!’ his outer garment, his undergarment, were torn to pieces; the gold, silver and jewels in his pocket were thrown to the ground, but how could there be any sutra?

“Zheng *Gongzi*,” Wei Xiaobao called out, “Where did you hide the sutra? Why don’t you tell them? It’s not such a precious object anyway.”

Zheng Keshuang was furious, “I don’t have it!” he loudly shout.

A lama slapped him hard that he almost passed out. “Will you speak or not?” the lama shouted, while giving him another slap.

Seeing Zheng Keshuang’s cheeks were immediately swollen, Wei Xiaobao’s joy was unspeakable. “Zheng *Gongzi*,” he called out again, “Why don’t you get that sutra for this Buddha masters? I saw you digging a hole in that inn; did you hide

the sutra in there?”

Sangjie happily said, “Right, the little kid must be telling the truth; take him back to the inn.”

“Yes!” the lama complied. He slapped Zheng Keshuang’s face again.

Ah Ke could not bear it anymore, she scrambled out of the haystack and called out, “This little kid is an expert liar, don’t believe him. This Zheng *Gongzi* has never seen any sutra.”

Wei Xiaobao turned his head around and said in a low voice, “I am trying to save *Shitai* and you, let Zheng *Gongzi* lead them away.”

“I don’t want you to save me,” Ah Ke said, “You have wronged Zheng *Gongzi*, you will make him losing his life.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “*Shitai*’s and your lives are ten thousand times more important than Zheng *Gongzi*’s.”

Sangjie said to the lama grabbing Zheng Keshuang, “Don’t kill him.” Turning his head around, he said, “Little Nun, come out. And these two babies, take them with us to find the sutra.”

Ah Ke angrily said, “You are the one who is afraid of death, yet you said you want to save Shifu. If you have guts, go fight these lamas.”

The hot blood in Wei Xiaobao’s heart welled up, he thought, “You despise me like this, so what if I’ll let myself be killed by these lamas?” He said, “You want me to fight? Fine. My death is not a big deal, it’s just that I won’t be able to save *Shitai* and you. But what if I win?”

“Humph,” Ah Ke snorted, “Even if you reincarnated you won’t win. If you defeat one lama, I will obey you forever.”

“What do you mean defeat one lama? Didn’t I kill seven lamas?” Wei Xiaobao said.

“You used trick to kill,” Ah Ke said, “It does not count.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “If I defeat one lama, you will marry me and be my wife.”

“Nonsense!” Ah Ke angrily said, “You are a little monk, you are also a little

eunuch, how can … how can …”

“Little monk can return to normal life, little eunuch can quit being an eunuch,” Wei Xiaobao said, “In short, I must marry you and take you as my wife.”

“Shifu,” Ah Ke anxiously said, “Did you hear that? In situation like this he is still foul-mouthed and talks nonsense.”

The nun in white sighed; she thought that the situation was seriously critical. She might be forced to cut her own channel[56] and die, to avoid being humiliated by the lamas. “Xiaobao,” she called in a low voice, “Stretch your hand into the haystack.”

“Yes,” Wei Xiaobao replied. He stretched his left hand backhandedly into the haystack. He felt a small paper packet in his hand; he heard the nun in white said in a low voice, “This is the map hidden inside the sutra. You don’t need to care about me, you must escape alone. If you could obtain the other seven sutras in the future, perhaps our great Han people’s rivers and mountains will have a hope of recovering. It is much more important than my, one person’s life.”

Wei Xiaobao saw how high she regarded him; she did not entrust this matter to her own disciple, but gave it to him instead, immediately his spirit rose. Suddenly he had an idea. Right now he did not have time to think about it in details, but he loudly said, “My Shifu is a martial art expert of this age, she is unwilling to fight with you. Just appoint one person to have a match with me. Only if you can beat me will my *Shijie* go into action. Humph, humph! I’ll say you won’t dare. Just know your own limitation, you’d better run away quickly with your tails between your legs.” While saying that, he put the paper packet into his bosom.

The five lamas laughed aloud. Although they were quite afraid of the nun in white, why would they take this little kid seriously? One lama laughed and said, “I only need to send you one palm strike, I guarantee you will roll around seventeen, eighteen times, and have a match in farting!”

Wei Xiaobao took a step forward and said in a clear voice, “Alright, let you and I have a match then.” Turning his head toward Ah Ke, he said, “After I win, you will be my wife, you can’t deny.”

Ah Ke said, “You won’t win. No matter what you won’t win.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “A man stake out everything he has, ten thousand men can’t stop him. In order to win you to be my wife, I have no choice but to stake everything I have.”

The lama took several steps forward and said with a laugh, “You really want to have a match with me?”

“Why would I lie to you?” Wei Xiaobao replied, “The two of us will have a one-on-one match. Don’t worry, my Shifu will not personally go into action. Those four martial brothers of yours, are they going to help you?”

Sangjie burst into loud laughter. “Naturally we won’t help him,” he said.

Wei Xiaobao said, “Supposing that I kill him with a single blow, will you go together, relying on numbers to gain victory? Let us agree up front: if all of you swarm together, I won’t be your match, my Shifu will have to personally go into action.”

Sangjie was actually afraid that the nun in white would personally go into action. He thought about his several martial brothers who died without clear reason, he did not know what kind of martial art this nun possessed, he thought it would be greatly advantageous to him if he let his martial brother have one-on-one match with this little kid, so that he could see the nun in white’s martial art school and her background. Thereupon he said, “The two of you will have a one-on-one match, neither side is allowed to help you two.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Whoever helps is a turtle son of b1tch.”

“That’s right,” Sangjie said, “Whoever helps is a turtle daughter of b1tch.”

Not only Sangjie had a high martial art skill, he was also very smart. He saw that the nun in white and Ah Ke were women, thereupon he changed the ‘turtle son of b1tch’ into ‘turtle daughter of b1tch’, because since in any case the opponent would not be ‘turtle son of b1tch’, they might go forward and help anyway.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Very good. You, big lama, is exceptionally astute, *Zaixia* is full of admiration.”

“Move forward several steps more,” Sangjie said. He saw Wei Xiaobao was standing very close to the haystack, and was afraid the nun in white might put her hand onto his back and secretly transfer her internal energy to him, then his martial brother would not be able to withstand.

Wei Xiaobao said, “We, Han people, are frank and upright, if we win, we will win honorably, if we lose, we will lose gracefully; how can we practice fraud?”

The nun in white said in a low voice, “Xiaobao, you won’t win, just pretend you are having a martial art match, then grab a horse and escape.”

“Yes,” Wei Xiaobao replied. He took three steps forward, so that the distance between him and the haystack was a bit more than a *zhang*.

Seeing that the nun in white would no longer able to help in secret, Sangjie nodded. The lama also took several steps forward until he stood face to face with Wei Xiaobao, and then he said with a laugh, “How do you want to compete?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “We could have either soft match, or hard match[57].”

The lama laughed and said, “How do we have a soft match? And how do we have a hard match?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “In soft match, I punch you once, you also punch me once. I will punch you again, and you also punch me again. We punch each other seventy, eighty times, until one of us fall down. When you punch me, I must neither dodge, nor lift my hand to block; I can only stand still, transporting my internal energy to receive your punch head on. When I hit you, you will do the same. In hard match, we can either fight with weapons or barehanded. Naturally we can dodge, block, run or leap.”

Sangjie thought, “This little urchin is nimble; supposing he jumps around, I am afraid *Shidi* won’t be able to hit him. He is so full of confidence, he must have some other trick up his sleeve. Most probably he will jump toward the haystack, enticing *Shidi* to chase him, and then that nun will suddenly launch a sneak attack from inside of the haystack. If they fight a soft match, his fist is so small, seventy, eighty of his punches landed on Shidi’s body would be no more than scratching an itch.” Thereupon he shouted in Tibetan, “Have a soft match with

him, but don't injure him. The longer you let him fight the better, so that we can see his martial art school and background."

"Your *Shixiong* is scared," Wei Xiaobao said, "He is afraid that you can't beat me, and thus telling you to surrender, isn't he?"

The lama laughed and said, "Little demon speaks nonsense. *Shige* feels sorry for you, he told me not to kill you in just one strike. Since you are so young, your weapon, as well as punching and kicking skills must be limited. I don't want to take advantage over you either, so let's have a soft match."

"Good!" Wei Xiaobao said. Sticking out his chest, he put his hands behind his back and said, "You may hit me first. If I evade or block, just consider me not a hero or a warrior."

The lama laughed. "You are a little kid," he said, "Naturally you must go first." While saying that, he copied Wei Xiaobao's manner: he stuck out his chest and put his hands behind his back. Compared to Wei Xiaobao, he was a good one head taller. He was giggling incessantly, obviously he did not take this little urchin seriously.

Wei Xiaobao stretched out his left fist, it barely reached the lama's lower abdomen. Seeing his small fist, the five lamas burst into laughter. "Alright," Wei Xiaobao said, "I am sending my first strike."

The lama did not dare to be too careless; afraid that Wei Xiaobao might have some unusual skill, he gathered his internal energy and sent it all toward his lower abdomen. Wei Xiaobao suddenly flicked his right sleeve, with his fist inside it; noiselessly the punch landed on the left side of the pit of the lama's stomach. Seeing such a powerless punch, Sangjie and the others burst out laughing again.

The sound of laughter had not ceased, they saw the lama's body swayed. Wei Xiaobao said, "Now it's your turn to hit me." The lama suddenly dropped down, crouching on the ground, and then stopped moving altogether. Sangjie and the others were greatly shocked; they rushed forward at once.

Wei Xiaobao withdrew to the haystack and called out, "Halt! Whoever helps is a turtle lama son of a b1tch."

The four lamas halted; they saw the lama was still unmoving, not because his

breathing was constricted due to serious injury, but because he had died. The four lamas' jaws dropped in endless surprise; they were all speechless. Wei Xiaobao raised his clenched fists high above his head and said, "My Shifu has taught me unique martial art called the 'Splitting Mountain Striking the Ox Divine Fist' that I am able to strike a big ox dead with one punch, much less just a little lama. Whoever refuses to accept may come forward to try it!" With a low voice he continued, "Ah Ke, my wife, will you renege on your promise?"

Ah Ke saw that the fist technique that she looked down was actually a superior martial art; a tall and sturdy lama being hit, unexpectedly he could not withstand it and had to lie prostate on the ground without able to stand up again, his life and death was unknown; she was also very surprised. Hearing Wei Xiaobao, unexpectedly she forgot to reprimand him.

"Ha, ha," Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "You complied. My good wife."

Ah Ke angrily said, "I am not."

"You blatantly reneged on your own promise, you are not a hero or a warrior," Wei Xiaobao said.

"So what if I am not?" Ah Ke said.

The nun in white actually saw that after Wei Xiaobao hit the lama's heart, blood was seeping out of the lama's chest before he swayed and fell face down on the ground. After thinking about it for a moment, she knew that Wei Xiaobao had hidden his dagger in his sleeve; actually, he did not send out a punch at all, rather, he thrust his dagger into the opponent's heart. The dagger was sharp beyond compare, even steel would be penetrated by it, let alone human flesh. Wei Xiaobao used his left hand first to let everybody know that he was using a fist; after using the dagger, he hid it immediately, and then lifted his fists high above his head, hence other people did not suspect him even more.

Sangjie called the lama several times, but did not hear any response; he was bewildered and did not know what to do. A thin lama pulled his *jiedao* out and shouted, "Little demon, so what if your boxing skill is superior? Your Buddha master wants to try your blade technique." He thought that this little kid had received teaching from brilliant master, his internal energy cultivation and fist strength were indeed not a small matter, but if he fought him using weapons, his

fist strength would be useless.

"You want to have a match with blades? Yes, you can. Come!" Wei Xiaobao said.

The lama did not dare to come near, he shouted, "If you have guts, you come!"

Wei Xiaobao echoed, "If you have guts, you come!"

The lama said, "One, two, three, we both take three steps forward."

"Alright!" Wei Xiaobao said, "One, two, three!" And he took three steps forward.

The lama also took three steps forward, while brandishing his *jiedao* into a circle of white ray to protect himself, afraid that Wei Xiaobao might suddenly launched his 'splitting mountain striking ox divine fist'."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Don't be afraid, I won't use the divine fist against you."

How could the lama believe him? He still brandished the *jiedao*, creating 'whoosh, whoosh' noise. "Quickly pull your blade!" he shouted.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "I have trained and mastered the divine skill to protect my head from 'Jin Ding School' ['golden crown of the head' - see Chapter 10]. You can try chopping my head with your saber, I guarantee that that big saber will bounce back and chop your own bald head. I am telling you this in advance, so that you won't be fooled."

The lama was half believing and half doubting; but after seeing him killing his martial brother with one punch without extra trouble, his martial art skill must be deep and immeasurable. Momentarily he did not dare to go forward rashly; he did not dare to lift his saber to chop Wei Xiaobao's head even more.

"Your martial art is too low," Wei Xiaobao said, "I won't hit you back. But you can only chop my head, you must not chop my chest. I am still young, the divine skill to protect my body has not been trained to perfection. If you chop at my chest, I will definitely die."

The lama looked at him with squinted eyes; he asked, "Your head really does not afraid of saber chop?"

Wei Xiaobao took off his cap and said, "Just look, my braid is already gone, the more I train, the shorter will my hair be; the divine skill of the top of my head and of my neck has been trained to perfection. By the time I train until not a single hair on my head remains, my chest won't be afraid of your saber chop as well."

Because he became a monk in Shaolin Temple and Qingliang Temple, the hair on his head was shaved clean. By this time his hair was only less than a *cun* long. At that time, other than Buddhist monks and people who were bald by nature, all males had to have their hair in braids. Someone with a *cun* long hair like him was indeed unheard of. As for the story that the more he trained the shorter his hair and so on, Wei Xiaobao recalled it from what he saw and heard in Prince Kang's mansion, when he met Wu Yingxiong's escorts from Jin Ding School.

The lama saw his head, and believed several points. He had also heard that there was indeed a school called Jin Ding in Wulin, whose hard head martial art skill was very formidable. "I don't believe your head can withstand my saber chop," he said.

"I suggest you'd better not try it," Wei Xiaobao said, "When the saber bounces back, the eating apparatus of your body cannot be guaranteed."

"I don't believe you!" the lama said, "Stand still, I am going to chop your head." While saying that, he raised his *jiedao* high.

Seeing the flickering blade, Wei Xiaobao's fear was unspeakable; he thought that if the lama realy chop his head, not only his skull would be split in two, his body would also be split like split bamboo. It's just that: one, he could not fight the lama for real anyway, other than resorting to trickery, he did not have any other way of escaping; two, gambling had become his second nature, he was betting that when the lama heard his threat, he would not dare to chop his head or neck. In a way, he was gambling with his own life as the stake.

By now his life and death lay in this lama's mind, but winning or losing, it was no different than throwing dice; much less in this case he had no other alternative to gambling anyway. If he did not gamble, this lama would raise his saber and chop randomly, then in the end he, as well as the nun in white and Ah Ke would be hacked to death. Moreover, right now the eyes of the beautiful girl Ah Ke were steadily fixed on him. Thinking to this point, he could not help but

cast a glance toward Zheng Keshuang, who was still lying on the ground; he said in his heart, “You are a young master of a prince’s mansion, compared to me, the son of a wh0re, who is more heroic? Damn it, do you dare to stand here and let others chop your head with a saber?”

Sangjie called out in Tibetan, “This little demon knows witchcraft, don’t chop his head or neck.”

“What did he say?” Wei Xiaobao asked, “He told you not to chop my head, didn’t he? You are all treacherous and crafty, you don’t keep your own words; that won’t be good.”

“No, no,” the lama said, “*Da Shixiong* told me not to believe your bragging; he told me to chop your head into two halves.” As the word ‘halves’ came out of his mouth, the saber chopped down from the air.

Wei Xiaobao was so scared that his soul flew to the outer sky, in a twinkling his heroic spirit disappeared without a trace. Hastily he pulled back his head while groaning in his heart, “My life stops here!”

Unexpectedly when the saber was still three *chi* away from his head, it suddenly changed direction; the *jiedao* made a half circle turn in a different move ‘embracing moon in the bosom’, the saber swung from outside to the inside, ‘stab’, it hacked on Wei Xiaobao’s back.

The saber carried a tremendous force, Wei Xiaobao felt severe pain on his back, he was unable to stand and tumbled down into the lama’s bosom. Immediately the dagger in his right hand stabbed the pit of the lama’s stomach three times, and then he ducked down and crawled underneath the lama’s crotch, while calling out, “Aiyo, aiyo, you did not keep your words!”

The lama made some ‘he, he, he’, gurgling noise, his *jiedao* turned back and hacked his own face. His body curled up, twisted several times, and then he lay down motionless.

Wei Xiaobao was hoping that the lama would hack his chest; since he was wearing the treasured vest to protect his body, he would not lose his life, hence the four lamas would be scared and run away. Who would have thought that the lama did not hack his chest but his back instead? By doing so, Wei Xiaobao was pushed toward the lama. Seizing this opportunity, Wei Xiaobao stabbed his chest

several times. It's just that by crawling under the opponent's crotch he looked to be in a very desperate situation. His near escape this time did not differentiate him as a hero or a coward.

"Shifu," he made such a big fuss, "The divine skill on my back has also been trained to perfection. Did you see that? Cough, cough … the saber bounced back and killed him. Wonderful, wonderful!"

Actually, the lama only suffered minor injury from the bouncing saber, it was the three stabs of the dagger that killed him; yet Sangjie and the other, three people, could not see that. They assumed it was indeed the bouncing saber that killed the lama. They were so scared that they withdrew several *zhang* away, while loudly calling the dead lama's name.

The nun in white was already aware that Wei Xiaobao was wearing the treasured vest to protect his body. She knew that Ah Ke had chopped him twice without injuring him, hence this time she was not surprised. However, seeing that he dared to bet with his own head against the saber, she could not help but admiring his guts. Actually, Wei Xiaobao was so frightened a moment ago that he peed in his pants; his crotch was dripping wet, only no one else knew about it.

The lama's saber carried such a tremendous force that as it hit Wei Xiaobao's back, his ribs were almost broken. Leaning against the haystack, he could not bear not to groan. The nun in white said, "Quickly give him the 'snow ginseng jade toad pill'."

"Where is the pill?" Ah Ke asked Wei Xiaobao.

"In my pocket," Wei Xiaobao replied, "I might not be able to live."

Ah Ke took the jade bottle from his pocket, pulled the cork, and tipped one pill out of the bottle. Then she put the cork back, and returned the jade bottle into Wei Xiaobao's pocket. "Quickly take it!" she said.

Wei Xiaobao reached out to take it, but he pretended that he could not lift his hand. Grudgingly Ah Ke brought the pill to his mouth. Seeing her snow white, tender and delicate little hand, as soon as the pill entered his mouth, Wei Xiaobao puckered his lips to kiss it. Ah Ke hastily pulled her hand, but his lips brushed the back of her hand. "Ah!" she cried out.

Wei Xiaobao said in loud voice, “Shifu, these lamas speak like releasing dog fart. They said they were going to chop my head, but they chopped my back instead. And now only three left, let disciple strike them dead with the ‘splitting mountain striking ox divine fist’!”

When Sangjie and the others heard this, they withdrew several steps back. The three of them talked among themselves for a moment, and then they took out some flints to light up several stalks of hay, and tossed the burning stalks onto the haystack. The first three stalks fell on empty space. Sangjie lighted another stalk and ran several *zhang* forward, and then threw the stalk as hard as he could, while clapping his palms in front of his body as a shield. Afraid that Wei Xiaobao would attack him with the ‘splitting mountain striking ox divine fist’, he immediately leaped back.

As soon as the haystack met the fire, it was burned instantly. Wei Xiaobao pulled the nun in white out of the haystack. Looking all around, he saw a cave on the rocky hill to the west. Having not enough time to check, he said, “Ah Ke, quickly help Shifu to that cave over there to hide, I am going to block these lamas.”

Taking two steps toward Sangjie, he called out, “You are too brazen; unexpectedly you are not afraid of *Xiaoye*’s [young master] ‘splitting mountain striking ox divine fist’ and ‘protecting head golden crown divine skill’. Sangjie, you are the leader, quickly come here and take two punches from *Xiaoye*.”

Sangjie was cautious; momentarily he really did not dare to pursue, but then he thought about the importance of the sutra, plus the ten of his martial brothers who had lost their lives. If he gave up just like that, what would remain of his illustrious name? He saw the nun in white was walking slowly with the help of that young lady; if she was not injured, then she must be sick. It was indeed a golden opportunity for him, could it be that he could not even beat the little kid in front of him? It’s just that his martial art was so strange that those who got hit died instantly. Hence he hesitated and momentarily did not know what to do.

When Wei Xiaobao turned his head, he saw the nun in white and Ah Ke had almost reached the cave. He turned back and shouted, “You don’t dare to have a martial art match with me, *laozi* is going to come forward to kill you; why haven’t you run away?”

These words actually revealed the 'horse's leg'. Sangjie thought, "If you really have the ability to kill me, why didn't you simply charge forward? You told me to run away, that means you are scared of me in your heart." Laughing maliciously, he stretched out both hands, the bones in his body were cracking as he took two steps forward.

Wei Xiaobao groaned inwardly, "Bad; what trick can I use this time to kill him?"

By this time the haystack behind him was roaring with fire, the tongues of the fire almost licked his body; he mused, "*Laozi* better hide in the cave first, and then think of some other way slowly." Thinking about hiding in a cave, his heart was immediately happy. If the cave was so dark that they could not see anything, he might be able to grope around Ah Ke's body. He stooped down to pick Hubayin's hand from the dead lama's grip and put it into his pocket.

Seeing Sangjie took several more steps forward, he called loudly, "It's too hot in here, *laozi*'s divine skill cannot be used. If you have guts, go over there and have match with me." Finished speaking he turned around and ran toward the cave. When he entered the cave, he saw the nun in white and Ah Ke had already sat on the ground. This cave was actually only a cavity on the mountain wall, there was not enough place to hide at all; the cave was not dark either, plus Ah Ke sat leaning on the nun in white, hence it was impossible for him to grope around. He could not help but feeling a bit disappointed.

Sangjie and the two lamas slowly walked toward the front of the cave, and stopped when they were about three *zhang* from the cave. Sangjie called out, "You have stepped onto a dead end, there is no way out. Get the torches!" The two lamas picked the stalks and handed them over to him.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Very good, quickly throw the torches over, and see if you can burn us to death. I am afraid the Forty-two-chapter sutra will also be burned very quickly."

Sangjie held the burning stalk high, he was just about to hurl it toward the cave, but when he heard that, he felt that Wei Xiaobao was right; if he wanted to burn the three of them to death, he would also destroy the sutra. Thereupon he tossed the torch aside and called out, "Quickly hand over the sutra, your Buddha master is merciful, I will let you walk the path of life."

Wei Xiaobao said, “You kowtow eighteen times in front of my Shifu, my Shifu is merciful, she will let you walk the path of life.”

Sangjie was furious; he picked up the torch and threw it to the front of the cave. A burst of thick smoke was blown into the cave, Wei Xiaobao and Ah Ke were assaulted by the smoke that their eyes watered and they coughed incessantly. The nun in white was breathing very slowly, she was unaffected by the smoke. The other two lamas threw more torches.

“Shitai,” Wei Xiaobao said, “That sutra has no use anymore, just give it to them, we will … we will slowly think of other ideas.”

“’Postpone the troops’ stratagem,” Ah Ke said.

“They are not troops,” Wei Xiaobao said. Ah Ke was coughing repeatedly, she was unable to argue with him.

“Fine,” the nun in white said, and handed over the sutra to him.

Wei Xiaobao raised his voice, “I have a copy of the sutra in here, I’ll throw it out. If it falls into the fire, it’s not my problem.”

Hearing that he agreed to hand over the sutra, Sangjie was delighted. Afraid that the sutra might fall into the fire and burn, he quickly picked several large rocks and threw them at the burning stalks. His strength was enormous, his aim was accurate, the burning stalks were crushed by the rocks and immediately extinguished.

Seeing his strength in throwing the big rocks, Wei Xiaobao could not help but was shocked; he mused, “If he threw the rocks to the cave, the three of us would be crushed to death, while the sutra won’t be harmed the least bit. I must not let him think about this idea.”

“Quickly throw the sutra out,” Sangjie called out.

“Alright, alright!” Wei Xiaobao replied, “My Shifu says that you want to study the sutra, you are good disciples of Buddha, she instructed me not to harm you …” While he talked, he pulled his dagger and made several cuts on Hubayin’s hand. He placed it on the sutra, and took the bottle of ‘transforming corpse powder’ from his pocket, and sprinkle some fine powder on the fresh cuts of the severed hand. His body was obstructing the nun in white and Ah Ke’s visions, he

would not let them see what he was doing. And then with a loud voice he said, “My Shifu said that this copy of ‘Forty-two-chapter Sutra’ was taken from the Imperial Palace in Beijing, it is very valuable. I heard there is a big secret hidden in it, after it is revealed, the teachings of Buddha will be flourishing, it will make everyone throughout the world believe in Bodhisattva. Men will become monks, women will become nuns, little children will become little monks, little nuns, the old men …” While he was talking, the severed hand gradually changed into yellow liquid permeating the sutra.

Hearing that the sutra was indeed from the Imperial Palace, and that it concealed a big secret, Sangjie was ecstatic. He knew that ‘flourishing the teachings of Buddha’ and so on was obviously not the truth. Afraid that Wei Xiaobao might not be willing to hand over the sutra, he quickly gave some careless, perfunctory promise; he said, “Flourishing the Dharma, spreading our teachings, those are all very good.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “My Shifu read it, but could not find the secret. Now she gives it to you, asking you to study it well. If you can reveal the secret, you must spread it to the monks’ monasteries and the nuns’ convents throughout the world; you must not be selfish by keeping the secret only for your lamaseries. Will you promise to do that?”

Sangjie laughed and said, “Naturally I promise. Tell your Shifu to set her heart at ease.”

“If you cannot figure out the secret,” Wei Xiaobao continued, “You must hand it over to Shaolin Temple. If Shaolin Temple’s monks cannot figure out the secret, ask them to bring it to Qingliang Temple on Mount Wutai. If Qingliang Temple’s monks cannot figure it out, they must bring it to Chanzhi [dhyana wisdom] Temple in Yangzhou. One hands over to another, until the secret within the sutra is revealed.”

“Alright, alright,” Sangjie said, “I will surely accomplish that.” While in his heart he said, “The nun only knew that the secret in the sutra is concerning the Dharma. Lucky for me she did not know the truth, otherwise, how could she easily hand it over to me? Humph, after obtaining the sutra, I will slowly think of a way to put them to death.”

Wei Xiaobao continued, “My Shifu says, after you finish studying this ‘Forty-two-chapter Sutra’, if your heart admires the teachings of Buddha, and you want to read some more, you may come to look for her, the Senior; we still have the Jin Gang [vajra] Sutra, Fa Hua [lotus] Sutra, Xin [Heart] Sutra, Da Bo’re [great/major prajna/wisdom] Sutra, Xiao Bo’re [minor prajna] Sutra, Long Ah Han Sutra, Short Ah Han Sutra, Not-too-long-not-too-short Ah Han Sutra, Old Ah Han Sutra, Young Ah Han Sutra …” He mentioned more than a dozen Buddhist scriptures in succession, all of which he had heard when he was being a monk in Shaolin Temple and Qingliang Temple; naturally he misspoke quite a few of the scriptures’ names.

Sangjie was impatient, yet he did not dare to rashly seize the sutra, since he was still afraid of the nun in white’s divine fist; he was also afraid that they might destroy the sutra. Without any other choice he thoughtlessly gave his promise, “That’s right, after I finish studying this sutra, I will borrow some more from your Shifu.”

Seeing the severed hand had completely melt, and the yellow liquid had soaked the sutra, inside and outside, Wei Xiaobao removed his shoe to cover his hand, and picked and tossed the sutra out. “Here comes the ‘Forty-two-chapter Sutra’!” he called out.

Sangjie was greatly delighted; he leaped forward with outstretched hand to catch the sutra, but suddenly thought, “This sutra is very valuable, how can I obtain it this easily? Could there be any trick in it? Perhaps he would take the opportunity while I am holding the sutra to shoot some secret projectiles to me.” While he was hesitating, the two lamas picked up the sutra and said, “*Shixiong*, is this the Sutra?”

Sangjie said, “Examine it carefully over there, don’t fall into their trick and get the fake sutra.”

“Yes,” the two lamas replied, “Shixiong has thought everything thoroughly; we must not let them deceive us.” The three of them withdrew several *zhang*; hastily they opened the book’s envelope and thumbed through it.

Sangjie said, “The sutra is wet, turn the pages slowly, don’t damage the paper. Examine the look, see if it is fake, if it really looks like the description that man

gave to us."

One lama called out, "This is it. *Da Shixiong*, this is the book."

Wei Xiaobao heard them speaking loudly; although he did not understand Tibetan, listening to the tone, he could deduce that they were exceptionally delighted. He called out, "Hey, hey, how come you have centipedes on your faces?"

The two lamas were startled; they reached up to feel their faces and did not find any centipede or any other insect. "Little urchin loves to talk nonsense," they cursed.

Sangjie's cultivation in meditation power was really deep, hearing Wei Xiaobao's shout, unconsciously he felt something like a bug crawling on his face, but he ignored it; he focused all his attention to thumbing through the sutra.

Wei Xiaobao shouted again, "Aiyo, aiyo! A dozen scorpions are creeping into their necks."

This time the two lamas were not fooled. One of them said, "Seeing us obtaining the Sutra, this urchin is not happy, he is making preposterous remark to cheat us. This little thief has killed two of our *Shidi*, we can't simply spare his life."

The other lama, however, really felt his neck was rather itchy. He reached back to scratch it, but after scratching a few times, he felt his ten fingers were unbearably itchy; thereupon he wiped the fingers to his arms. By this time Sangjie and the other lama also started to feel their fingers were itchy, but they ignored it. After half a day, unexpectedly the itch was becoming unbearable. When they looked at their fingers, they saw all their fingertips were covered in yellow liquid. "Strange," they three of them said to each other, "What is that?"

The two lamas also felt their faces were itchy; instantly they reached up and vigorously scratched their faces. The more they scratched, the worse they felt. After a while, their faces started to ooze yellow liquid. Sangjie suddenly realized what was going on. "Aiyo!" he cried out, "Not good, the Sutra is poisonous!" And he threw the Sutra as far as he could. He saw his own fingers were producing yellow liquid, like beads of perspiration coming out of his skin. In his great shock, he hastily rubbed his fingers to the dirt on the ground, but he saw

his two martial brothers were clawing their faces vigorously; each scratch produced a strip of bloodstain.

This bottle of ‘corpse transforming powder’, which Wei Xiaobao obtained from Hai Dafu’s room, was very fierce; if it came into contact with intact skin, it was absolutely harmless, but if it came into contact with a drop of blood, the blood would turn into yellow liquid with great corrosive power, the rotten flesh would then turn into yellowish poisonous liquid. The poison would then melt more and more flesh, just like a single spark from the flint would burn a large stack of hay into flying ash.

This ‘transforming corpse powder’ became poison when it came in contact with blood, it could be considered the number one poison under the heavens. Initially it came from the west. It was reported that the poison entered the Wulin world of the Song Dynasty by the devil champion Western Poison Ouyang Feng, who created it from the venoms of more than a dozen different vipers and poisonous insects. After the ‘mother poison’ was created, re-processing was not needed, simply let the yellow poisonous liquid dry in the sun, and it will become the poisonous powder.

When the two lamas scratched their faces and the poison came into contact with blood, in an instant their faces were turning into yellow liquid. They screamed and howled while their faces were even more painful and itchy; they fell to the ground and rolling around continuously. Luckily Sangjie had not scratched his face, but the itch on his ten fingers had penetrated onto his bones. Immediately he took off his outer garment to wrap the sutra, and then holding it under his arm he flew away, urgently trying to find water to wash the poison from his fingers.

The itch the two lamas experienced was so terrible that they lost their minds; they raised their heads and crashed them randomly against the rocks. After several strikes, they both fainted.

Witnessing this kind of scene, the nun in white and Ah Ke were amazed endlessly. Wei Xiaobao only knew that the ‘transforming corpse powder’ could melt dead body, but he was not sure if it would be effective on living persons. In desperate situation, he had no choice but to try it. Unexpectedly it was a success at the first attempt, plus he was lucky to have Hubayin’s severed hand to initiate

the poisoning. Supposing he sprinkled the 'transforming corpse powder' directly on the sutra, it would be quite useless. Originally he only wanted to use the severed hand to fondle Ah Ke, unexpectedly it had become a very effective weapon.

Seeing Sangjie had run far away and the two lamas had fainted, he rushed out of the cave and pulled his dagger, thinking that he would stabbed once or twice on these lamas' bodies. But as he came near them, he saw the two lamas' faces had already rotten until only their bones were visible. He did not need to do anything; shortly afterwards, the corpses would turn into two pools of yellow liquid.

He walked toward Zheng Keshuang and said with a laugh, "Zheng *Gongzi*, my demonic method is very effective. Would you like to try it?"

Zheng Keshuang saw the terrifying condition of the two lamas; hearing Wei Xiaobao's words, he was shocked. Hastily he jumped backward with clenched fists in front of his body. "You … don't come near me!" he shouted.

Ah Ke came out of the cave; she angrily shouted at Wei Xiaobao, "You … what are you doing?"

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "I am just scaring him a little bit, what does it have to do with you?"

"I don't want you to scare anybody," Ah Ke angrily said.

"You are afraid I might scare him to death?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

"Why would you want to scare anybody without any rhyme or reason?" Ah Ke said.

Wei Xiaobao beckoned to her, "Come and look," he said.

"I don't want to look," Ah Ke said. Although her mouth said so, her curiosity was piqued; slowly she walked over and looked down. She could not help but jumping in fright, while screaming in high-pitched voice. She saw that the flesh on the two lamas' faces, their noses, their lips, everything was gone; what remained was their skulls, with four holes on it. All hairs, ears and the muscle behind their necks were not yet rotten. Perhaps there has never been any person alive on this earth with such a frightening face like these two lamas.

Ah Ke was dizzy and fell backward. Wei Xiaobao hastily reached out to hold her. “Don’t be afraid, don’t be afraid!” he called out.

Ah Ke screamed again and ran back to the cave. “Shifu, Shifu,” she panted, “He … he turned those two lamas into … into monsters.”

The nun in white slowly stood up. Ah Ke held her hand and took her to the two lamas, but she turned her head away, she did not dare to look again. Seeing those two skulls, the nun in white could not refrain from gasping. She looked up at the distant place and saw the bodies of three more lamas; she could not hell but heaving a deep sigh while casting her gaze to the distant mountain.

By now the sun was sinking on the west, painting half of the sky with blood red color. She was thinking about how this setting sun was also illuminating thousands of mountain passes and tens of thousands hills, as well as the barbarians of the distant land. If she wanted to restore the country, she wondered how many more lives would be killed, how many more bones would be piled up. When all is said and done, should she, or should she not?

Chapter 27

Someone heard a ghost crying on Yunnan's sea, thorny gate provided another source of amusement.

(Translated by Foxs)

Feng Jizhong grabbed both of Zheng Keshuang's hands, twisted him around, and threw him seven, eight zhang away. "Catch this!" he shouted. One after another Tian Di Hui warriors shouted and rushed to catch Zheng Keshuang and toss him over. Zheng Keshuang stayed in the air and had never fallen to the ground.

The nun in white was lost in thought for half a day. Seeing Wei Xiaobao

approaching with a big grin on his face, she knew that he was the one who put poison on the Sutra. She sighed and said, “If not for your intelligence and quick-thinking, it would be difficult for me to escape losing my life in the enemy’s hand today. It would not be a big deal, I was more afraid I would be humiliated. Only, killing people is not something to be proud of, no need to be this happy.”

Wei Xiaobao quickly erased the smiling expression from his face. “Yes,” he replied.

The nun in white added, “This kind of sinister and ruthless method is not the way of prestigious house or upright sect’s disciples. In critical situation, you have no choice but to use it to deal with the villains, but from now on you must not use it recklessly.”

Wei Xiaobao complied again. He said, “Today was the first time I ever used that method. Frankly, my martial art skill is too lacking, I can’t fight a just and honorable fight with them; otherwise, a man must fight like a real man, victory must be achieved handsomely. How could I use such a fooling around method?”

The nun in white stared at him for half a day before asking, “You have been at Shaolin Temple, Qingliang Temple, for many days, could it be that the martial art master Shifu at the Temple did not teach you any martial art?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Martial art, I have learned some. It’s a pity that junior did not learn the proper way; I only learn some superficial styles, but did not cultivate internal strength.”

The nun in white cast a glance toward Ah Ke before she asked, “And why is that?”

“There was not enough time to train,” Wei Xiaobao replied.

“What do you mean not enough time?” the nun in white asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, “Because disciple has offended Miss Ah Ke, she wanted to kill me. The situation was urgent, I had no choice but to carelessly learn some moves to protect my life.”

The nun in white nodded. She said, “Just now when you talked to those lamas, you repeatedly said that I am your Shifu; why is that?”

Wei Xiaobao blushed. Ah Ke interjected, “Shifu, he is harboring a bad thought, he wanted to do obeisance to you and take you as his master.”

The nun in white smiled and said, “Wanted to do obeisance to me and take me as his master cannot be considered a bad thought.”

“It’s not,” Ah Ke anxiously said. She knew that Wei Xiaobao’s real intention in wanting to do obeisance and take the nun in white as his master was so that he could entangle her all day every day, but of course she could not say it.

The nun in white said to Wei Xiaobao, “You have called me Shifu, naturally I cannot let you call in vain.”

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted; immediately he kneeled down and respectfully kowtowed eight times while calling out loudly, “Shifu.”

The nun in white smiled and said, “Now that you have entered my school, you must abide by the rule: you must not fool around.”

“Yes,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “Toward bad people disciple will fool around, but toward good people I will always follow the rule strictly.”

Ah Ke made faces to him and stuck out her tongue at him, while in her heart she was unspeakably angry. “This little vile creature has done obeisance to Shifu and be her disciple; from now on I can’t kill him anymore, and will always be entangled by him. I can’t push her away, I can’t kick him, it’s a serious headache.”

The nun in white had been besieged by the six lamas, were it not for Wei Xiaobao's help, she would not have the good fortune. Afterwards Sangjie and the other, seven lamas pursued her, she could only helplessly let herself be captured; her situation was indeed very dangerous. Although her age had surpassed four decades, her appearance was very beautiful. If she fell into these evil lamas' hands, she was bound to suffer enormous humiliation. By the will of heavens this little kid was completely crafty and cunning, and was able to eliminate the enemies one by one, and thus he had helped her preserving her purity; the gratitude in her heart was unspeakable. Seeing that Wei Xiaobao was cherishing the idea of having her as his master, she decided to agree; thinking that the little kid was naughty, loved to act willfully and make a scene, but that it should not make her worry. If he received her nurture and training, someday he might make a name for himself in Jianghu.

According to Wulin rule, since Wei Xiaobao had entered Chen Jinnan's school, without Shifu's permission he could not do obeisance and take somebody else as his master. However, he did not know all these rules; even if he did, right that moment he did not care. The nun in white had agreed to accept him into her school, now he could constantly see Ah Ke. Even if Kangxi abdicated his throne and gave it to him, he would not want it. He was very lazy in training martial art, he thought that most likely he would have to train hard under the nun in white, the headache would be inevitable. But as long as he could be with Ah Ke, more bitter matter would feel as sweet as syrup; therefore, he did the eight kowtows while bursting with joy, indeed he felt as if a treasured object has fallen from heaven just for him.

Seeing his delight, the nun in white thought he was happy to have found a brilliant master and henceforth would train hard to master the excellent martial art. If she knew his real intention, perhaps she would kick him until he rolled around eight times, and although she had just accepted him into her school, would expel him immediately.

Ah Ke's little mouth flattened, she said, "Shifu, look at him this happy, he will

really spoil our family."

Wei Xiaobao said, "A martial art master whose skill is number one in the present age has accepted me as her disciple, naturally I am exceedingly happy."

The nun in white smiled and said, "You must not talk nonsense about me as the number one martial art master of this age. Now that you have entered my school, you need to know your master's Buddhist name. My Buddhist name is Jiu Nan [lit. nine difficulties/disaster]. Our school is called the Tie Jian Men [iron sword school]. Your *Shizu* [master ancestor] was a Taoist Priest, whose title was Mu [wood] at the top and Sang [mulberry] at the bottom; he has passed away. Although I am a Buddhist nun, my martial art skill actually belongs to Taoist branch."

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao said, "Disciple will remember."

The nun in white Jiu Nan added, "Ah Ke, you and him, who is a bit older?"

"Naturally I am," Ah Ke replied.

"I am older," Wei Xiaobao said.

"Alright," Jiu Nan said, "The two of you need not argue, whoever entered the school first is older. From now on there is no more 'Miss Ah Ke' or 'little vile creature'; one is 'Chen *Shijie*', the other is 'Wei *Shidi*'."

With a loud voice Wei Xiaobao called, "Chen *Shijie*."

"Humph," Ah Ke snorted; in front of her Shifu, she did not dare to curse, but she cast him a malicious look.

"Ah Ke," Jiu Nan said, "The minor matter of the past should not be taken to heart forever. This time Xiaobao has rendered some meritorious deed by saving you and me, two people. Even though he has offended you, he has done more

than enough to redeem it." Speaking to this point, she gently sighed, thinking, "This child is intelligent and sharp, it's a pity he has met misfortune since he was young by being a eunuch."

She continued, "Previously Xiaobao was bullied and humiliated by others, he was forced to be a eunuch. As his martial older sister, you must pity his wretched fate and look after him a little bit. This is actually better, there won't be male-female division between the two of you, when you are together later on you must not have any misgivings. It's much more convenient. However, you must not tell anybody about this."

Ah Ke complied. Thinking that this little vile creature was a eunuch, his rudeness to her in the past was not too big of a deal; her anger somewhat subsided. Turning to Zheng Keshuang, she called out, "Zheng *Gongzi*, are you injured?"

Limping, Zheng Keshuang walked over; he said, "Not too bad, only my leg is twisted." Thinking that previously he boasted by saying that he had more than enough force to cope with the lamas, while when things came to a head he failed miserably, and they had to rely on this little kid to repel the enemy, his face blushed with shame.

"Shifu," Ah Ke said, "What should we do? Shall we still go to Hejian Prefecture?"

Jiu Nan hesitatingly said, "Going to Hejian Prefecture to take a look is fine, but we must guard against that Lama Sangjie returning. Right now I am unable to move freely."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Shifu, you can stay here and take a rest, I'll go find a large carriage."

Wei Xiaobao could not find any carriage, but he bought an ox cart from a peasant family, and invited Jiu Nan and the others, three people, to ride on it, while he drove the cart slowly to continue their journey. Luckily Sangjie did not reappear.

When they reached another small town ahead, they abandoned the cart and hired two large carriages. Along the way Wei Xiaobao asked his Shifu to take several more ‘snow ginseng jade toad pills’. Jiu Nan’s internal energy was profound, with the efficacious medicine giving her a boost, her internal injury was healing really quickly.

After traveling for two days, they arrived at Hejian Prefecture at noon. After putting up at an inn, Zheng Keshuang went out to scout the area and hear the news. More than two hours later he came back dejectedly, saying that he inquired everywhere in the city, but unexpectedly no one knew anything about ‘Turtle-slaying Assembly’.

Jiu Nan asked, “Zheng *Gongzi*, from where did you hear about this ‘Turtle-slaying Assembly’?”

Zheng Keshuang replied, “The two River Heroes Feng Brothers, Feng Bupo and Feng Bucui asked Tian Di Hui to deliver a letter to Taiwan, inviting my *Fu Wang* [father king] to send an envoy to preside over the ‘Turtle-slaying General Assembly’. The letter says that the general assembly will be held on the fifteenth of this month at Hejian Prefecture. Today is the eleventh, so it is only four days away.”

Jiu Nan nodded. She slowly said, “The two brothers from the Feng Clan, aren’t they from Huashan Pai?” Lifting her head up, she looked outside the window, remembering the matter of many years ago.

Zheng Keshuang said, “*Fu Wang* sent me to preside over the general assembly; I presumed the Feng Clan brothers would definitely send people to wait for me respectfully in here, who would have thought … humph …” His expression showed that he was really angry.

Jiu Nan said, “Perhaps the Tatars have obtained the information and made some moves, hence the Feng Clan brothers changed the date and place.”

Zheng Keshuang resentfully said, “Even if that’s the case, they ought to notify me.”

While they were still talking, a waiter knocked the door and said, “Zheng *Keguan* [lit. ‘guest’ Zheng], there are people outside seeking an audience with you.” Zheng Keshuang was greatly delighted; hastily he went out.

A moment later, he hurriedly came back, saying, “The Feng Clan brothers have personally come here; they really apologized to me, saying that they knew that I brought more than twenty attendants, hence for the last several days they were waiting outside the city to welcome me, who would have thought that we have sneakily [orig. the gods unaware, the ghosts unconscious] entered the city? Right now they have prepared a big feast for us to wash the dust and welcome us. Would everybody please come with me?”

Jiu Nan shook her head and said, “Zheng *Gongzi* should go alone, and please do not mention anything about me being here.”

Zheng Keshuang was rather disappointed; he said, “Since *Shitai* is not willing to be disturbed, how about Miss Chen and Wei *Xiongdi* come with me?”

“They also do not need to go,” Jiu Nan replied, “On the day of the general assembly, we will all go together.” That night Zheng Keshuang returned to the inn completely drunk.

Around midnight, his more than twenty attendants also arrived at the inn, only everybody’s hands and feet were bandaged and tied with splints, making them did not look elegant at all.

Early morning the next day, Zheng Keshuang recounted what happened in the big banquet the previous night to Jiu Nan, Ah Ke and Wei Xiaobao. He said that the Feng Clan brothers were very respectful to him, they invited him to sit at the seat of honor, and did not stop praising the Zheng Clan for erecting the banner

of righteousness, resisting the Manchurian Qing in Taiwan alone. Jiu Nan asked him who else had come to the feast.

Zheng Keshuang said, “There are already many people arrived here. In the past few days people are coming one after another. It was decided that we will have the general assembly at midnight of the fifteenth, at the Locust Tree Plain, eighteen *li* west of the city. The midnight assembly is to guard against the Qing Court’s ears and eyes. Actually the Feng Clan brothers are too cautious. With these many heroes and warriors assembled here, even if there is a large number of a Qing troop coming here, we will kill and have them completely routed.”

Jiu Nan asked in details the names of the heroes and warriors attending the meeting, but Zheng Keshuang was unable to come up with anything. He only said, “There were several hundred people eating and drinking together. Every one of the several dozen leaders came to propose a toast to me for *Fu Wang*’s sake. They all announced their school, sect, name and surname, but I am not able to recall that many names at once.”

Jiu Nan did not say anything; she mused, “This Zheng *Gongzi* has an attractive outward appearance in vain, he actually does not have any talent.”

After recuperating in the inn for several days, Jiu Nan’s injury was completely healed. She restrained Ah Ke and Wei Xiaobao from coming out and wandering aimlessly, to avoid meeting Wulin characters and creating some trouble. Zheng Keshuang, however, left the inn every day early in the morning, and did not return until very late at night. Every day there was Jianghu hero or warrior who invited him to a banquet.

When the night fell on the fifteenth, Jiu Nan put on the clothing that Wei Xiaobao bought for her. She dressed as a middle-aged woman, her head was covered in black head wrap; she put yellow powder on her face, and drew her eyebrows slanted downward. No one would recognize her true identity. Wei Xiaobao and Ah Ke dressed as ordinary young man, young woman. Zheng Keshuang, however, was wearing brocade gown. He removed his fake braid and put on the attire of Ming Dynasty nobility; he looked beaming and buoyant.

Jiu Nan had not seen her former country's attire for a long time; seeing his clothing and adornment, she was both delighted and rueful. Seeing his godly charm, jade-like appearance, Ah Ke felt like her soul was even more intoxicated. Only Wei Xiaobao, who felt ashamed of his inferiority, cursed in his heart 'embroidered pillow son of a b1tch' seventeen, eighteen times.

About the first watch of the night [between 7-9 pm], the Yanpin Mansion's attendants drove a large carriage to take the four of them to the Locust Tree Plain for the assembly. The Locust Tree Plain was a large piece of flat land surrounded by hills all around it. It was the place where the locals held market days, or religious festivals, or having theatrical performances. In the darkness one could see that the plain was packed with people.

As soon as Zheng Keshuang arrived, a joyous sound thundered all around them. Several dozen people surged forward to greet him and flock around him. Jiu Nan took Ah Ke and Wei Xiaobao to sit far away underneath a large locust tree. By this time there was a continuous flow of people from east, west, south and north. More and more people assembled on the grassy field.

Wei Xiaobao thought, "That treacherous bandit Wu Sangui tied enmity with really a lot of people. Our Tian Di Hui and the Mu Palace have made a bet to see who can kill him first. This b@stard's personal enemies number in millions, if somebody made their move first, unavoidably Tian Di Hui and Mu Palace lose."

The round bright moon slowly rose to the top of their heads. On the grassy field, an old man, tall and well-built, with long white beard fluttered in the wind, stood up, cupped his fist, and said, "Gentlemen, heroes and warriors, *zaixia* Feng Nandi salutes you."

The crowd of heroes stood up to return his salute and said together, "Old Hero Feng, how are you?"

In a low voice Jiu Nan said, "He is the father of the Feng Clan brothers." She

remembered how she had had a casual acquaintance with him on the summit of Mount Hua. At that time, when she, under the name ‘Ah Jiu’ [lit. ‘nine’], met with Jianghu heroes and warriors, she was only a young teenage girl, Feng Nandi was at the prime of his life; yet today he was already on the brink of old age. Presumably his *Shizu* [ancestor master] Mu Renqing, and his Shifu, the ‘Copper Pen and Abacus’ Huang Zhen, had both passed away; but what about his *Shishu* [martial uncle] Yuan Chengzhi? Her feelings toward this man were carved into her bones. But for more than twenty years she had not heard any news about him. For the last several years her heart was like an old well without any ripple [i.e. widow who does not remarry]. Suddenly seeing an old friend tonight, she could not restrain myriads of thoughts from invading her heart; all of a sudden her feelings welled-up in her breast.

Wei Xiaobao saw the glistening tears on her eyes. “Why does Shifu suddenly want to cry as soon as she saw this old man Feng?” he mused, “Could this old man be her old sweetheart? There is no harm in me playing a matchmaker, let she and her old sweetheart mend whatever broken heart she might have. It’s just that Shifu is still very young, she can’t possibly fall in love with this old man.”

He heard Feng Nandi with loud, clear and ringing voice said, “Friends, we gather together in here today, everybody is already aware what important matter we are facing. Our Great Ming’s rivers and mountains is occupied by the Tatars. The main culprit is that unpardonably wicked, the one deserving ten thousand deaths …”

From all around the crowd of heroes shouted together, “Wu Sangui!” With everybody shouted together, it really sounded like a thunder reverberating throughout the range of hills. Someone then shouted, “Big traitor!” Another one shouted, “Son of a turtle.” Yet another one shouted, “Son of a b1tch.” And, “F*ck his eighteen generation ancestors.” Everyone cursed and swore for a while before the voices gradually calmed down.

Suddenly there was a high-pitched childish voice shouted, “F*ck his nineteen generation ancestors’ granny.” The crowd of heroes was actually full of hatred,

but suddenly heard this cussing, they could not help but bursting out in loud laughter.

The voice indeed belonged to Wei Xiaobao. Ah Ke angrily said, “Why did you say such an unpleasant words?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Everybody was cursing, why can’t I?”

“But nobody said such an unpleasant words,” Ah Ke replied.

Wei Xiaobao smiled without saying anything. “People were saying words ten times more unpleasant,” he mused.

Feng Nandi said, “The big traitor’s crime is great, his evil extreme, everyone gnashed his teeth in hatred. Although that little brother is young, he knew that we all wish to feed on his raw flesh and spread his dead skin in our bedroom. Tonight everybody gathers here, it is precisely to discuss a brilliant plan on how to put this traitor to death.”

Immediately the crowd of warriors offered their suggestions one after another. Someone said that they all should go to Yunnan, force their way into Ping Xi Wang Mansion, and massacre Wu Sangui’s entire family, without leaving anything; not even their chicken or their dogs. Someone else responded that the Thief Wu had numerous troops and horses under his command, open attack would be difficult to succeed, hence it was not a good way to assassinate him. Someone said that killing him with one stab was too easy for him; it would be better to have his eyes gouged, his hands broken, and made him suffer unbearable pain. Someone said that they had better used violent poison, so that his whole body would rot slowly.

A middle-aged woman dressed in black said that it would be best to have Wu Sangui’s entire family, old and young, massacred; leaving him, one man, alone, so that he would feel the suffering of being lonely and desolate. Another middle-aged man said that Wu Sangui surrendered to the Qing because of his love

toward Concubine Chen Yuanyuan, whom Li Chuang[58] forcibly took away; it would be better to capture Chen Yuanyuan, so that Wu Sangui would die of broken-heart. Someone else responded that although Wu Sangui was a lecher, the love of his life was after all power and position, riches and honor; hence it would be best to let him achieve fame, riches and honor, but let his wife, sons and daughters to be impoverished, to reduce them to be beggars on the earth, but don't let them die.

Several hundred heroes cheered loudly; they all said, "With a punishment like that, it can be considered a punishment for his entire family."

A man said, "Manchurian Qing Tatars favor him considerably, they set the evil thief as the Ping Xi Wang[59], his power and influence reach the heavens. Killing his wife and children is already not easy, taking away his power, riches and honor would be as difficult as ascending to the heavens."

A Yunnan native stood up and recounted how Wu Sangui bully common people in Yunnan, how he kill people like mowing grass, and how he create all kinds of disaster. The listening warriors were filled with righteous indignation, their blood was boiling. Several people said if they let Wu Sangui wield power for one more day, several more innocent common people would die under his hands. But on how to get rid of this dangerous traitor, nobody had a really good idea.

By this time Feng Nandi, father and sons' subordinates arrived with the delivery of beef, flat bread, wine and water. The crowd of heroes cheered and ate and drank to their hearts' content. As soon as wine entered these warriors' belly, their speech became even more unrestrained and their ideas became even wilder.

Someone said that after they capture Chen Yuanyuan, they must open a brothel, and let Wu Sangui become the big turtle.

As soon as Wei Xiaobao heard this idea, he agreed with all his heart. "This brothel must be opened in Yangzhou," he called out.

A warrior laughed and said, "*Xiao Xiongdi*'s [little brother] idea is fine. When that time comes, will you or will you not go to have a visit?"

Wei Xiaobao was about to reply, "Naturally I will go," but in a glance he saw Ah Ke's angry look; thereupon he did not dare to say it out loud.

"Xiaobao," Jiu Nan said, "Do not talk like these obscene people of the marketplace."

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao complied, but in his heart he mused, "In the business of opening a brothel, perhaps among several thousand people in here, no one has expertise like *laozi*'s."

After the people ate and drank for some time, Feng Nandi stood up and said, "We all are rough martial people who, risking death, are used to use saber and spear to kill our enemies, who are bound by righteousness, but we are shallow and crude in facing important matters of the world. Right now I am asking Mr. Gu Tinglin to give us advice. Mr. Gu is a profound scholar of the present age. After our country was broken, he, the Senior, rushed around all parts of our country, contacting virtuous warriors, concentrating his thoughts and efforts to plan and prepare the restoration of our country. Everybody admires him very much."

There were not a few among the crowd who had heard Gu Tinglin's name, perhaps from ten people, eight or nine had heard about his reputation; immediately thunderous applause erupted from all directions.

A thin, old man stood up from among the crowd, he was none other than Gu Tinglin. Cupping his hand across his chest, he said, "Feng *Daxia* [great hero] praised me like this, *Xiongdi* is really ashamed and dare not accept the honor. Just now I have heard everybody's opinion, each one harbors loyal and patriotic heart, each one is determined to put this big traitor to death, *Xiongdi* is indeed full of admiration. The men of old said, 'Unity of will is an impregnable

stronghold'; someone else has said, 'sincerity splits open metal and stone'. If everybody is working as one, determined to deal with this criminal ringleader, even of he has a gargantuan ability, we can still succeed."

The crowd of heroes erupted in cheers, "Right, right! We can certainly succeed."

Gu Tinglin said, "The schemes all of you have raised, every one of them is a brilliant idea, it's just that to deal with this treacherous bandit, we must change according to the situation. It's hard to decide in advance which plan would work best. In *Xiongdi*'s humble opinion, we all must advance separately at the same time, we will act as circumstances dictate: first, naturally we must never leak the secret, otherwise this traitor will step up his guard. Second, we must not be reckless, everything must be planned well before we go into action, so that we will not deliver our lives in vain. Third, we all are good *Xiongdi*; we must not fight with each other and harm the *yi qi* in striving to set the meritorious deed first."

The crowd of heroes replied, "Yes, yes, Mr. Gu is absolutely right."

Gu Tinglin continued, "Heroes and warriors of every school, sect, clan and society gather here today. If from now on we return to our separate ways, our strength will be scattered too much. If we form one large clan, the number of people is indeed too large; it will be too easy for the Tatars and that Thief Wu to detect our presence. I wonder if you have a good idea."

The crowd of heroes fell silent. After quite a while, someone said, "I wonder if Mr. Gu has a wise opinion."

Gu Tinglin said, "From what *Xiongdi* saw, all heroes from eighteen provinces are represented here. We form one union per one province, altogether we will have eighteen 'turtle-slaying alliances'. Oh, by the way, 'turtle-slaying alliance' does not sound too elegant, it would be better to call it 'weeding-out traitor alliance'; what do you think?"

One after another the crowd of warriors clapped and cheered. They said, "The

words of a scholar is definitely different from crude people like us."

Before his participation in the 'turtle-slaying assembly' at Hejian Prefecture, Gu Tinglin had had careful deliberations; he felt that if the crowd of heroes had one mind to kill Wu Sangui, everybody made one vigorous effort and advance bravely, killing him might not be too difficult. But the real important matter was not to kill this traitor to China, rather, it was to drive the Manchurians away and recover Han people's rivers and mountains. If in order to put to death one person the number of casualties is significant, and their vitality harmed, it would be damaging to their great undertaking of recovering the country instead.

Martial art practitioners put great emphasis on school and sect, to put these several thousand warriors under one person's command would be very difficult to accomplish. In order to vie over the 'meng zhu' [alliance master, I am aware that other translators have used 'chancellor'] position, they would inevitably struggle in the light and fight in the dark, there would be a lot of hostility. If the defeated party was narrow-minded, they might switch side and inform the Qing court or even Wu Sangui. But if they were split into eighteen provinces' alliance, with each alliance elect their own alliance leader, not only they all would not be lumped together in confusion, they would not be under one command either. Moreover, it would be a lot easier than electing one 'meng zhu'. In the future, this eighteen provinces' 'weeding-out traitor alliance' may be gradually expanded to be the backbone of the uprising against the Qing. Hearing that his proposal was met with approval of this crowd of heroes, he was very pleased.

Feng Nandi said, "Mr. Gu's idea is extremely brilliant. Since nobody has any objection, we are going to form 'weeding-out traitor alliance' for eighteen provinces. Each province will elect their own alliance leader. The way we determine which province we will belong to is not according to our native place, but according to which province our school or sect is located. For example, Shaolin Temple's lay disciples may be from Liao Dong or Yunnan, but they will all belong to Henan province. Huashan Pai disciples will all belong to Shanxi province. What do you think?"

The crowd of heroes responded, “It should be so. Otherwise, people from the same school, the same sect, the same clan or the same society from different provinces will belong to various alliances; it would be a complete mess.”

Someone stood up and said, “What about our Tian Di Hui? We have quite a number of halls in different provinces, while our *zongduo* [lit. head/chief helm – headquarters] location is not fixed either. May I ask how should we decide which province we will belong to?”

Wei Xiaobao noticed that the speaker was actually Qian Laoben. “Turns out he is also here,” he thought, “I wonder how many of my Green Wood Hall’s brothers are here.”

In a loud and clear voice Feng Nandi replied, “Mr. Gu said that the numerous heroes of the halls of Tian Di Hui in Guangdong should belong to Guangdong province, the different halls of Zhili [see Note 3 Chapter 9] should belong to Zhili. We are forming alliances just for the common goal to accomplish the important matter, not to break up school, sect, clan and society. The duty of the ‘meng zhu’ of ‘weeding-out traitor alliance’ is simply to communicate with the heroes of his province, to pool together the heroes’ brains and brawns. As for the internal matter of each school, each sect, each clan and each society, naturally the ‘meng zhu’ has no right to intervene. The ‘meng zhu’ of each province is not higher than the ‘zhang men’ [sect leader/head/chief] of each school or sect, or higher than the ‘bang zhu’ [clan leader] of each clan or society.”

At first some people among the crowd were apprehensive, they were afraid that the elected ‘meng zhu’ of each province would inevitable lower their own position. Listening to Feng Nandi’s explanation, they understood and all doubts in their heart gone. Immediately they split up into their respective province to elect their leader.

“Shifu,” Wei Xiaobao asked, “Which province should we join?”

“I won’t join anything,” Jiu Nan said, “I am coming and going alone, I don’t need

to join any alliance."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Based on your, Senior's status and martial art, you should be the 'meng zhu' of the entire world's alliance."

"Hey," Jiu Nan said, "You must not say those words again, so that nobody would hear it and we won't provoke any ridicule."

In her heart, among the heroes attending the assembly, there was no one whose status was more respected than hers. This Great Ming's rivers and lakes originally belonged to her Zhu family anyway. As for the martial art cultivation, other than learning the Iron Sword School martial art under Taoist Priest Mu Sang's tutelage, more than ten years ago she had a fortuitous meeting that her 'hundred-*chi* bamboo pole' was advancing one step forward, so that compared to Priest Mu Sang of the past, she had far surpassed him like the 'green is born of blue, but the green beats the blue'. Looking at the present age, perhaps other than Yuan Chengzhi, whose whereabouts was unknown, no one could be considered her match.

The crowd of heroes on the grassy field was divided into eighteen groups, with about seventy, eighty people standing up, scattered around the field. These were people with outstanding talent, who, like Jiu Nan, were not willing to be the 'meng zhu', but were not willing to accept orders from other people either. Understanding clearly that these were martial art masters of Wulin world with eccentric characters, Gu Tinglin and Feng Nandi did not force them, thinking that since they had attended the assembly, when there is any problem in the future, they might lend a hand in secret.

Before long, several provinces had already had their 'meng zhu' elected. Henan province elected the Abbot of Shaolin Temple, Hui Cong *Chanshi* [Dhyana Master]. Hubei province elected the *Zhangmenren* [sect leader] of Wudang Pai, Priest Yun Yan. Shanxi province was *Zhangmenren* of Huashan Pai, 'Awe-inspiring on Eight Sides' Feng Nandi. Yunnan province was Mu Jiansheng, Mu *Gongzi* of the Mu Palace. Fujian province was Yan Ping Jun Wang's second son,

Zheng Keshuang. All these people were in favor with the public, in a short while nobody raised any objection.

As for other provinces, there were minor disagreements, some people refused to concede, hence they could not make decision. In the end they asked Gu Tinglin to impartially mediate; eventually all provinces had elected their leaders, including three Tian Di Hui's '*xiang zhu*' [fragrant hall masters] elected to be the 'meng zhu' in three provinces. It could be considered that Tian Di Hui had gained considerable face that day.

Presently the elected alliance leaders of all provinces met together, but it turned out that only thirteen were present, Dhyana Master Hui Cong, Priest Yun Yan, and the others did not attend the assembly, only their disciples participated on behalf of their masters.

In a loud and clear voice Feng Nandi said, "Now that the eighteen provinces' 'meng zhu' have been elected, *Xiongdi* is not going to announce their revered surname and great names in public to avoid the secret from leaking out."

The alliance leaders met for a while. Feng Nandi also said, "We are respectfully asking Mr. Gu Tinglin and Chen *Zongduozhu* of Tian Di Hui to be chief military strategist [orig. 'zong jun shi' – chief army master] of the eighteen provinces' 'weeding-out the traitor alliances'." The crowd of heroes broke off in thunderous applause. Hearing his Shifu was highly revered by this crowd of heroes by being appointed as the chief military strategist of this 'weeding-out the traitor alliances', Wei Xiaobao was very proud.

Immediately the crowd of heroes split into several groups to discuss how they were going to kill Wu Sangui. A pile on the east, a bunch on the west, the discussions were very enthusiastic.

Jiu Nan took Wei Xiaobao and Ah Ke back to the inn. Early in the morning the next day they hired a carriage and continued their journey eastward. Jiu Nan knew that as the crowd returned to their native places, they might came across

some acquaintances along the way, hence she did not remove her disguise.

Seeing Zheng Keshuang was no longer following them, Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted; he did not stop talking about the 'turtle-slaying assembly' the previous night. After listening to him for a while, Ah Ke shot him malicious look and said, "I know why you are this happy."

"You are very smart," Wei Xiaobao said, "You have guessed it right. With these many people want to kill Wu Sangui, how could we be unsuccessful? Naturally I am very happy."

"Humph," Ah Ke said, "Definitely you are happy not because of that. How can there be any goodness in your heart?"

"That's strange," Wei Xiaobao said, "Why am I happy then?"

Ah Ke said, "It's because Zheng *Gongzi* … Zheng *Gongzi* …"

Seeing her upset expression, Wei Xiaobao deliberately provoked her, he said, "Ah, I forgot. Zheng *Gongzi* is really a good man. When I went out to hire the carriage just now, I saw him with four good-looking women, he was talking and laughing with them. When he saw me, he told me to send his regards to Shifu and you."

Ah Ke's heart skipped a beat. "Why … why didn't you say so earlier?" she said, "What else did he say?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "He said that those heroines wanted to visit Taiwan to have fun, he is taking them along, saying that he must fulfill his land … land something."

"Friendship of the land-owner," Ah Ke said with clenched teeth.

"That's right, that's right," Wei Xiaobao said, "Turns out *Shijie* was behind me

just now, you have heard everything."

Ah Ke angrily said, "I did not hear it until now." Speaking to this point, her voice broke.

After traveling for more than ten li, they heard sound of hooves behind them, several dozen riders were coming fast at them. A delighted expression appeared on Ah Ke's face. But those dozens of riders swept past the large carriage, galloping to the east without stopping at all. Ah Ke's countenance sank.

"What a pity, what a pity," Wei Xiaobao said, "It is not."

"What a pity what?" Ah Ke said.

"What a pity it was not Zheng *Gongzi* catching up with us," Wei Xiaobao said.

"He … Why would he want to catch up with us?" Ah Ke asked.

"Perhaps he wanted to invite you to Taiwan to have fun with them," Wei Xiaobao replied.

"Wah!" Ah Ke broke up crying.

Jiu Nan understood the content of her female disciple's heart. "Xiaobao," she scolded him, "Stop playing dirty trick to provoke your *Shijie*."

Wei Xiaobao was very delighted in his heart, but his mouth said, "Yes, yes." Yet he continued, "The prince's descendants and young masters of nobility all over the world have three wives four concubines, they are people with the least conscience. When those four good-looking heroines reach Taiwan, I'll say it will be difficult for them to come back. When this Zheng *Gongzi* reaches Zhejiang, Fujian, perhaps he will take several more beautiful women."

"Xiaobao," Jiu Nan spoke harshly.

“Yes, yes,” Wei Xiaobao said.

The three of them travelled until noon, and stopped by a small family noodle shop by the road. Suddenly they heard hoof beats, several dozen more riders coming from the west. When the riders arrived outside the noodle shop, they dismounted and entered the restaurant. Someone called out, “Kill the chicken, cut the beef, make some noodles, quick, quick!” And then they all sat down.

As soon as Wei Xiaobao saw them, he recognized these people as Xu Tianchuan, Qian Laoben, Guan Anji, Li Lishi, Feng Jizhong, Gao Yanchao, Priest Xuanzhen, Fan Gang, and the other martial art experts from the Green Wood Hall of Tian Di Hui. He thought, “Although at the assembly last night I said several words, cursed several people, but there were so many people around, the atmosphere was chaotic, they were far away from where I was. It must be that they did not recognize me in the dark, otherwise, why didn’t they come to greet me? If I make myself known to them right now, we will talk about all kinds of matters endlessly. Plus if they saw me having another Shifu, they might not like it. I might as well pretend that I did not see them.” Thereupon he turned his body sideways and did not look directly at them.

A moment later, the food and wine Xu Tianchuan and the others ordered were being delivered one after another. They picked the chopsticks and were about to eat when suddenly there were more hoof beats, another group of people arrived at the restaurant. Someone called out, “Kill the chicken, cut the beef, make some noodles, quick, quick!”

Ah Ke was very delighted that she called out, “Zheng … Zheng *Gongzi* has arrived.” Turned out this group of people was Zheng Keshuang and his attendants.

Hearing Ah Ke’s call, he turned his head and saw her. Greatly delighted, he walked over and said, “Miss Chen, *Shitai*, you are here. I looked for you everywhere but could not find you.”

The noodle shop was actually very small and narrow, the Tian Di Hui warriors occupied six tables, plus Ah Ke and the others occupied another table, there was no other table. A Zheng Mansion's attendant said to Xu Tianchuan, "Hey, old man, why don't you crowd together some more? Let us have several tables."

During the 'turtle-slaying assembly' the previous night, Zheng Keshuang was wearing Ming Dynasty's nobility attire, catching everybody's attention. Xu Tianchuan and the others were aware that Tian Di Hui was, in fact, an organization under Yan Ping Jun Wang. They originally wanted to offer up their seats; however, this attendant was really rude that as soon as they heard it, they were all angry. "Damn it," Priest Xuanzhen cursed, "Who do they think they are?"

Li Lishi signaled him with his eyes, he said in a low voice, "We are on the same side, don't lower ourselves to their level. There is no harm in giving them some seats." Immediately Xu Tianchuan, Guan Anji, Gao Yanchao, and Fan Gang, four people stood up and moved to Feng Jizhong's table, and thus freed up one table.

By this time Zheng Keshuang had already sat down by Jiu Nan. Ah Ke glowered at Wei Xiaobao and said, "You lied on my face; you said Zheng *Gongzi* is taking four whatever heroines with him …"

Wei Xiaobao said, "As soon as Zheng *Gongzi* arrived, you don't want to sit next to me anymore, if you see me, you won't be able to eat your noodle; it has nothing to do with what I said." He walked over to Xu Tianchuan's table and sat down; he said in a low voice, "Just pretend you don't know me."

As soon as Xu Tianchuan and the others saw him, they were pleasantly surprised. But every one of these people was Jianghu veteran and was very astute. When they heard him, they understood immediately, they all remained calm and collected.

"We'll pretend that we have never met each other," Wei Xiaobao continued in a

low voice, “Xu *San Ge*, please pass it on to everybody.”

Xu Tianchuan stood up and walked over to Li Lishi’s table; he said in a low voice, “Our Hall’s Wei *Xiangzhu* is here; he wants everybody to pretend we don’t know each other.” Li Lishi and the others did not even turn their heads, they continued eating and drinking, but their hearts were delighted. In a short moment the information had been passed to other tables.

On the other table, Zheng Keshuang was in high spirit; he said in a loud voice, “*Shitai*, during the meeting last night, the numerous heroes elected me as the Fujian province’s ‘meng zhu’. We were discussing important matters until daybreak. When I returned to the inn, I looked for you, but you have already left. We pursued along the way, luckily we can meet you here.”

Jiu Nan said, “Congratulations Zheng *Gongzi*. However, this is a secret important matter, we must not mention it in public with numerous people around.”

“Yes,” Zheng Keshuang said, “Fortunately there are no other people in here. These crude peasants won’t understand even if they heard it.”

Actually, the Tian Di Hui warriors were dressed as peasants, they were all bare-footed, some even carried a hoe or toothed rake. There were too many people in the meeting last night that Zheng Keshuang did not recognize them.

Wei Xiaobao lowered his head and ate the noodle, he said in a low voice, “This fellow is very arrogant; in Hejian Prefecture these past few days he boasted everywhere, saying that our Tian Di Hui is his Taiwan Yan Ping Mansion’s subordinate, he said that when *Zongduozhu* sees him, he is very respectful that he does not even dare to breath out loud. He also said that our certain hall’s *Xiangzhu* Cai *Laoge* [old brother] was formerly his *yeye*’s [paternal grandfather] stable hand, that certain hall’s *Xiangzhu* Li *Laoge* also fetched chamber pot for his *yeye* …”

Guan Anji angrily said, “How can there be such thing? Although Cai *Xiangzhu*, Li

Xiangzhu were Koxinga's [orig. Guo Xing Ye – master of Guoxing] subordinates, they were military officers who went to fight battles …"

Xu Tianchuan said in a low voice, "Guan *Fuzi*, lower your voice." Guan Anji nodded.

Wei Xiaobao continued, "He also made many negative remarks and malicious words about our Green Wood Hall's Yin *Xiangzhu*. Others commented that Yin *Xiangzhu* has died early on. This fellow responded, 'That's right. This fellow surnamed Yin's martial art skill was low, his leadership skill was also second rate, I knew early on that he would be a short-lived ghost' …"

Guan Anji was extremely angry; he raised his palm to strike the table heavily. Xu Tianchuan deftly reached up and caught his wrist.

Wei Xiaobao knew that this group of warriors would not want to offend Yan Ping Mansion's people, much less this fellow was their *Wangye*'s [master king] son. If he did not instigate wantonly, it would be hard for him to provoke them into action. Seeing these people getting angry, he was secretly delighted, but he maintained grim expression on his face. He said, "This fellow talked nonsense; which is not a big deal, actually. But along the way he kept bragging, he mentioned many secret and important matters of our Society. Even to people he has just met he said something like 'high mountain ridge arose from the earth, a group of mountain creeks is elegant for all eternity'. He claimed to have sat on the Red Flower Pavilion on the mountain peak, *Zongduozhu* burned six incense sticks, he himself burned seven incense sticks. Other people did not understand what he was saying, he then explained in details …"

The crowd of warriors shook their heads. He revealed a secret of their society just like that, if this information ever reached the imperial court's eagle claws' ears, the lives of Tian Di Hui's brothers would be in danger. But with their own eyes they had seen Zheng Keshuang's frivolous expression, even the attendants he brought were bossy and domineering; why would they think Wei Xiaobao was telling lies? Moreover, just now they heard him bragging to a woman about the

‘turtle-slaying assembly’ the previous night, immensely proud of himself he proclaimed to be the Fujian province’s alliance leader.

Wei Xiaobao said, “I’ll say we must kill his loftiness, otherwise he might harm our important matter.” The crowd of heroes slowly nodded their heads. Wei Xiaobao continued, “I am asking Feng *Dage* to beat him up, but don’t hit him too hard, just teach him a lesson. And then I will come out to avenge his grievance. I am asking Feng *Dage* to pretend that you lost to me.” Feng Jizhong nodded slightly. Wei Xiaobao added, “Qian Laoben, you spoke in the meeting last night, I am afraid this fellow would recognize you.”

“Yes,” Qian Laoben said in a low voice, “I am going to make myself scarce first.”

There were still quite a number of Zheng Mansion attendants who did not have any seat. Seeing a few empty seats among the Tian Di Hui warriors’ tables, one of them nudged Xu Tianchuan’s back lightly and said, “Hey, there are still empty seats over there, why don’t you move and let us have this table?”

Xu Tianchuan sprang up and cursed, “We let you have one table and that’s still not enough? *Laozi* hates to see young masters of rich family relying on force to bully others the most.” Coughing out, ‘whoosh!’ thick phlegm shot out toward Zheng Keshuang.

Zheng Keshuang was talking to Ah Ke, he was caught totally off-guard; by the time he heard the wind, the phlegm was already too close to his cheek. Hastily he dodged, but the phlegm still landed on his neck. It was slimy and sticky; really disgusting. Hurriedly he pulled his handkerchief and busily wiped it, while cursing loudly and angrily, “Disregarding the law and natural morality these several mud-footed peasants are attacking me!”

An attendant immediately sent a punch toward Xu Tianchuan. “Aiyo!” Xu Tianchuan cried out. Without waiting for the punch to reach his face, Xu Tianchuan threw his body backward; he was pretending to be in a very difficult situation, while bellowing, “Help! Murder! Murder!” Zheng Keshuang and Ah Ke

laughed aloud.

Feng Jizhong stood up, pointed at Zheng Keshuang and shouted, “What’s so funny?”

Zheng Keshuang angrily replied, “I want to laugh, what does it have to do with you?”

Feng Jizhong stretched out his hand. ‘Slap!’ A heavy slap landed on Zheng Keshuang’s face. Zheng Keshuang was both startled and angered; he threw his body forward and repeatedly punched with both fists. Feng Jizhong dodged to the left and evaded to the right, and then he turned around and ran out of the door. Zheng Keshuang ran after him, while sending a punch straight to Feng Jizhong’s face. Feng Jizhong leaned sideways to evade.

Feng Jizhong understood Wei Xiaobao’s intention; he must let this young master Zheng to suffer as much humiliation as possible to pull down his arrogance. Hence he only sent a punch to the east and a kick to the west, going around and around fighting with him.

Xu Tianchuan called out, “As heroes of Henan’s Mount Funiu, we must not let our prestige to fall under this fellow’s hands.”

The rest of the warriors also cheered and yelled; they all knew that although there was no harm in fooling around with this young man, they must not let him know their real background. Therefore, although they were cursing and shouting, they did not utter even half an inappropriate word, or anything that would disgrace his family or school.

Li Lishi shouted, “This time we go out from Funiu Mountain to do business, before even reaching the marketplace we are lucky to come across this richly bedecked fellow. We might as well capture him, have his old man to pay us one million *taels* as the ransom.”

Seeing their young master was unable to defeat this crude peasant in a short time, plus hearing from their shouts that these people were actually bandits and robbers from Mount Funiu, the Zheng Mansion attendants pulled out their weapons and charged forward. Xu Tianchuan, Fan Gang, Priest Xuanzhen, Gao Yanchao, Guan Anji, Li Lishi, and the others immediately made their moves. 'Bing, bing, bang, bang!' The fight was very noisy.

Although those Zheng Mansion attendants were hand-picked warriors, how could they match the Tian Di Hui warriors? Much less just a few days ago they were injured by the lamas, every one of them suffered either broken arm or broken leg. In just a short period of time, they were all subdued by Tian Di Hui heroes. Only Tian Di Hui heroes were being lenient to them; they only snatched away their weapons and surrounded them, but when snatching their sabers or swords, they did not harm them at all.

On the other side, Zheng Keshuang had fought more than a dozen rounds; he saw Feng Jizhong's hands and feet were clumsy, he kept staggering along as if his stances were extremely unsteady. Zheng Keshuang gathered his spirits, unleashing everything he had learned his entire life. He wanted to show off in front of Ah Ke, to win favor of this extremely beautiful woman. His fists created strong winds, his kicks made noise; move by move he pressed on. Feng Jizhong appeared to have barely enough strength to parry; often times he managed to evade at the nick of time [orig. *jian jun yi fa* – a thousand *jun* (unit of measure equivalent to thirty catties) one hair, 'a thousand pounds hang by a thread'].

Ah Ke watched with anxious heart; she did not stop calling softly, "Aiyo, what a pity, he missed only a little."

Wei Xiaobao came near and said, "Shifu, you, Senior has not completely recovered, these bandits are very vicious, when Zheng *Gongzi* is defeated, you, Senior, must not fight with them."

Ah Ke angrily said, "Don't you see he has complete upper hand? How can he lose? Really talk nonsense."

Jiu Nan smiled and said, “These people do not seem to have evil intention toward Zheng *Gongzi* at all; they are just playing with him. The opponent’s martial art skill is a lot higher compared to Zheng *Gongzi*’s.”

Ah Ke was incredulous. “Shifu,” she asked, “Are you saying that this robber’s martial art is stronger than Zheng *Gongzi*?”

Jiu Nan smiled and said, “Do I need to tell you that? This man’s martial art skill is indeed excellent, I am afraid they are not necessarily some Funiu Mountain robbers. If they were really robbers, they would not carelessly blurt it out, saying that they were going to kidnap him and ask for a ransom.”

Wei Xiaobao thought, “In the end, Shifu’s insight is very clear.” He said, “In that case, why don’t disciple urge them not to fight?”

Ah Ke shot him a malicious look; she said, “What face do you have? What skill do you have that you can urge them not to fight?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Although this robber’s martial art is strong, there must be holes in his punching and kicking. Zheng *Gongzi* cannot beat him, I guarantee that within ten moves I will beat him and make him flee to the wilderness.”

Jiu Nan knew his martial art skill was meager, but perhaps he had some strange or weird tactics, enough to score victory. “These people do not seem to be evil people, you must not harm their lives.” After a short pause, she continued, “Those lowly tricks such us knock-out drug, poison and so on, must not be used, unless you are facing a life and death situation. You have entered my Iron Sword School, you must not damage our school’s reputation.”

“Yes, yes,” Wei Xiaobao said, “I hear and obey Shifu’s instruction, I simply will not harm them.”

Jiu Nan sighed gently, as her mind suddenly revisited the Huashan’s summit,

when the Iron Sword School's Sect Leader Yuzhen Zi came to pick a fight with Priest Mu Sang. Yuzhen Zi had committed any imaginable misdeed: raping, looting, and so on. Speaking about Iron Sword School's reputation, first of all, the number of disciples was very few, their reputation was not resounding; secondly, due to Yuzhen Zi's conduct, in reality their reputation was not too great anyway. This young disciple was frivolous and jumpy, if he did not step into the proper way, it was very likely that in the future he would become Yuzhen Zi's direct descendant, and that would be greatly inappropriate.

Seeing the sudden appearance of worried look on her face, naturally Wei Xiaobao did not understand the reason, he still thought that it was because she saw the Tian Di Hui warriors' martial art was not weak, while her own martial art had not recovered, hence she felt it would be very difficult to deal with this situation. Thereupon he said, "Shifu, please set your heart at ease, I have a way to save Zheng *Gongzi*'s life."

Ah Ke spat and said, "You speak nonsense again. Zheng *Gongzi* is going to win in a flash, what life do you want to save?"

Just as she finished speaking, there was ripping noise, Zheng Keshuang's long gown was pulled and ripped. Zheng Keshuang was furious, he fought faster, but there was a series of continuous ripping noise; like the talon of an eagle Feng Jizhong's ten fingers ripped his long gown, his undergarment and trousers, piece by piece. But he used just enough strength so that Zheng Keshuang's flesh was not harmed.

Zheng Keshuang realized that with several more rips, he would be stark naked. In his fright he turned around trying to flee. Feng Jizhong bent his arms, both of his elbows were already stationed in front of Zheng Keshuang's chest. Zheng Keshuang hastily pulled back, while sending out a double-punch. Suddenly he felt his wrist tightened, Feng Jizhong's left hand grabbed his right hand, his right hand gripped Zheng Keshuang's left hand. In one fluid motion he twisted around, sending Zheng Keshuang's away. "Catch this!" he shouted. Unexpectedly this throw had sent Zheng Keshuang's body seven, eight *zhang*

away.

Priest Xuanzhen launched his *qinggong* to catch up, he raised his head and called out, “Gao *Xiongdi*, your turn!”

Gao Yanchao leaped immediately. Fan Gang, Xu Tianchuan, Guan Anji, and the others thought it was fun; they all shouted and rushed to join the game. Priest Xuanzhen caught Zheng Keshuang and tossed him over, he fell just as Gao Yanchao rushed over. Gao Yanchao caught him and threw him several *zhang* away toward Xu Tianchuan.

These people’s strength varied, some were stronger than the others, their *qinggong* also varied, some high, some low; when they threw Zheng Keshuang, some managed to throw him farther than the other, when they rushed to catch him, some could move faster than the other, yet Zheng Keshuang stayed in the air for several dozen *zhang*, and had never fallen to the ground. The Tian Di Hui warriors displayed what they were really good at; it was only now that they revealed their true skill.

Guan Anji’s physical strength was amazing; he tossed Zheng Keshuang about four, five *zhang* high in the air, and when he fell, he gave Zheng Keshuang’s back a push with both palms, two lines of force working together to send Zheng Keshuang high to the air, as if he was soaring to the clouds or riding in the fog.

Wei Xiaobao was watching with extreme delight; he clapped and laughed heartily. ‘Bang!’ Suddenly Ah Ke knocked the back of his head heavily with her knuckles. He was startled and quickly turned his head around. Ah Ke was frightened and angry at the same time; she anxiously said, “They are going to kidnap him, you … quickly save him.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “They have no enmity with Zheng *Gongzi*, Shifu said that they are just playing with him; why would you be worry?”

“No, they are not,” Ah Ke said, “They are going to kidnap him, to demand ransom for one million *taels*.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “There are lots of money in Zheng *Gongzi*’s home. They can easily afford to pay three millions, four millions *taels*. One million *taels* is not a big deal.”

Ah Ke stomped her right foot heavily on the floor. “Ay, don’t you have eyes?” she said, “These bandits will … will make him suffer extreme distress.”

Wei Xiaobao whispered in her ear, “You want me to save him? It’s not difficult, as long as you agree to be my wife.”

“Nonsense,” Ah Ke angrily said.

Looking up, she saw that after the last man caught Zheng Keshuang, he did not throw him up anymore; she heard someone calling out, “Hey, quickly go get the money and come back to Mount Funiu to redeem him. We won’t harm this fellow’s life, we will only give him three hundred floggings. The money is here one day early, he will suffer three hundred less floggings. If you are ten days late, he will suffer three thousand more floggings.”

Ah Ke grabbed Wei Xiaobao’s hand and anxiously said, “Did you hear that? Did you hear that? They are going to give him three hundred floggings every day. From here to Taiwan is very far, they won’t necessarily make it back in one month.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Three hundred floggings every day. Supposing they took two months, two months is 60 days, three times six is eighteen, it’s only 1800 floggings …”

“Ay, you are wrong,” Ah Ke said, “It’s 18,000 floggings. You are really …”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “I am not good in counting. With 18,000 floggings, his ‘pigu gong’ [buttocks skill] can be trained to perfection.”

Ah Ke was extremely angry; she flung his hand and said, “I won’t pay you any attention.” In her anger and anxiety, she broke up crying.

“Alright, alright,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Don’t cry, I’ll think of something. But my proposal just now, you must not go back on your words.”

“You quickly save him, we’ll talk about it later,” Ah Ke said.

Wei Xiaobao knew that she was only blurting perfunctorily, she would never agree under any circumstances to really marry him; he said, “I will go through water and tread on fire for you, I won’t decline your request under any circumstances, but in the future you must not bully me again.”

“Yes, yes,” Ah Ke said, “Quickly go, quickly go!” While saying that, her eyes had never met his, she kept her gaze on the distant Zheng Keshuang. She saw those bandits tied his hands behind his back, and put him onto the horseback; very soon they were going to take him away. In a moment of desperation, she put her hand on Wei Xiaobao’s back and gave him a push.

Wei Xiaobao cursed in his heart, “His granny, *laozi* met a beautiful girl, she always asks me to save her sweetheart. *Laozi* may be extremely skillful in becoming a fool [orig. ‘yuan da tou’ – someone with more money than sense]; perhaps my ‘yuan da tou gong’ is also trained to perfection.” Quickly he rushed forward and called out, “Hey, hey Funiu Montain’s big kings[60], *zaixia* has something to say.”

The crowd of heroes was already waiting for him to bravely step forward; they turned around immediately. “*Xiao Xiongdi*,” Gao Yanchao said, “What is it that you want to say?”

“Why did you catch him?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

Gao Yanchao replied, “The brethren in mountain fort is many, yet we lack provision. Today we temporarily detain him, because we want to borrow one

million *taels* from his father."

Wei Xiaobao said, "One million *taels*, that's a small matter. Why don't I lend it to you?"

Gao Yanchao laughed aloud and said, "*Xiao Xiongdi*, what is your honored surname and great given name? What makes you talk big like that?"

"My name is Wei Xiaobao," Wei Xiaobao replied.

"Aiyo," Gao Yanchao exclaimed; he cupped his fist and bowed, saying, "Turns out it's the Little White Dragon Hero Wei [the word here is 'ying xiong', not 'da xia']. You killed the Number One Warrior of Manchuria Oboi, your name became famous throughout the world, we admire you very much. Today we can pay our respect to our revered model, it is indeed the blessing of three lifetimes."

Fan Gang and the others respectfully bowed and saluted. Wei Xiaobao cupped his fist to return the salute while saying, "I do not dare to accept the honor."

Gao Yanchao said, "In view of Hero Wei's great face, we'll let this fellow go. That one million *taels* we do not dare to ask anymore."

Xu Tianchuan fetched two big silver *yuanbao* from his pocket and presented the money respectfully with both hands, saying, "Hero Wei, if you do not have enough traveling expense along the way, here is a hundred *taels*, please accept it and use it first."

"Thank you very much," Wei Xiaobao said, while accepting the *yuanbao*. And then he turned around to give it to Ah Ke.

Not in a million years would Ah Ke expect this little vile creature's reputation was this resounding. When these devils and monsters big robbers heard him announcing his name, they acted as if they had met their superior. How could she know that this 'little vile creature' was indeed those 'big robbers' immediate

superior? In order to please their superior, these ‘big robbers’ had deliberately redoubled their effort to flatter him, and thus had performed a good play. She was pleasantly surprised, thinking that finally Zheng *Gongzi* would escape from danger.

But she saw Feng Jizhong took a step forward and said, “Wait a moment. Hero Wei, you killed Oboi, we extremely admire you. It’s just that we do not know each other. How do we know that you are indeed Hero Wei and not someone pretending to be him, assuming the Senior’s great name to come out and swindle us?”

“What you said makes sense,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “What can I do so that Sire is convinced?”

Feng Jizhong said, “*Zaixia* brazenly asks Hero Wei to give me direction with three moves. The Number One Warrior of Manchuria died in your hands, naturally Honored Sir’s martial art skill is no small matter. Whether you are real or fake, once we test it we will find out.”

“Very well,” Wei Xiaobao said, “We will only try the style, one touch and we stop.”

“Absolutely,” Feng Jizhong said, “I am asking Hero Wei to be lenient, so that *zaixia* will not seriously hurt.”

Wei Xiaobao was secretly amused; he thought, “Feng *Dage* usually does not like to talk; who would have thought that when playacting, he could emulate the actors very well.” Thereupon he said, “*Laoxiong* needs not be polite, perhaps I am not your match.”

With left hand finger pointed out, light as a feather his right palm struck out; only after moving for half a *chi*, the palm suddenly circled around and struck down diagonally. It was precisely the move from Bo’re Palm that Cheng Guan demonstrated, called the ‘without color without shape’.

Feng Jizhong's had a vast knowledge and experience. "Wonderful!" he called out, "This is a masterstroke from Bo're Palm, called 'without color …' something." Stretching out his hand to block, he threw his upper body backward to evade too far that he nearly fell down.

Actually, there was not even half a part of internal energy; Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Sire is right. This move is called 'without color without shape'." And then he raised his left hand and struck down diagonally from upper right corner to lower left. Suddenly his five fingers turned into a claw and moved down several times.

Feng Jizhong loudly shouted, "Amazing! There is the 'Bo're Palm' divine skill, and then there is 'spirited vulture listening to the scripture'." Assuming the horse stance, he pushed both palms slowly forward, the center of his palm lightly touched Wei Xiaobao's fingertips. Immediately he cried out, "Ah!" and tumbled anxiously backward three times. While somersaulting, he secretly circulated his internal energy so that by the time he stood up, his entire face was red as if he had just drunk seventeen, eighteen bowls of strong wine. Hid body swayed several times, and then he fell sitting down. Shaking his head, he said, "Can't … can't do it … no more fight. My utmost admiration! Hero Wei, thank you very much for sparing my life."

Wei Xiaobao cupped his fist and said, "*Laoxiong* deliberately yielded to me." While saying that, he winked several times.

Feng Jizhong's appearance looked very real; he had a dejected expression, mixed with gratitude, on his face, but there was also a hint of heartfelt admiration.

Xu Tianchuan took a step forward and said, "Hero Wei's martial art is astonishing, indeed your name is not in vain. Let *ziaxia* experience several moves."

"Very well!" Wei Xiaobao said. Moving swiftly forward, his hands crossed each

other, one hand swung to Xu Tianchuan's left chest, one hand seized his right flank. It was a move from Shaolin Pai's upper class martial art, 'picking flower *qinna* [grab and capture]'.

Xu Tianchuan saw the brilliance of this *qinna* technique, he could not help but admiring him in his heart, "Wei *Xiangzhu* is extremely smart, as soon as he started learning martial art, his progress is amazingly quick." He did not know that although Wei Xiaobao executed the style correctly, he did not have the slightest bit of internal strength, so that even if he was seized by him, he would not suffer any damage. Xu Tianchuan's stature was short and small, the type of martial art he was most adept was, coincidentally, the *qinna*. Immediately he unleashed his special skill and sparred with Wei Xiaobao.

After several moves, the hands of both men interlocked with each other. "Ah!" Xu Tianchuan cried out, his right hand hung limply on his side, he was pretending that it was twisted out of joint. "My utmost admiration," he said, and took two steps backward. His left hand cradling his own right hand, lifted it up and pulled it out, as if he was fixing the joint. This fixing joint skill was also an upper class technique of *qinna* martial art. He performed the procedure with 'not one thread loose', his movement was clean and deft.

One after another Fan Gang, Priest Xuanzhen and Li Lishi stepped forward asking for a match. Wei Xiaobao kept using the upper-class styles that Cheng Guan taught him. In just three or four moves, or perhaps seven, eight moves, Fan Gang and the others were defeated.

In a loud and clear voice Gao Yanchao said, "We have witnessed Hero Wei's brilliant moves today, indeed our horizons have been expanded. *Xiaoren* all are full of admiration. When Hero Wei pass by Funiu Mountain someday, please do not forget to go up the mountain and stay for several days."

"Naturally I will receive the benefit of disturbing you," Wei Xiaobao replied.

The group of heroes bowed with cupped fists, and led their horses away. They

walked to the edge of the town before mounting their horses and galloped away. Unexpectedly they did not dare to mount their horses in front of Wei Xiaobao; it was a display of utmost respect.

Ah Ke finally submitted to him, “Turns out this ‘little vile creature’ has superior martial art; every time he pretended he was beaten, he was simply yielding to me.”

Things had come to this, Zheng Keshuang had no choice but to come to Wei Xiaobao to express his thanks. Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Zheng *Gongzi* does not need to be polite, I was simply lucky that I accidentally defeated them. Speaking about real martial art, I am far too inferior compared to Sire.”

He was speaking the truth, but to Zheng Keshuang’s ears it was highly sarcastic; he could not stop his face from turning deep red.

That evening they arrived at Xian County to the south. After settling down in an inn, Jiu Nan dismissed Ah Ke and asked Wei Xiaobao, “Those people who were playacting with you during the day, they are your friends, aren’t they?”

Jiu Nan’s insight was very keen; Feng Jizhong, Xu Tianchuan and the others putting on an act, they were able to deceive Zheng Keshuang and Ah Ke, but how could they deceive this martial art expert? Wei Xiaobao knew that his trickery was exposed; he laughed and said, “They are not really my friends.”

Jiu Nan said, “The martial art skill of every one of those people is quite established; how could they agree to accompany you playing that trick?”

Wei Xiaobao said with a laugh, “Most likely they cannot bear to see Zheng *Gongzi*’s arrogance, so they borrowed disciple to knock him down several notches.”

Jiu Nan thought that his answer was very reasonable. She asked, “The way you executed those several moves of yours: Bo’re Palm, Picking Flower *Qinna*, was

not bad at all.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “I was just putting on airs, the roar of a toothless tiger; totally useless.”

While they were talking, they heard the clamor of hooves beat, a large group of people had arrived at the inn. Someone with a loud voice said, “One upper-level room, must be the best you have. The rest of us can accept whatever you have.”

As soon as Wei Xiaobao heard this, he was delighted, since he recognized the voice to be the Shaking-head Lion Wu Lishen of the Mu Palace. “Shifu,” he asked, “Are we going to kill Wu Sangui?”

Jiu Nan said, “This time the injury I suffered was really not light. Although the injury is healed, my internal energy is not recovered yet. I must find a quiet and secluded place to recuperate several days before we can decide what we are going to do. Otherwise, if I meet some strong enemies again, I won’t be able to fight, and will have to depend on your muddled and crazy techniques; our Iron Sword School’s reputation won’t look too good.” While saying that, she could not help but smiling.

“Yes, yes,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Shifu’s body is important.”

From this traveling sack he fetched some best quality Qiqiang Longjing tea leaves and soaked it inside a covered teacup. He said, “In the future disciple will learn Shifu’s martial art. When I meet the enemy, I can fight him justly and honorably. Shifu, I want to go to the market to see if there are any fresh vegetables.”

Going out of the room, he saw Ah Ke and Zheng Keshuang were walking side-by-side out of the inn; they looked very intimate with each other. Immediately a whiff of jealousy bubbling up in his chest, hence he followed behind them.

Ah Ke turned her head and said, “Why are you following me?”

“I am not following you,” Wei Xiaobao said, “I am going to buy vegetable for Shifu.”

“Alright,” Ah Ke said, “Zheng *Gongzi*, let’s go over there.” She pointed to a small hill west of the city walls.

Wei Xiaobao’s jealousy flame was blazing; he said, “Be careful, don’t bump into some mountain’s big kings, I can’t come to rescue you.”

Ah Ke shot him a malicious look and said, “Who needs your rescue?”

Zheng Keshuang knew Wei Xiaobao was mentioning the scandal involving him earlier, he was furious. “Humph,” he snorted, and quickly left.

Wei Xiaobao followed these two people with his eyes. Suddenly he heard Ah Ke was giggling. In his fury, he reached out to pull his dagger, he wanted to pursue them and kill Zheng Keshuang. But after only two steps, he thought, “If we fight for real, I am not those two people’s match.” Therefore, he suppressed his anger and continued to the market to buy some kuomo mushroom, winter-picked mushroom, wooden-ear mushroom, and bean vermicelli, which he brought back to the inn.

Ah Ke and Zheng Keshuang had not returned. Imagining that those two people were discussing passion and talking about love in some secluded place, he could not suppress his anger and cursed silently. Suddenly someone lightly patted his shoulder and embraced him, while saying with a laugh, “Wei *Xiongdi*, you are here!”

Wei Xiaobao turned his head around and saw that it was the Imperial Bodyguards Chief Dolong. He could not help but was ecstatic. “What are you doing here?” he said with a laugh.

He saw behind Dolong there were about a dozen men, they were all Imperial Bodyguards, but were dressed in common soldiers’ uniform. Seeing Wei

Xiaobao, all of them were beaming with joy, but they did not go forward to greet him. Dolong said in a low voice, “There are other people here, let’s go to my room and talk.” Turned out these men were also staying at the same inn.

When they got to Dolong’s room, one by one the Imperial Bodyguards came forward to pay their respect. Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Enough, enough.” Taking out one-thousand-*tael* banknote, he laughed and said, “Brothers, take this to buy some drink.”

The Imperial Bodyguards knew that this Deputy Chief was very liberal with money, each time they saw him, they would always enjoy some advantage. Immediately they happily expressed their thanks.

Dolong said in a low voice, “Wei *Xiongdi*, ever since you met with danger on Mount Wutai, every day His Majesty was thinking about you, hence he sent us out to seek for you.”

Wei Xiaobao was very grateful; he stood up and said, “Thank you for His Majesty’s benevolence. But how can I dare to toil brothers’ honorable selves?”

Dolong laughed and said, “Actually, His Majesty did not send me out, he only sent fifteen Imperial Bodyguard brothers. But I volunteered myself. First, as your big brother I am anxious to find you; second, this is a good opportunity for me to get out of the Capital and have fun. This has been your brother’s great fortune.” Everybody laughed.

Dolong continued, “This time, it can be considered that we have set up a great merit. When we return to the Capital and His Majesty finds out and Wei *Xiongdi* has escaped from danger, he must be extremely delighted. We have made inquiries along the way, but did not hear any news about Wei *Xiongdi*. We heard about a group of traitors palling a rebellion instead, we heard that they are going to hold a large assemble at Hejian Prefecture to discuss business. So we came to investigate.”

“I am here also for this matter,” Wei Xiaobao said, “I heard the assembly this time is called ‘turtle-slaying assembly’ or something like that.”

Dolong raised his thumb. “Formidable, formidable,” he said, “Nothing escape Wei *Xiongdi*’s eyes.”

“What information have you gathered?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

Dolong said, “Two brothers here sneaked into the assembly. They found out that they want to deal with Wu Sangui. Every province elected their own ‘meng zhu’. We have several names of these ‘meng zhu’.”

Wei Xiaobao ‘s heart was moved; he asked, “Which ones?”

Dolong replied, “Yunnan has Mu Jiansheng, Fujian has Taiwan rebel Zheng Jing’s second son called Zheng Keshuang.” And then he mentioned several other alliance leaders’ names.

Wei Xiaobao asked, “Those Mu Jiansheng, Zheng Keshuang, and so on, do you know what they look like?”

Dolong replied, “It was a dark at night, these two brothers could not see them clearly, they also did not dare to come too close.”

“Duo *Dage* [reminder: in Chinese ‘Dolong’ is Duo Long],” Wei Xiaobao said, “When you return to the Capital, please report to His Majesty, tell him that his servant Wei Xiaobao is also investigating this matter. As soon as I have their appearance, I will go back to the Capital to present a memorial to the Emperor.”

“Yes, yes,” Dolong said, “Wei *Xiongdi* is so loyal in working for the Emperor. This time you set up a great merit, His Majesty will surely reward you handsomely.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “If there is any merit, won’t that be for the benefit of our Imperial Bodyguards’ face? Right now I have something that I’d like to ask

brothers to toil for me."

All the Imperial Bodyguards replied, "Wei *Fu Zongguan* [deputy chief] sends us for an errand, we will definitely do."

Wei Xiaobao said, "This is a matter that annoys me the most. I have a good lady friend that is fooling around with a frivolous young fellow right now …"

He had just spoken to this point, fury had already filled the Imperial Bodyguards' breasts; they all opened their mouth, cussing and swearing, "His granny, which fellow is so brazen, dare to make a move on Wei *Fu Zongguan*'s girl? Let's go and kill this fellow."

"You don't need to kill him," Wei Xiaobao said, "I only want you to beat him a little, to vent my anger. But this fellow is my friend, so I don't want you to beat him too severely either. Especially you must not touch that young lady."

The Imperial Bodyguards laughed and said, "Naturally we will pay particular attention to this. Wei *Fu Zongguan*'s good lady friend, who dare to offend?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "Those two people were heading west. As soon as you make your move, I will pretend to come out and save them by driving you away. I want you to yield to me so much that *Xiongdi* can show off in front of my beloved."

The Imperial Bodyguards burst out in laughter; they all said, "Wei *Fu Zongguan*'s assignment this time is most amusing."

Dolong said with a laugh, "In doing this job, hey, every one of us has to be extra careful. If we reveal the horse' leg, Wei *Fu Zongguan* will not consider all of you as brothers anymore."

The Imperial Bodyguards all laughed and said, "For Wei *Fu Zongguan*'s important matter, we will all go through water and tread on fire, how could we dare to shrink away?"

An imperial bodyguard said, “Damn it, this fellow harasses Wei *Fu Zongguan*’s good lady friend, it’s just like he is harassing my own mother. *Laozi* will fight him to the death.” Everybody laughed.

“Quiet down,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Don’t let other people hear.”

Stroking their fists and rubbing their palms, the Imperial Bodyguards went out the room, laughing and giggling. Wei Xiaobao brought the vegetable to the kitchen, he gave five *qian* to the cook and instructed him to prepare exquisite vegetarian dish. And then he slowly walked to the western end of the town.

He only walked for a little more than a *li* when he heard shouting and cursing, and saw in the distance several dozen of people were fighting with weapons in their hands; it was a very noisy fight. He thought, “This fellow is not bad, fighting alone against many enemies, unexpectedly he is able to stand.”

Unhurriedly he walked toward the fight, and could not help but was startled. He saw the Imperial Bodyguards were surrounding seven, eight people, engaging them in a fierce combat. The opponents had their backs against the city wall, they were trapped in a corner but were fighting fiercely. They were none other than Mu Jiansheng, Wu Lishen and several other people.

There was a young woman by Mu Jiansheng’s side; his hands wielded a pair of sabers, he fought ferociously that his hair was in a mess. On top of the city wall there were a couple of people standing hand-in-hand, watching the fight below; they were precisely Ah Ke and Zheng Keshuang.

Wei Xiaobao was angry, but he was also amused; he thought, “Damn it, they have the wrong people. They must have seen Mu *Gongzi* first, and saw that he has a young lady by his side; without distinguishing red-blue or black-white, they simply rushed to attack.”

He saw Dolong, holding a demon-head saber in his hand, was standing behind

those people, supervising the fight. Immediately he walked over to him and said in a low voice, “You have the wrong couple, it’s those two on top of the city wall.” Finished speaking, he immediately walked away.

Dolong shouted, “It’s not right, hey, they are friends. The person who owes money is not you. Alright, everybody step back, let them go.” As soon as the Imperial Bodyguards heard it, they pulled back one after another.

Mu Jiansheng, Wu Lishen and the others were not many, they were not these people’s match. Previously they thought that they had been recognized and that these Qing soldiers wanted to arrest them. Luckily they withdrew, which was exactly what they had been hoping for.

Wu Lishen caught a glimpse of Wei Xiaobao. “Ashamed,” he groaned inwardly, “This time we also receive Wei *En Gong*’s [benefactor] help. Otherwise, it’s not a big deal if I get killed, but if *Xiao Gongye* [young master/Duke] fell into the Tatars’ hands, I can’t redeem it with ten thousand deaths.” Since at that time it was inconvenient to acknowledge Wei Xiaobao, he hurried along with Mu Jiansheng and the others out of the city gate, and rushed northward.

Wei Xiaobao went up the city wall and asked Ah Ke, “Shijie, why did they fight? Who are those people?”

Ah Ke pouted her little mouth and said, “Who knows? Those soldiers were demanding some payment.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Let us quickly return to the inn, don’t let Shifu be anxious over us.”

Ah Ke said, “You go back first, I’ll come soon afterward.”

She had just finished speaking, the numerous Imperial Bodyguards already rushed up the city wall. An Imperial Bodyguard pointed to Zheng Keshuang and shouted, “It’s him, this fellow is the one who owes me money.”

Wei Xiaobao said in a low voice, “Zheng *Gongzi*, Shijie, let’s go quickly. Tatar soldiers commit all kind of outrages, it will be very troublesome to provoke them.”

Ah Ke was also somewhat afraid, she said, “Right, let’s go.”

An Imperial Bodyguard rushed over; pointing to Zheng Keshuang he said, “The night before last you were having fun spending money with young women in a brothel in Hejian Prefecture, you owed me ten thousand *taels*, quickly pay me back.”

“Rubbish,” Zheng Keshuang angrily said, “Who went to the brothel? How can I owe you money?”

“You still deny it?” the Imperial Bodyguard said, “The day before yesterday in the evening, you had two ‘powdered heads’ on your knees, what were their names again?”

Another Imperial Bodyguard said, “The older one was called Ah Cui, the younger one was Hong Bao. You turned to the left and kissed and drank a mouthful of wine, then you turned to the right and caressed her cheek and drank another mouthful of wine, so loose and happy. Do you still deny it?”

Another Imperial Bodyguard said, “With two ‘powdered heads’ in your arms you threw the dice with us, and lost two thousand *taels*. Eager to win your capital back, you borrowed from me three thousand *taels*, and borrowed from this *laoxiong* two thousand taels. Afterward you borrowed from him one thousand five hundred, and from him two thousand *taels*.”

Another man said, “And from me you borrowed one thousand five hundred *taels*; altogether you owe us ten thousand *taels* of shiny white silver.”

Five men held out their hands together and said, “Killing people you pay with

your life, owing money you have to pay back. Quickly pay!”

Ah Ke recalled the scene at the brothel where she saw Wei Xiaobao was fooling around with the prostitutes, she also recalled a few days ago inside the haystack was groping and pinching her body; it seemed to her that these men were not faking it. Moreover, she remembered that the night before last was exactly the eve of the ‘turtle-slaying assembly’. She recalled that Zheng *Gongzi* did not return to the inn until very late at night, and in the morning she saw him having a hangover; he said that certain hero and warrior invited him for a drink. He did drink all right, but it was not any hero or warrior, rather, it was the s1uts at the brothel. Thinking to this point, she could not stop tears from flowing down her face.

The Imperial Bodyguards had blocked Zheng Keshuang’s escape route; they had him completely surrounded. Someone behind him reached out and grabbed the back of his neck. Zheng Keshuang was furious; his elbow struck backward, heavily he hit the pit of the man’s stomach. The Imperial Bodyguard cried out and doubled up in pain. The rest of the Imperial Bodyguards closed in, giving him punches and kicks. Fighting one on one, these people were not Zheng Keshuang’s match, but with seven, eight people attacking him at once, very soon he was sprawling on the ground.

Ah Ke anxiously called out, “If you have something to say, let’s talk. Don’t hit people carelessly.” And she scrambled forward to help him.

“Hey, Big Miss[61],” Dolong said, “It has nothing to do with you; don’t get involved with this muddle head.”

“Go away,” Ah Ke anxiously said; she reached out to push Dolong’s shoulder away.

Dolong was a martial art master of the Imperial Palace, naturally his martial art skill was superb. With light brush of his left hand, he sent her tumbling several steps backward.

On the other side, the Imperial Bodyguards were punching and kicking, hacking and chopping Zheng Keshuang; they did not stop slapping Zheng Keshuang's face. Ah Ke anxiously attacked several moves, but with a chuckle Dolong easily parried her and pushed her farther and farther away from Zheng Keshuang. Dolong said with a laugh, "Big Miss, this playboy is dining, wining, whoring and gambling; nothing that he did not do. Early morning today he still wanted to borrow five thousand *taels* from me, saying that he wanted to marry two 'powdered heads' and take them home to be his concubines. Why do you want to protect him?"

Ah Ke took several steps back and shouted anxiously, "If you have something else to say … we can talk it over slowly."

An Imperial Bodyguard laughed and said, "If you tell him to pay back our money, naturally we won't beat him." While saying that, 'whack!' he sent another punch on Zheng Keshuang's face; immediately blood flowing out of his nose.

Another Imperial Bodyguard pulled his saber and shouted, "Let's cut his two ears first, and then we talk." While saying that, he waved his saber in chopping motion, twice.

Ah Ke pulled Wei Xiaobao's hand, in her anxiety, she almost cried. "What shall we do? What shall we do?" she said.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Actually, I do have ten thousand *taels*; but I really don't want to give it to him so that he can gamble and visit prostitutes."

"They are going to cut his ears," Ah Ke said, "Please lend the money to me then."

Wei Xiaobao said, "If Shijie wants to borrow money, I would lend you even a hundred thousand *taels*, let alone only ten thousand *taels*. But you will be my wife in the future, so it does not count as a debt. Just tell Zheng *Gongzi* to borrow from me."

Ah Ke stomped her feet. “Ay,” she said, “You are really …” She called out, “Hey, don’t hit, we’ll pay you back.”

The Imperial Bodyguards had hit enough, so they stopped, but they still held on to Zheng Keshuang and did not let him go.

Ah called out, “Zheng *Gongzi*, my Shidi has the money, just borrow from him to pay them back.”

Zheng Keshuang was really angry that he almost passed out; but seeing the steel saber swaying back and fro in front of his face, he was afraid that they would really cut his ears. He became terrified and looked at Wei Xiaobao, imploring him with his eyes.

Ah Ke tugged at Wei Xiaobao’s sleeve. “Lend him,” she said in a low voice.

An Imperial Bodyguard said with a cold laugh, “Ten thousand *taels* is not a small amount of money. Without any guarantee, how can he easily loan it to others? This fellow loves to borrow money the most, didn’t we all fall into his trick?”

“If only this Miss is willing to be the guarantee,” another Imperial Bodyguard said, “If this fellow did not pay back, then it will fall onto this Miss’ responsibility to pay it back.”

The Imperial Bodyguard who had his saber raised said in a loud voice, “Another family’s Big Miss is neither a friend nor a relative to this stinky fellow, why would she be willing to be the guarantor? If the ten thousand *taels* is not paid back, what else can she do unless using her body to repay the debt by marrying this young rich kid?”

The Imperial Bodyguards roared with laughter. “That’s right,” they said, “That is a brilliant idea.”

“Shijie,” Wei Xiaobao said in a low voice, “It won’t work. You heard them, won’t it be too unfair to you?”

‘Slap!’ an Imperial Bodyguard heavily slapped Zheng Keshuang on his face again. His hands and feet were being held by these people, he was helpless to resist. An Imperial Bodyguard shouted, “Just beat him severely, beat him to death, just consider the ten thousand *taels* is going down the drain. This is called ‘the eyes do not see, the heart does not feel vexed’.” ‘Slap! Slap!’ he then slapped Zheng Keshuang several times.

Zheng Keshuang called out, “Don’t hit! Don’t hit! Wei *Xiongdi*, if you have the money, please lend ten thousand *taels* to me. I … I guarantee that I will pay you back.”

Wei Xiaobao cast a sideway glance toward Ah Ke. “Shijie,” he asked, “Do you think I should lend it to him?”

With tears brimming on her eyes, Ah Ke sobbed, “Lend … lend it to him.”

An Imperial Bodyguard on the side caught on to please Wei Xiaobao, he said with a loud voice, “Big Miss is willing to be the guarantor. In the future Big Miss will marry the young rich gentleman, this stinky fellow is actually the matchmaker.”

Wei Xiaobao fished a pack of banknotes from his pocket, counted ten thousand *taels*, and was about to give it to Zheng Keshuang, but then he changed his mind and handed it over to Ah Ke instead. Ah Ke received it and said, “Here’s the money, please let him go.”

The Imperial Bodyguards all thought that Deputy Chief Wei said that he was going to fight to rescue others, but now he was using money to save others; they were not sure if it was what Wei Xiaobao had in mind, thereupon they were still holding on to Zheng Keshuang and did not let him go.

Wei Xiaobao said, “Here is ten thousand *taels*, take it and divide it among

yourselves. Damn it, just consider it a reward of your effort. You are all such muddleheaded son of a b1tch, quickly release him."

As soon as the Imperial Bodyguards heard it, they were delighted. They understood that Wei Xiaobao intended to give them the ten thousand *taels* as their reward; hence they let Zheng Keshuang go immediately.

Ah Ke reached out to help him up and to give the money to him. Zheng Keshuang was extremely angry, he snatched the money away and without looking he handed it to an Imperial Bodyguard by his side.

Wei Xiaobao cursed, "You are a bunch of sons of a b1tch, Tatars soldiers, you beat my friend like this, *laozi* will not let this matter rest."

Ah Ke was afraid of prolonged dispute, she hastily said, "Don't curse, let's go back."

Wei Xiaobao said, "I am furious just thinking about this, the debt has to be paid, and we have already paid it. But Zheng *Gongzi* has suffered the beatings, didn't he suffer it in vain?"

Dolong laughed aloud and said, "This fellow has just shed away his 'poor star', but his lewdness is on the rise. Damn it, why do you always want to be near other family's Big Miss?" Reaching out, he grabbed the back of Zheng Keshuang's neck and lifted his body up. Turning him around in the air, he shouted, "Let me throw you down the city wall, I want to see whether you will die or you will live." Zheng Keshuang and Ah Ke screamed together.

Dolong dropped Zheng Keshuang heavily on the ground; he shouted, "Later on I want you to leave this Miss far away. Other family's good Miss, if she is seen together with you, a boy who crazily visit prostitute and gamble excessively, who 'imitate the dog and steal chicken' [i.e. to dally with women], her reputation will be ruined. Let me tell you this: if in the future I ever see you by this Miss' side, *laozi* will definitely wring your dog head off your neck." While saying that, his left

hand grabbed the root of Zheng Keshuang's braid, he coiled Zheng Keshuang's braid twice around the palm of his right hand; and then he took a very deep breath, his chest swelled, the muscles on his arms and the back of his hands bulged out, with a loud roar his hands pulled apart, 'snap!' the braid broke into two.

Seeing a display of such a divine strength, the Imperial Bodyguards broke into thunderous applause. Dolong's natural strength was enormous, plus he trained the external, hard type of martial art. His arms had a thousand-catty power. Fortunately his left hand was holding the root of the braid, otherwise, since Zheng Keshuang's braid was fake, with one light pull it would be revealed that he was not obeying the imperial court's order, which was a major criminal offense for a subject of Qing Dynasty.

Dolong tossed the half braid away, his five fingers, which knuckles were as big as pestles, forked Zheng Keshuang's neck, followed by his left hand also grabbed the back of his neck. His hands slowly tightened, Zheng Keshuang's face slowly swollen red, until finally his tongue stuck out; very soon he would be choked to death. The dozen or so Imperial Bodyguards drew their weapons and positioned themselves around the two people, to prevent Ah Ke from stepping forward and rescue him.

Wei Xiaobao shouted, "The money has been returned, you still want to kill him?" He charged forward, 'Bang!' and he sent a punch toward an Imperial Bodyguard's lower abdomen. "Aiyo!" the Imperial Bodyguard cried out, and tumbled down, howling and screaming, flailing his hands and feet randomly, and was not able to crawl up no matter what.

With both fists Wei Xiaobao attacked Dolong using the move 'a pair of dragons fought over a pearl'. Dolong's two hands were holding Zheng Keshuang's neck, he could not parry, and thus was hit by the fists. The move 'a pair of dragons fought over a pearl' was originally intended to strike the enemy's temples ['sun' acupoints], but Dolong was big and tall, while Wei Xiaobao was short and small; his two fists were hitting Dolong's lower back.

Pretending to be angry, Dolong cursed, “Dead little demon, *laozi* will choke you to death.” Letting Zheng Keshuang go, he fought with Wei Xiaobao.

Wei Xiaobao unleashed the martial art he learned from Hai Dafu and Cheng Guan. His movements were agile, each move each style was ingenious and very pleasing to the eye. Dolong’s fists created strong gust of wind. He struck just a few *cun* from within Wei Xiaobao’s side, suddenly he advanced swiftly and sent a ferocious kick. ‘Crack!’ the jujube tree by Wei Xiaobao’s side was broken. The Imperial Bodyguards broke into loud cheers.

Witnessing Dolong’s divine power, Ah Ke was afraid Wei Xiaobao would be beaten to death. “Shidi,” she called out, “Don’t fight, let’s go back.”

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted. “She cares about me. In the end this little mother skin [xiao niang pi] is not without any conscience.”

Dolong sent another kick, sending a large rock on the ground flying away and falling down from the city wall. Wei Xiaobao moved faster and faster, ‘whack!’ his palm struck the opponent’s abdomen. “Ah!” Dolong cried out; he bent his knees and fell sitting down on the ground. “*Laozi* won’t give in, let’s fight again,” he called out.

Springing up, his arms moved up and down rapidly. Wei Xiaobao leaned sideways to evade, Dolong’s punch hit the city wall; instantly three pieces of large greenish black brick fell off. Amidst the flying dust, Wei Xiaobao sent a flying kick with his right leg; but before his toes even touched him, Dolong already roared as he slipped down from the city wall and fell onto the ground at the foot of the wall, and lay unmoving.

Wei Xiaobao was shocked; afraid that Dolong might really fell to his death, he bent over to look. Dolong raised his head and smiled, he winked and waved his hand, indicating that he was all right, and then immediately lay facing down on the ground. Wei Xiaobao finally felt relieved. The Imperial Bodyguards were

shocked and frightened; they rushed down the city wall to look.

Wei Xiaobao pulled Ah Ke and said in a low voice, “Quickly go, quickly go.” Like a wisp of smoke the three of them ran back to the inn.

Back at the inn, Jiu Nan notice unusual expression on Ah Ke’s face, plus she was panting incessantly. “What happened?” she asked.

Ah Ke replied, “There were more than a dozen Tatar soldiers giving Zheng *Gongzi* some trouble, fortunately … fortunately Shidi overthrew the leader of those soldiers.”

Jiu Nan said, “Do this for me: stay quietly in the inn, do not wander anywhere and create trouble.” Ah Ke lowered her head in compliance.

After a while, concerned over Zheng Keshuang’s injury, she went to his room to pay a visit. She saw that his attendants had applied medicine on his wounds; he was asleep with the attendants accompanying him in the room.

Seeing her coming out of Zheng Keshuang’s room, Wei Xiaobao was angry and upset at the same time. “Why didn’t I tell them to really cut this fellow’s ears?” he mused, “This little girl is always worrying wholeheartedly about this stinky fellow. Even if I cut this fellow’s ears and poke his eyes blind, it seems that she will still consider him as her beloved treasure.” Despite of his sharp-witted and extensive knowledge, encountering this kind of matter of the heart between men and women, he was actually at his wits’ end.

Note:
The phrase ‘thorny gate provided another source of amusement’ in the Chapter’s title originated from Han Wendi’s [fourth Han emperor, personal name Liu Heng, reigned 180-157 BC] commendation of Zhou Yafu’s speech, referring to his strict military order; other generals fell short of his achievement. The original poem sang about Wu Sangui’s brutal and tyrannical way of dealing with the people as well as operating his armed forces. ‘Thorny gate’ was the ‘halberd

gate’, which may also refer to the Imperial City Gates. This book borrows the phrase as an allegory of the Imperial Bodyguards went out of the Palace and deliberately created trouble.

Chapter 28

Over the top passion takes a lot of twists and turns, but exquisite to those who painstakingly open their hearts.

(Translated by Foxs)

In a very short period of time the dozen or so Mu Palace people were already in a very dangerous position. Wu Lishen groaned inwardly, he had no choice but to brandish his saber in fierce combat. The barbarian leader hopped up and down while loudly blabbering in barbarian tongue.

That night Wei Xiaobao slept until midnight, when suddenly he heard a light knock on his window. Still in daze, he sat up, and heard someone outside the

window said in a low voice, “Wei *En Gong* [benefactor], it’s me.”

He focused his attention and recognized the voice as Wu Lishen’s. Quickly he walked toward the window and said in a low voice, “Is it Wu *Er Shu* [second uncle]?”

“I do not dare to accept the honor, it’s me,” Wu Lishen said.

Wei Xiaobao quietly opened the window. Wu Lishen leaped inside and embraced him. He seemed to be very happy. “*En Gong*,” he said is a low voice, “I think about you every day; I did not expect to see you in here.” Turning around, he closed the window, and then pulled Wei Xiaobao to sit side by side on the *kang*. He said, “During the great assembly at Hejian Prefecture, I inquired about you from your precious Society’s friends, but they were not willing to tell me.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “It’s not that they considered you as an outsider, and intentionally did not want to tell you. Actually, I attended the ‘turtle-slaying assembly’ in disguise; the Society brothers did not know.”

Wu Lishen felt relieved. “So that’s how it is,” he said, “Today we bumped into the Tatar soldiers, we also received *En Gong*’s help in getting out of difficult situation. Otherwise, I am afraid our *Xiao Gongye* would suffer mishap. *Xiao Gongye* wanted me to pay his utmost respect to *En Gong*, he is deeply grateful.”

“We all are good friends, there is no need to be polite,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Wu *Er Shu*, you keep calling me *En Gong* this and *En Gong* that, it sounds really awkward. If you consider me a friend, henceforth the use of this word to address me must be avoided.”

“Very well,” Wu Lishen replied, “I won’t call you *En Gong*, but you must not call me *Er Shu* either. From now on we call each other ‘*Xiongdi*’ [brother]. I am several years older, so I will call you *Xiongdi*.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Wonderful. That martial nephew of yours, Liu

Yizhou, shouldn't he call me *Shishu* then?"

Wu Lishen felt slightly embarrassed; he said, "That fellow has no future prospect; let us not mind him. *Xiongdi*, what are you up to?"

"This matter is complicated and not easy to express succinctly," Wei Xiaobao said, "*Er Ge* [second brother], your *Xiongdi* has decided on marriage."

"Congratulations, congratulations," Wu Lishen said, "I wonder which family's young lady?" Immediately he recalled, "Could it be Fang Yi? Has he found Miss Fang and Xiao Junzhu?" His whole face was beaming with delight.

"My wife is surnamed Chen," Wei Xiaobao said, "But there is one problem, for which I am quite ashamed."

"Why?" Wu Lishen asked.

"My wife has another good friend surnamed Zheng," Wei Xiaobao replied, "This fellow's moral quality is not upright and honest. He is fooling around with my wife, that is a small matter; he actually informed the Tatar soldiers about you. Those soldiers who were giving *Xiao Gongye* a hard time today, it was actually his idea."

Wu Lishen was furious. "This fellow really is bored to be alive," he said, "But I wonder why did he do that?"

"Do you know who this fellow is?" Wei Xiaobao said, "He is none other than Taiwan's Yan Ping Jun Wang's second son. He said that Yan Ping Jun Wang is in command over a large army, while your Mu Palace is in decline; without power and without potential, what else can you do?"

Wu Lishen angrily said, "Our Mu Palace is also an outstanding founding minister of the Great Ming who subdued Yunnan; how can it be compared to their Zheng Family who rise to power just recently?"

“Isn’t that so?” Wei Xiaobao said, “Yet this fellow said: whoever kills Wu Sangui will gain an enormous face in front of the world’s heroes; in Yunnan, you are the local bullies, compared to their Zheng Family in Taiwan, it will be a hundred times more convenient for you to kill Wu Sangui. He confides with me, saying that he wanted to eliminate Mu Family people first. I told him that our Tian Di Hui has already made a bet with Mu Palace to see who will get rid of Wu Sangui first. We are heroes and warriors; if we win, we must win brilliantly, if we lose, we must lose gracefully; how could we secretly plot against the competitor? This fellow refused to accept, hence he resorted to different ruse. Fortunately Tatar soldiers did not recognize *Xiao Gongye*, hence I was able to trick them into thinking that they had the wrong person and thus you were able to get away.”

“So that’s how it is! So that’s how it is!” Wu Lishen repeatedly said, “Damn it, this fellow is not human.”

“*Er Ge*,” Wei Xiaobao said, “We must teach this fellow a lesson. But looking at Yan Ping Jun Wang’s face, we must not kill him. It would be best if you could beat him a bit, and then Xiongdi will boldly come out to help him, and fight with you a little bit. You deliberately yield to me several stances, then you pretend to retreat in defeat. I wonder if you’d willing to do that.”

“*Xiongdi* is venting our anger, why would I be unwilling?” Wu Lishen said, “It would be best since we won’t damage the relationship with Taiwan’s Zheng Family and won’t provoke any dispute.”

“He is the one with wounds on his head and face, the fellow who is with *Xiongdi*,” Wei Xiaobao said.

“Yes,” Wu Lishen said, “Who does he think his Zheng Family is? Although nowadays our Mu Palace has fallen into dire straits, we are not one to be bullied.”

“Isn’t that so?” Wei Xiaobao said.

Following which he asked about ‘seeing the ghost’ at the Zhuang Family’s big house. Although he had seen Xu Tianchuan during the day, at that time it was inconvenient to ask, hence his mind had been preoccupied with this matter.

Wu Lishen revealed an ashamed look on his face; continuously shaking his head, he said, “*Xiongdi*, today you are calling me ‘*Er Ge*’; honestly, your big brother is quite ashamed. That day we were subdued by those fellows who ‘dress up as god, play the devil’ using some demonic method; who would have thought that those fellows were lured out of the room and were taken captive? Several women had just come out to set us free when a bunch of crafty fellows rushed into the room and rescued Zhang *Laosan* and his men.”

Wei Xiaobao nodded; he said in his heart, “They must be Shen Long Jiao people, the Third Young Mistress of the Zhuang Family and the others were not able to resist them.”

Wu Lishen shook his head and said, “At that time Xu *Laoye* [old master] and I had just had our acupoints unsealed, our hands and feet could not move freely yet. In the darkness we fought randomly; we were separated from each other. It was not until the next morning did we finally get together, except you, *Xiongdi*, Xiao Junzhu and Miss Fang, three people; we could not find you no matter what. We went back to that haunted house to look for you, but there was only an old woman there. I don’t know whether she was really deaf or pretending to be deaf, after interrogating her for half a day, we could not find the least bit of useful information. Xu *Laoyezi* and I were unwilling to give up, we searched openly and investigated in secret, and done so for over half a month straight, ay, yet we did not find the least bit of clue. Good *Xiongdi*, seeing you today, I am very happy. Where did Xiao Junzhu and Miss Fang go? Do you have any news? Our *Xiao Wangye* is worried about his sister, he is always anxious.”

Wei Xiaobao gave him a vague answer, “I am also concerned over those two ladies. Miss Fang is smart and quick-witted, but Xiao Junzhu is a bit naïve. The sooner she can meet her brother the better.” While in his heart he mused,

“Turns out you did not get captured by Shen Long Jiao, and did not get forced to take the poison and compelled to be spies; that’s very good.” He knew Wu Lishen was upright and frank, he could not lie; if this story was told by Liu Yizhou, it would not necessarily be credible.

Wu Lishen said, “*Xiongdi*, take a good care of yourself, your *Gege* is leaving.” While saying that, he stood up, seemingly very reluctant to leave. Pulling Wei Xiaobao’s hand, he said, “*Xiongdi*, there is no lack of good ladies in the world, if that lady of yours does not treat you well, you should not take it to heart too much.”

Wei Xiaobao heaved a deep sigh; gloomily he remained silent. This time his sigh was a genuine sigh. Wu Lishen pushed open the window and leaped out.

The next day Wei Xiaobao followed Jiu Nan and Ah Ke going out of the city gate and continued their journey north. Zheng Keshuang, accompanied by his entourage, was traveling with them. “Zheng *Gongzi*,” Jiu Nan asked him, “Where are you heading?”

“I want to go back to Taiwan,” Zheng Keshuang replied, “But I want to walk *Shitai* off for a while before taking my leave.”

After traveling for twenty some *li*, suddenly they heard the sound of galloping horses, a group of people were hurrying along toward them. As these people were drawing near, they could see that it was a group of peasants, with hoes, iron rakes and so on in their hands. The one in the front called out, “It’s that fellow; it’s him!” As soon as Wei Xiaobao saw the man, he recognized him as Wu Lishen.

The people surrounded the large carriage, blocking their way. Wu Lishen pointed to Zheng Keshuang and cursed, “Thief boy, what a fine thing indeed you did last night at the Zhang Family Village! The cat has stolen the food, now you want to quietly slip away?”

“What Zhang Family Village, Li Family Village?” Zheng Keshuang angrily said, “You don’t have eyes and talk rubbish.”

“Good!” Wu Lishen roared, “Turns out the Li Family girl was also deceived by you; you admit it. Damn it, thief boy! In one night you swindled two maidens; you are really brazen and shameless.”

The attendants shouted together, “This is our *Gongzi Ye*, you have the wrong person, such a crazy and unfounded ravings!”

Wu Lishen pulled a peasant girl out; pointing to Zheng Keshuang he asked, “Is it him? Look carefully.”

Wei Xiaobao saw the peasant girl had thick eyebrows and big eyes, high cheekbones and buckteeth, she wore green fancy-patterned clothing and had a piece of printed cloth wrapped around her head; presumably this girl was hired by Wu Lishen, he was secretly amused.

With a deep and gruff voice the peasant girl said, “It’s him, it’s him, I am a hundred percent sure. Last night he went to my room and embraced me, boo hoo … this … this dead stinky person, aiyo, boo hoo … ahh … mother …” While saying that, she was bawling.

Another peasant shouted, “You bullied my *meizi* [younger sister], *laozi* should be your brother-in-law. Damn it, *laozi* should fight you to the death.” He was Wu Lishen’s disciple, Ao Biao.

Wei Xiaobao examined carefully the Mu Palace people, he had seen about five or six people, but Liu Yizhou was not among them. Presumably Wu Lishen had carefully selected these people in advance to make sure that there was no one harboring any hostility with him, so that their scheme would not be exposed.

Seeing the peasant girl was so ugly, Ah Ke did not believe that Zheng Keshuang would have illicit relationship with her, it’s just that the girl had personally

confirmed that it was him. These peasants had neither enmity nor hatred toward Zheng Keshuang, hence it was unlikely that they would deliberately accused him falsely. She could not help being skeptical.

Wei Xiaobao knitted his brows as he said, “Zheng *Gongzi* is a bit too loose; going to a brothel and playing with prostitutes is one thing, but why did he go … go … go … ay, this peasant girl is so ugly. *Shijie*, I think they must have the wrong person.”

“Right,” Ah Ke said, “It must be a case of mistaken identity.”

Wu Lishen told the peasant girl, “Say it quickly, say it quickly, are you afraid of being disgraced? He … what did this thief boy give you?”

The peasant girl took out a big *yuanbao* worth a hundred *taels* from her pocket; she said, “He gave me this; he told me to obey him. He said that he came from Taiwan, his father is some *Wangye*, he has gold mountain, silver mountain in his house, and … and …”

“Ah!” Ah Ke shrieked. She thought that this peasant girl was ignorant and unlearned, it was impossible for her to fabricate that fact, naturally it must be Zheng Keshuang himself who told her that. She could not help but feeling angry and hurt.

The Zheng Mansion’s attendants also thought that it was the truth, since they believed that a peasant girl like her would not have such a big *yuanbao*; they shouted, “Get out of the way, get out of the way! You already have the *yuanbao*, what are you fussing about? Don’t stand in your masters’ way.”

“Can’t do!” Ao Biao shouted, “You have raped my *meizi*, how can she marry someone else in the future? You have to take her as your wife. Quickly go back with me, bow to the Heaven and the Earth with her, and then take her back with you to Taiwan to pay her respect to your father and mother. My *meizi* is a good family’s daughter, not some servile s1ut; do you think she would take your

money to prostitute herself to you? What did he say this hundred-*tael* for?" The last question was directed to the peasant girl.

The peasant girl said, "He said … he said that it is some betrothal gift, he also said that he would send a matchmaker to take me as his wife, and bring me back to his palace to be some first-rate madam."

"That's it," Ao Biao said, "*Meifu* [younger sister's husband], let me tell you: you won't marry my sister but thinking you can escape by walking away? It won't be easy. Quickly go back with your *Dajiuzi* [wife's older brother]." [Translator's note: just want to show the different words to describe 'brother-in-law'.]

Zheng Keshuang was extremely angry; he thought that he came to the Central Plains this time he had always met with unfavorable situations, even this uncouth peasants also trying to give him trouble without any rhyme or reason. Raising his horsewhip, 'crack!' he lashed it down on Ao Biao's head.

"Aiyo!" Ao Biao screamed. He raised both hands to protect his head, and then fell down his horse and curled up on the ground, twitched several times, and then lay down motionless.

"Murder, murder!" the crowd of peasants cried out.

The peasant girl jumped down from her horse to embrace Ao Biao, while screaming and wailing. Her voice was really rough and husky, she sounded like a pig being slaughtered.

Zheng Keshuang was shocked; thinking that right now they were on foreign land, plus he was someone wanted by the Qing government. If he was involved in legal case involving homicide, he would be in a very big trouble. Instantly he shouted, "Everybody, run!" Raising the horse's reins, he was thinking of making a dash out of the encirclement.

Suddenly a peasant leaped up high to the air and pounced down on him. Zheng Keshuang sent a left backhand punch toward the man's chest. The man caught

his wrist and twisted it. ‘Crack!’ his elbow was dislocated. The man landed on the saddle behind him, his right hand reached down from his flank and up to his neck. It was precisely a move from qinna technique called the ‘slanting stage backward scale (of fish)’. The man’s movement was clean and agile; his mouth was yelling and calling loudly, “Ah San, Ah Gou, [lit. ‘the third’ and ‘the dog’] quickly come and help me, I … I … I am hurt from his strike. Aiyo hey, this fellow is killing me! He is killing me!”

Zheng Keshuang’s body was numb and aching; he was already immobilized completely. The Zheng Mansion attendants pulled out their weapons and charged forward. This time, although Mu Palace people were not too many, each one’s skill was not weak. They lifted up their hoes and iron rakes, and engaged the opponents in a tangled battle, preventing the already injured attendants from coming to Zheng Keshuang’s rescue.

The peasant grabbed Zheng Keshuang and rolled underneath the horse, while raising a clamor, “Ah Hua, quickly catch your husband, don’t let him run away.”

“He won’t run away,” the peasant girl shouted back, while leaping up and firmly holding Zheng Keshuang in her arms.

It was only then did Wei Xiaobao realize that this peasant girl was actually a man disguised as a woman; no wonder she was that unbearably ugly. Obviously he was a Mu Palace person. The way ‘she’ captured Zheng Keshuang was also a *qinna* technique.

Ah Ke anxiously called out, “Shifu, Shifu, they captured Zheng *Gongzi*, what should we do?”

Jiu Nan shook her head and said, “This Zheng *Gongzi*’s behaviors is dishonorable, receiving a bit of lesson will not be useless to him. These peasants won’t possibly harm his life.” She was reclining on the large carriage to recuperate, hence she only heard the commotion outside without actually seeing the way the Mu Palace people were making their moves; otherwise, with her keen vision, as soon

as she saw these people's agility, she would have seen through their scheme.

Ah Ke said, "These peasant seem to know martial art."

"Martial art they don't have," Wei Xiaobao said, "But their brute force is definitely not small."

Ao Biao crawled up from the ground; he called out, "Damn it, you nearly killed your *laozi*." [Reminder: 'laozi' literally means 'old man', as in 'father'; also to refer to self (arrogantly or jocularly).]

A peasant laughed and said, "You are his *Dajiuzi*, how could you be *laozi*?"

"Alright," Ao Biao said, "Grab this fellow. Since *Dajiuzi* is not dead, he does not need to pay with his own life. My Ah Hua *meizi* will have someone to depend on all her life. Take him to bow to the Heaven and the Earth."

The peasants cheered and yelled, "We are going to drink wine of happiness, we are going to drink wine of happiness!"

They led the attendants' horses away, and with Zheng Keshuang in the middle, they rode back to the direction they came from. Shouting and yelling, the Zheng Mansion attendants tried to run after them, but those people disappeared behind a cloud of dust, how could they pursue on foot?

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Zheng *Gongzi* will live with the bride's family in here, that's wonderful. Turns out this place is called Gao Lao Zhuang."

Ah Ke was shocked and angered at the same time; she was already at a loss of what to do. Hearing him saying that, she thoughtlessly asked, "This place is called Gao Lao Zhuang?"

"That's right," Wei Xiaobao replied, "In the Journey to the West, isn't there a chapter called 'Zhu Bajie [the pig] lives with the bride's family at Gao Lao

Zhuang'?"

Ah Ke angrily said, "You are the Zhu Bajie!" Leaning on a tree by the road, she cried.

"Shijie," Wei Xiaobao said, "Zheng *Gongzi* is getting married, that is a happy occasion; why are you crying instead?"

Ah Ke was going to scold him, but then she changed her mind, thinking that this little demon head had an extensive remarkable ability. Only by asking for his help would she be able to rescue Zheng Gongzi back. She said with a cry, "Shidi, please think of a way to rescue him from danger."

Wei Xiaobao opened his eyes wide; pretending to be utterly astonished, he said, "Did you say 'rescue him from danger'? He did not commit any murder, they won't make him pay with his own life."

"Didn't you hear?" Ah Ke said, "Those people are going to force him to bow to the Heaven and Earth with that peasant girl."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Bowing to the Heaven and Earth is very good." Lowering his voice, he said quietly, "I want to bow to the Heaven and the Earth with you, it's too bad that you are not willing."

Ah Ke shot him a malicious look and said, "Others are dying of anxiety, you are still talking that kind of senseless talk. Just see if I am going to ignore you in the future or not?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "Shifu says that Zheng *Gongzi*'s moral conduct is not good, let him suffer a bit of hardship, it will be greatly beneficial to him. Much less bowing to the Heaven and the Earth and get married is not a hardship at all. Most probably Zheng *Gongzi* is very happy. Otherwise, why would he look for that miss last night, and dilly-dally with her, and do some dubious thing?"

Ah Ke stomped her right foot and angrily said, “You are the one who dilly-dally with women and do dubious thing.”

Along the way that day Ah Ke was deliberately trying to delay their journey. When they stopped for a meal, she slashed her saber on the mule’s hind leg, thereupon the mule was limping and afterwards it walked really slow so that they only travelled for a bit more than ten *li* when they had to stop in a small town to lodge for the night. Wei Xiaobao knew that that night she would definitely want to rush over to save Zheng Keshuang. After dinner, and after everybody in the inn went to bed, he went to the stable and slept on the pile of straw.

Sure enough, before the first watch of the night[62] he heard intermittent footsteps, a dark shadow entered the stable and pulled a horse out. Wei Xiaobao called in a low voice, “Someone’s stealing horse!”

The shadow was precisely Ah Ke; she was startled and turned around to run, but then she recognized Wei Xiaobao’s voice. “Xiaobao,” she called, “Is that you?”

“Naturally it’s me,” Wei Xiaobao replied.

“What are you doing here?” Ah Ke asked.

Wei Xiaobao replied, “Mountain people have divine foresight and marvelous calculation; foreseeing that some people would turn into a horse thief tonight, I am guarding here to catch the thief.”

Ah Ke spat. And then with an imploring tone she said, “Xiaobao, come with me to … to save him back.”

Hearing her beseeching him with a gentle voice, Wei Xiaobao could not stop the bones in his body from turning soft. He said with a laugh, “If I can save him, what will be my reward?”

“Whatever you want …” Ah Ke was going to say ‘whatever you want, it’s up to you’, but immediately recalled, “This little demon head always wanted me to marry him, I can’t leave it up to him.” Therefore, before she finished, she changed her statement, “You … you are always thinking of a way to bully me; you have never been willing to help me sincerely.” Speaking to here, she started to sob and cry. It was not a fake cry, however, she was actually thinking about Zheng Keshuang’s frivolous character, but also the fact that he was falling into a dangerous situation; she was wondering if he had bowed to the Heaven and the Earth to get married or not.

As soon as she cried, Wei Xiaobao’s heart softened. He sighed and said, “Alright, alright! I am going to go with you.”

Ah Ke was delighted. Sobbing and sniffling, she said, “Thank … thank you.”

“You don’t need to thank me,” Wei Xiaobao said, “It’s just that we don’t know where Gao Lao Zhuang is.”

Ah Ke was startled, but then she understood that by saying ‘Gao Lao Zhuang’, he was scolding Zheng Keshuang in a roundabout way. “We will have to inquire along the way,” she said in a low voice.

The two of them opened the inn’s back door, led the horse out, and rode together along the road they travelled during the day. Wei Xiaobao asked, “Actually, what’s so good about Zheng *Gongzi* that you like him like this?”

“Who says I like him?” Ah Ke said, “It’s just that … it’s just that we know each other; he meets calamity, naturally I must go to rescue him.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “If some people caught me and forced me to bow to the Heaven and the Earth and get married, will you come to rescue me or not?”

“Pfft!” Ah Ke stifled her laughter and said, “Are you good looking? Who would want to catch you and force you to bow to the Heaven and the Earth to get

married?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “You think I am not that pleasing to the eye, but there might be a young lady out there who thinks that I am outstandingly handsome, outstandingly smart?”

Ah Ke laughed and said, “In that case, I should thank the Heaven and the Earth for sparing me from your ghost always entangling me.”

“Fine,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Since you don’t have any conscience like this, if some people caught you and force you to bow to the Heaven and the Earth to get married, I am not going to rescue you.”

Ah Ke was slightly startled; she thought that if she really encountered such matter, she would definitely want him to rescue her. “You will definitely come to rescue me,” she grimly said.

“Why?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

Ah Ke said, “Others bully me, you won’t watch with folded arms. Who told you to be my Shidi?” As soon as these words entered his ears, Wei Xiaobao felt sweet comfort in his heart.

While talking, they had reached the place where they met Mu Palace heroes during the day. They saw more than a dozen people were sitting on the ground by the road, with lanterns in their hands; they were none other than Zheng Mansion attendants. Ah Ke reined the horse and asked, “Where is Zheng *Gongzi*?”

The attendants stood up. With a sullen look on his face, someone said, “In the ancestral hall over there.” While saying that, he pointed to the northwest.

“Ancestral hall?” Ah Ke asked, “What is he doing?”

The attendant replied, “Those peasants invited *Gongzi*, and insisted that he bow to the Heaven and the Earth. *Gongzi* is unwilling, and thus they punched and kicked, very vicious!”

Ah Ke was angry. “You all are … humph … you all are martial art masters,” she said, “How come even several peasants like that you are not able to defeat?”

The attendants were very ashamed; they hung their heads low. A man said, “Those peasants know martial art.”

Ah Ke angrily said, “Other people know martial art, and you simply ignore your master? We are going to rescue him, lead us the way.”

An elderly attendant said, “Those peasants said that if we dare to raise a ruckus, they would slaughter every one of us.”

“They want to slaughter let them slaughter,” Ah Ke said, “What are you afraid of? *Jun Wang* ordered you to protect *Gongzi*, yet you are greedy for life, afraid of death like this?”

“Yes, yes,” the attendant said, “It would be best if Miss does not ride the horse, so that we won’t alert them.”

“Humph,” Ah Ke snorted. Together with Wei Xiaobao they jumped down the horse and tied the horse on a roadside tree. The attendants set down their lanterns, and led the two people toward the northwest.

They walked for about a *li*, passing through a wood, a stretch of graveyard, and arrived at a seven, eight-room big house. Sounds of gongs and drums can be heard inside the building. Ah Ke’s heart was anxious, “Has he really bowed to the Heaven and the Earth?” she mused.

Pulling Wei Xiaobao’s sleeve, she quickened her steps, circled around the side of the building, and saw a door half opened. Peeking inside, she saw complete

darkness with nobody inside. The two of them sneaked in, following the sound of gongs and drums toward the main hall. They squatted down underneath a window and peeked inside from a crack on the window; and were able to see everything in the main hall. Ah Ke was immediately greatly worried, while Wei Xiaobao was extremely delighted.

They saw Zheng Keshuang's head was adorned with several stems of red flower, standing opposite a woman whose head was draped in red silk. The hall was bright with a lot of candles. Several peasants were beating gongs and drums while continuously cheering and jeering.

Wu Lishen called out, "Bow again, bow again!"

"I have bowed to the Heaven and the Earth," Zheng Keshuang said, "What else should I bow to?" Hearing this, Ah Ke was so mad that she nearly fainted.

Shaking his head, Wu Lishen said, "We have a custom here, the groom has to bow to the bride one hundred times. You have only bowed for thirty times, there are still seventy times left."

Ao Biao raised his leg and kicked Zheng Keshuang's buttocks. Zheng Keshuang was unable to stand, he fell kneeling down. Ao Biao pressed his head down and shouted, "You are the groom today, what's the big deal of bowing several more times?"

Wei Xiaobao knew that they were stalling, waiting for his arrival. In all his life he could not necessarily see this kind of good and rare drama several times, thereupon he thought that there was no harm in watching it a bit longer; hence he took his time in coming out to save him. Ah Ke, on the other hand, could not bear it any longer. 'Bang!' she kicked the window, and leaped inside with a saber in her hand. "Release him quickly," she shouted, "Otherwise your Miss will kill each and every one of you!"

Wu Lishen laughed and said, "Miss, are you here to drink the wine of happiness?

Why are you using saber and spear?”

Ah Ke took a step forward, brandishing her saber to chop at Ao Biao. In her anxiety and anger, her saber was moving very swiftly and fiercely. Ao Biao hastily leaped away. He picked a long wooden bench behind him to block the saber. Although Ah Ke did not have internal strength, her moves were quite refined and amazing. Ao Biao’s wooden bench was an awkward weapon, unexpectedly he was forced to draw back again and again.

Wu Lishen laughed and said, “Hey, not bad at all.” And he stretched out his hand to meet the saber. His martial art skill was considerably higher than Ao Biao’s, just with two bare palms he was able to weave in and out between the saber blade.

Zheng Keshuang leaped up with the intention to help, but his back was punched twice, ‘bang, bang!’ and he fell to the ground.

Ah Ke successively launched seven, eight moved. Seeing that she could not resist the enemy, she called out, “Shidi, Shidi, come here, quick!”

But she heard Wei Xiaobao was shouting outside the window, “How fierce! *Laozi* will fight you to the death.” She heard the sound of punching and kicking on the window, apparently Wei Xiaobao was fighting fiercely with someone else.

Hearing Wei Xiaobao’s arrival, Wu Lishen busily signaled with his eyes, and then shouted, “Who’s there?” Two of his disciples immediately stepped forward with unsheathed weapons to meet Ah Ke’s willow-leaf saber.

Wu Lishen rushed outside the hall, but saw that Wei Xiaobao was alone, kicking the window, making a lot of noise; obviously he was not fighting with anybody else. Wu Lishen nearly burst out laughing; he called out, “Everybody stops! You, little kid, what are you doing here?”

Wei Xiaobao loudly replied, “My Shijie asked me to save people; quickly let him

go! Aiyo! Not good, these peasants have superb martial art skill." While making a big fuss, he ran outside the door. Wu Lishen laughed and ran after him.

When they were outside, Wei Xiaobao stopped and said with a laugh, "*Er Ge*, thank you very much! The way you manage this matter is very interesting."

Wu Lishen laughed and said, "Is that Miss *Xiongdi*'s beloved? Her martial art is really good, her appearance also … also … hey, hey, not bad." He was straightforward and frank; Ah Ke's physical appearance was extremely beautiful, he did not think much of it, but her moves were refined and amazing, he was quite admiring her.

Wei Xiaobao sighed and said, "It's a pity that she wholeheartedly wanted to marry that stinky fellow, and is unwilling to marry me. You can force that stinky fellow to bow to the Heaven and the Earth to marry that peasant girl; if only you could force her to marry me …" Suddenly he had an idea. "*Er Ge*," he said, "I am asking you to help me to the end. Pretend that you capture me, and seize that Miss also, and then force us to bow to the Heaven and the Earth to get married. What do you think?"

Wu Lishen burst out laughing; he could not help but shaking his head, and hastily said, "Very good, very good. *Xiongdi*, I hope you don't mind, shaking my head has become a second nature to me; it's just that … it's just that …" Speaking to this point, he slightly hesitated.

"It's just that what?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Wu Lishen said, "We are men of chivalrous and righteous way, it is all right to play a joke, *Xiongdi*, please don't be oversensitive, your *Gege* is speaking frankly: you should absolutely have to guard against any voracious desire to satiate lascivious heart."

"Naturally," Wei Xiaobao said, "She is my Shijie; after we bow to the Heaven and the Earth to get married, she will be my official wife. *Er Ge*, you are the

matchmaker; after bowing to the Heaven and the Earth, we will be officially married, won't we? It's not 'picking flowers' [i.e. enter houses at night to rape women] or visiting prostitute, so you cannot say 'lascivious heart', can you?"

"Yes, yes," Wu Lishen said, "*Xiongdi*, please promise me, you must do not any … any bad things that are not according to chivalrous and righteous way."

"Please set your hundred and twenty hearts at ease," Wei Xiaobao said, "A real man make a promise, some horses cannot chase it."

Wu Lishen was greatly delighted; he laughed and said, "I already knew that you are a well-known hero and warrior. This Miss can marry you, it is indeed her good fortune."

Wei Xiaobao smiled and said, "You are the matchmaker, we must offer you the first cup of the wine of happiness."

"Wonderful!" Wu Lishen said with a laugh, "*Xiongdi*, let's do it."

Wei Xiaobao put his hands behind his back and said with a laugh, "No need to be polite."

Wu Lishen grabbed his wrists with his left hand; raising his voice, he said, "I want to see where are you going to run to?" And then he pushed Wei Xiaobao into the main hall.

They saw Ah Ke's saber had been knocked down, while three weapons were pointing to her front and back. Although Ao Biao and the others wanted to completely subdue her, they knew that she was Wei Xiaobao's beloved, hence they did not dare to be rude to her at all.

Wu Lishen took off his belt to tie Wei Xiaobao's hands, and then he pushed him to sit on a chair. Next, he also bound Ah Ke's hands. Wei Xiaobao did not stop cursing.

“Little demon,” Wu Lishen shouted, “You curse one more time, I am going to dig your eyeballs out.”

Wei Xiaobao replied, “I’ll curse whenever I want to curse, stinky thief!”

“Shidi,” Ah Ke said in a low voice, “Stop cursing so you won’t suffer the present trouble.” Only then did Wei Xiaobao hold his tongue.

Wu Lishen said, “This Miss actually has more sense, her appearance is also not bad. Very good, very good. I have another brother who is not married yet, I’d better take her as my ‘difu’ [younger brother’s wife] today.”

Ah Ke was greatly shocked. “That won’t do, that won’t do!” she hastily said.

“Why not?” Wu Lishen said, “Big Miss of a good family will always be married, my *Xiongdi* is a hero and a warrior, he will not bring disgrace to you, why are you unwilling? You really fail to appreciate other people’s kindness! Play the music!”

Ao Biao and and the others picked up the gongs and drums and started beating them. ‘Dong! Dong! Dang! Dang!’ It was very lively.

Of all the frightening experiences Ah Ke went through in her entire life, nothing was scarier than this. She thought that these peasants were rough, uncouth and dirty, his younger brother must be of the same quality; if she lost her chastity to this kind of coarse peasant, even if she killed herself right now, it was already too late. She clenched her jaw and bit her lips, she was so scared that she was unable to utter anything.

Wu Lishen laughed and said, “Very good, you agree.” He waved his right hand, and everybody stopped beating the gongs and the drums.

“Not yet, I haven’t agreed yet,” Ah Ke called out, “Just kill me quickly!”

“Alright,” Wu Lishen said, “I will kill you. I will kill even your Shidi.” While saying that, he took the steel saber from Ao Biao’s hand and raised it high in the air.

Ah Ke cried and said, “Quickly kill me, if you don’t, you are not a real man. You … you kill my Shidi quickly, kill … kill him first.”

Wu Lishen cast a sidelong glance toward Wei Xiaobao; he thought, “This Miss is so without feeling and without sense of justice toward you, why would you want to marry her?”

In his heart, Wei Xiaobao was also cursing, “Stinky little girl, why would you want to kill me first?”

Wu Lishen angrily said, “I simply won’t kill your Shidi. Ah Gou, take this stinky fellow and chop his head outside!” While saying that, he pointed to Zheng Keshuang.

Ao Biao replied, “Yes.” And dragged Zheng Keshuang away.

“No,” Ah Ke cried out in alarm, “Don’t harm him … he can’t be killed. His father … his father …”

“Never mind!” Wu Lishen said, “Are you going to be my Dixi [yet another word for ‘younger brother’s wife’] or not?”

Ah Ke cried and said, “No, no, you … just kill me.”

Wu Lishen tossed away his steel saber and picked up a horsewhip. “I won’t kill you,” he shouted, “I’ll lash you a hundred whip first.” In that moment the anger in his heart was unbearable. ‘Crack!’ he cracked the whip in the air, ready to lash it down onto her body.

“Hold on!” Wei Xiaobao shouted.

Wu Lishen halted the whip in the air and did not lash it down. “What?” he asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, “We are heroes and warriors; we pay particular attention to *yi qi*. Shijie and I are like hands and feet born on the same parents, this a hundred-lash whip, just strike it on me.”

Seeing Wu Lishen’s ferocious and tyrannical look as he raised his whip, Ah Ke was already scared and panicked. As soon as she heard Wei Xiaobao, her heart was delighted. “Shidi,” she said, “You are a really good person.”

Wei Xiaobao said to Wu Lishen, “Hey, *Laoxiong*, whatever it is, let me take it. This is called ‘being a real man, I am not afraid of calamity, I’ll step forward bravely’. You must not force her to marry your Xiongdi, if you have any Jiejie or Meimei [older and younger sister, respectively] who is not married yet, just let me bow to the Heaven and the Earth with her to marry her. This Zheng *Gongzi* has already married one, I will marry another one, successively we marry two of you; it’s not bad, is it? If you have another one, just let her marry me. *Laozi* is a junk copper, rusty iron; my brain is already rotten …”

He spoke to that point, Wu Lishen and the others burst out in laughter. Ah Ke also could not help feeling funny, but she only chuckled a moment, and immediately remembered the wrong she was suffering; her tears flowed down again.

Wu Lishen laughed and said, “You, this little kid, is very interesting; you are a real man. I was actually thinking of letting you go, and was saying all those things to scare you, but *laozi* is too worthless. This matter of bowing to the Heaven and the Earth must be done; you tell me, who is going to bow to the Heaven and the Earth? Will it be you, or she?”

Ah Ke was anxious to get away. “It’s he, it’s he!” she hastily said.

Wu Lishen fixed his gaze at her; raising his voice, he said, “You say he is to bow to the Heaven and the Earth to get married?”

Ah Ke felt slightly ashamed; she hung her head and said, “Yes.”

“Alright!” Wu Lishen said. Pointing to Wei Xiaobao he said in a loud voice, “Today I insist that you bow to the Heaven and the Earth to get married.”

Wei Xiaobao turned his gaze toward Ah Ke and said, “I … I …”

Ah Ke said in a low voice, “Shidi, you help me out of great catastrophe today, I will never forget it. Please agree!”

Wei Xiaobao looked distressed. “You want me to bow to the Heaven and the Earth and get married? Ay, you know, this is a very difficult matter.”

“I know,” Ah Ke said in a low voice, “If you did not help me out of this great difficulty today, I would have no choice but to crash my head and die. I … I have no choice but to ask for your help. They … they are extremely vicious.”

“Shijie,” Wei Xiaobao said in a loud voice, “Today you opened your mouth to ask me for help. I, Wei Xiaobao, have no choice but to face the difficulty, to agree on your behalf. It is you who wanted me to bow to the Heaven and the Earth to get married; it was not me who wanted to do it, am I right?”

“Yes,” Ah Ke replied, “It was me who asked you. You are the hero, a real man who steps forward bravely, who relieve other people’s distress, also … also someone who listen to my words the most.”

Wei Xiaobao heaved a deep sigh and said, “Shijie, my feelings to you, you have always understood. No matter what it is that you want me to do, I will readily agree, I won’t frown. Since you ask me to bow to the Heaven and the Earth to get married, naturally I will comply.”

“I know you treat me very well,” Ah Ke said, “Later on … later on I will also treat you well.”

“So be it,” Wu Lishen said, “*Xiao Xiongdi*, I do not have any *meizi* for you to marry. My daughter is only three; she can’t marry you. Hey, if any of you have *Jiejie* or *Meimei*, quickly call her out to bow to the Heaven and the Earth to get married with this young hero.”

Ao Biao said with a laugh, “I don’t have any.”

Another man said, “This young hero’s righteousness reaches the clouds and the sky; if I can be his in-law, it will be my greatest good luck. Too bad I only have brothers and no sisters.”

Another man said, “My *Jiejie* has already married and gave birth to eight kids. Young hero, if you are willing to wait, wait for my jiefu [older sister’s husband] to die, then I will tell *Jiejie* to marry you.”

“He can’t wait,” Wu Lishen said, “Who has someone who is readily available?”

Everybody shook his head and said, “I don’t.” Everybody appeared to have missed a good opportunity and had deep regret.

Wei Xiaobao happily said, “Gentlemen friends, it is not me who is unwilling, but you do not have any sisters, so please let us go.”

Wu Lishen shook his head and said, “No we won’t. A real man said a word, a team of horses cannot chase it. Today you must bow to the Heaven and the Earth. Otherwise, we will offend Sha Shen [don’t know what it is, literally means demon deity] Taisui [God of the year], and then everybody here will die a violent death; won’t this joke be started again? Alright, you bow to the Heaven and the Earth to get married with her.” While saying that, he pointed to Ah Ke.

Ah Ke and Wei Xiaobao shouted together, “No, not good!”

Wu Lishen angrily said, “What do you mean not good? Little Miss, do you want to bow to the Heaven and the Earth with my *Xiongdi*, or do you want to bow to

the Heaven and the Earth with this young hero? You decide.”

Ah Ke’s entire pretty face bloated with deep red; she shook her head and said, “I don’t want both!”

Wu Lishen angrily said, “Until now you still use all sorts of excuses. The time has arrived, if we miss this good hour, the demons will descend, no one here will stay alive. Hey, Ah San, Ah Gou, these two little fellows are not willing to bow to the Heaven and the Earth to get married, cut their noses!”

Ao Biao and one of his younger martial brothers complied together; with raised steel saber, they rubbed the flat of the blade on Ah Ke’s nose several times. Ah Ke was not afraid of death, but thinking that if her nose was cut, she would be extremely ugly; she was scared to death that her face turned completely without any color.

Wei Xiaobao said, “Don’t cut my Shijie’s nose, cut mine instead.”

Wu Lishen said, “We need to cut two noses as a sacrifice to the Sha Shen, you only have one. Hey, the one surnamed Zheng, how about we cut your nose as a substitute for this Miss’ nose?”

Ah Ke looked at Zheng Keshuang with begging-for-pity look. Zheng Keshuang looked the other way, he did not dare to meet her eyes, yet he shook his head.

Wu Lishen said, “This fellow is unwilling, yet your Shidi is. Hey, your Shidi treats you a lot better than he does. If you don’t marry this kind of person, whom are you going to marry? Bow to the Heaven and the Earth, play music!”

Amidst the sound of gongs and drums, Ao Biao took the head covering from the fake bride and put it on Ah Ke’s head; he also untied her. As soon as she was free, Ah Ke sent out a punch. ‘Wham!’ it hit the pit of Ao Biao’s stomach. Luckily she did not have any internal energy, so that although he was hit, it was not too painful. Ao Biao raised his steel saber and put it across the back of her neck.

Wu Lishen started the ritual, “The bride and groom bow to the Heaven!”

Ah Ke felt the coldness of the blade on the skin of her neck, as well as a slight pain; she had no choice but to stand alongside Wei Xiaobao and kowtow toward the outside.

Wu Lishen continued, “The bride and groom bow to the Earth.” Ao Biao pushed her body around to kowtow toward the inside.

At the ‘bride and groom bow to each other’, the two of them kneeled toward each other and kowtowed several times.

Wu Lishen laughed aloud and said, “The new husband and wife thank the matchmaker.”

Ah Ke was extremely angry; suddenly her leg flew up and kicked Wu Lishen’s lower abdomen. This kick was indeed not light. ‘Ah!’ Wu Lishen cried out and retreated several steps back, while repeatedly coughing. He then laughed and said, “The bride is so vicious, even the matchmaker is being kicked!”

Right this moment, there were repeated whistles outside the ancestral hall, followed by sounds of footsteps from east, south, west and north; at least there were forty, fifty people. Wu Lishen’s smiling expression immediately vanished. “Blow out the candles,” he hissed. Immediately the ancestral hall was pitch-black.

Wei Xiaobao rushed toward Ah Ke and pulled her hand, “There are enemies outside,” he said in a low voice.

Ah Ke was really angry and upset; she sobbed and said, “I … I have bowed to the Heaven and the Earth with you.”

“To me, it was something that I always seek but fail to get,” Wei Xiaobao said in

a low voice, “It’s just that the bowing to the Heaven and the Earth was rather too sloppy.”

Ah Ke angrily said, “It does not count. You think it was for real?”

“Why would it be a fake?” Wei Xiaobao said, “This is called ‘the (grain of) rice has become (steamed) rice’, ‘the wood has become a dog’ [mu yi cheng gou].”

With a whimper Ah Ke said, “What ‘the wood has become a dog’? It’s ‘the wood has become a boat’ [mu yi cheng zhou].”

“Yes, yes,” Wei Xiaobao said, “*Niangzi* [wife] is well-educated, later on you need to teach me a lot to be a *Xianggong* [lord/master/young gentleman, but can also mean ‘husband’ (wife’s term of address)].”

Hearing him unexpectedly thickening his face by using the term ‘*niangzi*’ and ‘*xianggong*’ to call each other, Ah Ke was growing more anxious and broke into crying.

They heard the shout outside was deafening, dozens of people were shouting together. It sounded like the roar of a beast, or the bellow of an ox; it was so jumbled and indistinct that they did not know what they were shouting. Ah Ke was terrified, against her will she leaned close to Wei Xiaobao. Wei Xiaobao reached out and wrapped his arm around her; he said in a low voice, “Don’t be afraid, looks like a bunch of lamas are attacking.”

“What should we do?” Ah Ke asked.

Wei Xiaobao pulled her arm, he took her quietly sitting behind the image of the deity. Suddenly there was a flash of light, several dozen people rushed into the ancestral hall, each one of them had a torch and a weapon in his hands. As soon as Wei Xiaobao and Ah Ke saw these people, they were shocked. These people’s faces were painted with green fancy patterns, they wore bird’s feather on their heads, and their upper bodies were naked. Their waists were wrapped in a piece

of animal skin, their torso and their arms were also painted in elaborate patterns. Turned out these people were of ethnic groups from outside China.

Ah Ke thought that these barbarians did not look like human, but they did not look like ghosts either; each one of them had a sinister expression on his face. She was even more terrified, and shrank herself inside Wei Xiaobao's embrace while trembling incessantly.

The barbarians uttered wild 'wah, wah!' noise; one of them, who was among the first to enter, shouted, "Han people, no good, kill them all! Barbarians, good, must kill people! Guhuatulu, ahbasili!" The barbarians shouted loudly, they were talking in barbarian language.

Wu Lishen was a Yunnan native, he understood barbarian language, but he did not understand even half a word of these barbarians' talk. He said in barbarian language, "We are good Han people, we must not kill."

The barbarian leader still said, "Han people, no good, must kill all. Guhuatulu, ahbasili!"

All the barbarians shouted together, "Guhuatulu, ahbasili!" They raised their big sabers and steel forks, and charged forward. Wu Lishen and his company did not have any choice but to raise their weapons and meet the enemy.

As soon as these people met, Wu Lishen and the others were greatly amazed. Turned out these barbarians' martial art skill was quite refined and established; their weapon technique was conforming to the martial art study, their attack and defense was carefully measured, they did not randomly chop or wildly attack at all.

Several moves later, even Wei Xiaobao and Ah Ke were able to see this fact. While engaging in a fierce fight, Wu Lishen shouted, "Everybody, be careful, these barbarians have learned our Han people's martial art, we must not consider them lightly."

The barbarian leader called out, “Han people’s killing technique, barbarians know them all, not afraid of Han people. Guhuatulu, ahbasili!”

The barbarians were many, their martial art skill was also very good. Each one of Mu Palace people had to face three, sometimes four, enemies. In a very short period of time they were already in a very dangerous position. Wu Lishen brandished his saber in a fierce combat against the leader, yet unexpectedly it did not look like he was having the slightest bit of advantage. The longer they fought, the more he was alarmed. Suddenly he heard ‘Ah, Ah’, twice; two of disciples were injured and fell down. Shortly afterwards, Ao Biao’s leg was stabbed by a hunting fork and he also fell down. Three barbarians pounced on him and captured him.

A moment later, about a dozen or so Mu Palace people had been knocked down. Zheng Keshuang’s had already been injured early on; he only offered a little bit of resistance and was quickly subdued. All the barbarians carried ox tendon, with which they bound their captives.

The barbarian leader hopped up and down while loudly blabbering in barbarian tongue. Wu Lishen groaned inwardly; he was thinking of escaping, but was concerned about Wei Xiaobao and his disciples’ safety. Thereupon he did everything he could to fight fiercely, hoping to subdue the leader and thus forcing them to let his people go. Suddenly the leader hacked his saber directly toward Wu Lishen’s head, Wu Lishen raised his saber to block. ‘Dang!’ his arm went slightly numb. Suddenly he felt a stick sweeping toward his back, hastily he leaped up to evade. The leader’s saber flipped over, and then landed on his neck. The leader shouted, “Han people, lose. Barbarian, not lose.”

Wei Xiaobao mused, “This barbarian is so stupid, he does not know the word ‘win’, only knew the word ‘not lose’.”

Wu Lishen shook his head and heaved a deep sigh; he tossed his saber and immediately had his hands bound.

With torches raised high, the barbarians looked everywhere. Wei Xiaobao knew that they could not hide anymore. Pulling Ah Ke's hand, he rushed outside while calling out, "Barbarians, good people. The two of us are barbarians. Guhuatulu, ahbasili!"

The leader reached out to grab Ah Ke's neck. Three barbarians pounced forward and grabbed Wei Xiaobao. Wei Xiaobao only shouted half of "Guhua …" before his mouth was covered.

When the leader saw him, his expression changed. Stretching out his arm, he grabbed Wei Xiaobao in his arms while shouting, "Xihuahbu, qiliwendeng." And then he carried Wei Xiaobao out of the ancestral hall.

Wei Xiaobao was greatly shocked; turning his head toward Ah Ke, he called out, "*Niangzi*, this barbarian is going to kill me. You must live as a widow for me, you can't remarry that …" Before he finished, they were already outside the main gate.

The barbarian leader ran more than ten *zhang*, before he released Wei Xiaobao and set him on the ground. He said, "Gui Gonggong, how come you are here?" He sounded genuinely surprised, but was also delighted.

Wei Xiaobao was startled and happy at the same time. "You … you are a barbarian, and you knew me?"

The man laughed and said, "*Xiaoren* is Yang Yizhi, the Yang Yizhi from Ping Xi Wang Mansion. Gui Gonggong did not recognize me. Ha ha …"

Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud. He was about to speak, Yang Yizhi pulled his hand and said, "Let's go farther away to talk, don't let the others hear us."

The two of them went more than twenty *zhang* away before stopping. Yang Yizhi said, "Unexpectedly I can see Gui Gonggong in here, truly I am delighted."

“How did Yang *Dage* come here?” Wei Xiaobao asked, “And you dress up as Guhuatulu, ahbasili?”

Yang Yizhi laughed and said, “There were a bunch of people having an assembly at Hejian Prefecture, planning to bring harm to our *Wangye*; *Wangye* obtained some information about it and sent *Xiaoren* here to investigate.”

Wei Xiaobao was secretly alarmed; his brain turning very fast, trying to find an idea. He said, “Last time those Mu Palace fellows entered the Palace to assassinate the Emperor, framing Ping Xi Wang …”

Yang Yizhi hastily said, “And we owe it to Gonggong’s esteemed, as high as the cloud and the sky’s friendship, by presenting a memorial to the Emperor and clear this matter up, washing away the injustice our Ping Xi Wang received. Our *Wangye* is endlessly grateful, he often mentioned that he wanted to personally express his gratitude to Gonggong.”

“I do not dare to accept the gratitude,” Wei Xiaobao said, “*Wangye* regards me highly like this, while I am by the Emperor’s side, if I can do such a trivial matter for *Wangye*, naturally I will. This time His Majesty knew that there are some rebellious thieves who were having an assembly at the Hejian Prefecture, with the intention of bringing harm to Ping Xi Wang. I volunteered to come over here to investigate.”

Yang Yizhi was greatly delighted. “Turns out His Majesty already knew about it,” he said, “There is no way the rebellious thieves’ evil schemes will succeed. That’s wonderful. *Xiaoren* received *Wangye*’s order to infiltrate those damn dog-heads’ congress. I heard them electing various provinces’ *meng zhu*, intending to harm our *Wangye*. I won’t conceal it from Gui Gonggong: in our hearts we are deeply concerned. It is easy to dodge the spear in the open, it is hard to avoid a stab in the dark. If the rebellious thieves dare to come to Yunnan to fight, it’s not that *Xiaoren* is boasting, but if a thousand of them came, we’ll capture a thousand, if ten thousand of them came, we’ll kill all ten thousand. What we are afraid of is

that like last time the Mu Palace's dog thieves committing outrages, yet they shifted the blame to our *Wangye*, and thus later on have brought us infinite trouble."

Striking his own chest, Wei Xiaobao boldly said, "Yang *Dage*, please report to *Wangye*, there is nothing to be worried about. When I return to the Capital, about that dog-heads' congress, I will report everything by fives and tens, by fifteens and twenties [i.e. systematically and in full detail], nothing will be left out in my memorial to the Emperor. Opposing Ping Xi Wang is the same as opposing His Majesty. The more they hate Ping Xi Wang, the more it shows that *Wangye* is loyal and devoted to His Majesty. If His Majesty is happy, not only Ping Xi *Wangye*, even Yang *Dage* will be heavily rewarded, you will be promoted and gain wealth; it's a cinch."

Yang Yizhi happily said, "We are heavily reliant of Gui Gonggong's vigorous intercession. *Xiaoren* does not expect promotion and wealth. *Wangye* has shown great kindness to my late father, he has saved *Xiaoren*'s entire family's lives. Just before his death, my late father left me his last words, instructing *Xiaoren* to pledge my life to protect *Wangye* completely. Gonggong, you came here, are you investigating Mu Family dog thieves' plot?"

Wei Xiaobao slapped his thigh. "Yang *Dage*," he said, "Not only your martial art skill is superb, your foresight is also divine. My admiration, my admiration. My Shijie and I are in disguise, we want to find out what trick they are playing, but we were discovered. I talked some nonsense, surprisingly they believe it, and forced my Shijie and I to bow to the Heaven and the Earth to get married. Ha ha … this is called 'profiting from a disaster'."

Yang Yizhi thought, "You are a eunuch, how can you marry? Ah right, you and that young Miss pretended to be a pair of lovers and they believed it." He said, "That Shaking-Head Lion's martial art is not bad, nevertheless, he is bold but not very astute."

Wei Xiaobao said, "You dress as barbarians, is it for the purpose of capturing them?"

Yang Yizhi said, “Mu Family and our Prince’s Mansion have enmity as deep as the sea. Last time we suffered heavy damage from them, all along we have not been able to collect our capital back. This time at the dog-heads’ congress we saw them, *Xiaoren* then made a plan. If we made disturbance in Zhili [see Note 3 Chapter 9] and His Majesty finds out, I am afraid he will blame our *Wangye*, saying that Ping Xi Wang’s Mansion people are breaking the law in the vicinity of the Capital, committing murder and creating trouble.”

Wei Xiaobao gave him a thumb up; he praised, “Yang *Dage*’s stratagem is indeed very brilliant. You are dressing up as barbarians, guhuatulu, ahbasili; even if you massacre the whole lot of Mu Palace people, other people only know that it was the barbarian revolting, nobody would suspect Ping Xi Wang at all.”

Yang Yizhi laughed. “Exactly,” he said, “It’s just that by dressing like this, crazy and bizarre, we only make Gonggong laugh.”

“What do you mean ‘laugh’?” Wei Xiaobao said, “In my heart I envy you very much. I really want to shed these clothes, paint my face with green fancy patterns, and shouting and jumping around with you.”

Yang Yizhi laughed and said, “If Gonggong wishes, we can dress up together.”

Wei Xiaobao sighed and said, “This time I can’t; if my wife saw me dressing outlandishly like that, she will throw a fit.”

“Gonggong really getting married and have a wife now?” Yang Yizhi asked, “I thought you were forced by those dog thieves to pretend?”

This matter was not easy to explain clearly in just a few words, thereupon Wei Xiaobao changed the subject by saying, “Yang *Dage*, you and I hit it off very well with one another. If you consider me worthy, let the two of us tie the knot to become sworn brothers. There’s no need to use ‘Gonggong’ or ‘Xiaoren’ anymore, it sounds so awkward.”

Yang Yizhi was greatly delighted. First, Ping Xi Wang was in need of his help; hereafter, there would be many important matters in need of his aid in front of the Emperor. Second, this little Gonggong was generous, outspoken and straightforward, a really good friend. That day at the Prince Kang's mansion, he was very polite to him. Thereupon he said, "That is exactly what I have been wishing for; but I am afraid I am not able to climb that high."

"What do you mean climbing high or climbing low?" Wei Xiaobao said, "Speaking of high and low, are you the taller one, or I am the taller one?"

Yang Yizhi burst out laughing. Thereupon the two of them kneeled down on the spot, using dirt as the incense, they kowtowed eight times and made a statement to be brothers.

"*Xiongdi*," Yang Yizhi said, "From now on the two of us are as close as flesh and bones, a lot more than ordinary brothers. However, in front of other people, your *Gege* will still call you 'Gonggong', to avoid raising other people's suspicion."

"Naturally," Wei Xiaobao replied. "*Dage*, what are you going to do with those Mu Family people?"

Yang Yizhi said, "I am going to take them to Yunnan and slowly torture them. After obtaining their confession that they framed our *Wangye*, we are going to take them to the Capital to let the Emperor know that Ping Xi Wang has wholehearted loyalty, and make it clear that by protecting Ping Xi Wang, *Xiongdi* did not make the slightest mistake."

Wei Xiaobao nodded. "Very good, very good!" he said. "*Dage*, do you think that Shaking-head Tiger would confess?"

"It's Shaking-head Lion Wu Lishen," Yang Yizhi corrected, "This man has quite a reputation in Jianghu; I heard his manner is very unyielding, he won't confess. I

respect him as a real man, I won't make things too difficult for him. But the rest of those people, inevitably there will be some who can't endure the torture; they might confess."

"Not bad," Wei Xiaobao said, "This plan is not bad."

Yang Yizhi could detect from his tone that he was speaking thoughtlessly and did not really mean it; thereupon he said, "*Xiongdi*, you and I are not outsiders. If you think something is inappropriate, please speak bluntly."

"There is nothing inappropriate about it," Wei Xiaobao said, "I heard there is another rebellious thief within the Mu Family called Mu Jiansheng, there is also a certain Stiff-backed Black Dragon called Liu somebody."

"Iron Back Blue Dragon Liu Dahong," Yang Yizhi said, "He is Mu Jiansheng's Shifu."

"Right," Wei Xiaobao said, "*Dage*, your memory is very good. His Majesty instructed me to find these two people's trail. Have you caught them?"

Yang Yizhi said, "Mu Jiansheng also went to Hejian Prefecture. Along the way we scooped up information about him, but as soon as we entered Xian County, he slipped away, we do not know where he hides."

Wei Xiaobao said, "It is somewhat embarrassing; just now I talked nonsense, and was able to deceive that Shaking-head Lion and turned him into Nodding-Head Lion, who agreed to take me to see their *Xiao Gongye*. I actually wanted to verify their plot in framing Ping Xi Wang, and then return to the Capital and present a report to the Emperor. Since *Dage* has already had assurance, you might be able to torture their conspiracy out. In the end it's the same thing, *Xiongdi* actually does not need to take a risk."

Yang Yizhi deliberately considered, "I torture several insignificant people, they may not necessarily know the real inside information. Even if they did, Mu Family

dog thieves' bones are very hard, they may not necessarily be willing to speak. Besides, *Wangye* personally offers an explanation is absolutely inferior to the report from someone whom the Emperor personally sent to investigate, which will emerge powerful. If we simply pretend we did not know anything and let Gui *Xiongdi* go submit the report to the Emperor, it will be much better." Thereupon he pulled Wei Xiaobao's hand and said, "*Xiongdi*, your plan is a lot more brilliant, I'll listen to you in everything. But how are we going to release those Mu Family dog thieves without raising their suspicions?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "For that, I will need you to think of something."

Yang Yizhi thought for a moment, and then said, "Let's do it this way: You run away back to the ancestral hall, pretending that you are summoning up courage and determination to save your Shijie, I will pursue you, and then the two of us will speak gibberish, pretending to speak in the barbarian tongue. After talking for a while, you convince me, and I will respectfully leave. This way we won't reveal the least bit of trace."

Wei Xiaobao laughed, "Wonderful!" he said, "I, Gui Gonggong is fluent in barbarian tongue. There is an opera about that, Emperor Ming of Tang[63] had a subordinate scholar named Li somebody, when he was drunk, he produced an essay, scaring a bunch of barbarians that they pissed in their pants in terror."

Yang Yizhi laughed and said, "That was Li Taibai's drunken manuscript scared barbarian book."

Wei Xiaobao clapped his hands and said, "Right, right! Gui Gonggong awakes and speaks scary barbarian language is just as amazing as that. *Dage*, we must play a convincing act; you may punch and kick me, and I won't be injured. Ah, right, I am wearing a treasured vest that saber and spear won't penetrate. There is no harm in you chopping me several times; as long as you don't use any internal energy, so you won't shake and injure my five viscera and six bowels, I will be perfectly all right."

Yang Yizhi said, “*Xiongdi* has that kind of treasured clothes, that’s very good.”

Wei Xiaobao bragged, “His Majesty sent me on a mission to investigate the rebellious thieves’ treacherous plan, he was afraid they might find out and have me killed; thereupon he took off from his own body this treasured vest, which was a tribute from the western red-haired country, and bestowed it to me. *Dage*, you do not need to worry that you might injure me, why don’t you chop me several times to test it?”

Yang Yizhi pulled his saber out and lightly slashed Wei Xiaobao’s left shoulder. Sure enough, the saber cut open the outer garment, but as the blade came in contact with the inner garment, it could not go deeper. He increased the strength of his hand slightly, lightly chopping Wei Xiaobao’s left shoulder again, still he was not able to create any damage. “Good treasured clothes, good treasured clothes!” he praised.

“*Dage*,” Wei Xiaobao said, “There is a fellow surnamed Zheng inside; he is that young gentleman who wears gorgeous embroidered pillowcase. This fellow is always messing around my Shijie. Looking at him, *Xiongdi* is very angry. It would be best if you could take him away.”

“I’ll just send a palm strike and kill him then,” Yang Yizhi said.

“You must not kill him, you must not kill him,” Wei Xiaobao said, “This man is wanted by the Emperor, in the future a very important matter will rest on his shoulder. Please just capture him and take him away. Guard him well, don’t make things difficult for him, but don’t interrogate him about anything either. After twenty, thirty years, I will let you know when I want him, then you send people to take him to Beijing.”

“Yes,” Yang Yizhi said, “I will take care of this thing for you properly.” Suddenly he raised his voice to shout, “Huluxidu, ailibala! Xulaoxulao!” Lowering his voice, he laughed and said, “The two of us have been talking for a while, I am afraid they will get suspicious.”

With a sharp voice Wei Xiaobao shouted several words of 'barbarian tongue'. Yang Yizhi laughed and said, "*Xiongdi*'s 'barbarian tongue' is a lot more fluent than your *Gege*."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Naturally; in the past *Xiongdi* wandered destitute in a foreign land, the lord of the foreign land wanted to take me as *fuma* [emperor's son-in-law, consort], hence I am accustomed to speak the 'barbarian tongue'." Yang Yizhi burst out in laughter.

"*Dage*," Wei Xiaobao continued, "I have a difficulty, I want you to help me finding a way out."

Yang Yizhi struck his chest and generously offered, "Whatever trouble *Xiongdi* has, your *Gege* will give my life if you want me to. As long as you tell me, there is nothing that I won't obey."

Wei Xiaobao sighed and said, "Thank you very much. To say that this matter is difficult, it is actually not difficult; but to say that it is easy, it is definitely not easy."

Yang Yizhi said, "*Xiongdi* may just tell me, I will help you ponder over it. Supposing your *Gege* cannot do it, I am going to ask our *Wangye*. Several tens of thousands troops and horses, several million *taels*, can be easily mobilized."

Wei Xiaobao smiled; he said, "Thousand armies ten thousand horses, mountain of gold and silver, I am afraid will be quite useless. It's about my Shijie, she was forced to bow to the Heaven and the Earth and marry me, but in her heart she is very unwilling. It would be best if you have a marvelous idea, help me to change rice (grain) into (cooked) rice, tricking her to decide that the timber has been turned into a boat."

Yang Yizhi could not help but feeling amused; he thought, "Turns out it is for that matter, I thought it was for some important matter, instead, it has something to

do with dealing with that young girl. But you are a eunuch, how can you take a wife? Right, I heard during the Ming Dynasty it was common for some court eunuchs to take several wives. *Xiongdi* must be thinking of having some toys to satisfy his 'dry craving'."

Thinking that since his childhood Wei Xiaobao had had his body purified, Yang Yizhi could not help but feeling sad. Taking Wei Xiaobao's hand in his, he said, "*Xiongdi*, in this life, we cannot always hope that everything is going as we wish. Since the ancient times, there are extremely numerous great heroes, great warriors who have physical defect; you don't have to care about it. Let's go in."

"Alright!" Wei Xiaobao said. He shouted some words in 'barbarian tongue' and rushed into the ancestral hall.

Brandishing his saber, Yang Yizhi ran after him, also shouting some 'barbarian' words, and rushed into the main hall to grab Wei Xiaobao. The two of them exchanged some words. You said some 'xilihulu', I replied with 'ahyibala', they were prattling incessantly, while sometimes pointed to Wu Lishen, sometimes pointed to Ah Ke.

Wu Lishen, Ah Ke and the others were pleasantly surprised, they thought that there was hope. "Luckily he understands barbarian language," they mused, "It would be best if he could make these barbarians retreat."

Yang Yizhi raised his saber high, aiming it at the crown of Ah Ke's head. "Woman, not good," he said, "Kill her."

Wei Xiaobao busily said, "Wife, mine, no kill!"

"Wife, yours, no kill?" Yang Yizhi asked.

Wei Xiaobao repeatedly nodded his head; he said, "Wife, mine, no kill!"

Yang Yizhi was angry; he shouted, "Wife, yours, no kill. Kill you!"

“Very good,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “Wife, mine, no kill. Kill me!”

‘Whoosh!’ Yang Yizhi swung his saber toward Wei Xiaobao’s chest. When the saber went down, the blade created a loud whooshing noise, obviously it carried a tremendous strength, yet as soon as the blade came into contact with Wei Xiaobao’s body, immediately he pulled his strength back; his wrist trembled, the blade of the saber bounced back. He feigned a shock and jumped backward. He then chopped three times in succession and made three long cuts on Wei Xiaobao’s outer garment.

“You, Bodhisattva, cannot be killed?” he shouted.

Wei Xiaobao nodded. “I, Bodhisattva, cannot be killed,” he said.

Yang Yizhi raised his thumb and said, “You, Bodhisattva, not. Big hero, yes.” Pointing to Wu Lishen and the others, he asked, “Han people, kill?”

Wei Xiaobao shook his hand and said, “Friends, mine, no kill!”

Yang Yizhi nodded; he asked Ah Ke, “You, wife, Big Hero’s?”

Ah Ke wanted to deny, but looking at the flickering saber in his hand, she did not dare to say anything. Yang Yizhi’s saber chopped down on the sacrificial table, breaking it into two pieces; he shouted, “Husband, yours?” while pointing at Wei Xiaobao.

Ah Ke had no choice, with a low voice she said, “Husband, mine.”

Yang Yizhi laughed aloud. He lifted Ah Ke up and dropped her in front of Wei Xiaobao, saying, “Wife, yours, embrace.”

Wei Xiaobao spread his arms and embraced Ah Ke tightly. “Wife, mine, embrace,” he said.

Yang Yizhi pointed to Zheng Keshuang and asked, “Son, yours?”

Wei Xiaobao shook his head and said, “Son, mine? No!”

Yang Yizhi shouted several ‘barbarian’ words; he grabbed Zheng Keshuang and rushed outside, while his mouth repeatedly whistled. His men abandoned their captives and ran outside. And then the sound of hoof beats was heard; unexpectedly they left just like that.

Ah Ke’s fear and panic was somewhat subsided; she felt Wei Xiaobao still had his arms around her waist and did not let go. “Take off your hand,” she said.

“Wife, mine, embrace,” Wei Xiaobao said.

Ah Ke was ashamed and angry at the same time; using her hands she pried open Wei Xiaobao’s arms and struggled to free herself. Wei Xiaobao picked up a steel saber from the floor and cut off the ropes binding Wu Lishen and the others.

“Those barbarians’ martial art is superb,” Wu Lishen said, “Fortunately the groom knows how to speak barbarian tongue, plus you have trained the ‘golden bell shield iron cloth garment’ martial art, sabers and spears cannot penetrate, hence we were all saved by you.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Although those barbarians’ martial art is quite high, they are very stupid. I talked nonsense a little bit, and they believed me.”

Ah Ke said, “Zheng Gongzi is captured by them, how can we save him?”

The fake bride suddenly yelled, “My husband is caught by the barbarians, they are going to boil and eat him.” And then she cried loudly.

Wu Lishen cupped his fist and said, “May I ask hero’s respected surname and great name?”

“I do not dare,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “*Zaixia* surnamed Wei.”

Wu Lishen said, “Wei *Xianggong* and Wei Family *Niangzi* got married today, won’t a tiny bit of congratulatory present be considered as showing respect?” While saying that, he put his hand inside his pocket and fished out two tiny golden *yuanbao*.

“Thank you very much,” Wei Xiaobao said, while reaching out to accept it.

Ah Ke’s entire face turned red; stomping her feet, she said, “It was not real, it did not count.”

Wu Lishen laughed and said, “The two of you have bowed to the Heaven and the Earth, and just now you said to that barbarian, ‘Husband, mine’. How can you deny? The bride and groom should enjoy the bridal room and ornamented candle, we are not going to disturb.” Waving his hand, together with Ao Biao and the others he strode out of the ancestral hall.

Instantly such a big ancestral hall became extremely quiet, nobody made any noise. Ah Ke was scared, but also ashamed and resentful. She stole a glance toward Wei Xiaobao, thinking about how she herself had said, ‘Husband, mine’. Suddenly she threw herself on the table and cried. Stomping her feet she said, “It’s all because you are not good, it’s all because you are not good!”

In a gentle voice Wei Xiaobao said, “Yes, yes, it’s all because I am not good. Wait till I think of something to save Zheng Gongzi, and then you will say that I am good.”

Ah Ke raised her head and said, “You … you can save him?” Under the red flickering candle light, her incomparably tender and beautiful face made the several beads of teardrops looked like bright full moon, so that even pearls inlaid with white jade seemed inadequate by comparison, so that the first budding rose could not surpass her luminescence and elegance. Wei Xiaobao could not

help but staring at her with blank expression, and forgot to answer.

Ah Ke tugged his clothes and said, “I am asking you, how are we going to save Zheng Gongzi?”

Wei Xiaobao woke up from his dream; he sighed and said, “That barbarian leader said that since they have come out, they cannot go back empty-handed, they must catch someone back to their cave, to be cooked so that everybody can eat …”

Ah Ke cried out in fear. “They want to cook him so that everybody can eat?” she asked. Thinking that the ‘bride’ had also cried out in fear, she was even more terrified.

“That’s right,” Wei Xiaobao said, “They originally said that you have a soft skin and white flesh; you must have the best taste, so they wanted to catch you and eat …” Ah Ke could not endure it; her body shivered all over as she looked outside the door, afraid that those barbarians would come back.

Wei Xiaobao continued, “… I told them that you are my wife, only then did they let you off.”

Ah Ke anxiously said, “They caught Zheng Gongzi, are they going to cook … cook …”

“That’s right,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Unless I volunteer myself to be eaten, in exchange for Zheng Gongzi.”

“Then you should go in exchange for him!” Ah Ke said. But as soon as she blurted it out, she realized that she had misspoken; her pretty face blushed and she lowered her head.

Wei Xiaobao was furious; he mused, “Stinky little mother, in your eyes your husband is not worth half a *wen*; you’d rather have the barbarians cook me and

eat me to have your lover [orig. male adulterer] rescued." With a cold voice he said, "Even if I go in exchange for him, it would be useless."

Ah Ke anxiously asked, "Why … why useless?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "Zheng Gongzi has bowed to the Heaven and the Earth with that peasant girl to get married; you have seen it with your own eyes. Since he already has a wife he officially married, the wood has been turned into a boat, you can't marry him anymore."

Ah Ke stomped her feet, "That was a fake."

Seething with rage, Wei Xiaobao said, "Alright, you want me to go in exchange for him, I will go. I just don't know where the barbarian cave is. Humph, let's go."

Ah Ke silently followed him out of the ancestral hall, she was afraid she might say anything wrong, and then he would not be willing to trade his life for Zheng Gongzi's.

When they reached the main road, they saw the Zheng Mansion's attendants standing in a circle with their raised lanterns, speaking loudly among themselves. When the two of them came near, a Zheng Mansion attendant said, "Miss Chen is here. Where is our Gongzi? Where is our Gongzi?" while rushing over to meet them.

From among the crowd suddenly a slim figure flashed by, his movement was fast, Wei Xiaobao only saw a blurred shadow and suddenly the man was already standing in front of him, and then he heard a sharp voice asking, "Where is our Gongzi?"

The man was standing with his back against the lantern, hence Wei Xiaobao was not able to see his face. His heart was frightened, he took two steps back. Who would have thought that as he withdrew two steps, the man also went forward two steps, so that they were still standing face-to-face, less than a *chi* apart. He

asked again, “Where is our Gongzi?”

Ah Ke replied, “He … he was captured by the barbarians, they … they are going to cook and eat him.”

The man said, “How can there be any barbarians in the Central Plains?”

“They are really barbarians,” Ah Ke said, “Quick … quickly think of a way to save him.”

“How long have they been gone?” the man asked.

“Not too long,” Ah Ke replied.

The man’s body suddenly stiffened up, he leaped backward and landed on a horse’s back. His legs squeezed, the horse immediately galloped away, and in an instant disappeared in the darkness. Wei Xiaobao and Ah Ke looked at each other in shock; one was dismayed, the other was delighted. They saw this person’s martial art skill was high, his movement was fast; they had rarely seen this kind of man in their lives, in their hearts they were full of admiration.

“I wonder who that martial art master is.” Ah Ke said.

The elderly attendant replied, “He is Gongzi’s Shifu, Feng Xifan; his title is ‘One Sword without Blood’. Feng Shifu is unmatched in the world, if he is going to rescue Gongzi, it is guaranteed that he will achieve success.”

“Turns out it is he,” Wei Xiaobao and Ah Ke said together. Ah Ke added, “Since Feng Shifu has arrived, why didn’t you ask him to immediately go to that ancestral hall over there to save Gongzi?”

An attendant said, “Feng Shifu has just arrived. He received our letter, sent by flying pigeon. From Hejian Prefecture he rushed over in the same night.”

“Feng Shifu was at Hejian Prefecture?” Wei Xiaobao asked, “Why we did not see him?”

The attendants looked at each other, nobody answered. Knowing that he had blurted out a secret, the attendant who spoke earlier lowered his head.

Wei Xiaobao thought, “Turns out there was a martial art master hidden among the Zheng Family people who attended the ‘turtle-slaying assembly’, all along he did not show himself. Only after this stinky fellow was captured did he finally rush over for the rescue.” Pinching his own cheek, he said, “Flesh, oh flesh, someone else is going to save Zheng Gongzi, you don’t need to be exchanged with some darling treasure and be eaten by those barbarians.”

Ah Ke blushed; she wanted to explain, but had a second thought, “I don’t know whether Feng Shifu singlehandedly [orig. single spear one horse] will be able to defeat that many barbarians.”

Wei Xiaobao saw she was going to speak but refrained herself, he could guess what was in her mind; he said, “Don’t worry, if Feng Shifu is not able to rescue him, there is still this rotten flesh of mine to be exchanged with your darling. A real man gave his words, some horses cannot pursue.”

“It’s good if Feng Shifu is able to save him,” Ah Ke said.

Wei Xiaobao was angry, he started to walk away, but with the corner of his eyes he saw her pretty face, his heart turned soft; he turned around and sat by the roadside.

Seeing he was about to leave, Ah Ke could not help but was worried, thinking that if Feng Shifu was not able to save Zheng Gongzi, and Wei Xiaobao left, who would get Zheng Gongzi back? Only after seeing he came back and sat down did she feel relieved. She did not dare to offend him this time, hence she came over and sat next to him.

Wei Xiaobao thought, “This moment you need my help; if I don’t take any advantage now, what am I waiting for?” Reaching out with his left hand, he wrapped it around her waist, while with his right hand he held Ah Ke’s right hand. Ah Ke struggled slightly, and then stay motionless. Wei Xiaobao was very happy, he thought, “It would be best if that man surnamed Feng is killed by Yang *Dage* and the others, and won’t come back forever, so that I can sit waiting like this for the rest my life.”

He was fully aware that Ah Ke did not have even half a part of feeling toward him, early on he already had no high hopes in his heart; he only hoped he could sit embracing her for a lifetime, then he would be perfectly contented, he would be even happier if she did not ask him for a help.

Unfortunately, things turned out contrary to the way he wished; he only embraced her for a short time when they heard the faint sound of hoof beats on the main road. Ah Ke sprang up and called out, “Zheng Gongzi is back.”

The sound of hoof beats was getting nearer and nearer, it sounded like two horses were rushing over. “All right,” Wei Xiaobao said, “I just got my life back, no need to have the barbarians eat me.” The tone of his voice was brimming with bitterness. But by this time, even if he was ten times more angry, why would Ah Ke care? She was anxiously running toward the main road.

The two horses arrived one after another. The attendants lifted high their lanterns, while cheering loudly. The one riding on the front was indeed Zheng Keshuang. Seeing Ah Ke rushing over to meet him, he leaped down from his horse. The two of them embraced each other with unbounded happiness. Ah Ke buried her head in his bosom, crying. She said, “I was afraid … afraid those barbarians would … would …”

Wei Xiaobao was actually starting to stand up, but seeing this sight, it was as if the pit of his stomach was punched, hard. He fell back sitting down, his head dizzy his eyes blurred. He made an oath in his heart, “His granny, if in this life I cannot make you, this stinky little mother, as my wife, I am your Zheng

Keshuang's seventeenth, eighteenth generation grandson. I, Wei Xiaobao, am a 'wang jiu dan', a 'wang ba dan' plus one egg[64]."

If other people undergo this situation, if they did not completely disheartened, broken hearted and shed some tears, then they would be determined to cut off all feeling and started to look for a better match. Wei Xiaobao, however, by nature was a hoodlum, with thick skin and very strong, tenacious personality; a thick-faced and strong-willed person.

"In short," he continued his musing, "*Laozi* will hang around you for the rest of my life. If my life is spent, my soul will not go away, I will cling to you. Even if you marry eighteen times, the nineteenth time will be with *laozi*."

He grew up in a brothel, he was accustomed to see the prostitutes welcoming new guests and sending off the old ones. He did not think that a woman's heart was capable to be attached to any extraordinary important matter; all those 'faithful unto death', 'chaste' or 'not double-hearted', he had never heard of.

He was upset for only a short time, and then was able to giggle while walking over and said, "Zheng *Gongzi*, you are back; you haven't been bitten by the barbarians?"

Zheng Keshuang was startled. "What do you mean bitten?" he asked. Ah Ke was also startled; she looked at him up and down; only after seeing that his five sense organs and fingers were whole did she feel relieved.

Feng Xifan was still sitting on the horseback. "Who is this little kid?" he asked.

"He is Miss Chen's Shidi," Zheng Keshuang replied. Feng Xifan nodded.

Wei Xiaobao looked up at him, he saw a slim face, yellowish, with black hair, two slanting swallowtail beard, his eyes turned into two slits; he really looked like a tuberculosis ghost. Concerned over Yang Yizhi's safety, he asked, "Feng Shifu, you really have capability, in just a short time you are able to rescue Zheng

Gongzi back. Did you kill that barbarian leader?"

"What barbarian?" Feng Xifan asked, "They dressed up."

Wei Xiaobao was inwardly shocked; he said, "They dressed up? But they can speak barbarian tongue."

"Fake!" Feng Xifan said. Feeling it was beneath his dignity to talk too much to this little kid, he turned to Zheng Keshuang and said, "*Gongzi*, you must be tired, why don't we go to rest at that ancestral hall over there?"

Ah Ke was concerned about her shifu. "I am afraid Shifu will worry when she wakes up and did not see me."

"Let's go back immediately," Wei Xiaobao said.

Ah Ke looked at Zheng Keshuang, she was hoping he would come with her. Zheng Keshuang said, "Shifu, let's everybody go to the inn to have something to eat, and some good sleep."

On the way Wei Xiaobao questioned Zheng Keshuang on how he escaped. Zheng Keshuang boasted about his shifu's skill, how in just a few moves he killed the barbarians that they scattered away. Wei Xiaobao made sure he heard that 'the barbarian leader did not lose his life' before he felt relieved.

By the time they all arrived at the inn, the sky had already brightened, Jiu Nan was already awake for quite some time. She had already expected that Ah Ke would pull Wei Xiaobao to save Zheng Keshuang; therefore, she was not surprised to see the two of them went missing.

When Zheng Keshuang and the others arrived, he introduced Feng Xifan to her. Jiu Nan noticed his listless appearance, but occasionally his eyes would open wide, and she could see the unusual brightness of his gaze; she thought, "This man has a reputation as 'One Sword without Blood', apparently his name is not

in vain, his martial art is indeed superb."

After breakfast, Jiu Nan said, "Zheng *Gongzi*, we, master and disciples, have some business we need to take care of; we'll have to separate here."

Zheng Keshuang was startled; he was quite disappointed. "It's a rare fate that brought me to see *Shitai*," he said, "I was just thinking of asking a lot of guidance. I wonder where *Shitai* is heading; in any case junior does not have any important matter to manage, don't you think it will be good if we travel together?"

Jiu Nan shook her head and said, "Those who have left home have many inconvenience." Taking Ah Ke and Wei Xiaobao, she climbed into the carriage.

Zheng Keshuang was at a loss, he could not say anything. Ah Ke's eyes turned red at once, she was barely able to refrain from crying. Wei Xiaobao struggled hard to maintain a straight face; he prayed silently, "May Shifu lives to be a hundred years, may she enjoys lots of good fortune and long life. Amituofo, may Buddha bless and protect her."

"Shifu," he asked, "Where are we going?"

"Beijing," Jiu Nan replied.

After half a day, she said coldly, "If that surnamed Zheng is following us, nobody is to pay him any attention. Whichever of you does not obey, I will immediately kill that surnamed Zheng!"

Ah Ke was startled. "Shifu, why?" she asked.

"No reason," Jiu Nan replied, "I love peace and quiet, I don't like other people bothering me."

Ah Ke did not dare to ask further. After a while, suddenly she remembered

something. “What if Shidi talked to him?” she asked.

“Same thing,” Jiu Nan replied, “I will kill Zheng *Gongzi*.”

Wei Xiaobao could not bear it anymore; he coughed, and then snickered.

“Shifu, it’s not fair,” Ah Ke said, “Shidi might deliberately talk to him.”

Jiu Nan glowered at her. “If that surnamed Zheng did not follow us, how can Xiaobao talk to him? If he ignored my request and kept hanging around me, death cannot wipe out his crimes.”

Wei Xiaobao was bursting with joy, he felt that among good people on the earth, nobody surpasses his Shifu. Suddenly he pulled Jiu Nan’s hand and kissed the palm of her hand.

Jiu Nan shook his hand away. “Fooling around!” she spoke sternly. But for more than twenty years there had never been anyone who was this affectionate toward her; although this disciple was unbridled, he was showing a genuine affection. Her mouth was scolding, but a smile appeared at the corners of her mouth.

Ah Ke saw how partial her Shifu was, plus she was wondering when she would see Zheng Gongzi again. The more she thought about it, the sadder she was; tears streamed down her face.

A few days later the three of them arrived at Beijing, and found a small, secluded inn in Dongcheng [lit. eastern town, a district of central Beijing] area. Jiu Nan went to Wei Xiaobao’s room, bolted the door, and said in a low voice, “Xiaobao, can you guess why we are in Beijing?”

Wei Xiaobao replied, “I am guessing that if not for Tao *Gugu*, then it must be for those remaining several copies of the sutra.”

Jiu Nan nodded, “Correct,” she said, “It is for those several copies of the sutra.”

After a short pause, she continued slowly, “This time I suffered a very serious injury, I got to think about a lot of things. One person, no matter how perfect he trained his martial art, inevitably his power is lacking. Ultimately, the important matters of the world need the pooling of brains and brawn of the men of great aspiration to succeed. The crowd of heroes initiated the ‘Turtle-Slaying Assembly’ at Hejian Prefecture; I have given it a careful thought: even if we managed to kill Wu Sangui, that traitor, one person, our rivers and mountains are still in the Tatars’ hands. It would be no more than we are venting our resentment for a short while; what else would it do? But if we can obtain the sutras, we can break the Tatars’ dragon vein, by appealing people aspiring to benevolence throughout the world to hold the banner of righteousness together. Only then will we have the hope to recover our Great Ming’s rivers and mountains.”

“Yes, yes,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Shifu is right.”

Jiu Nan said, “I need another half a month to recuperate before my internal energy can fully recover. After that I can go into the Palace to investigate. Finding the whereabouts of the other seven sutras is the first and foremost.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Let the disciple sneak into the Palace first, I will open my eyes and ears wide. Who knows? The Heaven might bless me so that I can find a clue.”

Jiu Nan nodded. “You are very smart,” she said, “Perhaps you will be able to accomplish this important matter. This big merit …” Speaking to this point, she heaved a deep sigh, her eyes were brimming with encouragement.

Wei Xiaobao had a strong impulse to reveal the truth: “The other five sutras are in disciple’s hand.” But immediately he had a second thought, “Xiao Xuanzi treated me like a true friend; if I helped Shifu, I am destroying his rivers and mountains, then he won’t be the Emperor anymore. Won’t that mean I am

violating *yi qi* too much?”

Seeing his hesitation, Jiu Nan thought he was concerned over if he would succeed or not; thereupon she said, “This matter is indeed very difficult. We simply have to do our best, and that’s all I can ask. This is called ‘man proposes Heaven disposes’ [orig. ‘planning is with man, success is with heaven’]. Ay, I wonder if the Zhu family has reached the end of its destiny, or will there still hope? Over the past dozens of years, all my hopes have turned to dust, my worldly thoughts broken. I did not expect that after seeing Hongying and you, originally I did not want to pay attention to the affairs of the nation, but the affairs of the nation managed to get back into my head.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Shifu, you are a princess of the Great Ming, these rivers and mountains originally belonged to your family; it was usurped by other people, naturally we must snatch it back.”

Jiu Nan sighed and said, “This matter does not belong to my family alone. All the other members of my family are dead.” Stretching out her arm, she gently stroked Wei Xiaobao’s head, while saying, “Xiaobao, you must never leak even half a word about this matter in front of your Shijie.”

Wei Xiaobao nodded in respond; he thought, “Shijie is such a beautiful and lovely woman, yet Shifu does not like her too much; I wonder what’s the reason? I think it must be because she cannot lick Shifu’s behind.”

Early morning the next day, he went into the Palace to have an audience with the Emperor. Kangxi was greatly delighted; pulling his hand, he laughed and said, “Damn it, why do you come back only today? Every day I am waiting for you. I was quite worried, afraid that you were seized by that evil nun, your little life could not be guaranteed. The day before yesterday Dolong returned and submitted his report, saying that he saw you; only then did I feel relieved. How did you escape?”

“Thank you for Your Majesty’s concern, and sent the Imperial Bodyguards to go

looking for your servant," Wei Xiaobao replied, "That evil nun was originally very angry, she was determined to punch and kick me, later on I told her that Your Majesty is 'raw bird fish soup' [niao sheng yu tang, see Chapter 14], is a very good Emperor, that she must not kill you. She spoke many more treason and heresy words. I praised you one sentence, she gave me one slap on the face. Later on I was unwilling to suffer another imminent pain, I had no choice but to shut my mouth and expect for the best."

Kangxi nodded. "If you were killed by her, that would be for nothing anyway," he said, "What is actually the evil nun's background? She came to assassinate me, who sent her?"

"Who sent her, your servant did not know," Wei Xiaobao replied, "After she kidnapped me that time, she tied my wrists with rope, and then took me away like pulling a circus monkey. Your Majesty, with my mouth I did not dare to curse, but in my heart I cursed her seventeen, eighteen-generation ancestors."

Kangxi laughed. "I am not surprised," he said, "Why wouldn't you?"

"She dragged me along for several days," Wei Xiaobao continued, "Several times she wanted to kill me, fortunately along the way we came across someone. This man has a friendship relation with your servant; he helped me by saying a lot of good words on my behalf, and then the evil nun stopped beating me."

"Who was that man?" Kangxi asked in astonishment.

"This man surnamed Yang," Wei Xiaobao replied, "He is the leader of the Ping Xi Wang's Heir Apparent warriors."

Kangxi was very interested. "So he is that servant Wu Sangui's subordinate?" he asked, "Why did he help you by saying good things on your behalf?"

"Actually, it originated from Your Majesty's benevolence," Wei Xiaobao replied, "When the people of Mu Family of Yunnan entered the Palace and created

disturbance the other day, they were framing Wu Sangui. Everybody else believed it, but Your Majesty is wise beyond compare, you were able to see through their plot. Your Majesty sent me to pass on the imperial edict to Wu Sangui's son. It was at that time that the man surnamed Yang met with your servant."

Kangxi nodded. "So that's how it is," he said.

Before entering the Palace, Wei Xiaobao had already prepared a good story; he added, "That man surnamed Yang is called Yang Yizhi. He mentioned the Mu Family incident to the nun, saying that although the Emperor is young, his knowledge and experience may surpass the 'raw bird fish soup', very intelligent and wise; practically he is the Daoist Immortal or Bodhisattva descending into the mortal world. The nun was half believing and half doubting, but she did not treat me that strict anymore afterwards. One evening, Yang Yizhi and the nun talked in the room, I pretended to be asleep, but I opened my ears. Turned out the nun came to assassinate the Emperor under someone else's order."

"It's Wu Sangui, that servant," Kangxi said.

Wei Xiaobao's face showed a shocked expression. "So Your Majesty already know," he said, "Did Dolong report it to you?"

"No, he did not," Kangxi said, "The leader of Wu Sangui's warriors knew this nun, and he discussed this matter with the nun in secret; what good can come out of that?"

Wei Xiaobao was startled but delighted; he kneeled down and kowtowed, saying, "Your Majesty, I am overjoyed to work for you; whatever it is, you can always guess it right the first time, no need for me to tell you. In all our lives, everything will be fine, we will never lose to anybody else."

Kangxi laughed and said, "Get up, get up! Last time it was dangerous enough at the Qingliang Temple on Mount Wutai. If you did not risk your life by blocking in front of me …" Speaking to this point, his expression turned serious; he

continued, “This traitor’s evil plot would have prevailed.” Thinking how that day the nun in white strike like thunder or lightning, he could not help but shiver.

Wei Xiaobao said, “Actually, when the nun’s sword was thrust your way, your movement was very quick, naturally you could have used the move ‘single cloud coming out of the mountain peak’ to evade, and then you turned around and used the ‘red-crowned crane combing its tail feathers’ to strike the evil nun’s shoulder. She must have cried out ‘Surrender!’; it’s just that I was afraid you might be injured, my mind was confused, I was only thinking of blocking in front of you, to take the sword on your behalf. Your Majesty has not had any opportunity to unleash your martial art skill and create a stir in front of the Shaolin monks; it was indeed a pity.”

Kangxi burst out in laughter; he knew perfectly well that if that day Wei Xiaobao did not block in front of him, he would have died from the nun in white’s stab. This little fellow was so loyal and unexpectedly did not claim any credit for himself; a person like him was indeed hard to come by. He laughed and said, “You are very young, yet your official duty is already quite big. Wait till you are a few years older, I will promote you to be a high-ranking official.”

Wei Xiaobao shook his head and said, “I don’t want to be a high-ranking official; I only hope to go on missions for Your Majesty. As long as I do not provoke you into anger, I am perfectly contented.”

Kangxi patted his shoulder. “Very good, very good,” he said, “Just do what I told you to do, I will be very happy, how can I be angry at you? What else did that man surnamed Yang say to the nun?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Yang Yizhi repeatedly persuaded the nun, saying that there are a lot of good things about Your Majesty. He said that Wu Sangui has shown kindness to his father, hence before his father died, he beseeched him to protect Wu Sangui. But Wu Sangui single-mindedly wants to be the Emperor, which is really a treason and heresy, something that he should have never wanted. When this matter is exposed in the future, everybody will be executed along with his

family unto the third generation. The nun also said that her entire family was wiped our by the Ta … Ta … by us, Manchu people. Wu Sangui treated her with full respect. She came to assassinate you, first of all it was to give Wu Sangui a lot of face, secondly, she wanted to avenge her father and mother. The rest of her family has already died, hence she was not afraid of execution unto the third generation."

Kangxi nodded. Wei Xiaobao continued, "Yang Yizhi said that Your Majesty treats the common people well, if … if she harmed you, and Wu Sangui became the Emperor, although he would become a high-ranking officer or a great general, but the common people under the heavens might suffer great hardship. The nun is actually softhearted, she pays particular attention to mercy. After thinking for a long time, she said that he was right, therefore, she decided not to continue her mission. The two of them then agreed that if Wu Sangui sent another assassin, the two of them would kill this assassin in secret."

Kangxi happily said, "Those two people actually understood virtuous cause very well."

Wei Xiaobao said, "But Yang Yizhi said that there was one more thing that is not easy to accomplish."

"What other strange thing is that?" Kangxi asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, "The two of them talked in low voice for quite a while, it was not too clear to me, I only heard something like 'Yan Pin Jun Wang' and 'Zheng Family of Taiwan' was mentioned, it seems to me that Wu Sangui wanted to divide the world equally with somebody surnamed Zheng."

Kangxi stood up; he said in a loud voice, "Turns out that servant is colluding with those Taiwan's rebellious thieves in secret."

Wei Xiaobao asked, "What kind of damned b@stard is Zheng Family of Taiwan?"

“That rebellious thief surnamed Zheng occupies Taiwan illegally,” Kangxi explained, “They refuse to accept beneficial influence of the sovereign; only because they are far away overseas that temporarily it is not easy to pacify that region.”

Wei Xiaobao’s expression showed that he had just suddenly seen the light. “So that’s what happened,” he said, “By this time the more I heard, the more your servant was angry, thinking that these rivers and mountains are Your Majesty’s, what kind of ‘thing’ are those men surnamed Wu and surname Zheng anyway? How dare they want to divide Your Majesty’s land under the heavens equally? Yang Yizhi said that the one surnamed Zheng of Taiwan sent his second son, his name was Zheng Ke … Zheng Ke …”

“Zheng Keshuang,” Kangxi said.

“Yes, yes,” Wei Xiaobao happily said, “Your Majesty knows everything.”

Kangxi smiled without saying anything. The fact was: for the last several years he had been planning and preparing to take Taiwan back under his territory, he had long ago acquired clear information on the names of the Zheng family father and sons, as well as Taiwan’s military strength and their naval situation.

“That Zheng Keshuang visited Yunnan recently,” Wei Xiaobao continued, “He had a meeting with Wu Sangui for over half a month.”

Kangxi’s face suddenly showed displeasure. “Is there such thing?” he wondered aloud.

Taiwan and Yunnan were actually two regions that he was concerned about the most. He had never thought that Zheng and Wu, two people, would join hands in conspiracy. It was only this time that he heard about Zheng Keshuang’s visit to Yunnan.

Wei Xiaobao said, “Taiwan has a fellow whose martial art skill is very high, he

protected Zheng Keshuang all the way. This fellow is surnamed Feng, he is called One Sword Bleeding [yi jian chu xue] or something like that."

"One Sword without Blood [yi jian wu xue] Feng Xifan," Kangxi said, "Along with Liu Guoxuan and Chen Yonghua, they are known as the Three Tigers of Taiwan."

Hearing the Emperor mentioning his shifu's real name, Wei Xiaobao's heart turned cold. "Yes, yes," he said, "Exactly, it was One Sword without Blood Feng Xifan. Yang Yizhi said that among the three tigers of Taiwan, Chen Yonghua is the good one, Feng Xifan and the other one are the bad ones. Chen Yonghua is unwilling to join the rebellion against Your Majesty, it's just that he is only one tiger, he cannot stand up against the other two tigers."

In front of Kangxi he was speaking good things about Jiu Nan, Yang Yizhi and Chen Jinnan, three people, for a one in ten thousand chance that they were captured by the Qing court, then he already had something with which he could try to save them.

Kangxi shook his head. "That's not necessarily true," he said, "Chen Yonghua is a lot more formidable than the other two tigers."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Yang Yizhi also told that nun that there are too many Wu Sangui's adversaries in Jianghu, they assembled at Hejian Prefecture in a congress called the 'Slaying-Turtle Assembly', in which they discussed ways to kill Wu Sangui. That Zheng Keshuang and Feng Xifan mingled in the congress to gather information which they will then pass on to Wu Sangui. The longer they talked, their voices were getting lower and lower, I was trying to listen hard for half a day, and after knowing that they were not planning on harming Your Majesty, I did not pay too much attention anymore. Afterwards I fell asleep for real. Your Majesty, in this case your servant was a little bit lazy, but I was extremely exhausted. Around midnight Yang Yizhi quietly awakened me, unsealed my acupoints, and told me that the nun was meditating to cultivate her internal energy, he told me that it was the best time for me to sneak out."

Kangxi nodded. “That man surnamed Yang actually still has conscience,” he said.

“Isn’t that so?” Wei Xiaobao said, “When in the future Your Majesty put Wu Sangui to death, I am asking Your Majesty to show mercy by sparing this Yang Yizhi’s life.”

Kangxi said, “If he can render meritorious service, not only I will spare his life, I will also bestow him rewards. What else did you hear at the ‘Slaying-Turtle Assembly’?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Each province elected an alliance leader, that Zheng Keshuang was elected *Mengzhu* of Fujian province, I think Fujian, Guangdong, Zhejiang, Shanxi or something are put under their Zheng Family’s jurisdiction.”

Kangxi smiled; he thought, “Xiao Guizi is wrong, it must be Jiangxi, not Shanxi.”

With hands behind his back, he paced back and forth in the Study Room. Successively he went back and forth for dozens of times before he suddenly said, “Xiao Guizi, do you dare to go to Yunnan?”

Wei Xiaobao was startled; it was really beyond his expectation. “Your Majesty wants me to go secretly gather information at Wu Sangui’s place over there?” he asked.

Kangxi nodded; “This mission is indeed dangerous,” he said, “But you are young, Wu Sangui will not guard against you. Plus that Yang Yizhi is your friend, he will definitely look after you.”

“Yes,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Your Majesty, it’s not that I am afraid of going to Yunnan, but I have just returned to the Palace, I haven’t seen you quite a few days yet, and now I have to leave you, I really hate to part with you.”

Kangxi nodded. “Yes,” he said, “I have the same feeling. Too bad that I am the Emperor, I can’t move around as I wish; otherwise the two of us can go to

Yunnan together, I'll grab Wu Sangui's beard, you grab his hands, and together we'll ask, 'Damn it Wu Sangui, are you going to surrender or not?' Won't that be amusing?"

Wei Xiaobao laughed. "That's a wonderful idea," he said, "Your Majesty, you cannot go to Yunnan, I'll swindle Wu Sangui to come to the Palace, and then we can grab his beard, what do you think?"

Kangxi burst out in loud laughter. "Good! Fabulous!" he said, "I am just afraid this servant is a wily old fox, he won't be duped easily. Ah, Xiao Guizi, I have an idea that won't raise his suspicion."

"Your Majesty's divine strategy is definitely very brilliant," Wei Xiaobao said.

"We will marry Princess Jianning to his son," Kangxi said, "Now that we become in-laws, he could not possibly guard against us."

Wei Xiaobao was startled, "You want to marry her to that fellow Wu Yingxiong?" he asked, "This … isn't this too convenient for him?"

Kangxi said, "She is that old s1ut's daughter. We marry her to Yunnan, let her suffer a little bit of hardship first. In the future, when Wu Sangui is executed, along with his entire family unto the third generation, she will be executed together with them." His voice was brimming with hatred.

Originally he liked this little sister very much, but ever since he found out that the Empress Dowager murdered his own mother and angered his father that he left home to become a monk, he also hated this little sister. He added, "At that time I can say that the old s1ut did not raise her daughter properly, then I can force her to commit suicide."

"Your Majesty," Wei Xiaobao said, "Your servant has just heard a huge good news. Your Majesty must be very happy to hear it."

“What good news?” Kangxi asked.

Wei Xiaobao put his mouth near Kangxi’s ear and said in a low voice, “That old s1ut is a fake Empress Dowager, the real Empress Dowager is still alive and well in the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful.” In front of Kangxi, he still did not dare to utter the word ‘old wh0re’.

Kangxi was shocked. “What?” he said in a trembling voice, “What do you mean fake Empress Dowager?”

Thereupon Wei Xiaobao told Kangxi in details how the fake Empress Dowager imprisoned the real Empress Dowager, and then she assumed the Empress Dowager’s identity to commit all kinds of evil.

Kangxi was dumbstruck; he was speechless for half a day. After a long time passed he finally said, “Is there really such thing? Is there really such thing …? How did you know?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Knowing the old s1ut’s malicious character, your servant was afraid she might harm Your Majesty; therefore, I bribed a palace maid in the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful to secretly spy on her. As soon as I know something is not right, I will notify Your Majesty immediately, so that we can strike first and gain the upper hand. As soon as your servant entered the Palace today, the palace maid told me this very important matter.”

Beads of perspiration streamed down from Kangxi’s forehead; he said in a trembling voice, “Where is that palace maid?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “I thought that this secret is too big; if she leaked it out, the consequences might be very serious. Therefore, your servant brazenly pushed her into a well, making sure that nobody will find her. Ay, I really wronged her.”

Kangxi nodded, a relief expression briefly appeared on his face. “You handled it well,” he said, “Tomorrow you pull her body up and give her a decent burial, find

out where her family is, and generously give them gift to comfort the bereaved."

"Yes, yes," Wei Xiaobao said, "I will do as Your Majesty's instructed."

"This matter should not be delayed," Kangxi said, "Let us go to the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful at once." Finished speaking, he stood up, fetched a couple of swords from the wall and gave one sword to Wei Xiaobao. He said in a low voice, "We are going to take care of this matter ourselves, we must not let the palace maids and the court eunuchs know."

Wei Xiaobao nodded. "Your Majesty," he said, "The old s1ut's martial art is formidable, as soon as I enter the room to grasp her, Your Majesty should cut off her arms first, and then we can ask her the details."

Kangxi nodded. "Very well!" he said.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Your Majesty should take a lot of Imperial Bodyguards, have them wait outside the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful. If the situation turns really bad, we will have to call for help. Otherwise, if your servant is unable to hold the fake Empress Dowager firmly, this old s1ut might dash out and assault Your Majesty's ten-thousand-gold body; that … that might be very inappropriate."

Kangxi nodded; he made a decision right then and there: "If we absolutely have to have the Imperial Bodyguards' help, after everything is done, these Imperial Bodyguards will have to be executed to close their mouths."

Kangxi went out the Study Room and summoned eight Imperial Bodyguards to escort him. When they arrived outside the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful, he ordered the Imperial Bodyguards to wait far away in the flower garden, while together with Wei Xiaobao they walked straight toward the Empress Dowager's personal quarter. One after another the palace maids and court eunuchs of the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful kneeled down to greet him. Kangxi said, "All of you go to the garden, nobody can come here." Everybody obeyed and went away.

Wei Xiaobao knew that the fake Empress Dowager had sent his shifu Jiu Nan seven 'transforming bones soft palm' palm strikes, but all of this sinister and ruthless palm power was returned to her. Although his shifu had taught her how to dissolve the poison, but henceforth, as soon as she used internal energy, the bones in her body would immediately break into one-cun pieces. By counting the day, he calculated that by this time the poisonous power had not been completely dissolved; but even if it had, he calculated that she would not dare to fight. Plus, he still had the Five-Dragon Command in his hand. With this knowledge that he had a secure backing, his heart was calm.

Kangxi, on the other hand, knew that this fake Empress Dowager's martial art skill was very formidable; his entire martial art skill was actually taught by him. Even if he had Wei Xiaobao as his backup, the skill difference between them was indeed very far. Their only advantage was that the two of them had a pair of swords, while she was barehanded, and that she was going to be caught unprepared, just like when they were dealing with Oboi in the past. And thus when he entered the bedroom, his palms were wet with perspiration.

Wei Xiaobao thought, "Today is my chance to set up a great merit, I am going to pounce on the old wh0re, His Majesty only know that I am dashing on bravely without any thought of my personal safety, while in fact I am beating up a dead dog who cannot move a single step. Beating up a dead dog is what *laozi* can do best." In a low voice he said, "This s1ut's martial art is superb, Your Majesty must not take any risk. Let your servant move first!" Kangxi nodded, his right hand tightly grabbed the hilt of his sword.

When they entered the bedroom, they did not see anybody there, the bed curtain was hanging down. The Empress Dowager's voice came out from inside the bed curtain, "Emperor, you have not visited the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful for many days; are you well?"

Previously, Kangxi would visit the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful every day to pay his respect to the Empress Dowager. Ever since he learned the inside

story, his heart was filled with unspeakable hatred, hence his visit became very scarce.

Kangxi and Wei Xiaobao had not expected that she would sleep in the bed during the day, whatever method they had previously planned was quite useless now. Kangxi said, “I heard the Empress Dowager is not feeling very well, your son is paying the Empress Dowager a visit.” He made an eye signal to Wei Xiaobao, ordering him, “Raise the bed curtain!”

“Cha!” Wei Xiaobao complied[65], and walked toward the bed.

“I am afraid of the wind,” the Empress Dowager said, “Don’t raise the bed curtain.”

Kangxi thought, “If I did not heed her words and raise the bed curtain by force, she might guard against me.” He said, “Yes. I wonder what ailment does the Empress Dowager suffer; have you taken any medicine?”

“I have,” the Empress Dowager replied, “The imperial doctor says it’s a very light common cold, nothing serious.”

Kangxi said, “Your son wants to see how does the Empress Dowager look? Do you have any fever?”

The Empress Dowager sighed and said, “I look all right, you do not need to see. Emperor, please go back.”

Suspicion arose in Kangxi’s heart, “What trick is she playing?”

Wei Xiaobao noticed the bed was pitch-black, he turned his body around and made a signal to Kangxi, hinting that he was going to grab her feet, and the Emperor should hack with his sword. In that instant, Kangxi was having a second thought, “Supposing everything Xiao Guizi said is wrong, then what happen? Although the man dressed as palace maid was real, but perhaps the Empress

Dowager was just having a dirty confusion of mind against the Palace's prohibition, and could not control her desire. Once my sword is chopping down, in case she is the real Empress Dowager, and not an impostor, won't I not only be a muddle head, but an unfilial son as well? I would rather have the fake Empress Dowager guards against me and have the Imperial Bodyguards come to help me capturing her, but I must not be reckless in dealing with this matter and thus chopping and harming the real Empress Dowager." Thereupon he shook his head and waved his hand, ordering Wei Xiaobao to back off.

"Empress Dowager," he said, "Your son is worried." In a quick step he walked to the bed and stretched out his hand to open the bed curtain.

As the brocaded curtain parted, he saw the Empress Dowager quickly turned around, facing the inside of the bed. Yet in that instant Kangxi was able to catch a glimpse of Empress Dowager's thin cheeks, her appearance was substantially different. "Empress Dowager," he said, "You, Senior suddenly became very thin lately." His voice trembled.

The Empress Dowager sighed and said, "Ever since returning from Mount Wutai, my appetite has been bad, every day I can only eat less than half a bowl of rice. When looking at the mirror, I almost cannot recognize myself."

Kangxi thought, "Xiao Guizi's words are obviously not a lie, this old s1ut did not expect I would suddenly come back, she is sleeping on the bed, thinking that nobody would see her, today she did not put on her disguise, hence no matter what she did not allow me to see her face. Now that I have seen it with my own eyes, could I be mistaken?"

Burning with anger, he shouted loudly, "Aiyo, Empress Dowager, there's a big rat behind the hanging bed curtain. Help! Quickly roll up the bed curtain to catch the rat!" While saying that, he retreated two steps backward, afraid that when the Empress Dowager saw her plot had been exposed, she might suddenly turn violent and attack.

But he only heard the Empress Dowager's trembling voice, "What rat behind the bed curtain?"

Wei Xiaobao stepped forward to draw the woolen cord to roll up the curtain, exposing a wardrobe door behind it. "Uh!" Kangxi exclaimed, "Turns out there is a big wardrobe in here, the rat must be hiding inside the wardrobe!" While thinking, "Now that most of this matter has been exposed, she is prepared, we cannot launch a sneak attack anymore." Retreating toward the door, he beckoned toward Wei Xiaobao and said, "Summon the Imperial Bodyguards to come in. There's a strange noise in the wardrobe, we must not let any assassin hiding in there and frighten the Empress Dowager."

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao said. He turned outside and called out loudly from the door, "Summon the Imperial Bodyguards!" Eight Imperial Bodyguards appeared in front of the bedroom door and bowed, awaiting the imperial decree.

The Empress Dowager angrily said, "Emperor, what trick are you playing?"

Kangxi laughed and said, "Ah, right. Princess Jianning is hiding inside the wardrobe, playing hide-and-seek. Empress Dowager, I've been looking for her everywhere, she must be inside the wardrobe." He waved his right hand.

Wei Xiaobao immediately opened the wardrobe, but the wardrobe door was locked, he could not open it. Kangxi laughed and said, "Empress Dowager, where is the wardrobe key?"

The Empress Dowager angrily said, "I am not feeling well, you two children are actually coming to my room to play. Quickly get out for me." The Imperial Bodyguards knew that the Emperor often played with Princess Jianning. Hearing the Empress Dowager, they all broke into smile.

Kangxi said, "Pry the wardrobe door open. The Empress Dowager is ill, we must not disturb her, the Senior."

“Yes,” Wei Xiaobao complied. From his boot he pulled his dagger and inserted it into the wardrobe door. With a light cut the lock catch broke. He then pulled the handle and the wardrobe door opened smoothly. He saw a pile of brocade quilt inside, exactly what he saw that night inside the wardrobe, but there was nobody inside.

Wei Xiaobao was startled, “That night I clearly saw the real Empress Dowager was hidden inside the wardrobe,” he mused, “How can she disappear all of a sudden? Could it be that the old wh0re is afraid my shifu might reveal her secret and thus has killed the real Empress Dowager?”

Opening up the brocade quilt inside the wardrobe, he could vaguely see a book at the bottom of the quilt, the book looked like the ‘Forty-two-chapter Sutra’. Hastily he put down the brocade quilt to cover the book. Turning his head around, he saw Kangxi’s bewildered expression; when he turned his attention toward the bed again, he noticed the quilt on the bed was bulging, apparently there was someone else hiding underneath the bedding. “The Princess is hiding inside the Empress Dowager’s bedding,” he happily said.

“Quickly pull her out,” Kangxi urgently said. He was afraid that realizing her secret was exposed, the fake Empress Dowager would immediately kill the real Empress Dowager.

Wei Xiaobao rushed toward the bed and put his hand underneath the bedding at the Empress Dowager’s foot side, with the intention of pulling the real Empress Dowager’s foot out. As soon as he reached in, he felt that he was touching a hairy leg, and could not help but was very shocked. Right this moment, a big foot suddenly shot out and kicked his chest. “Aiyo!” Wei Xiaobao screamed, and fell backward.

The quilt rose up, a stark-naked meatball leaped out; carrying the quilt, with the Empress Dowager inside, the meatball dashed out of the door.

The eight Imperial Bodyguards was greatly shocked; hastily they tried to block,

but the meatball struck them. Three Imperial Bodyguards flew out of the door and fell on the ground outside the bedroom. Carrying the Empress Dowager, the meatball dashed out.

Kangxi bolted to the door, but saw that the meatball was leaping out as if it was flying. In just a few leaps it already reached the garden wall. With one leap it reached the top of the wall, and immediately disappeared on the other side. “Quickly pursue!” Kangxi shouted.

Three Imperial Bodyguards were struck by the meatball and were unable to crawl up from the ground. The remaining five Imperial Bodyguards rushed toward the wall, but they could no longer see the meatball’s shadow.

Wei Xiaobao’s mind was fuzzy, there was a severe pain on his chest. He scrambled up toward the wardrobe, reached into the quilt, grabbed the sutra, and hid it inside his pocket. He heard Kangxi’s shouts in the garden, “Come back, come back!” Wei Xiaobao turned around and fell to the floor. He heard footsteps as the Imperial Bodyguards rushed back. Outside the bedroom, Kangxi ordered the Imperial Bodyguards, “Everybody stay here, don’t make any noise.”

Kangxi returned to the bedroom, closed the door, and said in a low voice, “What happened?”

Propping himself against a table, Wei Xiaobao stood up and said, “Mon … monster!” In his shock his face was devoid of any color.

Kangxi shook his head and said, “That’s not a monster! He is the old s1ut’s male adulterer.”

Wei Xiaobao’s mind had not cleared up yet. “What male adulterer?” he asked.

“That was a man, didn’t you see?” Kangxi said, “A short and fat man.”

Wei Xiaobao was astonished, but amused at the same time; he said, “The old

s1ut was hiding a … short and fat man who was not wearing anything!”

Kangxi’s expression looked grave. “What about the real Empress Dowager?” he asked.

“It would be best if … if she has not been killed by the old s1ut …” Wei Xiaobao said. Suddenly he remembered something. Lifting up the mattress on the Empress Dowager’s bed, he said, “There is a secret compartment underneath the bed.” But he only saw an unsheathed platinum Emei Sting in the secret compartment; nothing else. Hesitatingly he said, “Let’s lift open the bed board and take a look.”

Kangxi rushed forward and helped Wei Xiaobao lifting up the bed board. They saw a woman lying on a mat underground, her body was covered with a thin quilt. When the bed board was in place, it seemed that the board was approximately less than half a *chi* from this woman’s face.

The bed room was dark, they could not see clearly. “Quickly light a candle,” Kangxi said.

Wei Xiaobao lighted a candle and brought the candlestick close to the hole. They saw the woman’s countenance was pale, her face was goose egg’s shape; apparently, she was the real Empress Dowager hidden inside the wardrobe the other night. The last time Kangxi saw the real Empress Dowager, he was very young. After so many years, he was not sure if she was the real Empress Dowager or not. Yet seeing this woman’s appearance looked a lot like the Empress Dowager he had seen daily, busily he helped her up and asked, “Is it … is it the Empress Dowager?”

With the candlelight right in front of her face, the woman temporarily was unable to open her eyes. “You … you …” she said.

Wei Xiaobao said, “This is the current Emperor, he has personally come here to rescue your sacred good self.”

The woman opened her eyes a slit, she gazed at Kangxi for a moment, and then with a trembling voice said, “Are you … are you really the Emperor?” Suddenly, “Wah!” she cried and reached out to embrace Kangxi and hugged him tightly.

Wei Xiaobao took the candlestick several steps backward; he looked around everywhere to make sure there was no more male adulterer, assassin or fake palace maid. He thought, “The Emperor has met the real Empress Dowager, naturally there will be a lot to talk about. If I hear one more word, my head might not stay on my neck.” Putting the candlestick on the table, he quietly withdrew and closed the door behind him.

He saw outside the door, eight Imperial Bodyguards, palace maids and court eunuchs were standing in the middle of the courtyard, with terrified look on their faces. He waved his hand, ordering them to go into the garden. He said, “Just now the Emperor was playing hide-and-seek with Princess Jianning, Princess was wearing a weird outfit, disguising herself as a large meatball, and then she jumped out. Did all of you see that?”

An Imperial Bodyguard was very perceptive; he busily replied, “Yes, yes. Princess Jianning can move very fast, her disguise is also very amusing.”

Wei Xiaobao showed a faint smile; he said, “His Majesty does not wish other people to know about this child play, whoever has an itchy mouth, the melon head above your neck might not be stable. Now, who wants to gossip and meddle, and talk rubbish?”

The Imperial Bodyguards, palace maids and eunuchs replied in unison, “We do not dare.”

Wei Xiaobao nodded; turning toward the three injured Imperial Bodyguards, he said, “What happened to you? How come without any rhyme or reason you are injured?”

An Imperial Bodyguard replied, “Reporting to *Fu Zongguan* [deputy chief]: *Xiaoren*, three of us, were having martial art practice this morning, we were practicing a bit too heavy, and injured each other.”

“Your granny,” Wei Xiaobao cursed, “You are all brothers, why did you move heavily during practice? You were not fighting to the death!”

“Yes, yes,” the three Imperial Bodyguards replied, “Next time we will be more careful.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Those of you who are injured may take twenty *taels* medical expense.” The three Imperial Bodyguards busily bowed down to express their gratitude. Wei Xiaobao continued, “Your granny, your dad and mom raised you until you are this big, this life is not too cheap. If everybody wants to keep your melon head and still loves to eat rice, then your dog mouths must be a bit more careful. In case you are afraid you might talk in your sleep, you might as well cut your own tongue right now. All of you, report your names to *Laozi*.”

The Imperial Bodyguards, palace maids and eunuchs reported their names at once. Wei Xiaobao said, “Very well, about the matter of hide-and-seek today, if *laozi* heard the least bit or rumor, I don’t care who talks too much, all thirty-five of you will be beheaded together. Anybody refuse to accept?”

In their hearts, everybody understood that after witnessing the strange event a moment ago, inevitably their lives would be very difficult to protect, most likely the Emperor would kill them all to close their mouths. By saying those words, Gui Gonggong was actually saving their lives. In their gratefulness, they all kneeled down and kowtowed, saying, “Thank you Gonggong for your great benevolence in saving our lives.”

Wei Xiaobao waved his hand and said, “Thank me for what? It’s His Majesty’s kindness.”

Returning to the bedroom door, he sat on the stone steps and waited quietly. It

was more than an hour later that he finally heard Kangxi calling out, “Xiao Guizi, come in.”

He entered the bedroom and saw the Empress Dowager and Kangxi were sitting side-by-side on the bed, they were holding each other’s hand, and there were tears on their faces. He kneeled down and kowtowed, saying, “Congratulations Empress Dowager, congratulations Your Majesty. There are a total of thirty-five servants outside who witnessed Your Majesty playing hide-and-seek with Princess Jianning. If there is any one of them dares to leak half a word, your servant will put all these thirty-five people to death, nobody will be spared. They are all scared to death, I expect no one will dare to talk rubbish.”

Kangxi nodded. Wei Xiaobao continued, “If you want them killed right now to avoid future trouble, your servant will see to it right away.”

Kangxi hesitated slightly. The Empress Dowager said, “Today you and I, mother and son, meet each other. This is an enormously happy occasion, we must not harm anybody’s life too much.”

“Yes,” Kangxi said, “We must do as Buddha has commanded, we thank the Heaven and Bodhisattva for blessing and protecting us.”

The Empress Dowager turned her gaze toward Wei Xiaobao; she said, “Your age is young, yet you have set up these many meritorious service, it is indeed very rare.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “It is because of the Empress Dowager and the Emperor’s great fortune. I only hate the fact that your servant did not display utter loyalty in handling this matter, unable to uncover the evil scheme at the earliest possible time that the Empress Dowager must receive these many years of suffering.”

The Empress Dowager’s heart ached, tears streamed down her face. She said to Kangxi, “You must reward this child well.”

“Yes, yes,” Kangxi said, “Xiao Guizi, your official position is already not low, today I bestow a nobility rank to you. Our Great Qing has five orders of nobility, namely Gong [duke], Hou [marquis], Bo [count], Zi [viscount] and Nan [baron]. By the Empress Dowager’s grace, you are now a first class Zijue [viscount].”

Wei Xiaobao kowtowed for the kindness shown by the Emperor; he said, “Thank you for Empress Dowager’s grace, thank you for Your Majesty’s grace.” While in his heart he mused, “What should I do with this Zijue title? How much money does it worth?” Seeing Kangxi waving his hand, he withdrew.

Wei Xiaobao returned to his residence. He took the book from his pocket. As expected, it was another copy of ‘Forty-two-chapter Sutra’, with which he was very familiar. This book had a blue silk cover with red border. “This must be the Bordered Blue Banner’s copy of the sutra,” he pondered, “Um, that’s right, Tao Gugu said that her *Tai Shifu* [grand master] tried to steal the sutra from the Bordered Blue Banner’s Banner Commander’s mansion. She failed to obtain the sutra, and was struck by a martial art master of Shen Long Jiao that she suffered a serious injury and died. This copy of sutra most likely fell into that Shen Long Jiao’s martial art master’s hand. Why is it that after so many years this book has not been submitted to Hong *Jiaozhu*? Perhaps it was not obtained then, but was obtained just recently.”

Expecting a lot of twists and turns in this matter, he knew it was hard for him to speculate. Feeling the pit of his stomach was still hurting very bad, he thought, “That short and fat meatball has a superb martial art skill. Aiyo, is it possible that he was the Shen Long Jiao’s martial art master who stole the sutra? He entered the Palace to meet with the old wh0re, the old wh0re treated him very well, she moved the real Empress Dowager under the bed to let him sleep inside the wardrobe. A moment ago the young emperor and I went to the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful just at the right moment, by lucky coincidence we caught the fornication in bed. This meatball may come back for a revenge, but also want to return to the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful to retrieve the sutra.”

He must inform Dolong, telling him that he heard information that there was a possibility that some villain would enter the Palace to assassinate the Emperor, telling him to dispatch Imperial Bodyguards to strictly guard the Emperor and the Empress Dowager.

He thought, “It won’t be good if the old wh0re is going back to the Divine Dragon Island and report everything to Hong *Jiaozhu*. *Laozi* better strike first to gain the upper hand, I must take the map inside the sutra first, and then send one or two empty copies to the Divine Dragon Island. Hong *Jiaozhu* will want me to find the other copies, hence he will definitely give me the antidote. If he cannot find the map inside the sutra, that’s his problem, it has nothing to do with *laozi*. It’s his own fault that his share of luck is too small. In any case, his long life is the same as the heaven’s, no need to be impatient, he can look for it slowly. Even if he has to spend 108,000 years, he will eventually find it!”

Chapter 29

Fragrant breeze suddenly arrives through the rolling curtain, new moon looks down on the bed drenched with early rain.

(Translated by Foxs)

Qian Laoben and Gao Yanchao felt their heads dizzy, they swayed and fell down to the floor. Wei Xiaobao saw stars dancing in front of his eyes, he only drank a mouthful of the sour plum, the rest of it splashed on his body.

Wei Xiaobao went out of the Palace to see Li Lishi, Guan Anji, Priest Xuanzhen, Qian Laoben, and the others. The Tian Di Hui warriors were in high spirit. Li Lishi said, “Subordinate has just received information that *Zongduozhu* has arrived in Tianjin, he will reach the Capital in a day. Wei *Xiangzhu* has just returned to the Capital as well; this is very good!”

“Yes, yes,” Wei Xiaobao said, “It’s very good!” Thinking that he was going to see his shifu again, his heart was inevitably frightened.

The warriors immediately bought some wine and killed some chicken to prepare a welcoming dinner for him.

When the night fell, Wei Xiaobao pulled Gao Yanchao aside and said, “Gao Dage, could you bring me an axe, an iron hammer and a chisel, please?”

Gao Yanchao complied and brought everything he asked for. Wei Xiaobao asked him to take him to the clay-walled shed in the garden where the coffin was placed. “I have to open the coffin,” he said, “To put some things inside.”

“Yes!” Gao Yanchao complied. He felt strange, but since *Xiangzhu* did not tell him, he felt it was inappropriate for him to ask.

“The night before last,” Wei Xiaobao explained, “This dead friend came to me in a dream, telling me that he wanted several things. Since he was my friend, I can’t possibly refuse.”

Gao Yanchao felt even stranger, but he only responded with ‘yes, yes’.

Wei Xiaobao said, “Please guard outside the door for me, don’t let anybody come in.” And he pushed the door and came in, closed the door, and bolted it.

He saw the thick dust on the coffin; apparently nobody had touched it. Using the chisel and axe he pried out the nails, and shoved the coffin lid away. He took the oil cloth bundle containing the five copies of sutra, and was about to push the coffin lid back when suddenly he heard Gao Yanchao’s voice outside, “Who’s there?”

And then he heard another voice sternly asked, “Where is Chen Jinnan?”

Wei Xiaobao was shocked. “Who’s asking for my Shifu?” he mused. The voice sounded somewhat familiar.

Gao Yanchao replied, “Who are you?”

And then someone coldly said, “No matter where he hides, we will drag him out.”

Wei Xiaobao did recognize this voice, it was Zheng Keshuang. He was even more surprised, “How could this stinky fellow be here?” Immediately he realized that the first person must be the ‘One Sword without Blood’ Feng Xifan.

He heard the clang of metals, the clash of weapons, followed by Gao Yanchao’s muffled grunt, and then ‘bang!’ he fell to the ground. Wei Xiaobao’s shock was even greater, without having much time to think he leaped into the coffin.

He heard Zheng Keshuang said, “That revolting thief must be hiding inside.” In his fright, Wei Xiaobao lifted the lid and closed the coffin, just in time before ‘crack, crash!’ the wooden door of the clay-walled shed was kicked broken. Zheng Keshuang and Feng Xifan walked in.

From inside the coffin Wei Xiaobao looked out, and saw a thread of light; he knew that in his rush he did not close the lid tightly. “Bad, bad!” he groaned inwardly, “They are looking for my Shifu, but find out his disciple instead.”

Suddenly outside the door someone said, “Is *Gongzi* looking for me? What can I do for you?” It was precisely Chen Jinnan’s voice.

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted, “Shifu is here!”

Suddenly Chen Jinnan cried, “Ah!” Apparently he was injured. Followed by ‘clang, clang’ twice, the sound of weapons clashing. Chen Jinnan angrily shouted, “Feng Xifan, you are plotting against me? Why?”

Feng Xifan coldly said, “I am following orders to arrest you!”

Zheng Keshuang’s voice was heard, “Chen Yonghua, do you still consider me in your eyes?” His voice was brimming with anger.

“Why did *Er Gongzi* [second young master] say such thing?” Chen Jinnan said, “It was only the day before yesterday that subordinate found out that *Er Gongzi* would grace us with your presence in Beijing; that very night I rushed over from Tianjin, unexpectedly *Er Gongzi* has arrived first. Subordinate was not here to welcome you, please forgive my offense.”

Hearing his shifu was speaking very respectfully and sincerely, Wei Xiaobao cursed in his heart, “Dog fart *Er Gongzi*, what are you angry for?”

He heard Zheng Keshuang said, “*Fu Wang* [father king] sent me to the Central Plains on official business, did you know that?”

“Yes,” Chen Jinnan replied.

Zheng Keshuang said, “If you did, why didn’t you come earlier to escort, serve and protect me?”

Chen Jinnan said, “Subordinate has several urgent matters to be dealt with, I was unable to spare the time for a separate task, please *Er Gongzi* excuse me. Subordinate also knew that Feng *Dage* is coming along to serve by your side, Feng *Dage*’s divine skill is unequalled, the crowd of lowly people are afraid and succumb to him, he would be able to protect *Er Gongzi* safe and sound through and through.”

“Humph,” Zheng Keshuang snorted; he angrily said, “When I came to Tian Di Hui, why are the shrimp soldiers and crab generals[66], and a skulk of foxes, a pack of dogs under your commands very rude to me?”

Chen Jinnan said, “Presumably they did not know *Er Gongzi*. In this area around the Capital, what we are doing is a rebellion against the Tatars, everybody is particularly cautious and prudent, to such an extent as to neglect etiquette. Subordinate hereby apologizes.”

The more Wei Xiaobao listened, the angrier he was. “Why is Shifu this polite to this stinky fellow?” he mused.

Zheng Keshuang said, “By giving me all kinds of excuses, you are actually saying that I was wrong?”

“I do not dare!” Chen Jinnan said.

And then Wei Xiaobao heard the rustling of paper. Zheng Keshuang said, “This is *Fu Wang*’s written order, read it.”

“Yes,” Chen Jinnan said, “Wangye’s order says: ‘The order of Yan Ping Jun Wang of the Great Ming: I am sending Zheng Keshuang to the Central Plain on official business, for anything beneficial to the country, he may act at his own

discretion'."

"What does 'act at his own discretion' means?" Zheng Keshuang asked.

Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, "It simply means don't ever suffer any loss; what's so difficult about it? Your old man is telling you to stand up and need not be polite."

Who would have thought that Chen Jinnan actually replied, "*Wangye* is instructing *Er Gongzi* that in all matters that benefit our country, you may forego reporting back to *Wangye*, and act at your own discretion."

Zheng Keshuang asked, "Will you submit to *Fu Wang*'s written order or not?"

"*Wangye*'s written order, naturally I will comply," Chen Jinnan replied.

"Very well," Zheng Keshuang said, "Cut your own right arm."

Chen Jinnan was startled. "But why?" he asked.

Zheng Keshuang coldly said, "In your eyes there is no master, you do not revere me, which means you do not revere *Fu Wang*. I'll say from your conduct and deeds, you do not have the heart of a loyal subject. Humph, in the Central Plains you strive to cultivate your own power, to expand Tian Di Hui, where's your concern for the Zheng Family of Taiwan? You are thinking of making yourself king, aren't you?"

Chen Jinnan's voice trembled, "Subordinate has never had that thought," he said.

"Humph! Never had that thought?" Zheng Keshuang said, "At the Hejian Prefecture congress this time, they elected me as the *Mengzhu* of Fujian province; did you know that?"

"Yes," Chen Jinnan replied, "It was because the heroes throughout the world respect *Wangye* for his loyalty in working for the country."

"How many provinces' Mengzhu does your Tian Di Hui have?" Zheng Keshuang asked. Chen Jinnan was silent.

"Damn it," Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, "Turns out the reason this fellow is throwing a fit is because he had drunk Tian Di Hui's vinegar [i.e. jealous]." He also mused, "My wife's lover [orig. male adulterer] is my Shifu's superior;

previously, it was a bit troublesome. Now those two people are in conflict; this is wonderful. It's just that Shifu has already fallen under their plot and is injured, I must prevent him from being killed by them."

He heard Zheng Keshuang said in loud voice, "Your Tian Di Hui has three provinces' *Mengzhu*, while I only have Fujian, one province. Compared to your Tian Di Hui, how much does my Zheng Family worth? I am only a tiny Fujian Province's *Mengzhu*, but you are the Central Military Strategist of the 'Weeding-out the Traitors Alliance'. Don't you realize you are crawling over my head? How can there be *Fu Wang* in your heart?"

"*Er Gongzi*, please reflect carefully," Chen Jinnan said, "Subordinate founded the Tian Di Hui under the order of the late Guoxing Ye [Koxinga] with the purpose of driving off the Tatars. Tian Di Hui is an integral part of *Wangye*, there is no distinction between what's ours and what's *Wangye*'s. In all Tian Di Hui's affairs, subordinate always report everything to *Wangye*."

With a cold laugh Zheng Keshuang said, "Your Tian Di Hui only knows Chen Jinnan, how could they know there is still Zheng Family of Taiwan? Supposing Tian Di Hui succeeded in expelling the Tatars, the ruler of this world would be you, Chen Jinnan, not any of our Zheng family."

Chen Jinnan said, "What *Er Gongzi* just said is not right. After we drive off the Tatars, together we will present the Great Ming royal family's descendant surnamed Zhu to be the ruler."

"Your speech is beautiful," Zheng Keshuang said, "This moment you do not have surnamed Zheng in your eyes at all, how can you have surnamed Zhu in your eyes in the future? I want you to break your own arm, you simply don't want to obey my command. This time I came from Hejian Prefecture, along the way I met with not a few calamities, yet I did not see a single soldier a single troop from Tian Di Hui coming to protect me. If not for Feng Shifu striving to save me, I don't know if by this time I was still alive. You are eager to see my demise; if that's your desire, then already death cannot wipe out your crimes. Humph, you can only lick my *Gege*'s behind, you don't usually have me in your eyes."

Chen Jinnan said, "*Da Gongzi* [big/first young master], *Er Gongzi* are brothers,

subordinate serve both the same; how could I dare to be partial?”

Zheng Keshuang said, “Someday my *Gege* will be the *Wangye*. How can we, brothers, be the same in your eyes?”

Listening to this point, Wei Xiaobao understood for the most part. He mused, “This fellow is struggling over the *Wangye* position with his *Gege*, he is blaming Shifu for supporting his *Gege*. With Feng Xifan’s instigation, he is trying to get rid of my Shifu.”

He heard Zheng Keshuang continued, “Your power in the Central Plains is so big anyway, it would be better for you to just kill me.”

Chen Jinnan said, “*Er Gongzi* confronts me like this, it’s hard for subordinate to explain. Why don’t we go back to Taiwan? We’ll see *Wangye*, and heard what *Wangye* has to say. If *Wangye* wants to kill me, how can I dare to disobey?”

“Humph,” Zheng Keshuang snorted, seemingly at a loss on how to answer him. He was afraid to have direct confrontation with Chen Jinnan in front of his father.

Feng Xifan coldly said, “I am afraid as soon as Mr. Chen leave this place, if you don’t surrender to the Tatars and betray *Er Gongzi*, then you’d fly your banner on a solitary tree, declaring yourself as the king, and will no longer return to Taiwan.”

Chen Jinnan angrily said, “Just now you attacked sneakily and injured me, was it under *Wangye*’s command? Where is *Wangye*’s written order?”

Fengxifan said, “*Wangye*’s written order says that in the Central Plains *Er Gongzi* is to act at his discretion. You don’t accept *Er Gongzi*’s order, that means you are rebelling against *Wangye*, everybody has the right to punish you.”

Chen Jinnan said, “*Er Gongzi* is perfectly all right, it is you who sow dissension. Guoxing Ye began the undertaking with great hardship and has succeeded in establishing good foundation. I am afraid it will be ruined in the hands of lowly, treacherous people like you. Although you, surnamed Feng, have unparalleled martial art skill under the heavens, do you think I am afraid of you?”

Feng Xifan sternly said, “So, you are blatantly rebelling against the Yan Ping Wang Mansion?”

In a loud and clear voice Chen Jinnan said, “I, Chen Yonghua, have a red-bellied devotion to *Wangye*. The word ‘rebel’ should never be slandered against me.”

Zheng Keshuang shouted, “Chen Yonghua is rebelling, arrest him!”

“Yes,” Feng Xifan complied.

And then a series of ‘clang, clang’ was heard as the weapons collided with each other; the three of them began to fight. Chen Jinnan called out, “*Er Gongzi*, please move aside, subordinate cannot fight with you.”

“You cannot fight with me? You cannot fight with me?” Zheng Keshuang asked the question twice, his weapon also rang twice. Apparently with each question he hacked his blade toward Chen Jinnan once.

Wei Xiaobao was greatly anxious; quietly he raised the coffin lid about a *cun* so that he could look out. He saw Zheng Keshuang and Feng Xifan attacked Chen Jinnan from left and right. Chen Jinnan held the sword with his left hand, while his right arm drooped down with blood constantly trickling to the ground from the wound inflicted by Feng Xifan’s sneak attack earlier.

Feng Xifan’s sword moved extremely fast, Chen Jinnan resisted with everything he had. Zheng Keshuang swept his blade across repeatedly, chopping and hacking, but Chen Jinnan did not dare to parry, he was only dodging here and there. Very soon he fell into the situation where he could only take a beating without being able to strike back. Moreover, he moved the sword with his left hand awkwardly, while the wound on his right arm was clearly not light.

Wei Xiaobao was anxious, “Where are Feng Jizhong, Guan *Fuzi*, Qian Laoben, and the others? How come not even one come to help? If this fight continues, Shifu will definitely be killed by them.” But the outside was very quiet, the clay-walled shed was noisy with ‘bing, bing, bang, bang’ of the fierce battle, but unexpectedly the outside seemed to be turning a deaf ear.

He saw Feng Xifan thrust his sword swiftly forward, a powerful strike, Chen Jinnan raised his sword to block, two swords immediately stuck together. Zheng Keshuang waved his saber in diagonal chop, Chen Jinnan leaned sideways to evade. Zheng Keshuang’s saber swept across, ‘rip’ he made a long cut on Chen Jinnan’s left leg.

“Ah!” Chen Jinnan cried out; the sword in his hand jerked upward. Feng Xifan seized this opportunity to thrust his sword forward and hit Chen Jinnan’s left shoulder.

Chen Jinnan was drenched in blood as he fought desperately; it was hard for him to stay standing, step by step he moved toward the door, with the intention of rushing out to make his escape. Feng Xifan understood his intention, he rushed toward the door first. “Rebellious thief,” he said with a cold laugh, “You are still thinking of escaping today?”

Wei Xiaobao was hoping Feng Xifan would walk toward the coffin, so that he could thrust his dagger through the coffin and kill him just like the way he killed the lama at the inn. This move, called ‘stabbing people from behind partition board’ [ge ban ci ren], was his entire life’s special skill, it far surpassed the martial art master’s special skill ‘striking ox from behind the mountain’ [ge shan da niu]. But Feng Xifan was fighting farther and farther away, how could he stab him?

“Rebellious thief,” Zheng Keshuang shouted, “Still not throwing down your sword and letting your hands be bound?”

Seeing how critical the situation was, Wei Xiaobao decided that even if he had to lose his life today, he had to save his shifu. Tightening up his throat, he made three loud ‘zhi, zhi, zhi’ noise.

(Book note: Zheng Chenggong [real name of Koxinga] fathered Zheng Jing and the others, ten people. Zheng Jing became the Ming Dynasty’s Yan Ping Jun Wang during the first year of Kangxi’s reign. He fathered Zheng Keshang, Zheng Keshuang, and the others, eight people. Keshang was the oldest, born of a concubine, and was Chen Yonghua’s son-in-law. Later on he became the Jian Guo [country supervisor] heir apparent. The second son Keshuang became Feng Xifan’s son-in-law. When Zheng Keshang succeeded the throne, he was barely twelve years old. Our book has these matters only as background, their age are increased considerably, hence there are discrepancies with historical fact.)

When Feng Xifan and the others, three people heard it, they were startled. “What is it?” Zheng Keshuang asked. Feng Xifan shook his head, but his hand did not slow down the least bit. Wei Xiaobao cried ‘zhi, zhi, zhi’ again three times.

Zheng Keshuang was afraid of ghost, he was trembling with fear. Suddenly he saw the coffin lid opened, a burst of white dust flew out. Immediately the three of them felt their eyes were burning, while an unbearably pungent smells assaulting their noses.

What happened was that usually before the body was entered into the coffin, the coffin would be lined with a large quantity of lime. When Gao Yanchao purchased the coffin, it was already loaded. This moment Wei Xiaobao grabbed a handful of lime and scattered it out. Feng Xifan knew it was not demon or ghost, he quickly jumped over with closed eyes, and leaned forward to thrust his sword into the coffin. 'Pop!' the tip of the sword stabbed the coffin's lid; while he was about to pull the sword to stab again, suddenly he felt pain on the right side of his chest. He knew he had fallen into the enemy's trick; hastily he leaped back to evade, but his back heavily crashed onto the wall. His martial art skill was superb, with his left hand pressed against the wound on his chest, he brandished the sword in his right hand so that 'wind and rain could not penetrate', as a shield in front of his body.

It was actually Wei Xiaobao from inside the coffin launching his move 'stabbing people from behind partition board'. As soon as his attack succeeded, he leaped out of the coffin, clenching the dagger tightly in his hand. He saw Feng Xifan, Zheng Keshuang and Chen Jinnan, three people, were brandishing their saber and swords randomly with their eyes closed tight. He noticed that although Feng Xifan was hit by his dagger, it was not a fatal wound. He wanted to seize the opportunity and gave him another stab, but Feng and Zheng, two people moved their sword and saber in a very tight formation. He really did not dare to recklessly charge forward. The timing was critical, if he waited too long, those two would have wiped the lime from their eyes, and if they could see, it would be really bad for him. Without any definite plan, he simply grabbed another handful of lime, and as soon as he saw either Feng Xifan or Zheng Keshuang moved to wipe their eyes, he would simply scatter the lime onto them. Scattering the lime was another special skill in which he was an expert.

After only throwing several times, Feng Xifan had already figured out the direction of the lime; with the move 'thirsty horse rushing to the spring' he thrust this sword straight forward. Wei Xiaobao was greatly shocked; hastily he

ducked down. ‘Pop!’ the sword pierced the coffin. Wei Xiaobao crawled and rolled away toward the door.

Feng Xifan raised his sword and hacked down on the coffin several times, he still thought the enemy was inside. Actually, based on his martial art cultivation, he would have detected Wei Xiaobao’s extremely clumsy exit immediately, but because his eyes were suddenly blinded and his chest wounded, for a moment his mind was in disorder. Moreover, he knew Chen Jinnan’s martial art was extraordinary, not inferior to his own at all; with a powerful enemy on the side, his situation was incomparably treacherous. In his fright, he did not realize that Chen Jinnan’s eyes were also blinded. He only wished to kill the enemy who attacked him sneakily, and made a quick escape.

After stabbing the coffin several times, he felt that he was piercing an empty coffin. With a move ‘thousand rocks vying to be the most beautiful’, the tip of his sword stabbed in a flower pattern to shield around his body. He heard to his left there was no sound of weapons splitting the air, immediately he leaped to the left. As soon as his shoulder bumped onto the wall, he stood leaning against the wall. Because of this excessive use of strength, the wound on his chest was bleeding profusely.

He tried to open his eyes a slit, the lime immediately entered his eyes, the pain was difficult to bear. Afraid that he might be blind permanently, he did not dare to open his eyes anymore. With his back against the wall he moved step-by-step, thinking that as long as he followed the wall, he would eventually find the door; as soon as he was out, the terrain would be spacious, then he would have a better chance of escaping.

Wei Xiaobao was standing at the door. Seeing Feng Xifan started to move, he knew his intention; Wei Xiaobao wanted to wait until he reached the door and then give him a stab, but remembering this man’s martial art skill was too high, even if he succeeded in stabbing him, at the point of death he might strike with his sword, and then Wei Xiaobao’s little life would inevitably be in danger. Thereupon he quietly inserted his dagger about two *cun* into the doorframe. Seeing Feng Xifan was no more than two *chi* from the door, he suddenly called out in shrill voice, “I am he …”

Before the word ‘here’ left his lips, Feng Xifan had already moved very fast. His

sword slashed down, ‘dang!’ the sword met the dagger, and broke into two. The other half flew up and slash Feng Xifan’s forehead before falling down to the ground. Wei Xiaobao had already hidden by the clay-walled shed with his heart thumping wildly.

He heard Feng Xifan’s roar and saw him dashing out. Wei Xiaobao returned to the door and saw Chen Jinnan and Zheng Keshuang were still brandishing their sword and saber randomly. With the powerful enemy gone, he did not care much about the Second Young Master of the Zheng Family. “Shifu,” he called out, “I have chopped that ‘One Sword without Blood’ so that now his entire body is full of blood; he has already escaped without a trace. Please come out.”

Chen Jinnan was startled. “Who is it?” he asked.

Wei Xiaobao replied, “It’s your disciple Xiaobao.”

Chen Jinnan was greatly delighted; he held the sword across his chest, no longer brandished it.

Wei Xiaobao called out, “Zhang *Dage*, Li *Erge*, Wang *Sange*, you have arrived! Very good, very good! This stinky fellow surnamed Zheng has not put down his weapon and surrendered, let’s come together and chop him down into pieces!”

Zheng Keshuang was shocked; he did not know that Wei Xiaobao was bluffing. “Shifu, Shifu!” he called out. But did not hear Feng Xifan’s replying. After slight hesitation, he tossed his saber aside.

“Kneel down!” Wei Xiaobao shouted. Zheng Keshuang bent his knees and kneeled on the ground. Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud. He picked up the saber and lightly pressed it against Zheng Keshuang’s throat. “Stand up!” he shouted, “Turned right, walked three steps, crawl up, get in!”

For each sentence Wei Xiaobao shouted, Zheng Keshuang followed his order, trembling with fear, until finally he crawled into the coffin. Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud, stepped forward, and pushed the coffin lid. He picked up the bundle of the sutra and slung it over his shoulder. “Shifu,” he said, “Let’s quickly wash your eyes.” Pulling Chen Jinnan’s hand, he led him out of the clay-walled shed.

They only walked for seven, eight steps when he saw Gao Yanchao lying by the flower terrace. Wei Xiaobao was startled, and rushed forward to help him up.

Gao Yanchao said, “Helping *Zongduozhu* is more important, subordinate only have my acupoints sealed, otherwise I am fine.” Chen Jinnan stooped down and massaged his back and his waist for a moment, the acupoints were immediately opened.

“What happened to *Zongduozhu*’s eyes?” Gao Yanchao asked.

“Lime,” Chen Jinnan replied.

“We must wash it with vegetable oil,” Gao Yanchao said, “Don’t use water.” Pulling Chen Jinnan’s hand, he quickly walked back to the house.

“I’ll be right there,” Wei Xiaobao said. He returned to the clay-walled shed, picked up the axe, and pounded seven, eight nails into the coffin’s lid. “Zheng *Gongzi*,” he said, “Just lay down and rest for several days. Consider yourself lucky, the ten thousand *taels* you owe me, I write off at one stroke, you don’t have to pay it back.” With another laugh he walked back into the main hall.

He saw Gao Yanchao had finished washing the lime off Chen Jinnan’s eyes with vegetable oil; he had also tended the injury on Chen Jinnan’s body. Feng Jizhong, Qian Laoben, Priest Xuanzhen, and the others were lying across the floor of the main hall, Chen Jinnan was in the process of unsealing everybody’s acupoints.

Turned out Feng Xifan launched a surprise attack. Not only his martial art skill was high, he also caught everybody off-guard. Before Feng Jizhong and the others were able to pull themselves together, he had already sealed their acupoints one by one. They were extremely enraged, but in front of the *Zongduozhu* they did not dare to curse.

Gao Yanchao told them how by using a trick Wei Xiaobao managed to inflict heavy damage to Feng Xifan; immediately everybody was in high spirit. They said that since that servant was so crafty and evil, they hoped that the lime would blind his eyes permanently.

Chen Jinnan’s eyes were still red and swollen, tears still streaming down his face. With a serious expression he said, “Qian *Xiongdi*, Gao *Xiongdi*, go wash the lime from Zheng *Er Gongzi*’s eyes, and invite him here.” Qian and Gao, two people complied.

“Ah!” suddenly Wei Xiaobao cried out and pretended to faint, his eyes were

tightly shut.

Chen Jinnan reached out with his left hand to held Wei Xiaobao's arm. "What happened?" he asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, "I … I was … scared … scared really bad just now, I was afraid they were going to kill Shifu … now … now my limbs feel weak …"

Chen Jinnan lifted him up and sat him on a chair. "Just rest for a moment," he said.

What happened was: Wei Xiaobao knew that scattering lime on people's eyes was a really low act; for this very reason Mao Shiba had given him a good beating in the past. Although the other warriors praised him for his resourcefulness, he thought that as his subordinates, naturally they wanted to flatter him. Shifu was a great hero, great warrior, ten times more so than Mao Shiba, he would surely give him a serious criticism. Thus Wei Xiaobao might as well pretend to faint in front of him, so that he would not punish him, or even if he did, he would be somewhat lenient.

Qian and Gao, two people rushed into the hall in a hurry; they said, "*Zongduozhu*, we did not find Zheng *Er Gongzi*; he must have left."

Chen Jinnan frowned. "He left?" he asked, "And not in the coffin?"

Qian and Gao, two people looked at each other in dismay. There was indeed a coffin in the clay-walled shed, but how could the Second Young Master of the Zheng Family be in it?

"Let's go take a look," Chen Jinnan said. He led everybody toward the clay-walled shed.

Wei Xiaobao was greatly anxious, he had no choice but to follow them. His hands rubbed his own buttocks while saying in his heart, "My buttocks, oh my buttocks, if Shifu heard that I forced that stinky fellow into the coffin, you, my old friend, will unavoidably receive several flogging; I am truly sorry."

When they got to the clay-walled shed, they saw the floor was covered with lime and blood, but indeed neither Zheng Keshuang's body nor his shadow was around. Chen Jinnan clearly heard Wei Xiaobao forcing Zheng Keshuang to enter the coffin, but at this moment the coffin lid was firmly nailed down. His suspicion

arose. “Xiaobao,” he asked, “Did you nail Zheng *Er Gongzi* inside the coffin?”

Seeing Shifu’s ill expression, Wei Xiaobao hummed and hawed. “I did not,” he said, “Perhaps he was afraid Shifu would kill him, he nailed himself inside the coffin.”

“Rubbish!” Chen Jinnan shouted, “Quickly open the coffin, don’t let him die of suffocation. Hurry, hurry!”

Qian Laoben and Gao Yanchao picked up the axe and chisel, and busily pried the coffin nails out. When they opened the lid, sure enough there was someone lying inside.

“*Er Gongzi*!” Chen Jinnan called out, and reached into the coffin to help the person up.

“Ah!” when everybody saw the person, they all cried out in alarm. Chen Jinnan quickly let go and retreated two steps back. The person fell back into the coffin.

“It’s Guan *Fuzi*!” everybody shouted in one voice. In that split second, everybody was able to see clearly that the person in the coffin was indeed Guan Anji.

Chen Jinnan rushed forward to hold him up again, they saw Guan Anji’s eyes were wide open, but he had already met a violent death. His body was still warm though, apparently he had not died long. The people were shocked and grieved. Feng Jizhong, Priest Xuanzhen, and the others jumped outside, but did not see any trace of the enemy.

Chen Jinnan untied Guan Anji’s robe, and saw a blood red hand print on his chest. “Feng Xifan!” he said in choked voice.

Priest Xuanzhen angrily said, “It is definitely Feng Xifan! This red sand palm is his Kunlun Pai’s unique martial art skill. After suffering serious injury, that evil thief must have circled around a moment later. It’s really … damn it, it’s alright if he wanted to save Zheng *Er Gongzi*, but why did he have to kill Guan *Erge*?”

Everybody cursed in rage. Guan Anji’s brother-in-law, Jia Laoliu’s [Ol’ Six Jia] cry shook the heavens and the earth. In his grief Chen Jinnan was silent.

They returned to the hall. Qian Laoben said, “*Zongduozhu*, we all know about

Er Gongzi and *Da Gongzi*'s struggle over the *Wangye* position. Our Tian Di Hui has always been impartial in this matter; *Da Gongzi* is older, naturally we support *Da Gongzi*. *Er Gongzi* has always considered you as a nail in his eyes, this time he received Feng Xifan's instigation, and was thinking of seizing this opportunity to get rid of you. Today we have offended *Er Gongzi*. I am afraid *Wangye* might believe their slanderous report. Hereafter *Zongduozhu* cannot return to Taiwan anymore."

Chen Jinnan sighed and said, "Guoxing Ye's benevolence to me was very heavy, even with torn body and crushed bones it would be difficult for me to repay his kindness. *Wangye* has always been wise, plus he is very respectful toward me; he can't possibly harm a loyal and good person."

Priest Xuanzhen said, "As the saying goes: distant relation cannot separate flesh and blood relation. *Er Gongzi* has already determined that our Tian Di Hui refuses to follow Taiwan's order. If even in the Central Plains he was already like this, would he give you any leeway in Taiwan? Their Zheng Family has altogether eight *Gongzi*, everybody is fighting everybody else to seize the power, our Tian Di Hui does not need to be involved. *Zongduozhu*, while it's true that we are not Qin Hui, but we are definitely not Yue Fei either[67]."

Qian Laoben said, "*Zongduozhu* is loyal and devoted, and has always served the Zheng Family all your life, yet you were nearly killed by *Er Gongzi*; no matter what we cannot simply swallow this matter."

Chen Jinnan sighed again and said, "A real man's conduct has a clear conscience against the heaven and the earth, whatever other people say, long or short, has nothing to do with him. It's just that I have never imagined such misfortune would befall us. Just now if it were not for Xiaobao's resourcefulness, we all would die a violent death … ay, it's a pity Guan *Erge* …"

Wei Xiaobao was relieved to hear that his shifu would not investigate the scattering of lime and the nailing of the coffin. Afraid that it was merely a momentary lapse of memory, he decided to change the subject immediately. "We have made quite some noise," he said, "I am afraid all next door neighbors have heard it; if they report to the authorities, I am afraid … I am afraid … We must move immediately."

“Absolutely,” Chen Jinnan said, “My mind is in turmoil, unexpectedly I haven’t thought about it.”

Right away they all went back to the garden to dig a hole and bury Guan Anji’s body. After shedding more tears and kowtowing, they carried their belongings out and left immediately. The Tian Di Hui warriors were constantly on the move around the Capital, moving their residence was a common occurrence. Wei Xiaobao was afraid his Shifu would ask him about his martial art training, he took the opportunity to take his leave and return to the Imperial Palace.

Back at his residence, he bolted the door, and opened the six copies of sutra one by one. Indeed he saw a lot of sheepskin pieces in between the cover of the sutras. He took out the pieces and stitched the cover back to its original state. But after stitching the cover of less than one book he already fed up with it; he thought, “It would be best if Shuang’er is here. Right this moment she is most likely still outside Shaolin Temple waiting for me. I was captured by Shifu Jiu Nan, this good servant girl must be extremely worried. I must send someone to tell her to come here.” Sewing several stitches later, his eyes grew very heavy; he hid the sutra well and fell asleep.

Early in the morning the next day he went to the Upper Study Room to wait upon the Emperor. Kangxi said, “I am going to issue an imperial decree tomorrow, sending you to escort Princess Jianning to Yunnan, to be married to that little b@stard surnamed Wu.”

“Yes,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “It’s just a pity that I have not served Your Majesty for several days and I will have to be far away from you.”

Kangxi lowered his voice and said, “The Empress Dowager has told me a very important matter. This time you go to Yunnan, you may try to take this opportunity to work on it.” Wei Xiaobao complied.

Kangxi continued, “The Empress Dowager said, that evil maid servant impersonating the Empress Dowager, actually it was part of a great conspiracy: her mission was to find the location of our Manchu’s dragon vein, and try to find a way to break it.”

Wei Xiaobao blurted out without thinking, “That old wh0re’s crime is great, her evil extreme!” But then he hastily covered his mouth, realizing that he had

cursed with vulgar language in front of the Emperor, unavoidably it was too disrespectful.

Who would have thought that Kangxi did not give it the slightest thought? “Correct!” he responded, “That old wh0re is indeed not a ‘thing’. The Empress Dowager had to endure disgrace and endure suffering, she would rather die than reveal the secret; only by doing that did the old wh0re’s evil scheme fail. With the Heaven’s blessing therefore the Empress Dowager is safe and sound until today, and has been able to hold on without revealing this big secret.”

Wei Xiaobao already knew the secret early on, but he said, “Your Majesty, it would be best if you do not tell me this huge secret. One more person knows about it, the danger that the secret will leak also increases by one part.”

Kangxi praised him, “You are making good progress; you understand that in everything we must be cautious. However, since the first time you work for me, you have never leaked anything. If I can’t even trust you, I can trust nobody else.”

Wei Xiaobao felt that the several hundred bones in his body, each bone was several *taels* several *qians* lighter. He kneeled down and kowtowed, while saying, “Your Majesty trust me this much, even if your servant’s tongue is cut, I will not dare to divulge half a word of what Your Majesty is going to tell me.”

Kangxi nodded; he said, “The secret of our Great Qing’s dragon vein is actually hidden in the eight copies of the ‘Forty-two-chapter Sutra’.”

Wei Xiaobao pretended to be astonished; he repeatedly said, “Ah, strange, is there such thing? It’s absolutely unthinkable!”

Kangxi continued, “After the Shezheng Wangye [master king regent] entered the pass, he bestowed eight copies of sutra to the Eight Banners’ Banner Commander. Within the Eight Banners, the troops and horses of Plain Yellow, Plain White and Bordered Yellow, three banners are under the command of the Son of Heaven. But the farmland and material belongings of these three banners are still the Banner Commanders’ responsibility. The Plain Yellow Banner’s copy has always been in *Fu Huang*’s [father emperor] possession, which he took with him to Mount Wutai. Later on he sent you to bring it back and bestowed it to me. Because the Bordered White Banner’s Banner Commander committed a

crime, the Bordered White Banner's sutra ended up in the Palace, and *Fu Huang* bestowed it to Empress Duan Jing."

Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, "The Old Emperor doted on Empress Duan Jing; naturally he wanted to give the best thing to her. If it were me, if all eight copies ended up in the Palace, I would bestow all to her."

Kangxi continued, "The old wh0re murdered Empress Duan Jing, naturally she took hold of her sutra. Oboi was the Bordered Yellow Banner's Banner Commander. When I sent you to search and seize Oboi's home that day, the old wh0re wanted you to find two sutras, one was precisely the Bordered Yellow Banner's, the other was Plain White Banner's."

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao said, "If I had known the old wh0re was bad, your servant would have reported to the old wh0re that I could not find it, and quietly presented the sutras to Your Majesty."

Kangxi laughed and said, "At that time we did not know that the old wh0re was a fake Empress Dowager; we also did not know that there is such great responsibility inside the 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra'. If you were fooling around like that, I would have … I would have flogged your buttocks."

"Yes, yes," Wei Xiaobao said. In his heart he said, "Flogging my buttocks and that's it? You don't need to be polite!" He asked, "The Plain White Banner's copy, I wonder where did Oboi get it from?"

Kangxi said, "He has killed the Plain White Banner's Banner Commander Suksaha, and seized his family property, his belongings, including his copy of sutra. Humph, even death cannot wipe out that rebel's crimes."

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao said, "In that case, the old wh0re had three copies in her hands."

"Only three?" Kangxi said, "She also sent the Deputy Chief of Imperial Bodyguards Rui Dong to make things difficult for the Bordered Red Banner's Banner Commander Hechabo. At that time I did not know the reason, that fellow Hechabo had always been in collusion with Oboi, so I did not pay him any attention. Now that I think about it, naturally it was to seize his copy of the sutra. And then Rui Dong mysteriously disappeared; the old wh0re must have killed him to close his mouth."

“Yes, yes,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Your Majesty can see things like a deity [i.e. prophecy with supernatural accuracy; you will see shortly why I kept the literal translation].” While in his heart he said, “You are convinced that Rui Dong was killed by the old wh0re, hence I praised you that you can see things like a deity; that is striking a nail on one foot. If in the future you find out that Rui Dong was killed by me, you cannot go back on your word by questioning me. Otherwise, you are acknowledging that you cannot see things like a deity. In your capacity as the Emperor, how can you see things not like a deity, but like a demon?”

Kangxi said, “But if my guess is incorrect …”

Wei Xiaobao busily said, “Definitely correct.”

Kangxi said, “… the old wh0re had four copies of sutra in her hands. But there is one very strange thing: *Fu Huang* bestowed to me that copy of the Plain Yellow Banner’s sutra, all along I put it on the table in the Upper Study Room, but suddenly it disappeared. You think who has such a nerve to brazenly come to the Upper Study Room and steal something?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Can come and go the Upper Study Room, and have guts to take a book without permission, only … only …”

“Princess Jianning!” Kangxi said.

Wei Xiaobao did not dare to interrupt; he mused, “This time indeed you can see things like a deity.”

Kangxi said, “The old wh0re sent her daughter to steal my copy of the sutra. In that case, she had five copies in her hands.”

“Let us quickly go to the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful to search,” Wei Xiaobao said, “The old wh0re was running away out of the Palace empty-handed, she did not bring anything.” While his heart was pounding madly, “If this moment the Emperor search my room, even if Xiao Guizi has a hundred heads, all will be chopped down.”

Kangxi shook his head, “I have already searched carefully,” he said, “I could not find anything. I only found a monk robe. The old wh0re’s good friend was actually a monk. Ha ha, ha ha …!”

Wei Xiaobao started to laugh, but after only two ‘ha’s, he felt it was extremely

rude, so he hastily stopped laughing. Kangxi was still laughing heartily, however, as he said, “It’s just that when that short winter melon ran away, carrying the old wh0re with him, I saw that he had long hair, hence I was surprised. Most likely he was like that palace maid impersonator, his hair was fake. That fellow was short and fat; the old wh0re’s man was not a good steal, why did she look for such a short winter melon?”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “That short winter melon’s martial art skill was very high. If he was handsome, he might not necessarily have the ability to sneak into the Palace. Last time that fake palace maid was also very ugly.”

Kangxi laughed and said, “You got that right.” After a short pause, he said, “The other three copies of the sutra are in the hands of Plain Red Banner, Plain Blue Banner, and Bordered Blue Banner, three Banners’ possession. The current Plain Red Banner’s Banner Commander is Prince Kang, I have already ordered him to present the sutra to me.”

Wei Xiaobao thought, “That night someone stole Prince Kang’s sutra, and right now it is in my possession; how can Prince Kang present it to the Emperor? This time that Ol’ Kang will be a deep trouble.”

Kangxi continued, “The Plain Blue Banner’s Banner Commander Fu Deng is still young. Just now I asked him, he said that his predecessor, the Banner Commander Jia Kun died during the assault of Yunnan; the funeral arrangement was taken over by Wu Sangui. What Wu Sangui handed over to him was an official seal, several army banners, and several tens of thousands *taels* of silver. Other than that, there was nothing else.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “The sutra must be embezzled by Wu Sangui.”

“That’s right,” Kangxi said, “For that reason, when you get to Wu Sangui’s mansion, carefully investigate this matter, think of a way to get the sutra. That servant Wu Sangui is very crafty, you must never let him know the inside story.”

“Yes,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Your servant will act according to the situation, will attempt to swindle him to come out.”

Kangxi knitted his brows, he paced back and forth in the Upper Study Room. “The Banner Commander of the Bordered Blue Banner, Eshuokeha is a big muddled egg, I told him to present the sutra to me, unexpectedly he said that it

disappeared a few years ago. I dispatched Imperial Bodyguards to his home to search, no trace. I have already sent him to Tian Lao [lit. heaven prison], and have the people interrogate and torture him well. I want to know whether it was really stolen or did he hide it and unwilling to turn it in."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Perhaps the old wh0re sent someone to embezzle it; I wonder if it was seized by force or was stolen in secret." He thought, "I am not slandering the old wh0re; the person who seized it by force or stole it in secret was most likely the short winter melon." He added, "Supposing these six copies were obtained by the old wh0re, when all is said and done, where are they?" As soon as he said that, he felt a slight remorse, "I said it wrong," he mused, "I suffer too much losses. I said it was the old wh0re who obtained the six copies of the sutra, while the one who has six copies of the sutra is actually Wei Xiaobao. Won't that mean I am the old wh0re?"

Kangxi said, "Actually, what is the old wh0re's background? At this moment we do not have any clue. She managed this important matter, there must be someone she conspired with. After she obtained the sutra, she must have smuggled it out of the Palace one by one. I am afraid it will be extremely difficult to recover all those six copies of sutra. Fortunately the Empress Dowager said that to find the Great Qing's Dragon Vein location, one must have all eight copies in one's possession. Even if someone obtained seven copies, as long as one copy is lacking, all seven will be useless. We only have to have the two copies in Prince Kang and Wu Sangui's hands and destroy them, and then there will be peace and security without any trouble. We do not want to find the Dragon Vein; as long as nobody else finds it, that will be enough. It's just that I lost the sutra *Fu Huang* bestowed to me; if henceforth I cannot find it back, I am really unfilial. Humph, Princess Jianning, that little … little …"

Kangxi could not finish his cursing, in his heart Wei Xiaobao was finishing it for him, "Little wh0re!"

Right this moment, however, in his heart Kangxi was recalling the admonition given by Shunzhi in the meditation room at the Jing'e Temple of Mount Wutai: "My son, you are astute and competent, you cherish common people; you are a much stronger emperor than I was. There is a map hidden in those eight copies of 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra', it's a map to an enormous hidden treasure. When

our Eight Banners' troops entered the pass, they plundered gold, silver, money and valuables everywhere they went in the Central Plains, and hid everything in this treasure trove. The Eight Banners have equal share on this treasure trove; therefore, the map was divided into eight parts, and were distributed to the Eight Banners, so that no single banner can keep everything for themselves. The Han people inside the pass is a hundred times more numerous than us, Manchu people; if they rose up in rebellion simultaneously, we are absolutely unable to suppress it. At that time, we have no choice but to return outside the pass, open up the treasure-trove, divide the treasure equally among the Eight Banners, and henceforth we won't have to worry not to have enough food and warm clothes for the next several years."

Kangxi recalled that at that time his father emperor asked Wei Xiaobao to bring back these words: 'In the matters of the world, he must let nature take its course, nothing can be forced. It would be best if he could benefit the common people of the Central Plains. But if the common people wanted us to leave, then from the place we came, there we should come back to.' He also heard Shunzhi saying, 'That our Manchurian Qing is able to conquer the land under heaven, it is solely by the Will of Heaven; in this matter, we are really lucky. We cannot harbor the thought that we will stay in the Central Plains for a long time; we must not let Manchu people destroy everything inside the Pass, because then a single horse will not be able to go beyond the Pass."

With his mouth Kangxi repeatedly say 'yes', but in his heart he was thinking otherwise, "The great undertaking of our Great Qing in the Central Plains is getting more and more stable. From now on we ought to open up new territory and expand our lands, establishing a foundation that won't pull out in ten thousand ages; why would we need to prepare a fallback plan? As soon as we have a fallback, it would only bring disaster. Father has left home, his heart is contented, he is standing aloof from worldly affair, no wonder he has that kind of thought."

As expected, his father continued, "However, the Regent instructed all Banner Commanders: the fact that there is an enormous treasure buried outside the Pass must never be revealed. Otherwise, if the Manchurian kings, dukes and soldiers knew that there is a fallback plan, when the Han people revolt, they

won't be willing to risk their lives in fighting, and then our great undertaking will fail. For this reason, when the Banner Commanders pass on the sutras to the next generation, they can only say that the sutras hide a great secret concerning the Manchurian Qing's Dragon Vein, that if the Dragon Vein is dug and broken, all the Manchurian people will die without a burial site. Hence, first, the later generation of the Eight Banners won't get greedy and sneakily dig the treasure; second, if there is anybody trying to dig the treasure, the Eight Banners would rise together to attack, to do their utmost to stop it. Only the lord of the country one person is allowed to know the real secret."

Thinking back about the past conversation, he had to admit, "The Regent indeed had great skill and strategy, his foresight is very true." Casting a glance toward Wei Xiaobao, he thought, "Although Xiao Guizi is loyal, I can only tell him about the Dragon Vein, I cannot say anything about the treasure. Someday this boy will grow, there is no guarantee that he won't be greedy. The Empress Dowager told me yesterday, when *Fu Huang* made up his mind to leave home, he entrusted this great secret to the Empress Dowager, telling her to wait for me to grow up, and then pass on this secret to me. The Empress Dowager was willing to bear humiliation to preserve her life was precisely for this reason. She did not know that I have already gone to Mount Wutai to see *Fu Huang*. But it was fortunate this way, the Empress Dowager was not killed by the old wh0re."

Seeing Kangxi pacing back and forth, deep in thought, Wei Xiaobao suddenly had an idea, "Your Majesty," he said, "If the old wh0re was sent by Wu Sangui to infiltrate the Palace, that means he … he has seven copies of sutra in his hand."

Kangxi was startled; thinking that it was a great possibility. "Send in the Imperial Clothing Supervisor!" he called out.

After a while, an old eunuch entered the Study Room and kowtowed; he was the eunuch manager [orig. Zongguan] of the Imperial Clothing Supervisors. Kangxi asked, "Have you found out?"

The eunuch replied, "Reporting to Your Majesty: your servant has examined it carefully, the material of that monk robe was weaved in Beijing."

"Hmm," Kangxi mumbled. Wei Xiaobao understood, "The Emperor wants to know the short winter melon's origin. The material of his clothing was

manufactured in Beijing, so what? He did not find anything."

The eunuch continued, "However, the man's undergarment was made of Liaodong Peninsula's cocoon silk, it was the product of Jinzhou [prefecture, Liaoning province] region."

Kangxi's countenance lit up; he nodded and said, "Dismissed." The eunuch kowtowed and withdrew.

Kangxi said, "Perhaps you are right, this short winter melon may have some connection with Wu Sangui."

"Your servant does not understand," Wei Xiaobao said.

Kangxi explained, "Formerly Wu Sangui was guarding Shanhai Pass, Jinzhou was his territory. Perhaps this short winter melon was his former subordinate."

"Exactly!" Wei Xiaobao happily said, "Your Majesty is brilliant, your premonition is definitely correct."

Kangxi muttered to himself, "If the old wh0re returned to Yunnan, the danger of your trip may increase by one part. You must bring more Imperial Bodyguards, plus three thousand Valiant Cavalry sergeants."

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao said, "Your Majesty, please set your heart at ease. It would be best if your servant can catch the old wh0re and the short winter melon, we can make mincemeat of them and thus venting the Empress Dowager's anger."

Kangxi patted Wei Xiaobao's shoulder; he smiled and said, "If you can render this great service, and help the Empress Dowager venting her anger, hey, hey, your age is young, your official position is big, you are going to make things difficult for me. However, we are the young emperor, the young high-ranking minister, a couple of young people managed to accomplish big matters; we let those bunch of old officials be intimidated and stupefied. It's very amusing."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Although Your Majesty is young, your wisdom and foresight has already made that bunch of old 'things' full of admiration in their hearts. After you deal with Wu Sangui, it will be 'before there is no such thing, after there is no one of ancient times' [qian wu lai zhe, hou wu gu ren]."

Kangxi burst out laughing; "Damn it," he said, "It's 'no one precedes, no one

follows' [qian wu gu ren, hou wu lai zhe]. You, this fellow, is clever and quick-witted, but without learning or skills, and not willing to study."

Wei Xiaobao laughed, "Yes, yes," he said, "When your servant has some spare time, I will study well for a few days."

Actually, Wei Xiaobao's uncouth and illiteracy was what made Kangxi like him more. If Kangxi wanted literate and highly educated chamberlains by his side, he could have as many as he wanted. Day in and day out he heard a lot of good poems, classical quotations and Confucius teachings. Only when talking street talk and day-to-day speech with Wei Xiaobao did he really feel carefree.

Wei Xiaobao withdrew from Kangxi presence. He had just went out of the Upper Study Room when an Imperial Bodyguard came up to him, paid him respect, and said in a low voice, "Wei *Fu Zongguan* [deputy chief], Prince Kang wishes to see you; he was wondering if Wei *Fu Zongguan* have spare time."

"Where is *Wangye*?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

The Imperial Bodyguard replied, "*Wangye* is waiting for your reply at the Imperial Bodyguard room."

"Has he come personally?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

"Yes, yes," the Imperial Bodyguard replied, "He said he wanted to invite Wei *Fu Zongguan* to drink wine and watch the opera. He was afraid that His Majesty might have some important matter for Wei *Fu Zongguan* to do that you, Senior, cannot spare a moment for him."

Wei Xiaobao laughed. "Damn it," he said, "What 'Senior' am I?"

Arriving at the Imperial Bodyguard room, he saw Prince Kang with a teacup in one hand, sitting on a chair with a blank expression on his face, wrinkled eyebrows, and deep worried look. As soon as he saw Wei Xiaobao, he hastily put down the teacup, scrambled up to pull Wei Xiaobao's hand, and said, "*Xiongdi*, long time no see, I miss you like crazy."

Wei Xiaobao was fully aware that Prince Kang was looking for him because of the lost copy of sutra, but seeing he was this warm, he was quite happy. "If *Wangye* needs anything, you can simply send someone to let me know," he said, "You want to bestow me with food and wine, won't lowly officer rush over to

your place? You are giving me a lot of face like this, you actually come personally to see me."

"I have prepared an opera troupe at home," Prince Kang said, "I was only afraid *Xiongdi* does not have time. Can we go now?"

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Alright, since *Wangye* is going to bestow a dinner to me, as long as His Majesty did not send me to do anything urgent, even if my own old man died, lowly officer will have to disturb *Wangye* and eat your food first before doing anything else."

The two of them left the Palace hand-in-hand, they mounted their horses and rode to the Prince's mansion. Prince Kang entertained his guest lavishly, he treated Wei Xiaobao with utmost respect. This time there was no other guest in his mansion.

After dinner, Prince Kang invited Wei Xiaobao into his study room. He made small talks, praising Wei Xiaobao about being the Emperor's proxy at the Shaolin Temple and amassing countless achievements and virtue, with good result; he also praised him as a young man, but had achieved the Deputy Chief position of the Imperial Bodyguards and Commander position of the Valiant Cavalry Brigade; his future prospect was really unlimited. Wei Xiaobao responded by some humble talk, saying that in the future he would rely heavily on the Prince's support and guidance.

Prince Kang sighed. "*Xiongdi*," he said, "You and I are family, I don't need to conceal anything from you: your *Laoge* [old older brother] is facing an imminent catastrophe; I am afraid my life, as well as my family's, will be difficult to protect."

Wei Xiaobao pretended to be greatly astonished. "*Wangye* is of royal family, a Great *Beilei* [see note 15 chapter 13] of the Virtuous Dynasty, the *Tie Maozi Wang*[68], the person His Majesty put in an important position as someone he could trust; what kind of imminent catastrophe might you be facing?"

"*Xiongdi*," Prince Kang said, "You did not know. When we, Manchurian Qing entered the Pass, the Banner Commander of each Banner was bestowed a Buddhist sutra by the Late Emperor. I am the Banner Commander of the Plain Red Banner, hence I was also entrusted with this gift. Today His Majesty

summoned me, asking me to present the sutra the Late Emperor bestowed to me. But … but my copy of sutra, somehow, unexpectedly … unexpectedly it is stolen …"

Wei Xiaobao's entire face looked astonished. "That's really strange!" he said, "Stealing gold and silver, I can understand. But stealing sutra? What good does it have? Is the sutra made of gold? Or perhaps fully inlaid with jade, pearls and precious stones, so that it is extremely valuable?"

"It's not that," Prince Kang said, "It is only a common sutra. But I was not able to safeguard the item that was bestowed to me by the Late Emperor, it is really disrespectful. His Majesty suddenly wanted me to present it to him, I am afraid he already knew that I lost this sutra and wanted to investigate this matter. *Xiongdi*, please help me." While saying that, he stood up and bowed with cupped fist to Wei Xiaobao.

Wei Xiaobao hastily returned the propriety; he said, "*Wangye* is too polite, don't you think *Xiaoren* deserve it?"

With a distressed look Prince Kang said, "*Xiongdi*, if you can't find a way to help me, I will have no choice but to kill myself."

"*Wangye* is considering this matter too heavily," Wei Xiaobao said, "Tomorrow I will present a memorial to let His Majesty know about this matter, at most he will punish *Wangye* by several months of official salary, or perhaps rebuke you openly in front of the other officials; how can there be any life and death situation?"

Prince Kang shook his head and said, "If only I can keep my life, I am willing to forego my royal status as a prince; even if I have to be a commoner, I will thank the Heaven and thank the Earth, and will be perfectly contented. Because of losing the sutra bestowed to him, the Banner Commander of the Bordered Blue Banner Eshuokeha was put into Tian Lao yesterday. I heard he received a lot of beating. His Majesty sent people to interrogate him severely, to find out where did that copy of sutra go?" While saying that, his facial muscle twitched, apparently he was imagining the miserable and ruthless torture he would experience if he was sent to Tian Lao.

Wei Xiaobao knitted his brows, "The sutra is that important?" he asked, "Ah,

right, that day when I searched and seized Oboi's home, the Empress Dowager ordered me to find two books in his house, some thirty-two-chapter sutra, forty-three-chapter sutra, or something like that. Is that the thing that *Wangye* lost?"

The worried look on Prince Kang's face grew deeper. "Exactly," he said, "It's the 'Forty-two-Chapter Sutra'. When you searched and seized Oboi's house, the Empress Dowager did not want anything else, but she only wanted that sutra, thus it is clear that that thing is extremely important. Did *Xiongdi* find it?"

"I did," Wei Xiaobao replied, "That servant Oboi had the sutra in his bedroom, in a hole on the floor; it took quite some efforts for me to find it. What's so strange about this sutra anyway? I can go to any monk's temple and ask for eight or ten copies for you, then you can present it to His Majesty."

Prince Kang said, "The Late Emperor personally bestowed the sutra, it is totally different than ordinary Buddhist scripture from the monk's temple; I can't pass it for the real thing."

With a solemn expression Wei Xiaobao said, "If that's the case, then it's a bit troublesome. I wonder what it is that *Wangye* wanted me to do?"

Prince Kang shook his head and said, "I really cannot say it; how … how can I ask *Xiongdi* to so something that will disadvantage our lord?"

Wei Xiaobao struck his chest, "Wangye might as well say it," he said, "You consider Wei Xiaobao as your friend, I will deliver this little life for you; it is *yi qi*. Very well, you present a memorial to His Majesty, just tell him that I, Wei Xiaobao borrowed the sutra to have a look, but I was not careful and I lost it. These last few days His Majesty liked me very much, at most he will have me flogged, he might not necessarily want to chop my head."

"Thank you very much for *Xiongdi*'s good intention," Prince Kang said, "But I'm afraid it won't work. His Majesty can't possibly believe that *Xiongdi* would want to borrow the sutra to have a look."

Wei Xiaobao nodded. "Although I have been a monk once, but I don't know any character even if it is as big as a watermelon. I am afraid His Majesty won't believe that I borrowed the sutra to read it. We must find another way."

Prince Kang said, "I was thinking of asking *Xiongdi* … of asking *Xiongdi* … asking

Xiongdi …" He said 'asking *Xiongdi*' three times but did not finish; he only looked at Wei Xiaobao, watching for his reaction.

"*Wangye*," Wei Xiaobao said, "Please don't feel awkward. Your *Xiongdi*'s little life …" His left hand grabbed his own pigtail, his right hand moved across his own neck, and then with both hands he made a gesture as if he lifted his own head and presented it to the Prince. He continued, "… has already been given to you. As long as it's not something that will endanger His Majesty, I will obey whatever you wish to tell me."

Prince Kang was greatly delighted. "*Xiongdi* upholds *yi qi* in such a high regard like this, ay, your Gege don't have anything much to say. I only wish to ask *Xiongdi* to go to either the Empress Dowager or His Majesty, and steal one sutra. I will prepare several dozen of master artisans to wait in here. We will start working that very night to make a copy of the sutra, so that I can pass through this crisis."

"Can you make an exact replica?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Prince Kang busily said, "We can, we can. We simply have to make an exact replica, I guarantee it won't have any flaw. After we finish making the copy, *Xiongdi* may immediately return the original, we won't dare to make the slightest damage to it."

Actually, he was fully aware that hastily making a copy of the sutra without any flaw was extremely difficult; he was thinking of wrapping both the real and fake sutras, and have Wei Xiaobao return the fake one to the original place, while he presented the real one to the Emperor. He presumed Wei Xiaobao did not know anything, and would have a hard time distinguishing the real from the fake. If Wei Xiaobao did not find out about it later, that would be an extraordinary good luck; however, even if he did, Prince Kang would not be implicated. It's just that at this moment he could not openly explain his intention to Wei Xiaobao.

"Alright," Wei Xiaobao said, "The matter should not be delayed, I am going to find a way to steal it. *Wangye* should just wait quietly in your mansion for my news."

Prince Kang thanked him profusely [orig. thousand kindness ten thousand thanks], and personally walked him out of the gate. He also warned Wei Xiaobao

repeatedly to be careful.

Wei Xiaobao returned to his room. He pieced together the several dozen of sheepskin fragments under the lantern; thinking that since he had obtained seven out of the eight copies of sutra, even if there would be some empty spaces, he would be able to assemble most of it. Who would have thought that after spending more than an hour he could not even locate the corners of the map? By nature he did not have the patience, and was easily bored. Thereupon he put the several hundred small pieces in a piece of wax paper and wrapped it in a layer of oilcloth.

After putting the bundle inside his inner pocket, he thought, “Old Kang is the Banner Commander of the Plain Red Banner, naturally his copy of sutra has red envelope. Tomorrow I’ll simply give him a copy with different color.”

Early morning the next day, he sewed back the outer sheepskin cover of the Bordered White Banner’s sutra, pasted the envelope, and put it in his pocket. He then went straight to Prince Kang’s mansion.

As soon as Prince Kang heard about his arrival, he hurriedly came out to greet him. Holding Wei Xiaobao’s hands, he repeatedly asked, “How was it? How was it?”

Wei Xiaobao frowned with concerned look on his face; he shook his head. Prince Kang’s heart immediately sank. “It is indeed a very difficult matter, today we cannot succeed …”

“I have it,” Wei Xiaobao said in a low voice, “I am only afraid that you won’t be able to make a replica within ten days or half a month.”

Prince Kang was ecstatic; he jumped up suddenly, gave Wei Xiaobao a big hug, and carried him into his study room. Seeing their *Wangye* was acting like that, the numerous attendants and family warriors could not help but were secretly amused.

Wei Xiaobao took the sutra out of his pocket and presented it with both hands, asking, “Is it this thing?”

Prince Kang grabbed the sutra tightly, his body was shaking all over; opening the envelope, he looked inside and said, “Precisely, precisely. This is the sutra

bestowed to the Bordered White Banner, hence it has white envelope with red border around it. We must start working on the carved printing block immediately. *Xiongdi*, can you think of some excuse so that I can stall for a few more days. Um, how about I pretend to fall down from the horse, with head broken and blood flowing, and remain unconscious? When the replica is finished, I will kowtow in salute to His Majesty. Do you think it's good?"

Wei Xiaobao shook his head and said, "His Majesty is extremely brilliant; you fell and knocked down dramatically like that, he would be suspicious instead. You present a 'western shellfish goods' [not sure what it means, 西贝货儿] to the Emperor, His Majesty examines it carefully, your trickery will be exposed at once. The copy of sutra that you lost, other than the color of the cover, what else is different?"

Prince Kang said, "Other than the cover, everything else is identical."

"That's easy," Wei Xiaobao said, "Just replace the cover of this book, today you can present it to the Emperor."

Prince Kang was startled and delighted at the same time. With a trembling voice he said, "This … this … book is missing from the Palace, if it is being investigated, I am afraid Xiongdi will be implicated."

"I quietly stole it from the Upper Study Room last night," Wei Xiaobao said, "Nobody saw it. Even if someone did, humph, humph, that puppy will not dare to say anything. I will take this responsibility from you."

Prince Kang was very grateful; he could not stop his eyes from turning wet. Holding Wei Xiaobao's hands tight, he could no longer say anything.

Wei Xiaobao returned to the Palace. He wanted to take two more sutra and go to see Fat Toutuo and Lu Gaoxuan. He thought that the Plain Yellow Banner's sutra was soaked in poisoned water and was snatched away by Sangjie Lama; the Bordered White Banner's sutra he gave away to Prince Kang, he still had five sutras left. He seized the Bordered Yellow and Plain White, two copies, from Oboi's house. The Bordered Blue he acquired from the old wh0re. The old wh0re had seen all three copies. By now the old wh0re must be with Cult Leader Hong, hence if he presented these three copies, it would not be too good. He snatched away the Plain Red Banner's copy from Prince Kang's mansion. The Bordered

Red Banner's copy was from Rui Dong's body. Although the old wh0re knew the origin of this copy, there was no harm in it. Therefore, he decided to give Fat and Lu, two people, the Plain Red and the Bordered Red copies.

Fat and Lu, two people had already been waiting eagerly for him. Seeing him suddenly appeared with two copies of the sutra their Cult Leader wanted, they were overjoyed. Wei Xiaobao said, "Mr. Lu, take these sutras and present them to Jiaozhu and Madame. Tell them that I heard that Wu Sangui knows the whereabouts of the other six. I, the White Dragon Envoy will handle this matter for Jiaozhu and Madame. I will be loyal and devoted, a hundred thousand deaths, a million deaths will not prevent me; thereupon I will go to Yunnan, I will go through water and tread on fire to find those sutras. Fat *Zunzhe*, I want you to come with me to set up more great merit for Jiaozhu."

Fat and Lu, two people happily agreed. Fat Toutuo said, "Lu *Xiong*, the White Dragon Envoy rendered this great service, the two of us can also enjoy the benefit. If Jiaozhu bestows us the leopard embryo tendon-altering pill's antidote, you must immediately send someone you trusted to deliver it to Yunnan."

"Yes, yes," Lu Gaoxuan repeatedly complied; he thought, "The White Dragon Envoy is so young, yet he is already established like this. Someday the great position of Cult Leader will definitely be his. If I don't seize the opportunity to curry favor with him right now, what am I waiting for?" Therefore, he said, "This antidote is indeed not a small matter, subordinate will not feel at ease to hand it over to other people, I will definitely deliver it personally. White Dragon Envoy, subordinate is loyal and devoted to you. I will make sure that you take the antidote first before subordinate and Pang *Xiong* [Fat brother] take it. Otherwise, even is the leopard embryo tendon-altering pill flares up, and subordinate has the antidote in my hand, I would rather die than take it first."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Very good, very good, you are so loyal and devoted to me, I won't forget it."

Lu Gaoxuan was delighted; he bowed and said, "Subordinate respectfully wish White Dragon Envoy a life of ease and comfort forever, and life as long as Mount Nan."

Wei Xiaobao thought, “My position is only a level below Jiaozhu, a life of ease and comfort forever, and life as long as Mount Nan does not sound too bad.”

He returned to the Palace. Before long, a eunuch announced the Imperial Decree: conferring Wei Xiaobao the status as first class viscount, assigning him as the marriage envoy to escort Princess Jianning to visit Yunnan, to be bestowed in marriage to Ping Xi Wang Heir Apparent Wu Yingxiong. Wu Yingxiong was conferred the title Third Class Jing Qi Ni Ha Pan[69] plus the concurrent titles of Shao Bao [young protector/guardian] and Taizitaibao [tutor to the crown prince].

Wei Xiaobao took some money and gave it to the eunuch. He mused, “That fellow Wu Yingxiong has it too easy, he is going to marry a good-looking princess and promoted as high-ranking official. The mister storyteller said that Jing Zhong Yue Chuan, Yue Fei, Yue *Yeye* [Grandpa Yue] was also conferred the title Shao Bao. How can you, stinky fellow Wu Yingxiong, be compared to Yue *Yeye*?” But then he thought, “His Majesty bestowed him a high-ranking official position, so that Wu Sangui won’t suspect anything. Sooner or later his head will be chopped. Wasn’t Oboi also a high-ranking official with the title Shao Bao? Right, right, Yue Fei, Yue Shao Bao was also killed by the emperor. Hence it is obvious that those with the title Shao Bao is going to be beheaded. Next time His Majesty wants to confer the title Shao Bao to me, I must desperately decline it.”

Immediately he went to have an audience with the Emperor to express his gratitude. “Your Majesty,” he said, “This time your servant is going to Yunnan on a mission for you, if you have some ‘brocade pouch of miracle plans’, why don’t you tell me right now?”

Kangxi burst out in laughter. “Xiao Guizi does not know how to read,” he said, “A brocade pouch of miracle plans will be sealed in a brocade pouch; mysteries of heaven must not be revealed, how can I tell you right now?”

“So be it,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Too bad I am illiterate, even if Your Majesty has a brocade pouch of miracle plans, it must be drawn into pictures. Your Majesty, last time you ordered me to Qing Liang Temple to be the head administrator, the drawings in the Imperial Decree were very beautiful.”

Kangxi laughed; he said, “Since ancient times, I am afraid only the two of us, a

ruler and his minister, who use pictures in place of letters in an imperial decree."

"This is called 'no one precedes, no one follows'," Wei Xiaobao said.

Kangxi laughed and said, "Very good, you remember it well. I taught you idioms[70], and you remember."

Wei Xiaobao said, "The ones Your Majesty taught me, I always remember. The ones other people taught me, some I can remember, some others I can't always remember; I don't know why. Just like the saying 'once a promise is made, some horses cannot chase'. What kind of horses, I never remember."

Right this moment, a eunuch reported the arrival of Princess Jianning who came to say goodbye. Kangxi looked at Wei Xiaobao, telling him to bring the Princess in.

As soon as Princess Jianning entered the Study Room, she threw herself in Kangxi's bosom, while crying loudly. "*Huangdi Gege*," she said, "I … I … I don't want to be married in Yunnan, please retract your Imperial Edict."

Originally, ever since they were little, Kangxi had always liked this younger sister; however, after he found out about the fake Empress Dowager's evil conducts, he started to loathe and detest this younger sister. By marrying her to Wu Yingxiong, his real intention was to frame her; however, seeing her pitiful cry this moment, he could not bear not to feel pity for her. It's just that things had come this far, he could not retract his Imperial Decree. Patting her shoulder gently, he said in tender voice, "When a girl grow up, she must be married. The husband I pick for you is really not bad. Xiao Guizi, tell Princess, that Wu Yingxiong is really handsome, isn't he?"

"Absolutely," Wei Xiaobao said, "Princess, the prince consort is a well-known handsome man in Yunnan province. Last time he came to Beijing, there were dozens of young women fighting outside the gate. The fight claimed three lives."

Princess Jianning was startled. "What happened?" she asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Ping Xi Wang Heir Apparent is very handsome, he is famous throughout the world. When he entered the Capital that day, thousands and tens of thousands young women and married women throughout Beijing's city wall were crowding the gate to have a look at him. Several dozens of young

women, you squeezed me, I crowded you, they ended up fighting with each other."

Princess Jianning laughed through her tears. "Pei," she spat, "You lied! How can there be such matter?"

"Princess," Wei Xiaobao said, "Do you know why His Majesty is sending me to escort you to Yunnan? And told me to bring a lot of Imperial Bodyguards, to give you adequate protection?"

The Princess replied, "It is because *Huangdi Gege* loves me."

"That's right," Wei Xiaobao said, "This is His Majesty's wisdom and foresight, his deep plans and distant thoughts. Just think: the prince consort is that handsome, I don't know how many young women want to marry him and be his wife. And now all of a sudden he will be yours, I don't know how many vinegar vats, vinegar jugs, vinegar pots, vinegar bottles are overturned in the world. Some young women are bound to know martial arts, they might give you some trouble. Although Princess herself has an excellent martial art skill, the few are no match for the many after all; isn't that right? For this reason, your servant is escorting Princess to the south this time, the load on my shoulder is indeed not light. Dealing with an army of sweet and sour women, just think, how difficult is that?"

Princess Jianning laughed. "What sweet and sour army of women?" she asked, "You are really good at talking nonsense." Right now her smiling face looked like flower, while several drops of sparkling tears were still hanging on her cheeks. She turned to Kangxi and said, "*Huangdi Gege*, after Xiao Guizi escorting me to Yunnan, let him accompany me talking to relieve my boredom, otherwise I don't want to go."

Kangxi laughed and said, "Alright, alright, let him accompany you for some time, until you get used to the situation there, and then we'll talk about it."

Princess Jianning said, "I want him to accompany me forever, I don't want him to go back."

Wei Xiaobao stuck out his tongue. "That won't do," he said, "If your *Fuma Ye* [master emperor's son-in-law] loathes seeing me, he might get angry and chop me with a saber. A headless Xiao Guizi won't be able to accompany Princess

talking to relieve your boredom."

Princess Jianning's little mouth flattened. "Humph," she said, "He dares?"

Kangxi said, "Xiao Guizi, before you go to Yunnan, I have something else I want you investigate. In this Upper Study Room I have lost a Buddhist sutra; I just felt a bit strange, even in here unexpectedly someone dares to steal things!" When he said the last sentence, his tone turned rather stern.

"Yes, yes," Wei Xiaobao complied.

"*Huangdi Gege*," Princess Jianning interrupted, "It was me who took your Buddhist sutra. Tee hee …"

"Why did you take it?" Kangxi asked, "Why didn't you ask me first?"

The Princess laughed and said, "Empress Dowager ordered me to take it. Empress Dowager said, every day the Emperor must deal with thousands and hundreds military and country's affairs, if I have to ask you for a small matter like a Buddhist sutra, it be too troublesome for you."

"Humph," Kangxi snorted, but did not say anything.

Princess Jianning stuck out her tongue. "*Huangdi Gege*," she pleaded, "Please don't be mad at me for this matter. Later when I go to Yunnan, if I want to come here to take your book again, I won't be able to do it."

Hearing her pitiful pleading, Kangxi's heart softened immediately. He said tenderly, "When you go to Yunnan, if you need anything, just let me know." After a short pause, he continued, "What can possibly be missing in Ping Xi Wang mansion?"

Wei Xiaobao went out of the Upper Study Room, a crowd of Imperial Bodyguards and eunuchs came to congratulate him. Each Imperial Bodyguard was hoping to be brought along to Yunnan; Wu Sangui's riches could be compared to a country, it was a cushy job, there was a nine out of ten chance that they would make some money there.

In the middle of the evening, Prince Kang went into the Palace to see Wei Xiaobao again. Jubilantly he said, "*Xiongdi*, the sutra has been presented to the Emperor. His Majesty is happy, he even praised me several times."

“That’s very good,” Wei Xiaobao said.

Prince Kang said, “You won’t leave for Yunnan in several days, today *Gege* will play host; first, to congratulate you of being conferred the title viscount, second, to give you a farewell dinner.” Taking along Wei Xiaobao’s hand, they left the Palace. But this time they did not go to Prince Kang’s mansion, instead, they went to an exquisite high-ranking official residence in Dongcheng district [lit. eastern city]. Although this house was not as grand as Prince Kang’s mansion, the engraved building, the painted beam, the flower, trees and mountain rocks, all the arrangement was very luxurious.

“*Xiongdi*,” Prince Kang said, “What do you think of this house?”

Wei Xiaobao laughed. “Very good, very beautiful!” he said, “*Wangye* really knows how to live a happy and prosperous life. Is this the Xiao Fujin’s [fujin is Manchurian word for wife] residence?”

Prince Kang laughed but did not answer his question; he invited Wei Xiaobao to enter the main hall. Many nobilities and high-ranking officials had already waited in the hall. Songgotu, Dolong, and the others came out to greet him. The word ‘Congratulations’ did not stop flowing into his ears. Prince Kang said with a laugh, “Today we are congratulating Wei *Daren* for getting a promotion; according to reason, he should sit in the place of honor. However, since he is the host, he will have to sit in the host’s seat.”

Wei Xiaobao was surprised. “What host?” he asked.

Prince Kang laughed and said, “This house is Wei *Daren*’s Viscount Mansion. Your *Gege* has prepared it for you. The carriage driver, cook, servants, maids, we have them all. Only it was such in a hurry that I am afraid it won’t be completely satisfactory. If *Xiongdi* wants anything, please feel free to send someone to my home to get it.”

Wei Xiaobao was pleasantly surprised; he did help Prince Kang out of a big trouble, but it did not cost him a single *wen*, did not pose him the slightest risk. Although he was aware that the Prince would definitely thank him with a gift, he had never imagined that he would receive such a heavy present. Momentarily he was speechless; he could only stammered, “This … this … how can I receive it?”

Prince Kang squeezed his hand and said, “The two of us have friendship that

surpasses life, why should you still distinguish between what's yours and what's mine? Come, come, come, everybody must drink. Whoever is not drunk cannot go home today."

The banquet continued with wine, everyone enjoyed themselves to the full before the party broke up. Wei Xiaobao was now a viscount, everybody also knew that he disguised himself as a eunuch under imperial orders; hence he could not comeback to live at the Palace anymore.

That night he slept in a splendid, magnificent and luxurious bedroom. Looking around, he noticed that if not golden utensils or silverwares, then it must be silk or satin. He suddenly thought, "His granny, if I open a brothel in this Viscount Mansion, ten Lovely Spring Courtyards cannot compare."

Early in the morning the next day, he went to see Jiu Nan, to report that the Emperor was sending him to Yunnan to escort the bride.

"Very good," Jiu Nan said, "I will accompany you."

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted; he turned his head to look at Ah Ke. Jiu Nan said, "Ah Ke is coming with us."

Wei Xiaobao was even more overjoyed at the news. Even if the Emperor conferred him a hundred viscount titles, it still could not compare to this one good news.

After taking his leave from Jiu Nan, he went to Tian Di Hui's new temporary lodging. Chen Jinnan hesitatingly said, "The Tatar Emperor favors Wu Sangui like that, we can't pull him down for the time being. But this is such a golden opportunity. Xiaobao, if the traitor Wu Sangui does not revolt, we have to provoke him to rebel. If the provocation does not work, we have to frame him as a rebel. I should have gone with you, but when *Er Gongzi* and Feng Xifan are back in Taiwan, they will surely slander me in front of *Wangye*. I expect *Wangye* will send someone to inquire of Tian Di Hui's affair. I must stay here to report everything according to the facts. You may take all brothers here to Yunnan."

"I am afraid that fellow Feng Xifan will return to harm Shifu," Wei Xiaobao said, "Better have the brothers here to help Shifu, otherwise disciple won't feel relieved."

Chen Jinnan patted his shoulder; he said warmly, “It’s rare to have someone as filial as you are. Although Feng Xifan’s martial art is strong, your Shifu may not necessarily be weaker than he is. Last time he simply attacked us when we expected it the least, he hid behind the door and launched a sneak attack; hence, he managed to injure my right arm first. Next time we meet, he won’t necessarily be able to occupy the advantageous position. Presently, killing Wu Sangui is the most important matter, we must try to accomplish it at all costs. I only hope that the matter in here will be resolved as quickly as possible, so that I can catch up with you to Yunnan. We can’t let the Mu Family have a head start.”

Wei Xiaobao nodded and said, “If we let the Mu Family make their move first, later on Tian Di Hui will have to obey their command; that won’t be too good.”

Chen Jinnan reached out to check Wei Xiaobao’s pulse, he also ordered him to pull out his tongue. He frowned and said, “How can the poison you contacted change its nature? Fortunately it won’t flare-up for the time being. You must not train the internal energy cultivation I taught you, so that the poison will not enter your channels.”

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted; he said in his heart, “You told me not to train martial art, you said so yourself; you cannot blame me in the future.” He also thought, “This leopard embryo tendon-altering pill is really fierce, even Shifu does not know what it is. I only hope Mr. Lu will deliver the antidote soon.”

Several days later, everything was prepared. Wei Xiaobao would lead the Imperial Bodyguards, the Valiant Cavalry Brigade, Tian Di Hui warriors, and Divine Dragon Cult’s Fat Toutuo. He took his leave from Kangxi and the Empress Dowager, to escort Princess Jianning to Yunnan. Jiu Nan and Ah Ke dressed up as palace maids, they mingled with the other palace maids. Tian Di Hui warriors and Fat Toutuo were also disguised as Wei Xiaobao’s personal attendants, they all wore Valian Cavalry Sergeants uniform.

Wei Xiaobao sat astride the Jade Buckskin horse Prince Kang gave him, with retinue in front and behind him, immensely proud of himself as he set off to the south. He had already sent a messenger to Henan, to tell Shuang’er to head south. He was hoping that they could meet en route. This moment everything was fine except for one small imperfection, namely he missed this gentle, soft, considerate and smart servant girl by his side.

Along the way, all government officials spared no effort in providing extravagant welcome; they were all trying their best to curry this high-ranking official, the marriage envoy's favor, in short, they licked his behind completely. Wei Xiaobao was bursting with joy, ever since he went on mission out of the Palace, he had never experienced anything as comfortable as this time.

"The old wh0re is very disappointing," he mused, "Why did she give birth to only one daughter? If she had seventeen, eighteen daughters, *laozi* will specialize in being marriage envoy, and would escort them all one by one; that way I would eat, drink, and be marry for the rest of my life. Having gold, silver and jewels to splurge sure beats everything else."

One day they arrived at Zhengzhou [prefecture level city and capital of Henan province in central China]. The prefectural magistrate welcomed the delegation and had them take a rest and lodge for the night at the garden of a local wealthy elite resident. After the grand welcoming feast, Princess Jianning sent for Wei Xiaobao, summoning him to come and chat with her.

Ever since they left Beijing, it had always been like this. Wei Xiaobao was afraid the Princess would beat him up, each time he always had Qian Laoben and Gao Yanchao to accompany him by his side. No matter how earnest the Princess asked him, or threatened him in anger, he simply would not send these two people away to let him alone with her face-to-face.

As usual, after dinner that day, the Princess summoned Wei Xiaobao. The three of them came to the small hall in front of the Princess' bedroom. The Princess wanted Wei Xiaobao to sit, while Qian and Gao, two people stood behind him. It was in the middle of a very hot summer weather, the Princess was wearing a thin gauze short jacket with open slits in place of sleeves. With circular fans in their hands, the two palace maids behind her were fanning her. The Princess' face was flushed. There were tiny beads of sweats above her lips, making her look very tender and beautiful.

Wei Xiaobao thought, "Although the Princess is not as good-looking as my wife, she could still be considered first class attractive woman. That fellow Wu Yingxiong can marry her, his luck in love is indeed not shallow."

The Princess cocked her head and smiled. "Xiao Guizi," she said, "Are you

hot?”

“Not bad,” Wei Xiaobao replied.

“If you are not hot,” the Princess said, “Why is your forehead sweating a lot?” Wei Xiaobao laughed while using his sleeve to wipe the sweat.

A palace maid entered with a large multicolored porcelain jar in her hands, she said, “Reporting to the Princess: Prefectural Magistrate Meng respectfully presents this iced sour plum drink for the Princess to relieve the summer heat.”

The Princess happily said, “Good, get a bowl for me to taste.”

Another palace maid fetched a blue and white china bowl, poured the sour plum drink, and presented it to the Princess with both hands. The Princess took a soupspoon and drank several mouthfuls. She let out a contented sigh and said, “I could not imagine a tiny Zhengzhou prefecture like this can store ice.”

The sweet-scented osmanthus fragrance from the sour plum drink inundated the room, the ice cubes tinkled against the soupspoon, Wei Xiaobao and Qian and Gao, two people, could not stop their mouths from watering. The Princess said, “Everybody is hot, pour a bowl for each one of them.”

Wei Xiaobao and Qian and Gao, two people, expressed their gratitude. As the ice-cold sour plum drink entered their mouths, a burst of cool air seemed to penetrate their inner beings; it was an unspeakably comfortable feeling. In just a short time, the three of them drank their bowls dry.

The Princess said, “Hastening through this kind of hot weather is quite an ordeal. From tomorrow on, we will travel only forty *li* a day. We’ll leave early in the morning, and stop to rest as soon as the sun is up.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Princess is so considerate of your subordinates, everybody is very grateful. But I am afraid we will be delayed for quite a long time.”

The Princess laughed and said, “What are you afraid of? I am not in a hurry, why are you anxious? Let that fellow Wu Yingxiong wait, it’ll be good for him.”

Wei Xiaobao smiled. He was just about to reply when suddenly he felt his head was spinning, his body swayed. “What is it?” the Princess asked, “You got heat-stroke?”

“I am afraid … I am afraid I drank too much wine just now,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “Your highness, Princess, your servant wants to take my leave.”

“You drank too much wine?” the Princess said, “In that case you all have to drink another bowl of sour plum drink to wash the wine away.”

“Many … many thanks,” Wei Xiaobao said.

The palace maid poured three more bowls of sour plum drink. Qian and Gao, two people also felt their heads dizzy. They drank the plum drink in one go. Suddenly the two of them swayed and fell down to the floor. Wei Xiaobao was shocked; he saw stars dancing in front of his eyes, he only drank a mouthful of the sour plum, the rest of it splashed on his body, in a flash he lost his consciousness.

He did not know how long he had been unconscious, but while he was still in daze, he felt like heavy rain was falling on his head. He wanted to open his eyes, but another heavy rain drenched his head. A moment later, his brain started to clear up, he felt his body was ice-cold, suddenly he heard a laughter. When he opened his eyes, he saw the Princess was looking at him, giggling happily.

“Ah!” Wei Xiaobao exclaimed; realizing that he was lying on the floor, he hastily wanted to prop himself up. Who would have thought that his hands and feet were bound? He was shocked, and struggled for a moment, but unexpectedly he was unable to move a single step.

He saw that he had been moved into the Princess’ bedroom. His body was soaking wet. Suddenly he also realized that his entire clothes had been stripped clean, he was stark naked without wearing a single thread on him. He was even more scared. “What … what happened?” he called out.

Under the candlelight he only saw the Princess, one person, in the room; the palace maids, Qian and Gao, two people, were gone. He was even more shocked. “I … I …” he stammered.

“You … you … you what?” the Princess said, “You dare to be rude to me?”

“Where are they?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

The Princess’ pretty face sank immediately. “I loathe to see your two attendants,” she said, “I have their heads chopped early on.”

Wei Xiaobao was not sure if she was telling the truth or was lying, but thinking that this Princess' action was unpredictable and did not follow conventional reasoning and morals, he would not be surprised if Qian and Gao, two people, were indeed killed by her. He thought better of it and guessed that there was some trick in the sour plum drink. "Was there any knockout drug in the sour plum drink?" he asked.

The Princess giggled. "You are very smart," she said, "Too bad it was too late."

"The knockout drug … did you get it from the Imperial Bodyguards?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

When he released Wu Lishen and the others, he also asked the Imperial Bodyguards for some knockout drugs. Later on he used the knockout drug up to disable Sangjie and the other lamas. This time he was back in Beijing, he immediately asked for another big package from Zhang Kangnian, which he had it inside his traveling sack. 'Dagger, treasured vest, knockout drug' were three magic weapons the Little White Dragon Wei Xiaobao used to attack and defend himself. Usually Princess Jianning asked for martial art advice from the Imperial Bodyguards, she often chatted with them about the marvels and legends of the Jianghu; hence he would not be surprised at all if she asked for some knockout drugs from them to play with.

The Princess laughed and said, "You know everything. Yet you did not know there was some knockout drug in the sour plum drink."

"Princess is a hundred times smarter than your servant," Wei Xiaobao said, "Princess wants to do anything to me, you want to bind my hands and feet, your servant cannot resist at all." While his mouth was busy talking, his mind was churning to find a way to escape.

With a cold laugh the Princess said, "Your shifty eyes keep turning around and around, what crafty idea are you thinking about?" Raising Wei Xiaobao's own dagger, she said, "As soon as you shout one time, I am going to poke eighteen holes on your tummy. Tell me, at that time, will you be a dead eunuch, or a live one?"

Seeing the flickering cold ray of the dagger, Wei Xiaobao mused, "Dead girl, a pest, doing things in total disregard of the law and natural morality; if you

casually scratch this dagger anywhere on my body, *laozi* will definitely die. I must scare her first so that she won't dare to kill me, and then I'll think of a way to escape." Thereupon he said, "At that time, I will be neither dead eunuch nor live eunuch, but I will turn into a blood-sucking ghost, an evil zombie."

The Princess raised her leg and kicked him heavily on his stomach. "Dead little demon," she cursed, "You still think of scaring me?"

"Ah!" Wei Xiaobao screamed in pain. The Princess said, "I have not tread on your tummy and squeeze your intestine out; did it hurt? Hey, guess how many times I will have to tread on your tummy to squeeze your intestine out? If you guess correctly, I will let you go."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Since people tied up your servant, my brain is getting dumb, I won't be able to guess anything."

The Princess said, "Since you won't be able to guess, I will have to try it. One kick, two kicks, three kicks!" With each count, she raised her foot and kicked his belly.

"That won't do, that won't do!" Wei Xiaobao called out, "If you kick me one more time, you will squeeze out the smelly excrement out of my tummy."

The Princess jumped in fright, and did not dare to kick anymore; she thought that it was not a big deal if she squeezed his intestine out, but if she squeezed his excrement, it would stink to high heavens, then it would not be fun anymore.

"Good Princess," Wei Xiaobao said, "Please release me quickly, Xiao Guizi will obey your command, I will accompany you for a martial art match or a fight."

The Princess shook her head, "I don't like fighting," she said, "I like to beat people!" 'Shua!' she drew a whip from underneath the mattress; 'whack, whack, whack, whack', successively she lashed the whip on Wei Xiaobao's fully exposed skin more than a dozen times. Immediately strips of blood appeared. As soon as the Princess saw the blood, she could not help but beaming with joy; she stooped down and gently ran her fingers on his scars.

Wei Xiaobao was hurting so much that it was as if he was roasted over the open fire. "Good Princess," he pleaded, "I have enough beating from you today, I have not offended you."

Suddenly the Princess got angry; she kicked his nose heavily, immediately blood flowed out of his nose. “You have not offended me?” she said, “*Huangdi Gege* is giving me in marriage to that fellow Wu Yingxiong, it was entirely your crafty idea.”

“No, no,” Wei Xiaobao busily said, “It was His Majesty’s holy decision, it has nothing to do with me.”

“You still deny it?” the Princess angrily said, “Empress Dowager has always loved me the most, why is it that I am being given away in marriage far away in Yunnan, the Empress Dowager did not say anything? So much so that when I said goodbye, the Empress Dowager ignored me completely. She … she is my own mother, you know!” While saying that, she covered her face and cried bitterly.

Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, “The Empress Dowager has been swapped long ago; since the old wh0re swapped the real Empress Dowager, she hates you to the bones, naturally she ignored you completely. She did not curse you or scold you, she can be considered very polite to you. But I can’t tell you this secret.”

The Princess cried for a while, and then hatefully said, “It’s all because you are not good, it’s all because you are not good!” While saying that, she kicked randomly on Wei Xiaobao’s body.

Wei Xiaobao suddenly had a bright idea, “Princess,” he said, “You do not want to marry Wu Yingxiong, why didn’t you say so earlier? I have an idea.”

The Princess opened her eyes and said, “Liar! What idea do you have? This is *Huangdi Gege*’s decree, nobody can defy.”

“Nobody can defy His Majesty’s imperial decree,” Wei Xiaobao said, “But there is a fellow that even His Majesty cannot do anything to him.”

“Who’s that?” the Princess asked in surprise.

“Yanluo Wang [King of Hell]!” Wei Xiaobao said.

The Princess still did not understand. “What can Yanluo Wang do?” she asked.

“If Yanluo Wang came to help,” Wei Xiaobao started, “He could grab Wu Yingxiong away, then you can’t get married with him.”

The Princess was startled. “How can that happen so conveniently?” she asked, “How can Wu Yingxiong die just like that?”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “If he does not want to see Yanluo Wang, we can send him go.”

“Are you saying we should kill him?” the Princess asked.

Wei Xiaobao shook his head. “Not killing him,” he said, “But some people die without any reason, nobody knows the cause of his death.”

The Princess stared at him for half a day, suddenly she shouted, “You tell me to murder my own husband? That won’t do! You told me that this fellow Wu Yingxiong is amazingly handsome, and that all the young women in the world want to marry him. If you kill him, I will deal with you and won’t let this matter rest.” While saying that, she raised the whip again and lashed it out on his body.

Wei Xiaobao could only scream in pain. The Princess laughed and said, “Did it hurt? The more it hurt the more fun it is! It’s just that you are screaming too loud, people outside might hear it. You don’t have a heroic spirit.”

“I am not a hero, I am a coward,” Wei Xiaobao said.

“F*ck your mother!” the Princess cursed, “Turns out you are a coward.”

This ‘golden branch, jade leaves’ belonging to the royal family would suddenly utter such a vulgar language. Wei Xiaobao could not help but was shocked. The Princess casually picked up a sock, which was actually taken from Wei Xiaobao’s own foot, and stuffed it into his mouth. Raising the whip again, she ruthlessly lashed it out on him.

After several lashes, Wei Xiaobao pretended to pass out; he rolled his eyes until only the whites were visible, and stayed still. The Princess cursed, “Little thief, you pretend to be dead? I am going to make three cuts on your belly; if you are really dead, you won’t move at all.”

Wei Xiaobao thought that he could not take the chance and test it out, hastily he turned and twisted to struggle free. The Princess laughed aloud; she raised the whip and lashed it out on his naked body again. ‘Whack, whack, slap, slap!’ the whip cracked sharp and clear.

After lashing the whip more than a dozen times, she tossed the whip down, and said with a giggle, “Zhuge Liang wants to burn the rattan-shield troops.”

Wei Xiaobao was greatly anxious, “To meet with this insane woman today, *laozi*’s nineteen generation ancestors must have committed a lot of sin.”

He heard the Princess was muttering to herself, “The rattan-shield troop do not have rattan-shield on him, it won’t be too easy to burn, I must pour some oil on him.” Finished speaking, she turned around and walked out of the room to find some oil.

Wei Xiaobao struggled desperately, but the rope binding his hands and feet was simply too tight, how could he escape? In his anxiety, he suddenly remembered his shifu. “*Laozi* has bowed to take quite a few of shifu. The old turtle Hai Dafu was the first, and then Chen *Zongduozhu* Shifu, Hong *Jiaozhu* whose long-life-is-the-same-as the-heavens Shifu, Madame Hong the coquettish-fox Shifu, the Young-Emperor Shifu, Cheng Guan the old-monk-martial-nephew Shifu, Jiu Nan the good-looking-nun Shifu, but among these string of shifu, no one has taught me any really useful martial art. If *laozi* knew superior internal energy, I only need to lightly push the muscle of my hands and my feet, the rope will immediately break; why should I be afraid of that crafty girl burning rattan-shield troops?”

While he was fretful, frightened and anxious, and was busy blaming the gods and accusing other people, suddenly he heard someone outside the window was speaking in a low voice, “Quickly go in and save him out.” It was Jiu Nan, the good-looking-nun Shifu’s voice.

As soon as the voice entered his ears, Wei Xiaobao was so happy that he wanted to jump; it was a pity his hands and feet were tied that he could not jump. He also heard Ah Ke’s voice, “He … he is not wearing any clothes, I can’t save him!”

Wei Xiaobao was furious; he cursed in his heart, “Dead girl, I don’t wear any clothes, why can’t you help me? Could it be that I have to wear clothes before you can save me? If you don’t save your husband, it’s the same as murdering your own husband. You will become young widow, will you be happy then?”

He heard Jiu Nan said, “Just close your eyes, cut the ropes binding his hands

and feet, won't that work?"

"That won't do," Ah Ke said, "If I close my eyes, I can't see. What if … what if I touch his body? Shifu, you save him."

"I have left home," Jiu Nan angrily said, "How can I do this kind of things?" Although Wei Xiaobao was young, he was a teenage boy, and he was stark naked, it was quite a disgraceful situation, how could she look?

Wei Xiaobao wanted to scream, "Just get some clothes and throw it in to cover me; won't that mean you will not see me?" Too bad there was a stinky sock stuffed in his mouth that he could not speak; plus Jiu Nan and Ah Ke, master and disciple, were extremely lacking in their experience to meet a contingency.

The two of them were dressing up as palace maids, they applied yellow powder on their beautiful faces; usually they were afraid the Princess would question them, hence they only mingled with palace maids who did heavy work, and had never seen the Princess' face.

That evening they heard indistinct cracking of whips and the screaming noise coming from the Princess' bedroom, thereupon they same to the bedroom window to take a look. They saw Wei Xiaobao, completely stripped off his clothes and bound, was being ruthlessly whipped by the Princess.

While outside the window Jiu Nan, master and disciple, had not reached an agreement, Princess Jianning already returned to the bedroom; she giggled and said, "Momentarily I cannot find any pig oil, cow oil, or vegetable oil, we will have no choice but to extract some black bear oil by heat. [The original word for 'coward' is 'black bear'] You said it yourself, you are not a hero [yingxiong] but a coward [gouxiong/black bear]; I have never seen what black bear oil look like. Have you seen it?" While saying that, she picked up a candlestick from the table and used the flame to burn the flesh of Wei Xiaobao's chest.

Under severe pain, Wei Xiaobao jerked his body backward. The Princess grabbed his hair with her left hand to prevent him from moving, while with her right hand she continued burning his skin. Shortly afterwards, burning smell arose. Jiu Nan was shocked. Instantly he pushed the window open, lifted up Ah Ke and threw her into the room. "Quickly save him!" she shouted, while she herself turned around with eyes closed tight to avoid seeing Wei Xiaobao's

nakedness.

Being thrown into the room by her shifu, Ah Ke saw saw the smooth naked body of Wei Xiaobao in front of her eyes; she did not want to look, but it was too late. Without any choice she stretched out her palm to hack down the back of Princess Jianning's neck.

"Who's there?" the Princess called out in alarm. She used her left hand to block, but due to the sudden movement of her right hand, the candle flame went out. However, there were still four or five red candles burning on the table, hence the room was still bright enough to see.

Ah Ke successively made her move; how could the Princess be her match? 'Crack, crack' twice, her right arm and her left leg were twisted out of joint, and she fell by the bedside. She had quite an unyielding temperament, her mouth was still cursing in rage.

Ah Ke angrily said, "It's you who are not good, and you are still cursing others?" Suddenly 'Ah!' she broke crying, in her heart she felt she was deeply wronged.

The Princess was stunned; she stopped cursing. She thought, you were the one who beat me up, why are you crying instead? Ah Ke grabbed the dagger from the floor and cut the rope binding Wei Xiaobao's hands and feet; her face blushed deep red from shame. Tossing the dagger away, she flew out the window and disappeared. Jiu Nan followed behind her.

The commotion inside the room was like the sky and the earth turning upside down, naturally the palace maids and eunuchs outside had heard it early on. However, they had been warned by the Princess, no matter how strange the noise inside, without being summoned, nobody was allowed to come in. Whoever stuck his or her head into the room, that head would be chopped down. Everybody looked at each other in dismay; they all have a strange look on their faces.

This Princess loved to fool around since she was little; hundreds and thousands of weird tricks emerged one after another, for many years these people were used to her antics, nobody suspected anything. The Princess' own mother was a fake goods born of the uncultivated land of the Jianghu, how could she control

and guide her daughter? Shunzhi left home to become a monk, Kangxi was still young, even if Princess Jianning was more undisciplined and out of control than this, nobody cared.

A moment ago the Princess summoned the palace maids and eunuchs into the room to drag the fainted Qian Laoben and Gao Yanchao out and bind them up. Everybody knew there would be some strange occurrences tonight. Yet it never occurred in anybody's mind that the Princess could, unexpectedly, be beaten and rendered immovable by other people.

Hearing his good-looking-nun Shifu and Ah Ke already left far away, Wei Xiaobao pulled the sock from his mouth, turned around to close the window, and cursed, "Stinky girl, have you ever seen fox-spirit oil? I haven't. How about we extract some by heat so we can look at it?"

He kicked her twice, grabbed and twisted her hands behind her back. He ripped a piece of her skirt, and tied her hands with it. The Princess' hand and leg's joints were dislocated, she was in so much pain that her brow was beaded with sweat, how could she resist? Wei Xiaobao grabbed the front of her clothes and pulled it hard. 'Rip' her clothes was immediately ripped apart. The gauze vest she was wearing was thin to begin with, as soon as it was torn, the snow white flesh of her chest was exposed.

Wei Xiaobao's heart was filled with hatred. He picked up the candlestick from the floor, lighted it, and put the flame on her chest. "Stinky girl," he cursed, "The payback is coming soon. I don't need too much fox-spirit oil, I only need to extract some by heat to fill the sour plum bowl; it will be enough."

"Ah!" the Princess screamed in pain. Wei Xiaobao said, "Ah right, you must also taste my stinky sock."

He stooped down to pick up the sock and was about to stuff it into her mouth. The Princess suddenly said in a soft voice, "Gui *Beilei*, don't stuff the sock in my mouth, I won't scream."

As soon as the three characters 'Gui *Beilei*' entered his ears, Wei Xiaobao was stunned. That day, in the Princess' bedroom in the Palace, she took the role of a servant and attended to him, she also addressed him as '*Gui Beilei*'. Right now hearing her calling him intimately with the same appellation, he could not stop

his heart from being moved. He heard her speaking in a soft voice, “Gui *Beilei*, please spare your servant. If you are not happy, just whip your servant to vent your anger.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “If I don’t whip you ruthlessly, it will be difficult to purge the hatred from my heart.” Putting down the candle, he picked up the whip and lashed it out on her.

The Princess cried softly, “Aiyo, aiyo!” She closed her charming eyes into a slit, yet there was a hint of smile on her cherry lips, as if she was experiencing an unspeakable comfort.

“S1ut,” Wei Xiaobao cursed, “Are you happy?”

The Princess replied softly, “I … your servant is a s1ut; would Gui *Beilei* hit me a bit harder, please? Aiyo!”

Wei Xiaobao tossed the whip away. “I won’t hit you!” he said. Turning around, he tried to find his clothes, but did not know where she had hidden them. “Where is my clothes?” he asked.

“Please,” the Princess said, “Help me fix my dislocated joints, let … let your servant attend Gui *Beilei* to dress.”

Wei Xiaobao mused, “Although this s1ut is weird, the Emperor has sent me to escort her to Yunnan. I can’t kill her.” He cursed, “F*ck your granny, you are a stinky little girl.” He continued in his heart, “Your *Ma* is the old wh0re, *laozi* does not have any appetite for her. Your granny does not have anything good in her, but *laozi* has never seen her.”

“Isn’t it fun?” the Princess asked.

“Your granny is fun,” Wei Xiaobao angrily replied. Lifting up her arm, he located the joint, and tried hard to fix it. But he did not know the technique to set broken bones; it was only after several tries was he finally able to fix the dislocated joint. The Princess did not stop crying ‘aiyo, aiyo!’ from the pain.

By the time her dislocated leg joint was fixed, the Princess was leaning over his back. The two people’s bare skin and flesh touched, Wei Xiaobao felt his lips dry his tongue parched, while his heart was burning. “Could you just sit down?” he said, “If you are like this, *laozi* might treat you as my wife.”

“But I want you to treat me as your wife,” the Princess said intimately. Her arms embraced him tight. Wei Xiaobao struggled lightly, he wanted to push her away, but the Princess pulled him and planted a kiss on his lips.

Immediately Wei Xiaobao felt his head spinning and his vision blurred, followed by his heart fluttering, as if he was inside the cloud and mist. He suddenly found out that the s1ut, fox-spirit in front of his eyes was unspeakably pretty and adorable. The red candles in the room went out one by one. Wei Xiaobao was in between asleep and awake states, his mind was fuzzy, he had no conscience where he was.

In his blurry, dazed state, suddenly he head Ah Ke’s voice outside the window, “Xiaobao, are you in there?”

Wei Xiaobao was startled, instantly he woke up from a beautiful dream. “I am here,” he replied.

“What are you doing? Why are you still here?” Ah Ke angrily asked.

Wei Xiaobao panicked. “Yes!” he said, “I am not … not doing anything.” He wanted to shove the Princess away and get out of the bed, but the Princess firmly embraced him.

“Don’t go,” she said quietly, “Tell her to get the hell out of here. Who is she anyway?”

“She … she is my wife,” Wei Xiaobao said.

The Princess said, “I … I am you wife, she is not.”

Ah Ke was ashamed and angry at the same time. She stomped her feet, turned around and left.

“Shijie, Shijie!” Wei Xiaobao called out. He did not hear any reply. Suddenly a pair of warm and soft lips closed his own, so that he could not call anymore.

The next morning Wei Xiaobao wore his clothes, and tiptoed out of the Princess’ bedroom. He asked the eunuch in-waiting outside the room, and found out that Qian Laoben and Gao Yanchao were all right, they were still bound inside a room on the eastern wing. He was relieved, but was quite ashamed as well; he did not dare to meet those two. Thereupon he ordered the eunuch to

quickly release them.

Back to his own room, he was joyous, but a little afraid. He did not dare to think too much, hence he crawled underneath his quilt and fell asleep.

Later on that afternoon he came to see Jiu Nan, with head hung low, and his face blushed deep red; thinking that this time Shifu surely would punish him severely, perhaps she would beat him to death with one palm strike. Who would have thought that Jiu Nan did not know what happened at all, instead, she warmly comforted him, “That girl is so mean,” she said, “Like a mother like a daughter. Are you hurt really bad?”

Wei Xiaobao was greatly relieved. “Not bad,” he said, “Only … only … fortunately she did not injure my muscle and bones.” Seeing Ah Ke was glowering at him, he said, “I owe it to Shifu and Shijie for rescuing me; otherwise she … she would definitely burn me to death last night.”

Ah Ke said, “You … you … last night …” Suddenly she blushed and did not continue.

Wei Xiaobao said, “She … the Princess … put some knockout drug. Shijie jumped into the room to rescue me, but she … at that time the effect of the drug has not worn out, I was unable to move.”

Jiu Nan took a pity on him, she said, “Although I have accepted you as my disciple, all along I have not passed on any martial art to you; unexpectedly you were bullied by that little girl.”

If Wei Xiaobao had a mind to train excellent martial art, he should have asked her in earnest, and Jiu Nan would have gladly taught him. He only needed to train a little, and would have reaped lifelong benefit. But for anything that needs hard work, he was afraid he might fall short. When he was bound, whipped and burned by the Princess the previous night, he blamed all his shifus for not teaching him martial arts, yet right this moment when his shifu really wanted to teach him, he hummed and hawed instead. “Shifu,” he said, “I have a terrible headache, as if my head is about to split open. I also feel like the skin and muscle on my entire body is about to fall piece by piece.”

Jiu Nan nodded and said, “Just go and rest; later on just see this little girl less, if you really have to see her, take a dozen or so people with you, she won’t

possibly give you any trouble publicly. When she gives you any food or drink, no matter what you must not eat or drink it."

Wei Xiaobao repeatedly said, "Yes." He was about to withdraw when Jiu Nan suddenly asked, "Why did she beat you up last night? Didn't she know that the Emperor is very fond of you?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "She … she did not want to go to Yunnan to get married, she said that it was my idea. It seems to me that he little s1ut knew that we, master and disciple, dealt with her mother." By telling minor lie like that, he was pushing most of the blame of the Princess beating him last night to Jiu Nan.

Jiu Nan nodded, "Most likely her mother has told her. From now on you must be extra careful." She thought, "When I dealt with the fake Empress Dowager at the Palace that day, I was quite ruthless; but Xiaobao did not show his face at all that time. Could it be that the fake Empress Dowager had an inkling and ordered her daughter to retaliate?"

The party slowly continued southwest. Every evening, the Princess always quietly summoned Wei Xiaobao to accompany her. At first Wei Xiaobao was still afraid his shifu and his Tian Di Hui companions might find out, but as these two young people had just found the matter between man and woman, once the extremely sweet and charming Princess wrapping her body around his, how could he be willing to give this experience up? Even a gentleman might not necessarily be able to resist, much less he had never received any proper training in human relationships or etiquette.

For the first several days he would sneak out quietly at night. Later on he would stay in the Princess' bedroom the whole night. During the day he was the marriage envoy, in the nights he was the prince consort. All the palace maids and court eunuchs dreaded the Princess, plus Wei Xiaobao unceasingly rewarded them with large quantities of money; who would dare to utter even half a sentence about this affair?

When Ah Ke twisted the Princess' joints that night, naturally the Princess wanted to know who was this 'Shijie', yet with graceful words, flowery speech Wei Xiaobao was able to skirt around this question. The Princess' character was rather coarse, plus she was at the heat of the passion, hence she did not inquire

further.

These two, a young man and a young woman, had just tasted the passion for the first time; it was like oil mixed in honey. In her cunning and reckless temperament, the Princess always playfully assumed the role of a slave, as soon as he entered the room, she would kneel down and greeted him, “Gui Beilei, Gui Fuma [consort, emperor’s son-in-law]” unceasingly.

When Fang Yi tricked Wei Xiaobao to go to the Divine Dragon Island, during the voyage, she only treated him with intimate manners and tender words, driving him crazy [orig. bewilder him until his six vital organs fail]. This time he was truly overwhelmed with joy, the Princess drove him even more crazy. The two of them only hoped that the journey would never last. Even though Ah Ke mingled among the palace maids, Wei Xiaobao knew perfectly well that she would never treat him like the Princess did; unexpectedly Wei Xiaobao did not try to curry favor from Ah Ke like he usually did.

One day they arrived at Changsha [prefecture, capital of Hunan province, south central China]. From the Divine Dragon Island Lu Gaoxuan caught up with them on fast horse, carrying with him the Cult Leader Hong’s verbal order, telling him that the Cult Leader was extremely delighted to receive the two copies of sutra, commending the White Dragon Envoy for handling this matter with dedication, that he was astute and competent, that he was indeed our Cult’s great minister who had given outstanding service. The Cult Leader especially bestowed him with the leopard embryo tendon-altering pill’s antidote.

With all the majesty of a royalty these past few days, Wei Xiaobao had already forgotten that there was an acute poison in his body. Hearing the message, he was nonetheless very happy. Immediately he, along with Lu Gaoxuan and Fat Toutuo, took the antidote. Lu and Fat, two people, bowed to express their gratitude, saying that it was entirely due to the White Dragon Envoy establishing this great merit that the two of them could enjoy the Cult Leader’s favor in the form of this legendary magic potion of the immortals, that the calamity in their bosoms was eliminated.

Lu Gaoxuan said, “Jiaozhu and Madame passed on an order to the White Dragon Envoy: the remaining six copies of the sutra must still be sought. If the White Dragon Envoy can render this distinguished merit, Jiaozhu would not be

stingy in bestowing his reward.”

“Naturally I will strive to do that,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Jiaozhu and Madame’s favor is as heavy as the mountain, even if our bodies are torn our bones are crushed, it is difficult to repay.”

Fat and Lu, two people said together, “Jiaozhu will enjoy the immortal good fortune forever, his long-life is the same as the Heaven’s. White Dragon Envoy will enjoy a life of ease and comfort forever, and live as long as Mount Nan.”

Wei Xiaobao smiled without saying anything. He mused, “What’s so good about enjoying life in ease and comfort? If I can enjoy romantic good fortune every day like this forever, having a life as long as Mount Nan will make a bit more sense.”

Chapter 30

Small town of the southern dynasty leans to be domineering, troops of western provinces are the most light and nimble.

(Translated by Foxs)

Wu Sangui held the wooden case with both hands and said with a laugh, "These two toys, would Imperial Envoy Daren take it so you can play with it?" Wei Xiaobao shook his hand, refusing to take it, and said, "This is an effective weapon to protect yourself, thank you for Wangye's generous gift, lowly officer does not dare to accept." Wu Sangui pushed the box into

his hand.

Wei Xiaobao and the Princess wished that the journey to Yunnan would not reach the end forever, but although the road was long, and the journey was slow, there would be a day when they arrived at the destination. Guizhou province was Wu Sangui's territory; a massive military force was stationed at Luodian [county], Guizhou. Princess Jianning's party had just entered the border of Guizhou province, Wu Sangui had already dispatched his troops and horses to meet them. By the time they entered Yunnan, Wu Yingxiong himself came out to welcome them. Seeing Wei Xiaobao, he did not stop expressing his gratitude.

According to the royal court protocol, he and the Princess could not see each other before the wedding ceremony. By this time however, the Princess and Wei Xiaobao had been stuck together as by glue; hearing about Wu Yingxiong's arrival, immediately her willow-like eyebrows went straight up, and she threw a fit.

That night the Princess told Wei Xiaobao to think of a way to send Wu Yingxiong to see Yan Wang, so that the two of them could live forever as husband and wife. Wei Xiaobao jumped in fright; he thought that there was no harm in sneakily being a fake consort in the night, but he must never be a real consort.

Seeing him frowning and muttering to himself irresolutely, the Princess angrily said, "Why aren't you saying anything? Sending that fellow Wu Yingxiong to see Yan Wang was your own idea, it wasn't mine."

"We must send him all right," Wei Xiaobao said, "But we must wait for a good opportunity before making our move. We must not raise anybody's suspicion."

"Alright," the Princess said, "I'll listen to you for the time being. In short, I only want to be with you, I will definitely not share my bed with this fellow. If you don't send him out to see Yan Wang, if what we are doing is revealed to the world, I will tell Wu Sangui that you have raped me. Even if *Huangdi Gege* favored you more than this, I am afraid Wu Sangui will still chop you into seventeen or twenty-eight pieces. You are going to see the old man Yan Wang first; just consider it you are preceding Wu Yingxiong as his advance party officer!"

Wei Xiaobao was enraged; he waved his hand in a slapping motion, and shouted, “Nonsense! When did I ever rape you?”

The Princess giggled and chuckled, she stretched out her arm to embrace him, while saying in soft voice, “You are such a heartless, short-lived little lover; you slapped me that heavily, aren’t you afraid you might hurt me?”

One day they arrived at Kunming [prefecture, capital of Yunnan]; they heard bugle horns and a military officer announced, “Ping Xi Wang welcomes Princess’ phoenix[71]-self.”

Wei Xiaobao urged his horse to move forward, he saw a team of soldiers in bright shining armor, riding on tall horses, galloping to meet them. They dismounted together, and arranged themselves on either side of the road. Amidst the sound of bamboo flute and string instruments, several hundreds young boys wearing red gown with banners in their hands preceding a general stepping out in front of the troops. A herald loudly announced, “Your servant Ping Xi Qin Wang Wu Sangui pays his respect to Your Highness Princess Jianning.”

Wei Xiaobao looked up and down carefully, sizing up Wu Sangui. He was a man of grand stature, with deep red, almost purple face, he had more white than black in his hair and beard; although he was old, his gait was still strong and healthy as he walked over in big strides. Wei Xiaobao mused, “People all over the world are talking about this old turtle’s reputation, turns out he has this kind of appearance.”

Seeing he walked to the Princess’ carriage, kneeled down and kowtowed, Wei Xiaobao stood by his side, and said in his heart first, “The old turtle Wu Sangui pays his respect.” But he waited until Wu Sangui finished kowtowing before announcing, “Ping Xi Qin Wang pays his respect.”

Wu Sangui stood up, walked over toward Wei Xiaobao, and said with a laugh, “And this must be the brave warrior who captured Oboi, the world famous Wei *Jueye* [master viscount]?”

Wei Xiaobao paid his respect and said, “I do not dare to accept the honor. Humble officer pays his respect to *Wangye*.”

Wu Sangui laughed aloud, grabbed Wei Xiaobao's hand, and said, "Wei *Jueye* is kind and virtuous, *Xiao Wang* [little king, referring to self] has been looking forward to meeting your illustrious self for a long time; please disperse with this perfunctory propriety. Henceforth *Xiao Wang*, father and son, will rely on Wei *Jueye* to preserve our existence. If you think we are worthy to receive the favor, please consider us your own famiy."

Wei Xiaobao noticed the Yangzhou accent in his speech, and was thirty-percent happy. "Hot piece Mama," he mused, "Looks like you and I are fellow townsmen." He said, "I really do not dare to accept the honor; how can humble officer dare to claim connections with people of higher social class?" He also added several percent of Yangzhou accent into his speech.

Wu Sangui laughed and asked, "So Wei *Jueye* also from Yangzhou?"

"Precisely," Wei Xiaobao replied.

"That's even better," Wu Sangui said, "*Xiao Wang*'s official residence is Liaodong, but my ancestral home is actually Gaoyou, Yangzhou. We are actually real kinsmen."

Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, "Hot piece Mama, turns out you are Gaoyou's salted duck egg. Yangzhou could produce a big traitor like you, *laozi* is actually quite ashamed."

Wu Sangui and Wei Xiaobao rode side-by-side; they rode in the front, leading the Princess entering the city. The people of Kunming heard that the Princess was about to marry Ping Xi Wang Heir Apparent, the street was already lined with a sea of people, the city was bustling with noise and excitement. There were lanterns everywhere, archways were decorated, houses and building were adorned with celebratory hanging scrolls; the sound of gongs and drums, mixed with firecrackers, shook the heavens.

Wei Xiaobao and Wu Sangui entered the city side-by-side. Seeing people were bowing to welcome them, he was very proud of himself. But then he had a second thought, "A princess as pretty as the flower and jade, coquettish and coy, for no reason is given to that fellow Wu Yingxiong to be his wife, and *laozi* has to escort his bride for thousands of *li*, this stinky fellow's luck in love is indeed too good." Therefore, he also felt indignant.

Wu Sangui welcomed the Princess at the Anfu[72] Garden west of the City of Kunming, which was Ming Dynasty's Qian Guo Gong[73] Mu Family's former residence. It was a lofty multi-story building, overlooking a garden pavilion with splendid view. As soon as Wu Sangui learned about the Princess was given into marriage to his son, he carried out a large-scale construction effort to renovate the building that it looked completely new. After Wu Sangui, father and son, paid their respect to the Princess from behind a hanging curtain, they accompanied Wei Xiaobao to the Ping Xi Wang Mansion.

Ping Xi Wang Mansion was located on Mount Wu Hua[74], which was the former palace of Ming Dynasty's Emperor Yong Li. The palace encompassed a vast area of several *li* square. After Wu Sangui occupied the palace, over the last few years he constantly added multi-story expansions and pavilions. By this time, the lofty towers and engraved walls, the red pavilions and jade-green ponds, hardly differed from the inner courtyards of the Imperial Palace.

A grand banquet was already prepared in the main hall. All civil and military officials under Wu Sangui's banner came to accompany the guests. Naturally the Imperial Envoy, high-ranking official Wei Xiaobao sat at the seat of honor.

After three rounds of drink, Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "*Wangye*, back in Beijing, I often heard people say that you wanted to rebel …" Wu Sangui's countenance turned ashen instantly, the countenance of a hundred or so officials also changed, only to hear Wei Xiaobao continued, "… as I came to the Mansion today, I knew that those people were talking rubbish."

Wu Sangui calmed down somewhat. "Please Wei *Jueye* understand," he said, "Despicable and lowly people are jealous of me and always trying to plant false evidence against me; you must never believe them."

"That's right," Wei Xiaobao said, "I think that the reason you wanted to rebel is no more than to be the Emperor. But His Majesty's Palace is not as magnificent as yours, his clothes are not as beautiful as yours. His Majesty's food was under my management, but I am very ashamed to say that it is not as delicious as your mansion's. Being the Ping Xi Wang, you live a much more comfortable life than His Majesty; why would you want to be the Emperor?

When I get back to Beijing, I will report to His Majesty that Ping Xi Wang is definitely not going to rebel. Even if you are asked to be the Emperor, you, Senior, would never be willing."

In that instant, the main hall was quiet, all the officials halted their cups in the air and did not drink, they all stared at him, not understanding his 'neither fish nor fowl' speech; their hearts were pounding. Wu Sangui's face alternated between red and white; he was at a loss of how to respond. He thought, "From what he said, obviously the Emperor has already suspected that I intend to rebel." With no other choice, he let out a hollow laugh and said, "His Majesty is wise and filial, he always makes determined efforts to govern. Indeed, of all the virtuous Emperors of the past, no one is as good as him."

"That's right," Wei Xiaobao said, "'Raw bird fish soup' [niao sheng yu tang, see Chapter 14], stepping down gracefully."

Wu Sangui was startled; after a while, he understood that Wei Xiaobao meant to say 'Yao Shun Yu Tang' [also Chapter 14]. He said, "Humble minister admires His Majesty's frugal virtue, actually I do not dare to live a sumptuous life every day; it's just that the holy graciousness has swept vast, the Princess is here to marry, we do not dare to be negligent in hospitality, and have to put our heart and soul in serving the Princess and Wei *Jueye*. After the wedding is over, we will have to save greatly." He thought that when this fellow returned to Beijing, he would report to the Emperor that I indulge in a life of luxury in here, of course the Emperor will get mad; it would be best if I can close his mouth.

Who would have thought that Wei Xiaobao shook his head and said, "Still, having money to spend, live an indulgent life is better. You are the *Wangye*, if you do not live off your wealth, why bother being a *Wangye*? If you dislike having too much gold and silver, afraid that you won't be able to spend it, I can help you spending it, why can't I? Ha ha!"

As soon as he said those words, Wu Sangui was greatly delighted, as if a large chunk of rock in his heart had just fallen to the ground; thinking that if you are willing to accept money, won't that be easy?

Hearing him openly asking for money during the banquet, the civil and military officials were beaming from ear to ear, they all thought that he was just a kid

after all, dealing with him should be easy. Everybody was drinking merrily, while in their hearts they were thinking of how to present the bribe. The former awkward and terrified atmosphere was swept clean, everyone sang the praises of his achievements and virtue, tooted their horns and licked his behind, and then dispersed after a happy time.

Wu Yingxiong personally escorted Wei Xiaobao back to Anfu Garden. They entered the main hall and were seated. Wu Yingxiong presented a brocade box with both hands, saying, “Here are some change; would Wei *Jueye* please accept to cover your incidental expenses? When your honorable-self is returning to the north, *Fu Wang* [father king] will have another way to compensate for Wei *Jueye*’s trouble.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “There is no need to stand on ceremonies. When I left the Capital, His Majesty said to me, ‘Xiao Guizi, everybody says that Wu Sangui is a treacherous court official. Go and personally investigate for me whether he is a loyal minister or a treacherous official. You must a bit more cautious, don’t make any mistake.’ So I said, ‘Your Majesty, please set your heart at ease, your servant will open my eyes wide, from start to finish I will investigate clearly.’ Ha ha, *Xiao Wangye*, don’t you agree that loyal or treacherous will be decided in just a mouth?”

Wu Yingxiong could not help but was secretly enraged, “Your Great Qing’s rivers and mountains were handed over by my father so that you could lay your foundation. After the great undertaking, you forget favors and violate justice by coming to investigate whether we, father and son, are loyal or treacherous. In that case, it seems that the Princess is given to marriage is not necessarily out of good intention.” He said, “We, father and son, are loyal and devoted in working for His Majesty. Even if we became dogs or horses, we could not ever repay His Majesty’s benevolence.”

Wei Xiaobao crossed his leg and said, “That’s right, I always knew you are most loyal. If His Majesty did not trust you, he would never have you as his *Meifu* [younger sister’s husband]. *Xiao Wangye*, as soon as you become the Emperor’s *Meifu*, you will rise eight levels, your promotion will come very quickly.”

“That is due to His Majesty’s vast and mighty heavenly grace,” Wu Yingxiong said, “I can’t thank Wei *Jueye* enough for helping me maintaining my social

circle."

Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, "I am helping you to be the little turtle, I wonder if you will be deeply grateful."

After sending off Wu Yingxiong, he opened the brocade box to see the contents. Inside there were ten packs of banknotes, each pack consisted of forty sheets, each sheet worth five hundred *taels*; altogether there were two hundred thousand *taels* of silver. Wei Xiaobao was pleasantly surprised; he mused, "He is very extravagant with gifts, two hundred thousand *taels* for incidental expenses. If *laozi* needs large spending money, how much will I get? One million, two millions?"

The next day Wu Yingxiong invited the Imperial Minister Marriage Envoy to visit the military drill ground to inspect the troops. Wei Xiaobao and Wu Sangui stood side-by-side on the reviewing platform. Two *Dutong* [Commander/Lieutenant General] under Ping Xi Wang's command led several dozen *Zuoling* [Company Commander] in full battle gear, with helmet on their heads and full armor, dismounted in front of the platform and saluted. Following which, team-by-team troops and horses performed demonstration under the platform.

After the border guards came the newly organized Wu Ying Zhong Yong [five-battalion loyal and brave] troops and Wu Ying Yi Yong [five-battalion righteous and courageous] troops; each battalion was led by a *Zong Bing Tong* [regional commander]. From the formation and the demonstration, it was obvious that these troops were 'strong soldiers and sturdy horses', a well-trained and powerful army.

Although Wei Xiaobao was completely without any knowledge of military affairs, seeing the majestic display of the troops, with unending flow of one team after another, he said to Wu Sangui, "*Wangye*, today I really submit to you. I am the Commander of the Valiant Cavalry Brigade, our Valiant Cavalry Brigade is His Majesty's personal troops, but I am ashamed to mention it. If we were to fight your Zhong Yong Brigade and Yi Yong Brigade, our Valiant Cavalry Brigade would be routed, would definitely flee to the wilderness."

Wu Sangui was very proud of himself; he said with a laugh, "Wei *Jueye*'s

compliment, I am ashamed and dare not accept. *Xiao Wang* was born of military family; training troops is my original occupation."

They heard the booming artillery sound, the troops shouted together, their voice shook the four corners of the field. Wei Xiaobao was greatly shocked, his knees turned to jelly, his buttocks dropped into his chair, and his face turned ashen immediately.

Wu Sangui snickered inwardly, "You are merely a puppet minister by the Emperor's side, relying on graceful words and flowering speech to coax the young Emperor's favor; other than that, what fart do you have? A yellow-mouthed little kid whose smell of mother's milk not yet dried, unexpectedly can become a Viscount, the Valiant Cavalry Brigade Commander, and Imperial Envoy Minister. Clearly the young Emperor is confused; how can he assign you as his trusted aide?" He did not have any regard toward Kangxi to begin with, and now that he had seen Wei Xiaobao's worthless appearance, he was even more delighted, thinking that the imperial court did not have any capable person, there was nothing to worry about.

After the troop inspection was finished, Wei Xiaobao took out the Emperor's Imperial Edict and handed it over to Wu Sangui, saying, "This is His Majesty's Imperial Edict, why don't *Wangye* read it for everybody to hear?"

Wu Sangui kneeled down to receive it; he said, "It is His Majesty's Imperial Edict, it would be better if the Imperial Envoy read it out loud."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "It recognizes me, but I do not recognize it. I am totally illiterate; how can I read?"

Wu Sangui laughed; he held the Imperial Edict with both hands, turned toward the troops and read it out loud. His voice was clear and sonorous, backed with abundant *chi*, sentence-by-sentence reached far away. The tens of thousands troops on the field bent their knees to kneel; they listened in absolute silence [orig. the crow and peacock made no sound].

The Imperial Edict commended Ping Xi Qin Wang's excellent service and heavy merit, his diligence in handling the royal matter, in guarding the border, in pacifying the non-Han ethnics. Without exception all the generals and soldiers under his command had rendered merit, all were to be promoted one level and

to be granted some rewards. After the reading of the Imperial Edict was done, Wu Sangui kowtowed to the north and called out, “Respectfully thank Your Majesty’s grace, long live Your Majesty!”

All the troops echoed, “Respectfully thank Your Majesty’s grace, long live Your Majesty!”

This time Wei Xiaobao was prepared, he was not startled; but as tens of thousands troops shouted their earth-shattering shout, his heart was shaken, he could not stand steadily.

Returning to the Ping Xi Wang Mansion, Wu Sangui consulted with him the Princess’ wedding day. Wei Xiaobao knitted his brows and looked very unhappy.

Wu Sangui said, “The fourth of next month is the ecliptic propitious day, having a wedding would have great luck, great profit. What does Wei *Jueye* think about that date?”

Wei Xiaobao mused, “Once the Princess is given in marriage to Wu Yingxiong, I can’t be the fake consort anymore.” He said, “Don’t you think it is too soon? The Princess getting married is not a small matter. *Wangye* should give everything thorough consideration. Let me be honest with you: Empress Dowager and His Majesty the Emperor dote on this Princess very much. If there is anything less than perfect, it won’t be too convenient for us as the servants.”

Wu Sangui was apprehensive; he thought, “You deliberately make things difficult, are you not trying to extort bribe?” He laughed and said, “Yes, yes. I leave it all to Wei *Jueye*’s discretion. Whatever it is that you think is inappropriate, please give us direction, we will strive to do it for you. If the fourth is too rushing, the sixteenth of next month is also an extremely good day, it does not clash with the Princess and my son’s birth date, all taboos are off.”

“Very well!” Wei Xiaobao said, “I will ask for instructions from the Princess; let’s see what she has to say.”

Returning to Anfu Garden, he found a lot of Yunnan officials were already waiting to have an audience with him. Wei Xiaobao received their gifts, spoke some perfunctory words, and sent them away. Remembering that ever since his arrival in Yunnan he had not seen his sworn brother Yang Yizhi, he sent a messenger to Wu Yingxiong, asking him to sent Yang Yizhi over to see him.

Yang Yizhi did not appear, it was Wu Yingxiong who personally came to see him, saying, “Wei *Jueye*, *Fu Wang* has sent Yang Yizhi on a mission and he has not returned yet; he cannot come to serve *Jueye*.”

Wei Xiaobao was quite disappointed. “I wonder where he is going?” he asked, “And when is he coming back?”

Wu Yingxiong’s countenance changed slightly; he said, “He … he went to Tibet, it’s far away from here; this time … I am afraid Wei *Jueye* won’t be able to see him.”

Noticing his vague answer, Wei Xiaobao thought, “His words is incomplete and not honest; what trick is he playing?” He asked, “I wonder what mission Yang *Xiong* is doing in Tibet? How long has he been gone?”

“Nothing important,” Wu Yingxiong replied, “The Tibetan Lama sent someone to deliver a gift, Fu Wang then sent Yang Yizhi to send a gift in return. He left a few days ago.”

“It’s very unfortunate,” Wei Xiaobao said.

After sending Wu Yingxiong off, the more he thought, the more he felt something was amiss. They knew very well that he was a good friend of Yang Yizhi; why was it that as he arrived in Yunnan, Yang Yizhi happened to be sent away on a mission, and not a moment later or a moment sooner? Wei Xiaobao had just arrived in Yunnan, Wu Sangui sent Yang Yizhi away, it seemed like Wu Sangui intentionally did not want Yang Yizhi to meet Wei Xiaobao. Immediately he summoned Zhao Qixian and Zhang Kangnian, two people, and ordered them to have a drink and gamble with Wu Sangui, father and son’s bodyguards, to try to make discreet inquiry about Yang Yizhi.

When he met the Princess that evening, he mentioned to her that the wedding date had been set to be the sixteenth of the next month. The Princess said, “I want you to send this fellow Wu Yingxiong to see Yan Wang before the wedding day; otherwise, during the ritual [of kneeling to heaven and earth] I will scream and yell. I don’t want to marry him no matter what.”

Wei Xiaobao’s mood was already bad, hearing her like that, his temper flared. He stomped his feet and stormed out of the room. The Princess grabbed and pulled his hand, but he flung her away heavily, and rushed out of the room. The

Princess screamed and yelled, but he pretended not to hear.

After sitting alone for half a day, he was bored; thereupon he called for a dozen or so Imperial Bodyguards to throw dice and gamble with him; only then did he feel better.

Gambling to the middle of the night, Zhao Qixian and Zhang Kangnian entered the room. Wei Xiaobao had the dice in his hand, but had not tossed it down yet; seeing the two of them, he laughed and said, “Right now the banker is lousy, if you want to lay your bet, better do it early.”

Zhao Qixian said, “The matter which *Fu Zongguan* [deputy chief] ordered us to do, subordinates have found some information.”

“Good!” Wei Xiaobao said, and tossed the dice. He got heaven’s gate. After paying the upper and lower gates, he pulled the two men’s hands and took them to the side room. “What is it?” he asked.

Zhao Qixian said, “Reporting to *Fu Zongguan*: that Yang Yizhi really did not go to Tibet. Turns out he violated something and Ping Xi Wang locked him up.”

Wei Xiaobao knitted his brows. “What did he do?” he wondered aloud.

Zhao Qixian said, “Subordinates had some drink with some mansion’s guards, we mentioned that we knew this man surnamed Yang, and wanted to invite him to drink and gamble with us. A guard said, ‘So you are looking for Yang Yizhi? He has gone to Hei Kanzi [lit. black/dark raised ground, or simply black hole in the ground].’ I asked him where Hei Kanzi is. Another guard scolded the first guard as talking rubbish, saying that he loves to joke, telling me not to believe him.”

“Hei Kanzi?” Wei Xiaobao muttered to himself.

“We knew something’s fishy here,” Zhao Qixian continued, “After drinking with them for a while, we excused ourselves. On the way back here, we asked around and found out that Hei Kanzi is a big prison. It was then that we know Yang Yizhi has been locked up by Ping Xi Wang. As for what crime he did, I was afraid I might arouse suspicion, hence I did not dare to ask too much.”

“Where is Hei Kanzi?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

“About five *li* southwest of Wu Hua Palace,” Zhao Qixian replied.

Wei Xiaobao nodded. “Right,” he said, “Both *Dage* have worked hard. Go back outside to play, be the bankers on my behalf.”

Zhao and Zhang, two people, were greatly delighted; they went out to gamble. They knew that to be bankers on Wei Xiaobao’s behalf means if they lost, it would be considered his loss, if they won, they would enjoy their share. Either way, it was an assignment with great benefit.

Wei Xiaobao was depressed. “Yang *Dage* must have committed a grave offense, otherwise Wu Yingxiong would not have lied to me by saying that he was sent to Tibet. If not grave offense, those two, father and son, would probably look at my face and let him out. Since Wu Yingxiong has already lied to me, if I plead on his behalf, they might adamantly deny, perhaps they would immediately kill him and destroy his body to eliminate the trace; henceforth the dead cannot testify. If I want to rescue him, I must use brute force. Even if Wu Sangui is angry, *laozi* is not afraid of him, I think he won’t dare to be hostile to me.”

Immediately he sent for Li Lishi, Feng Jizhong, Gao Yanchao, Qian Laoben, Priest Xuanzhen, Xu Tianchuan, and the other Tian Di Hui warriors. He explained the situation and asked them how to save Yang Yizhi.

“Wei *Xiangzhu*,” Li Lishi said, “We have to do it! If we can rescue this Yang *Dage*, that’s the best. If we cannot, Wu Sangui would think that you want to deal with him, naturally he would think that you are under the Emperor’s order. If we do not scare him half dead, we might force him to rebel sooner.”

“Precisely,” Wei Xiaobao said, “I am only afraid that he might rebel right away, and then he might grab our heads so that all of us will spend our time gambling inside the big jail Hei Kanzi; that might be far from good.”

Priest Xuanzhen said, “As soon as we see something is amiss, all of us must jump onto fast horses and make a dash.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “I want you to think of a way to rescue people, I will invite this fellow Wu Yingxiong and detain him here. We can use him as a hostage so that Wu Sangui will not dare to act rashly.”

Qian Laoben said, “Wei *Xiangzhu*’s move is brilliant. Tomorrow we will scout around Hei Kanzi’s surrounding, and then dressed as Wu Sangui’s attendants, we

will break into the prison and take the prisoner out."

In the afternoon of the next day, Wei Xiaobao sent a messenger to invite Wu Yingxiong for a feast and discussion about the wedding. The main hall of the Anfu Garden was filled with the sound of string and woodwind instruments, with wine and meat in abundance. The Tian Di Hui warriors had already changed into Ping Xi Wang Mansion Guards' uniform and went to the Hei Kanzi jail.

Wei Xiaobao secretly ordered Valiant Cavalry Brigade sergeants and the Imperial Bodyguards to secure the perimeter and keep an eye on Wu Yingxiong's guards; while he and Wu Yingxiong were drinking wine and watching the opera. The troupe presented a Kunqu opera [see note 11, Chapter 1], 'Zhong Kui[75] married the younger sister'. Five little demons tumbled around, crawling in and out the tables, displaying various martial art skills. It was very lively. Wei Xiaobao cheered and applauded again and again, and gave the troupe a generous tip.

While the show was in progress, someone sneaked behind him, and lightly tugged his sleeve. Wei Xiaobao turned his head around and saw that it was Gao Yanchao. Gao Yanchao nodded slowly. Wei Xiaobao knew the mission went well. He was greatly delighted. "*Xiao Wangye*," he said to Wu Yingxiong, "Please continue watching, I want to go pee."

Wu Yingxiong mused, "This little rascal is so vulgar." He laughed and said, "*Jueye*, please do as you wish."

Wei Xiaobao went to the rear hall, and saw not one of Tian Di Hui warriors was missing; he said happily, "Very good, very good, all *Xiongdi* did not suffer any harm; did you manage to get him out?" Seeing everybody's grim expression, he knew there must be something else.

Full of hatred Gao Yanchao said, "That traitor Wu Sangui is really ruthless!"

"What is it?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Gao Yanchao and Xu Tianchuan turned around and left the room. They returned carrying someone wrapped in felt blanket. Seeing the felt blanket was full of blood, Wei Xiaobao was startled and scared; he rushed forward, and saw that the man wrapped inside the felt blanket was indeed Yang Yizhi. But his eyes were tightly closed, with no trace of blood on his face at all.

“Yang *Dage*,” Wei Xiaobao called out, “It’s your *Xiongdi* rescuing you out.” Yang Yizhi slightly nodded, but it was not clear if he heard him or not. “*Dage*,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Are you injured?”

Xu Tianchuan gently opened the felt blanket. Wei Xiaobao cried out in alarm, and withdrew two steps back. His body swayed, he nearly fell down. Qian Laoben reached out to hold him. Turned out Yang Yizhi’s hands were severed from the wrist, his legs were also severed from the knee down. Xu Tianchuan said in a low voice, “His tongue was cut, and his eyes were gouged out.”

Wei Xiaobao had never seen anything more devastating than the pitiful condition in front of his eyes. He was deeply shaken and broke into wailing. Although originally he did not have too close of a friendship with Yang Yizhi, he did enjoy congenial conversation with him, plus they had already sworn brotherhood with each other, vowing to enjoy the blessing together, and to endure the hardship together.

Seeing his limbs were severed, Wei Xiaobao’s grief and indignation was difficult to bear. He pulled his dagger and shouted, “I am going to cut Wu Yingxiong’s four limbs.”

Feng Jizhong pulled his arm and said, “Need to make further consideration.”

This man did not talk a lot, but every time he spoke he hit the nail on the head. Wei Xiaobao was thirty percent afraid of him. Immediately he calmed down, nodded his head and said, “Feng *Dage* is right.”

Xu Tianchuan closed the felt blanket; he said, “This matter really is our concern. Wu Sangui blamed Yang *Dage* for making friends with Wei *Xiangzhu* and swearing brotherhood with him; he accused him of betraying the former master, of coveting riches and honor, of relying on the Imperial Court, and thus punished him like this, hovering between life and death, so that none of the high-ranking military officers under his command would dare to have any intention to revolt.”

With tears in his eyes Wei Xiaobao said, “All eighteen-generation ancestors of Wu Sangui are dead turtles! Yang *Dage* became sworn brothers with me does not mean that he was betraying him. That big traitor himself is harboring ill-

intention, yet he blindly suspicious of others doing so. To have Yang *Dage* look like this is the clear proof of his intention to rebel. Even if Yang *Dage* indeed wanted to rely on the Imperial Court, what's wrong with that?"

"Exactly," Qian Laoben said, "Wei *Xiangzhu* should take Yang *Dage* back to Beijing, let him submit an accusation to the young Emperor."

Wei Xiaobao turned to Xu Tianchuan, "Wu Sangui committed this evil deed because he accused Yang *Dage* of making friends with me; how did Xu *Dage* know about it?"

Xu Tianchuan turned around and went out the room. When he returned, he carried a man, whom he threw heavily to the floor. This person was wearing a seventh-*pin* rank uniform; he had fair skin, and rather plump. He crawled on the floor, and then stayed motionless.

"Wei *Xiangzhu*," Xu Tianchuan said, "You have heard this fellow's name for a long time, but has never met him. He is none other than Lu Yifeng."

"Aha!" Wei Xiaobao said with a cold laugh, "Turns out it is Lu *laoxiong* [old chap], you were brazenly being unbridled in Beijing, and then Wu Yingxiong had your dog legs broken; how come you are here now?"

Lu Yifeng was so scared that he could only say, "Yes, yes, *Xiaoren* does not dare!"

Xu Tianchuan said, "It was indeed 'the enemies on a narrow road' [i.e. inevitable clash between opposing factions], turns out this fellow is the big jail Hei Kanzi's warden. Even if he turned into ash, *laozi* will always recognize him. Dressed as Wu Sangui's personal bodyguards, we carried Yang *Dage* out; this fellow was putting some air, he said he wanted official document, he also said that we had to have Ping Xi Wang's personal decree. Damn it, his own dog life is the Ping Xi Wang's personal decree."

Wei Xiaobao nodded. "It was such a lucky coincidence," he said, "Meeting this fellow would make rescuing Yang *Dage* easier." He presumed that the Tian Di Hui warriors put a saber on his neck, hence it was an effortless victory [orig. 'no blood on the men's swords'], they managed to bring Yang Yizhi out without much trouble. In any case, the Eight-armed Ape had many arms; and while he was at it, he simply brought Lu Yifeng along.

Xu Tianchuan said, “It was this old fellow who informed me the confidential matter of Yang *Dage* offending Wu Sangui.”

As soon as Lu Yifeng heard the word ‘inform’, he busily said, “It was you … the Senior, who … who compelled me to tell you that; I … I would never dare to divulge Ping Xi Qin Wang’s confidential matter.”

Wei Xiaobao kicked him and three of his front teeth fell off. “I am going back to Wu Yingxiong,” he said, “I don’t want him to get suspicious. Gentlemen, please interrogate this fellow carefully. If he does not want to talk, just cut both his hands and both his legs.”

With mouth full of blood Lu Yifeng hastily said, “I talk, I talk.” He knew these people did not have any regard for the law or natural morality; thinking about Yang Yizhi’s tragic condition, he nearly fainted.

Wei Xiaobao went toward Yang Yizhi and called, “Yang *Dage*!”

Yang Yizhi heard the call, he wanted to sit up, but as soon as he raised his upper body, he fell back down. Seeing his miserable condition, the crowd of warriors was filled with hatred. This man was the lackey of a traitor, he actually did not deserve their pity, but unexpectedly Wu Sangui, father and son, were capable of cruelly treating a loyal subordinate like this; it was obvious how vicious their heart was.

Wei Xiaobao wiped his tears dry, calmed himself down, and returned to the hall. He burst into loud laughter and said, “Very interesting.” He saw the actors of the opera stood frozen in front of the banquet table. As soon as they saw Wei Xiaobao came back, the gongs and drums resounded, the opera ‘Zhong Kui married the younger sister’ resumed.

Turned out when he went inside, Wu Yingxiong ordered the opera to stop, to wait for his return before continuing, so that he would not miss anything. Wei Xiaobao apologize to Wu Yingxiong, saying that when the Princess heard that the prince consort was here to drink wine, she summoned him and meticulously asked him about the prince consort’s day-to-day habit, what kind of clothes he liked to wear, what kind of food he loved to eat, that sort of things, and did not let him go for a long time, so that he had to tire Wu Yingxiong, who was waiting in the hall. Wu Yingxiong was greatly delighted, he repeatedly said that it was

not a problem.

As soon as Wu Yingxiong left, Wei Xiaobao went back to the side room, but he did not see any Tian Di Hui warrior. Upon asking around, he was told that they went out. He felt strange, wondering what they were up to.

It was quite late into the night before the warriors returned; this time they also brought somebody along. What happened was that Xu Tianchuan interrogated Lu Yifeng, and found out that the reasons Wu Sangui punished Yang Yizhi like that were: one, he was undoubtedly suspicious that after becoming sworn brothers with Wei Xiaobao, Yang Yizhi might betray him; two, it actually had something to do with the Mongolian Prince Galdan.

For the last several years, this Galdan and Wu Sangui had developed quite a close relationship; they unceasingly sent gifts to each other, until recently Galdan sent an emissary to Kunming to deliver gift. This emissary was called Hantiemo. He had a lengthy conversation with Wu Sangui every day for several days. Somehow, Yang Yizhi found out the inside story; apparently he confronted Wu Sangui and thus incited his wrath. Lu Yifeng's official position was very low, he did not know the details; he only heard bits and pieces from Wu Sangui's bodyguards' mouths. Under Tian Di Hui warriors' torture, he did not dare to conceal anything and thus had spilled out everything he knew.

After quick discussion, the warriors decided to carry it through to the end [orig. one don't do, two don't rest]; while they were still dressed as Wu Sangui's personal bodyguards, they might as well go to kidnap the Mongolian emissary Hantiemo.

Wei Xiaobao had met Galdan at Shaolin Temple, that man was arrogant, harsh and unreasonable; he made his warriors to shoot him with golden secret projectiles, if not for the treasured vest protecting his body, he would have lost his life long ago. He thought Galdan's emissary must not be a good person. He saw Hantiemo was about fifty something years old, with a light yellow beard under his chin, his eyes flickered indefinitely, obviously he was a crafty man.

"Let him see Yang *Dage*," Wei Xiaobao said.

Gao Yanchao complied, and pushed Hantiemo to the room next door. They heard Hantiemo screamed, his voice was brimming with terror; seeing Yang

Yizhi's tragic condition, he was scared out of his wits. Gao Yanchao dragged him back. They saw his face was completely drained of color, his body was trembling unceasingly.

"Have you seen the man next door?" Wei Xiaobao asked. Hantiemo nodded. Wei Xiaobao said, "I asked that man, but his answers were vague and not honest, he lied to me several times. I always have a rule, anybody who told me a lie, I would cut one of his legs, told me two lies, cut his both legs. How many lies did that man tell me?"

Gao Yanchao said, "He told seven lies."

Wei Xiaobao shook his head. "Ay," he sighed, "That man told too many lies, I had no choice but to also cut both of his hands, both of his eyes, and his tongue. Only his head is spared."

Pulling his dagger, he leaned over and waved the dagger lightly, cutting one leg of a wooden stool in front of him, and then he played with the dagger in his hand. "My dagger can cut human's hand and leg cleanly and neatly," he said with a laugh, "Do you want to try?"

Hantiemo was actually a Mongolian brave warrior, but after seeing Yang Yizhi's devastation, he was so scared that his soul flew away and scattered. He stammered, "Whatever *Daren* … *Daren* ask, *Xiaode* [little/lowly one] … *Xiaode* will not dare to conceal … conceal even half a word."

"Very good," Wei Xiaobao said, "Ping Xi Qin Wang wanted me to ask you: everything that you told *Wangye*, are they actually the truth, or a lie? Was there any empty word?"

"*Daren* please understand," Hantiemo said, "How can *Xiaode* … *Xiaode* dare to deceive *Wangye*? Indeed there is not a single empty word."

Wei Xiaobao shook his head and said, "*Wangye* did not believe it; he said that you, Mongolians are very crafty, the words you said oftentimes cannot be trusted, you love to cover up things the most."

Pride mixed with anger appeared on Hantiemo's face; he said, "We are Genghis Khan's descendants, we always say one as one, two as two …"

Wei Xiaobao nodded, "Right," he said, "You say three as three, four as four."

Hantiemo was startled; he was very fluent in Han language, but his knowledge of idioms and Chinese expressions [see also note 5 of Chapter 29] was very limited; he did not know that what Wei Xiaobao said was tongue-in-cheek, he was simply teasing him. He thought there was a different meaning, which he did not know about; thereupon momentarily he did not know how to respond.

Wei Xiaobao's countenance sank as he said, "Do you know who I am?"

Hantiemo said, "*Xiaode* does not know."

"Go ahead and guess," Wei Xiaobao said.

Hantiemo saw that the construction Anfu Garden was magnificent and beautiful, he was brought in by Ping Xi Wang Mansion's attentands, Wei Xiaobao was very young, but he was wearing a first-*pin* rank uniform, and yellow *magua*, with a piece of ruby and a pair of peacock plumes on his hat; it was the attire of high-ranking official, nobility of the Imperial Court. Plus the yellow *magua* was the sign of outstanding honor and glory. Hantiemo's mind was very quick, he pondered, "You are very young, yet have achieved this high-ranking of officialdom, you must be relying on the shade of your father's good fortune. Within the Kunming city wall, other than Ping Xi Qin Wang, who else has this kind of fame and power? Plus Ping Xi Wang's personal bodyguards are so respectful to you. Right, that must be it." Thereupon he respectfully said, "*Xiaode* has eyes but failed to see; turns out *Daren* is Ping Xi Wang's *Xiao Gongzi* [little young master]." He had met Wu Yingxiong. Now that he saw Wei Xiaobao, he noticed the similarity of his clothes to Wu Yingxiong's; hence he came to that conclusion.

Wei Xiaobao was startled. "Damn it," he cursed, "What did you say?" In his heart he said, "You think I am the big traitor, the old turtle's son; won't that mean *laozi* is a little traitor, a little turtle?" Immediately he laughed aloud and said, "You are indeed smart, no wonder Prince Galdan sent you to handle this kind of important mission. Your Prince's friendship with me is not bad." He then described Galdan's appearance and the clothing he wore; he added, "That day your Prince and I discussed martial art, he demonstrated these several moves to me. His martial art skill is really superb." While saying that, he demonstrated the several moves Galdan used at Shaolin Temple.

Hantiemo was greatly delighted, immediately he paid his respect and said, "*Xiao Wangye* is a good friend of our Prince. Turns out we are of the same family."

"Is your Prince well?" Wei Xiaobao asked, "Wasn't he with Sang Qi Lama recently?"

Hantiemo said, "Sang Qi Lama is precisely staying at our Prince's mansion as an honored guest right this moment."

Wei Xiaobao nodded, "I thought so," he said. And then he asked, "There was also a young Han lady who loves to wear blue skirt; I think she is called Ah Qi. I wonder if she is also staying at your Prince's mansion?"

Hantiemo's eyes grew big, his face revealed a pleasantly surprised expression; he said, "Turns out … turns out even this … this matter Xiao Wangye also know; indeed … indeed … amazing."

Wei Xiaobao was only blurting whatever was on is mind, he was simply guessing randomly, yet surprisingly his guess was correct. Feeling very pleased with himself he laughed aloud and said, "Your Prince did not conceal anything from me, Miss Ah Qi is your Prince's good friend; his Shimei, Miss Ah Ke is my good friend[76]. Won't that make us really belong to the same family? Ha ha, ha ha …!"

The two of them laughed together, the barrier between them vanished. Wei Xiaobao said, "*Fu Wang* sent me to ask you really well, the things you told my *Fu Wang*, are they really with all sincerity, and there is no other conspiracy?"

"*Xiao Wangye*," Hantiemo said, "You have such friendship with our Prince, how can you still have such suspicion?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "*Fu Wang* said that when someone is telling lies, what he says the first time might not be the same as when he says it the second time. This matter is really of too great an importance, once we are not careful, everybody will fall with head and face filthy with grime, will be in an extremely difficult situation; therefore, Fu Wang wanted you to repeat to me everything from head to tail, to see if there is any 'mortise and tenon that won't fit with each other'. Hantiemo *Laoxiong*, it's not that I don't believe your Prince, but

with you, it is our first meeting; I don't really know you. I must, therefore, question you carefully; please don't blame me."

"That, you should," Hantiemo said, "If this matter ever leaks out, there will be fatal consequences. Ping Xi Wang is handling this matter very carefully, this is an absolute must. *Xiao Wangye*, please report back to *Wangye*, after our four families form an alliance, we will send troops together, and divide the land under the heavens [referring to China] into four parts. The rivers and mountains of the Central Plains will entirely belong to *Wangye*. The other three families will not be envious or have any change of mind."

Wei Xiaobao was shocked; he thought, "Four-part domination! I wonder which four families? But if I ask him, I would appear not knowing what he is talking about, and then my cover will be blown away." He then chuckled and said, "This matter has actually been discussed several times by your Prince and I. But as far as how this matter will be accomplished, how to divide the land under the heavens into four parts, after much negotiation we have never reached any agreement. What did your Prince say this time?"

"Our Prince says that it's not that he has a mind to demand too much favor," Hantiemo said, "But the matter of contacting the Luocha[77] Country to send their troops is the result of His Highness …"

As soon as Wei Xiaobao heard the word 'Luocha Country to send their troops', his heart shivered in fear. In the meantime, Hantiemo continued, "… is the result of His Highness' effort after he suffered untold hardship before he succeeded. Luocha Country's firearms are incomparably fierce, when the firearms shoot, the Qing troops will have countless difficulties to resist. As long as the Luocha Country is willing to send the troops, this important matter will succeed. Ping Xi Wang will become the Great Emperor of China, *Xiao Wangye* will become the Crown Prince."

Luocha Country is Russia, the country where the people have yellow hair and jade green eyes, and exceptional stature. The Chinese regarded these people as the demon 'luocha', the evil spirit in Buddhism; consequently, at that time the country was called Luocha Country.

During Shunzhi's reign, the Cossack Cavalry of Luocha Country had had several

confrontations with the Qing troops; although each time the Qing troops were beaten, they also managed to inflict serious damage to the Cossacks. Wei Xiaobao did not understand the affairs between nations, but when he was in the Palace, he had heard that the Luocha Country's troops were brutal and violent; their firearms were swift and fierce, and were difficult to withstand. He thought, "My, my, this is serious; selling his own country has become Wu Sangui's second nature, this time he collude with Luocha Country. I must report this to the young Emperor immediately, we must think of a way to resist Luocha Country's firearms and canons."

Seeing Wei Xiaobao was hesitating without saying anything, with his face showing a displeased expression, Hantiemo asked, "I wonder if *Xiao Wangye* has any advice?"

"Um," Wei Xiaobao's mind flashed like a lightning, trying to think how to conceal what he was really thinking. Suddenly he recalled Zheng Keshuang's strive with his older brother over their father's position that he sent Feng Xifan to assassinate his Shifu Chen Jinnan. Immediately he bitterly said, "Damn it, what other advice I may have? *Fu Wang* becomes the Emperor, in the future it will be my *Gege* who succeed him to the throne, I will only be a prince; what good will it be?"

Hantiemo suddenly saw the light; he walked over and said in a low voice, "Since our Prince is already a good friend of *Xiao Wangye*, when *Xiaoren* return, I will explain to the Prince *Xiao Wangye*'s desire. When this great undertaking is accomplished, our Mongolia and Luocha Country, plus the Living Buddha of Tibet, three families, will seek to protect *Xiao Wangye*. In that way … in that way *Xiao Wangye* will have nothing to worry."

Wei Xiaobao thought, "Turns out the four families who will deploy troops are Mongolia, Tibet, Luocha Country, plus Wu Sangui." Immediately his face showed a delighted expression as he said, "If the three of you will really strive for me, when I have the power in my hands, naturally I will reward you heavily; definitely I won't forget you, *laoxiong*, for your help." Casually he took out four banknotes, worth five hundred *taels* each, from his pocket and handed it over to Hantiemo, saying, "Please take this first for your incidental expenses."

Seeing how generous he was with reward, Hantiemo was overjoyed at the

unexpected fortune; immediately he bowed to express his gratitude. The little bit of suspicion he originally had in his heart, at this moment it vanished completely. He was certain that this *Xiao Wangye* wanted to vie for the Emperor position with his older brother Wu Yingxiong; his master Prince Galdan and Hantiemo himself just happened to be in the middle of the raising and lowering of their hands, hence they occupied a very advantageous position.

Wei Xiaobao said, “According to your Prince, after our success, how are we going to divide the land under the heavens?”

Hantiemo replied, “The beautiful rivers and mountains of the Central Plains naturally will belong to your Wu family. Sichuan will return to the Living Buddha of Tibet, the roads north and south of Tianshan[78], the Inner Mongolia’s four eastern and two western leagues[79], Chahar, Jehol, and the city of Suiyuan will return to our Mongolia.”

“That’s quite a vast expanse of land,” Wei Xiaobao said. Actually, he did not know the size of any places mentioned, but listening to Hantiemo mentioning a lot of places, he guessed the area must be quite substantial.

Hantiemo smiled and said, “The effort our Mongolia will spend on *Wangye*’s behalf will also be very substantial.”

Wei Xiaobao nodded. “How about the Luocha Country?” he asked.

Hantiemo replied, “The Great Emperor of Luocha Country said that Luocha Country and Wangye’s territory will have the Shanhai Pass [the Eastern Pass of the Great Wall] as the border. They will not tread a single step into the inside of the Pass. Outside Shanhai Pass originally belongs to Manchurian Tatars; the Luocha Country will occupy the Manchu people’s land, they will not occupy even a *cun* of Chinese people’s land.”

Wei Xiaobao nodded. “In that case, I think it is fair,” he said, “Have your Prince made a schedule on when we are going to raise our arms?”

Hantiemo said, “In this great undertaking, *Wangye* is the leader, the other three families will merely respond by launching converging attack; naturally we will wait for *Wangye*’s thought.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “*Fu Wang* really wants to know, after we deploy our troops, how are the three families going to respond?”

Hantiemo said, “In this matter, we ask that *Wangye* not to worry. As soon as *Wangye*’s large force is out of Yunnan and Guizhou, our Mongolian elite troops will be deployed from the west to the east, the Cossack elite cavalry of Luocha Country will move from the north to the south, and attack Beijing from two directions. The Living Buddha’s Tibetan army will immediately sweep Sichuan border, plus Shen Long Jiao’s surprise-attack force …”

“Ah!” Wei Xiaobao exclaimed, and slapped his thigh. “You … you know about Shen Long Jiao?” he said, “Hong *Jiaozhu* … what did he say?” Hearing that the Divine Dragon Cult was unexpectedly also involved in this conspiracy, his heart was shaken; he could not prevent his voice from quivering.

Seeing the change in his countenance, Hantiemo asked, “Has *Wangye* told *Xiao Wangye* about Shen Long Jiao?”

Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud; he said, “Why hasn’t he? Twice I have had long talk with Hong *Jiaozhu* and Madame Hong; I have even met with the Five Dragon Envoys of the Cult. I thought your Prince did not know about this matter.”

Hantiemo smiled and said, “Hong *Jiaozhu* of Shen Long Jiao has already received an imperial appointment from the Great Emperor of the Luocha Country. As soon as the Luocha Country deploys its troops, naturally Shen Long Jiao will have no choice but to respond. In the future, China’s coastal islands, including Taiwan and Hainan Islands, will become Shen Long Jiao’s territory. Not only that, Fujian’s Geng Jingzhong, Guandong’s Shang Kexi, Guangxi’s Kong Sizhen, everybody may respond. Once *Wangye* gives a shout, from the east, south, west and north everybody will move together, won’t this Manchurian Qing’s dominion fall into *Wangye*’s hands?”

Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud. “Wonderful, wonderful!” he said, while in his heart he groaned, “Bad, bad!” He was, after all, still very young; telling lies here and there, he was capable of not revealing any flaw. But encountering national affair like this, he could not help but secretly feeling worry for the young emperor. Those words, ‘wonderful, wonderful’ did not sound very joyous at all.

Hantiemo was very astute; he could tell the deep concern behind what Wei

Xiaobao did not really mean what he said. "*Xiao Wangye*'s friendship with our Prince is out of ordinary, you are also treating *Xiaoren* generously; even if my body is crushed to dust *Xiaoren* cannot repay it. Whatever difficulty *Xiao Wangye* might have, there is no harm in giving me clear direction. If *Xiaoren* can do anything to serve you, I will not balk at ten thousand deaths."

"I was just thinking," Wei Xiaobao said, "If everybody takes one piece on the east, one piece on the west, when I become the Emperor in the future, my territory will be broken and in disorder; that will be very disappointing."

Hantiemo mused, "Turns out you are concerned over this matter. It makes sense." He said in a low voice, "*Xiao Wangye* please understand, after this great undertaking is accomplished, those cronies Geng Jingzhong, Shang Kexi and Kong Sizhen will be eliminated. At that time, if you want us, Mongolian to send troops to help, naturally we won't decline."

Wei Xiaobao delightedly said, "Thank you very much, thank you very much. You may bring these words of mine back to your Prince. You are Prince Galdan's trusted aide; your promise is just the same as if the Prince personally gives me his words."

Hantiemo felt a bit awkward, but then he thought that it would be a future problem, there is no harm to carelessly make a promise right now. Patting his own chest, he said, "*Xiaoren* will definitely do my utmost for *Xiao Wangye*; I definitely will not turn my back on you."

Wei Xiaobao questioned him some more for quite a long time, but did not get any new useful information; hence he said, "Just take a rest in here, I will go back to report to *Fu Wang*." And then he continued in low voice, "Whatever we talked about today, if you ever leak even half a word, my *Gege* will definitely strike a vicious blow to kill me; I am afraid even *Fu Wang* will be helpless to save me."

Hantiemo had seen quite a lot of brothers struggling for position and killing each other within the Mongolian tribal clans; he knew this was indeed not a small matter. Thereupon he bent his knees immediately and raised his hands toward the heaven to make a vow.

Wei Xiaobao went out of the room; he instructed Feng Jizhong and Xu

Tianchuan to strictly guard Hantiemo, and then he went to visit Yang Yizhi. As soon as he pushed the door open, he could not help but was greatly shocked, for half of Yang Yizhi's body was rolled on the floor. He rushed forward to help him up, but saw that Yang Yizhi's eyes were wide open, yet he was motionless since he had already died. There were several large characters written in blood on the white sheet of the bed. Wei Xiaobao only knew a 'three' [San] character and a 'cassia' [Gui] character. He turned his head around and asked, "What characters are those?"

"Yes," Gao Yanchao responded, "Wu Sangui zao fan [rebel/revolt] mai guo [sell country], seven characters."

Wei Xiaobao sighed and said, "At the point of his death Yang *Dage* used his severed hand to write."

"Precisely," Gao Yanchao grimly said.

Wei Xiaobao called the Tian Di Hui warriors together and conveyed to them what Hantiemo had told him. None of the warriors was not enraged; they all cursed Wu Sangui for betraying his country the first time, and now wanted to do it the second time. Priest Xuanzhen gnashed his teeth. Suddenly he untied the front piece of his garment and said, "Gentlemen, please look!"

They saw a scar on his chest, as big as a rice bowl, where the skin wrinkled and the bone protruded; it looked really gruesome. He also had a long saber scar on his left shoulder, approximately a *chi* long. These people had known each other for quite a long time, yet nobody knew that he had suffered such a serious injury in the past. When they saw it, nobody was not overwhelmed with shock.

Priest Xuanzhen said, "This is precisely the wound from the devils of the Luocha Country's firearms."

Wei Xiaobao asked, "So *Daozhang* [(Taoist) priest] has fought with the Luocha people?"

With a grieved expression Priest Xuanzhen said, "My father, (older and younger) uncles, nine brothers in all, have died under the Luocha people's hands. *Pindao*[80] left home precisely because of this." Thereupon he briefly narrated his story.

Originally from generation to generation his family engaged in furs business. They ran a furs business in Zhangjiakou [prefecture, in Hebei province]; they owned a hundred-year old shop there. One particular year his father's elder brother and his father took their brothers, sons and nephew to go beyond the Great Wall to purchase silver fox, sable and other precious furs. Along the way they came across a band of Luocha people, who coveted their gold, silver and goods, and wanted to rob them. There were actually three escort masters under their employment who went along to protect them. But the Luocha people's firearms were very fierce; as soon as they opened fire, the three escort masters died instantly. His father and uncles also died under their firearms, sabers and horses. Xuanzhen's shoulder was cut by a saber, the pit of his stomach was fried by the gunpowder; he fainted in a pool of blood. The Luocha people thought he was dead. They plundered their gold, silver and goods, and left.

After Xuanzhen regained his consciousness, he struggled for many months in the forest of the mountain before his wounds were healed. Because of this calamity, his family property was completely gone, their furs business went bankrupt. In his discouragement he left his home to become a Taoist priest. When the country changed its master, he joined Tian Di Hui. But when he recalled how swift and fierce Luocha people's firearm was, although it had been more than twenty years ago, he still often got nightmares in the middle of the night, he would shout loudly and woke up with a start.

Li Lishi said, "The fiercest weapon those Luocha people have is the firearm. As long as we can think of a way to break it, we don't have to be afraid of them."

Priest Xuanzhen shook his head and said, "When it went off, it is indeed like thunder and lightning. Even if your martial art is higher, you won't be able to dodge it, you won't be able to block it."

Xu Tianchuan said, "Luocha people want to join hands with Wu Sangui to snatch away the Tatars' realm, we can simply watch with folded arms, let them fight each other until the sky and the earth turn upside down. We can benefit as the third party and seize the opportunity to restore the Great Ming's rivers and mountains."

Priest Xuanzhen said, "I am afraid we will only beat the tiger from the front door only to have a wolf come from the back door. Luocha people are ten times

more vicious than the Manchurian Tatars; after defeating the Manchurian Qing, they won't stop at Shanhai Pass, they would definitely enter the Pass to occupy our land under the heavens."

"Shall we help the Manchu Tatars instead?" Xu Tianchuan asked. The warriors made comments one after another.

Naturally Wei Xiaobao was determined to help Kangxi, but he did not dare to speak it out. "There is no hurry to make the decision right now," he said, "We have snatched Yang *Dage* away, we have captured Hantiemo and Lu Yifeng; very soon Wu Sangui will find out about it, and then what are we going to do?"

Everybody pondered silently, and then some said that they had better fight with him immediately, some said they had better escape that very same night. Wei Xiaobao said, "This old turtle has many troops and horses under his command; if we have to fight, we cannot beat him. Yunnan and Guizhou are so big, we won't necessarily be able to escape his clutch in ten days or half a month. Um, let's do it this way: I am asking gentlemen to take that dog official Lu Yifeng, along with Yang *Dage*'s body, back to the big prison Hei Kanzi."

The warriors were startled. "Send them back?" they asked.

"Exactly," Wei Xiaobao replied, "We only need to scare that dog thief Lu Yifeng, I'll say most likely he will not dare to announce it publicly. If he reports it to his superior, he himself will not escape the responsibility. Yang *Dage* is dead anyway, there is no point in keeping his corpse."

Although the warriors had rich experience in the Jianghu, their knowledge of government officials' character was far inferior to Wei Xiaobao's. They all thought that his risky move[81] this time was too dangerous; breaking into jail, freeing a prisoner and kidnaping an official was quite a major event, how could Lu Yifeng not report it to his superior? Li Lishi hesitantly said, "I think this dog official Lu Yifeng is too much of a coward; I am afraid … I am afraid in this important matter he won't dare not to report it."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "I am not afraid that he is a coward, but I am afraid he is too stupid and useless, cannot do his job as a government official. In the officialdom, there is a principle 'conceal from superior, do not conceal from

subordinate'; an enormous matter will disappear when you cover it up. Nobody wants to deliberately put a black pot over his own head. Just bring that dog official over, let me remind him some."

Gao Yanchao turned around and left, returning with Lu Yifeng in his arms, and tossed him to the floor. He had been beaten and was scared, his face had already turned ghastly pale.

"Lu *Laoge* [old older brother]," Wei Xiaobao began, "You must be exhausted."

"I … I don't dare," Lu Yifeng replied.

"Lu *Laoge* is a real friend," Wei Xiaobao said, "All Ping Xi Wang's classified information, you have narrated it to us in full detail without concealing anything. Very well, a friend is a friend, we are going to let you go. *Laoge* has leaked Ping Xi Wang's classified information, we will not tell anybody about it. Real men of the Jianghu will say one as one, two as two. If you, *Laoge*, like to publicize it yourself, to openly set yourself against Ping Xi Wang, it's your own business. Ha ha, ha ha …"

Lu Yifeng shook all over; he said, "Even if *Xiao* … *Xiaoren* has gar … gargantuan nerve, I won't … won't dare."

"Very good," Wei Xiaobao said, "Brothers, please escort Lu *Daren* back to *yamen*. You might as well bring that prisoner's body back with you, so that when there is any inquiry, Lu *Daren* will not have a hard time explaining." The warriors complied together. Lu Yifeng was pleasantly surprised, but was also confused; with the warriors holding his arms, he was ushered out.

For the next several days, the Tian Di Hui warriors were waiting in trepidation; they were afraid Lu Yifeng would report to Wu Sangui, and then a large group of troops and horses under Ping Xi Wang's command would storm into Anfu Garden to massacre them all; yet unexpectedly nothing was astirred. It was unclear whether that old traitor Wu Sangui was very crafty, that he waited until the time is ripe before making any movement, or contrary to what they expected, Wei *Xiangzhu*'s premonition was correct, that Lu Yifeng indeed did not dare to report.

The warriors were restless; day after day they talked about it over and over. Finally Wei Xiaobao said, "Let's do it this way, I am going to pay Wu Sangui a

visit, to see what he has to say."

Xu Tianchuan said, "I am afraid he will detain Wei *Xiangzhu* and won't let you go back; that would be terrible."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "All of us are in his grasp anyway, if the old turtle wanted to catch me, even if I don't go to see him, I won't be able to escape."

He selected several officers and soldiers from the Valiant Cavalry Brigade and several Imperial Bodyguards and went to the Ping Xi Wang Mansion. Wu Sangui personally came out to welcome him. With smiles all over his face he took Wei Xiaobao's hand; together they entered the Mansion. "To what do I owe Wei *Jueye*'s visit this time?" he asked, "You only need to pass it on to my son, and then won't everything be done for you? Why would you have to toil your honorable self?"

"Aiyo," Wei Xiaobao said, "*Wangye* is too polite. *Xiao Jiangguan*'s [lit. little/lowly military officer, referring to self] official duty is low, compared to the Prince Consort's it is too far below. What *Wangye* said, *Xiao Jiang* is too undeserving."

Wu Sangui laughed and said, "Wei *Jueye* is the beloved general serving by His Majesty's side that he most doted on, your future is full of promise, indeed your prospect is immeasurable. It won't be the least bit surprising if in the future you will come to this Mansion and be the *Wangye*."

Wei Xiaobao's heart skipped a beat; he could not stop his countenance from changing. Halting his steps, he said, "What *Wangye* said is not right."

Wu Sangui laughed. "What do you mean not right?" he asked, "Wei *Jueye* is only fifteen or sixteen years old, already you are the Commander of the Valiant Cavalry Brigade, Deputy Chief of the Imperial Bodyguards, Imperial Envoy, and was granted the title of Viscount. From Zijue [viscount] to Bojue [earl/count], Houjue [marquis], Gongjue [duke], Wangjue [king/prince] and then Qin Wang [prince[82]], it won't take more than a dozen, perhaps twenty, years. Ha ha, ha ha …"

Wei Xiaobao shook his head, "*Wangye*," he said, "*Xiao Jiang* left the Capital

this time, His Majesty instructed, 'Tell Wu Sangui to serve well. In the future this Ping Xi Qin Wang title will belong to my *meifu* [husband of younger sister] Wu Yingxiong; after Wu Yingxiong died, the Qin Wang title will belong to my *waisheng* [sister's son or wife's sibling's son], when my *waisheng* dies, it will belong to my *waisheng*'s son. In short, let Ping Xi Qin Wang title belongs to the Wu family forever.' *Wangye*, when he said that, His Majesty was extremely sincere."

Wu Sangui was very happy in his heart. "Did His Majesty really say that?" he asked.

"Why would I lie to you?" Wei Xiaobao said, "But His Majesty also said that there is no hurry for me to tell you this, he wanted me to investigate carefully; if *Wangye* is indeed a very loyal minister, then I should tell you that. Otherwise, hey, hey, won't that mean you are saying that the Lord of Ten-thousand Years' words does not count? That once he gave his words, dead horses cannot chase?"

"Humph," Wu Sangui said, "Since today Wei *Jueye* have just told me that, you have decided that I am a loyal minister?"

"Are you not?" Wei Xiaobao said, "If *Wangye* is not a loyal minister, nobody in this world is. If someday Wei Xiaobao can really have a golden mouth like *Wangye*, to be granted the title Zheng Dong Wang, Sao Bei Wang, Ding Nan Wang[83], or whatever, but can stay here in Ping Xi Wang Mansion in Yunnan, ha ha … I will be the guest for the rest of my life; I don't want to act as the host forever."

The two of them were talking and walking inside. Wu Sangui was very happy to listen to Wei Xiaobao; pulling Wei Xiaobao's hand, he said, "Come, come, let us sit in my private study room." Walking through two garden courtyards, they arrived at Wu Sangui's private study.

Although this room was called a study room, the walls were full of sabers, spears, swords and halberds, there was not a single bookshelf or a book. There was a large round-backed wooden armchair in the middle of the room, draped in tiger skin. Ordinary tiger will have black stripes on yellow background, but this tiger skin had black stripes on white background; it was really unusual.

“Aiyo, *Wangye*,” Wei Xiaobao said, “This white tiger skin must be very rare. *Xiao Jiang* has never seen anything like this in the Palace. Today my horizon has been broadened.”

Wu Sangui was very proud of himself; he said, “When I was guarding the Shanhai Pass in the past, I went hunting in the vicinity of Ningyuan, and caught it. This kind of white tiger is called ‘Zouyu’ [mythical animal]; it is indeed very rare, to get this tiger means great luck, great profit.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Every day *Wangye* is sitting on this white tiger skin, you will gain promotion and wealth forever without an end. Tsk, tsk, tsk, it’s really amazing.”

He saw next to the tiger skin chair there were a couple of marble screen, about five or six *chi* tall. The picture of mountain, water [together means ‘landscape], wood and rock on the screen seemed to be alive. On one of the screen, there was a picture of mountain peak, on the mountain peak there seemed to be a black-naped oriole. By the water there was a tiger, the posture looked beautiful and alive. Wei Xiaobao praised, “These two screens must be very valuable too. I have never seen something like this in the Palace. They say that *Laotianye* [God/Heaven] was gifted this kind of painting, to whomever’s hands it falls, it will be an omen.”

Wu Sangui smiled, “What about these two screens? I wonder what omen they might have?” he asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, “In *Xiao Jiang*’s opinion, this aloof and remote little black-naped oriole can only chirp ‘jijizhazha’, quite useless. Underneath is actually a big tiger, majestic, very formidable. This big tiger is naturally *Wangye.*”

Wu Sangui was very happy; immediately he thought, “He said that the little black-naped oriole is standing aloft, can only chirp ‘jijizhazha’, and is quite useless; isn’t he referring to the young Emperor? By saying those things, is he testing me?” Thereupon he asked, “This little black-naped oriole, I wonder what it is referring to.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “What does *Wangye* think?”

Wu Sangui shook his head, “I don’t know,” he said, “Would *Wei Jueye* give me your advice?”

Wei Xiaobao smiled. He pointed to the other screen and said, “Here we have mountains and we have water, of course it is referring to ‘ten thousand *li* of rivers and mountains’. Ha ha, good omen, good omen!”

Wu Sangui’s heart jumped; he was about to ask, but in the end he did not dare. In that moment he felt his lips were dry, his tongue parched.

With the corner of his eyes Wei Xiaobao suddenly caught a glimpse of a sutra laying on the desk, it was precisely the ‘Forty-two-chapter sutra’ with which he was very familiar. It’s just that the sutra had blue silk cover. Immediately his heart jumped. “The eighth copy,” he said in his heart, “Indeed it is in the old turtle’s place. Wonderful, wonderful!”

Immediately he turned his eyes away from the sutra, and looked at the sabers and spears on the wall. He laughed and said, “*Wangye*, you are indeed a great hero, a great warrior, even your study is full of weapons. Frankly speaking, *Xiao Jiang* cannot tell the good from the bad, when I heard the word ‘study room’, my head was getting big; who would have thought that your study room is this magnificent? Indeed, my utmost admiration.”

Wu Sangui laughed heartily; he said, “Each one of these weapons has its origin. *Xiao Wang* hang them here just for old time’s sake.”

“So that’s how it is,” Wei Xiaobao said, “In those years *Wangye* swept the east and shook the west, struggled in the south and fought in the north, establishing enormous heroic deeds [orig. to ride a laboring horse to great deeds]. These weapons must be the ones *Wangye* had used?”

Wu Sangui smiled. “Exactly,” he said, “In defending the border, throughout my life I have fought several hundred battles, big and small; from the cradle to the grave, this Wang [king] title came from struggling with everything I have.” The implication was that I was not like you, the little baby who was lucky to obtain the Emperor’s favor and was promoted to Viscount.

Wei Xiaobao nodded in agreement; he said, “When *Wangye* defended Shanhai Pass, I wonder which weapon did you use? Which great merit did you render?”

Wu Sangui’s countenance changed quickly. When he defended Shanhai Pass, the battle was against the Manchurians, which means the more he killed Manchurians, the bigger his merit was. By asking this question, Wei Xiaobao was

obviously mocking him as a traitor (to Han people). In that moment his hands trembled slightly, he nearly was not able to suppress his anger.

Wei Xiaobao continued, “I heard that the Emperor Yongli of the Ming Dynasty was pursued by *Wangye* from Yunnan all the way to Burma, until finally he was caught and hung by *Wangye* with a bowstring …” While saying that, he pointed to a long bow on the wall, and asked, “I wonder if that was the bow?”

When Wu Sangui killed Emperor Yongli of Ming, he had made up his mind to show his loyalty and devotion to the Qing Dynasty, that he would not be double-minded; however, deep down in his heart he was actually quite ashamed. Nobody in his mansion had ever dared to mention this matter; unexpectedly Wei Xiaobao brought it up on his face, and thus unmasking his scar. In that instant the fury in his breast was difficult to endure; he said sternly, “Today Wei *Jueye* has repeatedly mocked me, I don’t know what is your intention?”

Wei Xiaobao said in consternation, “I did not! How can *Xiao Jiang* dare to mock *Wangye*? Back in Beijing, *Xiao Jiang* heard everybody in the Palace said that *Wangye* even hang the Ming Emperor, showing your utmost loyalty toward our Great Qing. I heard that when *Wangye* hang Emperor Yongli, you acted personally, the bowstring tightened around his neck, ‘zhi, zhi, zhi’, Emperor Yongli groaned ‘ai, ai, ai’, and *Wangye* laughed heartily. Very good, very good, that was very loyal!”

Wu Sangui sprang up, clenched his fists, but then he had a second thought, “How can a little kid like this have this kind of guts, have the impertinence to provoke me like this? Must be that little muddleheaded lord incited him, ordering him to test me; or perhaps my other opponents in the Imperial Court intentionally prompted him to speak provoking words, trying to control me.” Being a wily old fox, immediately he suppressed his angry look and chuckled. “Those ‘defending our border and rendering great merits’ and so on are not worth mentioning,” he said, “Actually, only being loyal and devoted to His Majesty can be considered a little bit of my strong point. *Xiao Xiongdi*, you want to be Zheng Dong Wang, Sao Bei Wang, you must learn how to be loyal and devoted to His Majesty like your *Lao Gege* here.”

“Yes, yes!” Wei Xiaobao said, “Absolutely, I cannot afford not to learn it! It’s a pity *Xiao Jiang* was born several decades too late, the Ming Dynasty Emperors

have all been killed by *Wangye*, so that *Xiao Jiang* has nowhere to put my hands into."

Wu Sangui cursed in his heart, "There will come a day when you will fall into my hand, and then I will make a mincemeat of you!" He laughed and said, "If *Wei Jueye* wants to set up a merit, why worry you won't get any opportunity?"

Wei Xiaobao laughed, "It would be good if someone revolts," he said.

Wu Sangui's heart turned cold. "Why?" he asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, "If someone revolts, His Majesty will send me to battle, *Xiao Jiang* will do what *Wangye* has done, I will fight with everything I have and kill the enemy, catch the rebels, and may break open the border region."

"Wei *Xiongdi*," Wu Sangui grimly said, "This kind of talk is irresponsible and must not be mentioned. With the current Holy Son of Heaven on the throne, the whole world's heart is converted, every person gives his allegiance, who might want to revolt?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "So according to *Wangye*, nobody will revolt?"

Wu Sangui was taken aback; he said, "If we say nobody will revolt, naturally it may not be necessarily true. The former Ming Dynasty rebels, or followers of renegades everywhere, those who wish to create disorder, I am afraid there are some."

"If someone revolts," Wei Xiaobao continued, "Will it mean that the Holy Son of Heaven is not on the throne anymore?"

Wu Sangui struggled hard to suppress his anger. "Hey, hey, hey," he let out some dry laughed, and then said, "*Xiao Xiongdi*'s talk is very interesting."

Actually, after seeing the 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra' on the desk, Wei Xiaobao was constantly trying to infuriate Wu Sangui, hoping that in his anger, he might brush off his sleeve and storm out of the room, so that Wei Xiaobao might have a chance to steal the sutra. Unexpectedly Wu Sangui was extremely shrewd, although his anger flared several times, he was able to control his temper and thus he did not fall into Wei Xiaobao's trick.

Seeing Wu Sangui could not be provoked, Wei Xiaobao knew he would not

have the opportunity to reach out and snatch the sutra away; immediately he changed his tactic, he said several things that Wu Sangui would love to hear. But while his mouth was busy licking Wu Sangui's behind, his mind was racing, trying to find a way to get hold of the sutra. He thought, "Supposing I faked an Imperial Edict, saying that His Majesty wanted to have this sutra, I have no doubt that the old turtle would not dare not to offer it. Much less His Majesty did indeed want to have the sutra, and did tell me to take the opportunity while I am in Yunnan to look for it. If I said that I want the old turtle to hand me the sutra, I am not faking an Imperial Decree. However, I am afraid that while the old turtle would readily agree, he would rig up a scam in secret, perhaps he would be like Prince Kang, who forged a 'western shellfish goods' [there's this phrase again: 西贝货儿 see chapter 29] to the Emperor, then I could not get the pieces of skin inside."

As soon as he thought about forging the sutra, he had an idea. Suddenly he lowered his voice as he said, "*Wangye*, His Majesty has a secret edict for you."

Wu Sangui was startled; he stood up instantly and said, "Minister Wu Sangui respectfully hear and obey the Imperial Decree."

Wei Xiaobao pulled his hand and said, "No rush, no rush, let me tell you the background information first."

"Yes, yes," Wu Sangui said, but he did not sit down.

Wei Xiaobao said, "His Majesty understands very well that you are a loyal minister of the Great Qing, yet he repeatedly instructed me to ascertain whether you are loyal or a traitor, does *Wangye* know why?"

Wu Sangui scratched his head and said, "I don't know."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Actually, His Majesty has an important matter he wants you to do, but somehow he does not feel reassured yet whether you would or would not strive to do your best. He is sending Princess Jianning down to marry your Heir Apparent, actually his intention was to … to … that …"

"He wants to encourage me?" Wu Sangui asked.

"Right," Wei Xiaobao said, "His Majesty said his intention was to encourage you. My literary knowledge is too lacking, I could not remember that word."

Wu Sangui said, "Whatever mission His Majesty has for me, *laochen* [the old

minister, referring to self] will do my utmost, I will toil as his dog or his horse. I am just wondering what mission might His Majesty has for *laochen* to do."

"This mission concerns a matter of utmost importance," Wei Xiaobao said, "By this time tomorrow, I am asking *Wangye* to wait for me in the Mansion, *Xiao Jiang* will come back to pass on His Majesty's secret order."

"Yes, yes," Wu Sangui said, "His Majesty has a decree, *laochen* will go to Anfu Garden to receive it."

With a low voice Wei Xiaobao said, "Too many eyes and ears in Anfu Garden, this place is more dependable."

Finished speaking he took his leave. Wu Sangui wondered what trick he was playing, he respectfully walked Wei Xiaobao out.

The next day Wei Xiaobao returned about the same time, the two of them went into the study room.

"*Wangye*," Wei Xiaobao began, "What I am about to tell you is a matter of utmost importance, you must never divulge it in any way, even when you present a memorial to the Emperor, you must not mention it a character or half a word."

"Yes, yes," Wu Sangui complied, "Naturally I will not dare to divulge the secret."

Wei Xiaobao lowered his voice, "His Majesty obtained a secret report, Shang Kexi and Geng Jingzhong is about to rebel!"

As soon as Wu Sangui heard it, his countenance changed greatly. Ping Nan Wang [king who pacified the south] Shang Kexi was guarding Guangdong, Jing Nan Wang [peaceful south king] Geng Jingzhong was guarding Fujian; together with Wu Sangui, they were known as the three border defenses. These three defenses shared glory and disgrace, their rise and demise were interrelated. Wu Sangui's rebellion plot actually involved a joint large-scale military movement with Shang and Geng, two defenses. When he heard that the Emperor was aware that Shang and Geng, two people were about to revolt, naturally Wu Sangui was thrown into extreme panic. "Is … is that true?" he asked in a trembling voice.

The previous day he concocted a story that he had a secret order from the Emperor to scare Wu Sangui so that he would lose his head out of fear, and thus Wei Xiaobao would have an opportunity to steal the sutra. However, he was, after all, only a young kid whose knowledge of military or country affair was limited. He thought that if he babbled nonsense, first, Wu Sangui might not necessarily believe him, second, when the lie was exposed, perhaps the repercussion would be so significant that Kangxi might blame him; therefore, he decided to return to Anfu Garden and discuss it over with Tian Di Hui warriors first before returning on the next day to pass on the imperial edict. Qi Biaoqing suggested that they framed Shang and Geng, two defenses, saying that they plotted a rebellion, to frightened Wu Sangui in a big way, since in effect they were exposing his own rebellion plot. Sure enough, as Wei Xiaobao brought it up, Wu Sangui was so scared that he was at a loss of what to do.

“Actually,” Wei Xiaobao continued, “His Majesty kept hearing that the three defenses were planning a rebellion, but it sounded like a fabricated fact, just like the later generation of Mu Family trying to frame you; His Majesty never believed such thing.”

“Yes, yes,” Wu Sangui said, “His Majesty is an enlightened sage, His Majesty is an enlightened sage.”

“But this time, about the Shang and Geng, two defenses’ conspiracy, His Majesty has finally acquired reliable evidence,” Wei Xiaobao said, “His Majesty said: right now the two defenses’ rebellion plot is not out in the open yet, we must not beat the grass to scare the snake; however, he wants the Wu defense to deploy massive military force to be stationed at the Guangdong, Guangxi borders. As soon as those two defenses rise up, the Wu defense is to immediately dispatch the troops to Guangdong and Fujian, to arrest those two traitors and send them off to Beijing. That will be an enormous meritorious service.”

Wu Sangui bowed and said, “I solemnly receive the Imperial Edict. If Shang and Geng, two defenses are acting against the law, *laochen* will immediately deploy troops to capture those two people and present them to Beijing.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “His Majesty said: Shang Kexi is a muddlehead, Geng Jingzhong is a useless fellow, they are definitely not Wu defense’s match. As long

as Wu defense agrees to deploy troops, the Imperial Court will not need to send a single soldier, this matter will be solved just by stretching a hand and grab it."

Wu Sangui smiled and said, "Please tell the Lord of Ten-thousand Years to set his heart at peace. *Laochen* drills the troops in here, I do not dare to be negligence the least bit, especially to serve the Emperor on a special mission. All the soldiers and generals under *laochen*'s banner, each one is comparable to three bannermen soldiers, and they all pledge their lives in loyalty and devotion to His Majesty."

"I am going to report what *Wangye* is saying today back to the Emperor," Wei Xiaobao said, "When His Majesty hears it, he will be very happy."

Wu Sangui was secretly delighted, "This way I can move an army and send a general, even if the little muddleheaded lord knew about it, he won't be suspicious."

Wei Xiaobao pointed to a rifle hanging on the wall. "*Wangye*," he said, "Is that a westerners' firearm?"

"Exactly," Wu Sangui said, "That is Luocha Country's firearm. It was obtained during the battle our Great Qing and the Luocha Country had outside the Pass, it is indeed a very sharp weapon."

"I have never had any firearms before," Wei Xiaobao said, "Can you let me borrow it for a moment?"

Wu Sangui smiled and said, "Naturally you can! This kind of firearm is used during the battle; although it can reach far, it is rather inconvenient to use. Luocha people have some other short gun." Walking toward a wooden cabinet, he pulled open the drawer, and took a red wood case out.

Wei Xiaobao was standing right by the desk. As soon as he saw Wu Sangui turning around, he also turned around, lifted the front piece of the yellow *magua* he was wearing, took out a copy of 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra' from the pocket of the *magua*, put it on the table, took the copy of sutra that was originally on the table, and put it into the pocket of his *magua*. This swapping was done in an extremely fast and nimble manner; even if Wu Sangui was watching helplessly, his vision would be blocked by Wei Xiaobao's back and it would be hard for him to know what's going on, much less Wu Sangui was also

turning his back to fetch the gun. All eight copies of the sutra had exactly the same appearance, only the book jackets had different colors. The previous night Wei Xiaobao took the Bordered Blue Banner's copy, tore off the red border, and swapped it off with the Plain Blue Banner's copy.

He saw Wu Sangui opened the wooden case and took out two short guns, about a *chi* long each. From the muzzle he stuffed some gunpowder, and packed it using an iron rod. He also put three iron bullets inside the muzzle. And then he took a fire knife and ignited a piece of paper, and handed the gun and the paper to Wei Xiaobao and said, "Light the fuse, the iron bullet will shoot out."

Wei Xiaobao received the gun, and aimed the muzzle at the rockery outside the window. He blew the lighted paper to ignite the fuse. There was a loud explosion, a burst of hot air hit his face, his arm was violently jolted, the gun fell to the floor, smoke arose before his eyes; he could not help but to retreat two steps backward.

Wu Sangui laughed aloud and said, "This gun's power is very formidable, isn't it?"

Wei Xiaobao's arm was numb from the shock. "Damn it," he cursed, "Western people's toy is indeed demonical."

Wu Sangui laughed and said, "Look at the rockery!"

Wu Sangui focused his eyes and saw the a small corner of the rockery had been exploded, there were fragments of rocks scattered on the ground; he could not help but sticking out his tongue, and did not pull it back for half a day. "If this gun explode on someone," he said, "Even if you have copper muscle and iron bone, you won't be able to withstand it." Stooping down, he picked up the short gun and put it back into the wooden case.

When the mansion's guards heard the explosion, they all came to the window and looked inside. After seeing their *Wangye* was safe and sound, and was talking to Wei Xiaobao, they felt relieved.

Wu Sangui held the wooden case with both hands and said with a laugh, "Wei Xiongdi, please take it so you can play with it."

Wei Xiaobao shook his head and said, "This is an effective weapon to protect

yourself, *Wangye*'s generous gift, I do not dare to accept."

Wu Sangui pushed the box into his hand, and said with a laugh, "We are brothers, why differentiate between you and I? What's mine is yours."

Wei Xiaobao said, "This is Luocha people's treasure, you might not necessarily get another one in the future. *Xiao Jiang* absolutely cannot accept it." But in his heart he was thinking, "You are colluding with Luocha people, you can have any number of guns you want, naturally it is not a rare object at all."

Wu Sangui laughed and said, "Exactly because it is rare that I dare to give it to *Xiongdi*. If it is a common object, Wei *Xiongdi* would not even look at it. Ha ha …"

Thereupon Wei Xiaobao thanked him and accepted; he said with a laugh, "Hereafter if I come across people who want to harm me, I will take out the gun, 'bang!' I will shoot him, and explode him till his body torn and his bones crushed. *Xiao Jiang*'s life is actually bestowed by *Wangye*."

Wu Sangui patted Wei Xiaobao's shoulder and said with a laugh, "You don't need to be that polite. Guns are indeed very formidable, but putting the gunpowder, loading the bullets, lighting the flint, igniting the fuse, the procedure is really bothersome, unlike our bow and arrow, which we can shoot in rapid succession, continuously."

"That's right," Wei Xiaobao said, "If the westerners' guns are like bow and arrow, can be shot in succession, will we, Chinese, still have our lives? The Great Qing's beautiful rivers and mountains will be difficult to protect." Speaking to this point, he giggled and said, "Actually, there is a benefit to me to have these two guns; now I do not need to train martial art. All those martial art experts or martial art masters are not my match anymore."

After some idle talks, took his leave and returned to Anfu Garden, where he closed the door, and opened up the sutra's outer skin. As expected, he found a lot of sheepskin pieces inside. He mused, "I have obtained all the pieces of map hidden in the eight copies of sutra. *Laozi* only needs to focus my attention and slowly assemble the map together, the Tatars' buried treasure and dragon's vein will fall into my hand." However, the thought of focusing his attention to put together these several thousand pieces of sheepskin into a complete picture already gave him a headache; he thought, "No need to rush, we have plenty of

time.”

Immediately he stitched back the cover and put the sheepskin pieces into the pouch with the rest of the pieces, which he hid in his innermost pocket, next to his skin. Thinking about the great success of his mission, he could not help but feeling happy and contented. “The young Emperor, the old wh0re, the old turtle, Hong *Jiaozhu*, the big traitor, and also my Shifu, the not-old, not-young, middle-aged nun, everybody wanted to obtain these eight copies of sutra, in the end it is still I, Wei Xiaobao, who gets it. Ha ha … if they knew, one will pull my hand, the other will pull my leg, and pull me in four directions, I will be torn away from limb to limb.” He was very excited, too bad that he could not tell anybody about it. Unable to flaunt his achievement, unavoidably he felt everything was fine except for one small defect.

Crossing his legs, he hummed the little tune he learned in Yangzhou brothel, “A cup of wine, slowly being poured, I ask *Qing Gege* [beloved older brother], where did he come from? In that place, Yangzhou, there are twenty-four bridges, at the end of each bridge, there is a beautiful woman, *Qing Gege* …” While he was singing happily, suddenly he heard someone knocking his door lightly. Three knocks, stopped, two knocks, stopped, three knocks. It was precisely Tian Di Hui’s secret signal.

Wei Xiaobao stood up and opened the door, Xu Tianchuan and Gao Yanchao entered. Seeing the two people’s serious expression, he asked, “What is it?”

Xu Tianchuan said, “I heard from the Imperial Bodyguards that the Mansion’s bodyguards are searching to the east and inquiring to the west, to find a Mongolian; I am sure they are looking for Hantiemo. From what I heard, they seem to be highly suspicious of us, but they do not dare to ask us openly. Wei *Xiangzhu*, what do you think?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Go fetch that fellow, bind him and hide him underneath my bed; I don’t think Wu Sangui’s subordinates will dare to search my room.”

Xu Tianchuan said, “I am afraid that when Wei *Xiangzhu* is out, the big traitor’s guards will use whatever excuse they can find to force their way in to search.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “No matter what we won’t allow them to come in; if we really reach a stalemate in discussion, we will fight them. Could they be brazen

enough to resort to violence and kill us?" Xu Tianchuan and Gao Yanchao nodded in agreement.

Suddenly Qian Laoben rushed in and said, "The big traitor is going to set this place on fire."

The three of them were shocked. "What?" they asked in chorus.

Qian Laoben said, "These past few days I patrolled the Anfu Garden all around, to guard against the big traitor playing tricks on us. Just now I saw some people sneaked into the woods to our west. I secretly followed them, and saw more than a dozen people hiding in the woods, carrying quite a lot of kerosene, saltpeter, sulfur, and other materials to light a fire."

"Damn it," Wei Xiaobao cursed, "The big traitor has the guts to burn the Princess to death?"

"I don't think so," Qian Laoben said, "They suspect we kidnapped Hantiemo, but do not dare to enter the Garden to search. When the fire breaks, they will swarm in to fight the fire, while seizing that opportunity to search."

Wei Xiaobao nodded. "Right," he said, "That must be it. *Dage*, what is your wise opinion?"

Xu Tianchuan gestured by running his hand across his neck; he said, "Kill him to close his mouth, destroy his body to leave no trace!"

When Wei Xiaobao heard 'destroy his body to leave no trace', he thought, "That is one trick I am an expert at, nothing can be easier, I guarantee that in just a short time that big beard Mongolian will turn into a pool of yellow liquid. But this fellow has the inside information on the collusion between the big traitor and the Luocha Country, I must send him to the young Emperor so that he can personally interrogate him." He said, "This big beard Mongolian is the biggest proof of the big traitor's rebellion conspiracy. We must send him to Beijing; even if the big traitor does not rebel, he will be forced to rebel. This Hantie somebody is the magic weapon to guarantee that the Mu Family will obey our Tian Di Hui's orders."

How to force Wu Sangui to revolt, and how to force the Mu Family to obey Tian Di Hui's orders, were precisely the two important matters that were always

in the Tian Di Hui warriors' mind. As soon as the three men heard this, their countenance changed greatly; they chorused their agreement. Xu Tianchuan said, "If not for Wei *Xiangzhu*'s reminding us, we nearly harm this important matter." In their hearts their admiration toward this glib-tongued teenager grew.

Qian Laoben said, "The problems at hand are: how to deal with the big traitor's subordinates in setting this place on fire to do their searching, and how to get this Hantiemo out of the big traitor's territory. The borders of Yunnan and Guizhou, two provinces are tightly guarded; leaving Kunming is even more difficult."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Boss Qian [Qian Laoban, see Chapter 13], you can smuggle a Huadiao Fuling pork into the Palace, can't you smuggle another big fat pig out of Kunming?"

Qian Laoben laughed and said, "To get a big, fat pig out of town, I am afraid we can't go pass the gate; we must think of some other method. Hiding a corpse inside the coffin is also an old trick, I am afraid it will be difficult to conceal the truth."

Wei Xiaobao said with a laugh, "If faking a dead person is not good, let him pretend to be a live person. Boss Qian, you shave his big beard, put some kind of flour, plaster or whatever on his face, to change his appearance, let him wear the Valiant Cavalry Brigade hat and coat. I am going to select a squad of Valiant Cavalry Brigade sergeants and send them back to Beijing, saying that the Princess is sending her respect to His Majesty, reporting the wedding date to the Empress Dowager and the Emperor. Let this big beard without the beard mingled among the Valiant Cavalry Brigade troop, seal his mute acupoint so he can't shout. Would the guards, Wu Sangui's subordinates ask the Emperor's personal guards to announce their names one by one before letting them pass?" The three people cheered and praised his ingenuity, they all agreed that it was a brilliant plan.

"Is there any brothel in Kunming?" Wei Xiaobao suddenly asked.

Qian Laoben and the others, three people, looked at each other; they thought, "Wei *Xiangzhu* wants to visit a prostitute?" Qian Laoben laughed and said,

“Naturally there are some.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed. “If we invite Priest Xuanzhen to take a stroll in a brothel, will he be willing to go?” he asked.

Qian Laoben shook his head and said, “*Daozhang* has left home, I am sure he won’t want to go. If Wei *Xiangzhu* has an interest, subordinate may keep you company.”

“You will definitely go,” Wei Xiaobao said, “But Xuanzhen *Daozhang* is big and tall; among our brothers, he is the only one with similar built as that big beard.”

As soon as the three people heard it, they understood that Priest Xuanzhen was to impersonate Hantiemo. Gao Yanchao laughed and said, “For the sake of our Society’s important matter, I am sure Xuanzhen *Daozhang* will follow orders to visit a brothel.” The four of them burst into laughter.

Wei Xiaobao said, “Please ask *Daozhang* to wear the big beard’s clothes and take the big beard’s belongings, paste the ‘genuine goods at fair prices’ yellow beard shaved from the big beard’s face on his chin. The rest of the brothers, keep the Ping Xi Wang Mansion guards’ uniform you are wearing now; pick a big brothel, go and drink and make trouble there. Everybody grabs a prostitute [orig. good-looking powder head], in the fight that ensues, Qian Laoben stabs *Daozhang* to death …”

Qian Laoben was startled, but he understood immediately; naturally he would not kill people for real. He laughed and said, “Wei *Xiangzhu*’s idea is great. Xuanzhen *Daozhang* and I will fight over a beauty, we will mumble something, speaking in Mongolian tongue … But we must have another corpse ready.”

Wei Xiaobao nodded, “Right,” he said, “Go look around, find a criminal in Kunming whose stature is more or less the same as the big beard, catch him and kill him, hide his body by the brothel. After Boss Qian kills *Daozhang*, shoo the prostitutes out. *Daozhang* will turn back to life, and put the big beard’s clothes on the dead body.”

Gao Yanchao laughed and said, “The dead man’s face must be chopped into pulp, and throw the clump of yellow beard under the bed, let Wu Sangui’s subordinate find it, and then they will think that the murderer intends to conceal the fact that Hantiemo is dead.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Gao *Dage*’s thought is more thorough than mine. Everybody, take some money, go visit the brothel! This is so much fun, too bad I cannot go with you.”

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[1] Posthumous title of Hung Taiji (1592-1632), eighth son of Nurhaci; reigned 1626-1636 as Second Khan of Later Jin dynasty, then founded the Qing dynasty and reigned 1636-1643 as Emperor.

[2] In original Chinese, the word 'a team of four horses' sounds like the word 'dead' (si).

[3] Orig. Gui Bei Lei, ‘a prince with blood ties to the royal family’ – see footnote 15 of Chapter 13.

[4] A fudutong (副都统) actually was a 2a rank (正二品; zhengerpin). It was equal in rank to a Regional Commander (总兵; zongbin). During the Qing Dynasty, the system of nine pin-ranks (品) was used. Each pin-rank was divided into upper class (zheng [正]/a) and lower class (cong/b) (Courtesy of Ace High).

[5] A little bit of explanation here: so far, the people in blue had always called him ‘Xiao Jiangjun’ – Little/young general, now Yuan Yifang was calling him ‘Da Jiangjun’ – Big/great general.

[6] Orig. 'fashi' - one who has mastered the Buddhist sutras.

[7] Mythical bird, related to Phoenix.

[8] Shaoshi Peak was the location of Shaolin Temple.

[9] I remember in White Hair Demoness Faerie Queene translated Chanshi as Dhyana Master, but I think I am going to keep it in its original form.

[10] From the dictionary: Buddha's name for himself, having many layers of meaning - Sanskrit: thus gone, having been Brahman, gone to the absolute *etc.*

[11] The character ‘gao’ in Gao Seng (Senior Monk) literally means ‘tall’.

[12] Buddhist monk's knife (not used for killing).

[13] 'Damo' - Dharma, the teaching of Buddha, 'Bo're' - Prajna, the great wisdom. Actually, for Damo, the original Chinese uses 'courtyard/institution' (yuan) instead of 'hall' (tang), but since the term 'Damo Hall' is widely known, I decided to use 'Damo Hall'.

[14] Not sure about this, Shanxi Luhe Dao literally means 'six-direction (north, south, east, west, and up and down) saber of Shanxi'.

[15] Li Shimin was the personal name of second Tang Emperor Taizong, Wang Shichong was a general of late Sui, opponent of early Tang.

[16] Bookworm: orig. 书呆子 (shu daizi) - bookish fool; Cheng Guan was a 武呆子 (wu daizi) - martial art fool.

[17] The character ‘shao’ of Shaolin means ‘young/little/lesser/minor’. Shaolin means ‘lesser forest’, Shaonu means ‘young maiden’.

[18] This is literal translation. FYI, 'turtle' in Chinese can also mean 'son of a b1tch' or 'b@stard'.

[19] Referring to poster, envelope, *etc.* made of red paper, used especially at Chinese Ney Year.

[20] Er Lang Shen is a Chinese God with a third truth-seeing eye in the middle of his forehead.

[21] Orig. ‘Wei Menyao Shi’, shi – maiden name. Menyao –shaking/rocking the gate.

[22] From Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flower_sermon. Mahakasyapa actually means ‘Great Kasyapa’.

[23] Toutuo is Buddhist monk who did not shave his head.

[24] Reminder: the main hall of a Buddhist temple containing the main image of

veneration.

[25] Reminder: fashi is one who has mastered the sutras.

[26] Reminder: daren [lit. big man] is a title of respect toward government official.

[27] Transliteration of Sanskrit term, Anuttara-Samyak-Sambodhi - "Obtaining no greater passing over, all pervading perfect awakening" (Courtesy of Ace High).

[28] Referring to the Three Precious Treasures of Buddhism: the Buddha himself, his teaching (Dharma) and his monastic order (Sangha).

[29] Jin Gang – Buddha's warrior attendant or diamond (or hard metal), hu ti - protect the body, shen gong – divine ability.

[30] In Chinese, the literal translation of the word 'brothel' is actually 'prostitute courtyard', the exact same word of the other 'courtyards'. Actually, it can also mean 'institution'.

[31] From Sanskrit word: paramita, in Buddhism, means to cross over to the other shore. Paramita may also be translated as perfection, perfect realization, or reaching beyond limitation.
According to Mahayana Buddhism, there are six Paramitas:
1. Dana Paramita, the perfection of generosity (布施波羅蜜)
2. Sila Paramita, the perfection of ethics (持戒波羅蜜)
3. Kshanti Paramita, the perfection of patience (忍辱波羅蜜)
4. Virya Paramita, the perfection of joyous effort, vigor / enthusiastic perseverance (精進波羅蜜)
5. Dhyana Paramita, the perfection of concentration (禪定波羅蜜)
6. Prajna Paramita, the perfection of wisdom (智慧波羅蜜)
(Courtesy of Gubrak)

[32] During the Qing Dynasty, the system of nine *pǐn*-ranks (九品中正制/九品官人法) was used. Some of the *pǐn*-ranks were further divided into *zhèng* (正; regular), *cóng* (從; deputy), *shàng* (上; upper) and *xià* (下; lower) grades. Therefore in theory, the whole classification system actually holds more than

eighteen grades (等; děng). In reality the subdivisions were customized in specific central and local departments; for instance, one department can consist of twelve ranks whereas another composed of sixteen.

1a

1b ProvincinalCommander (提督), Commander-in-Chief (都统)

2a Regional Commander (总兵), Vice Commander-in-Chief (副都统)

2b Regional Vice-Commander (副将)

3a Administrator (参将), First Grade Bodyguards (一等侍卫) or Bodyguards Supervisors (侍卫领班)

3b Brigade Commander (游击)

4a Vice Brigade Commander (都司), Second Grade Bodyguards (二等侍卫)

5a Commandant (守备)

6a Company Commander (千总)

7a Squad Leader (把总)

8a Detached Fiscal Commissioner

There are some confusion on a Commander's (都统) *pin*-rank which I can't elaborate without giving a lot of spoiler. (Courtesy of Ace High)

[33] 'Wearing green hat' is an expression about a husband whose wife is having an extra-marital affair.

[34] Reminder: Mount Wutai literally means 'five platforms'.

[35] Buddhist knife and Buddhist staff, respectively, neither are supposed to be used to kill.

[36] Buddhist round meditation mat, usually made of woven cattail.

[37] Lit. 'good, peace'. Just like 'amituofo', I feel like this phrase should not be translated.

[38] Manjushri, the Boddhisattva of keen awareness.

[39] Reminder: fashi – one who has mastered the Buddhist sutras.

[40] The 'chi' character is the same as his name 'Xing Chi', meaning 'imbecile

sentimental stupid *foolish* silly'. 'Er' is a term of endearment. I don't know why he called his own son 'the silly one'.

[41] 'Fu' can mean 'poetic essay *taxation* to bestow on / to endow with'.

[42] In original Chinese, the words slaughter 'tu' sounds like gamble 'du'.

[43] Wei Xiaobao said 'gao shan liu shui' – high mountain flowing water [reminder: these two idioms were the name of Mu Palace's stances], Kangxi corrected him 'utterly defeated' ['luo hua liu shui' – falling flower flowing water].

[44] Ding Nan Wang, the King who Stabilized the South. Kong Yu De (? - 1652) was given Guangxi Province for his services in conquering China. He was one of the three leaders of Chinese Bannermen who has went over the Manchus in early 1630's. (Courtesy of Ace High)

[45] Lit. earth 'zang', Kṣitigarbha, the Bodhisattva of the Great Vow (to save all souls before accepting Bodhi) / also translated Earth Treasury, Earth Womb, or Earth Store Bodhisattva. All three words: Xizang, Dongzang and Dizang have the same 'zang' character.

[46] Orig. 'qin wang bei lei' (see note 15 of Chapter 13), 'bei zi' (son of 'bei'), 'gong' (duke, the highest of five orders of nobility) and 'hou' (marquis, second of the five orders of ancient Chinese nobility).

[47] Palace beauty, orig. Chinese Gong'E (as in Tao Gong'E).

[48] Shitai is a term of respect to address Buddhist nuns, the counterpart of Dashi [great master].

[49] Kun – one of the Eight Trigram (Ba Gua), symbolizing earth/female principle. Ning – peaceful.

[50] Orig. Aixin Jueluo, Manchu: Golden Clan, the surname of the Qing Emperors.

[51] *Dudou* is an undergarment covering chest and abdomen.

[52] Wu – martial art, ‘yi’ refers to non-Han people, especially to the east of China. It could be simply ‘a foreign sect’.

[53] Jun – county/region, wang – king.

[54] Qigong (chi kung) – a system of deep breathing exercises.

[55] The term I translated as ‘(martial art) master’ literally means ‘high hand’ (gao shou).

[56] Orig. Jing Mai – channel of traditional Chinese medicine, the passage through which vital energy (*qi* or *chi*) circulates.

[57] Orig. ‘wen’ and ‘wu’, literary and martial art.

[58] Reference to Li Zicheng, the Chuang Wang – roaming king, a Chinese rebel leader who overthrew the Ming Dynasty and ruled over China briefly as emperor of the short-lived Shun Dynasty.

[59] Reminder: Ping Xi Wang means ‘King who pacifies the west’.

[60] Common people usually address bandits or robbers as ‘kings’.

[61] Da Guniang; ‘big’ here is not derogatory, but showing respect, as in ‘first/oldest’ or ‘great’; *i.e.* Dolong was being respectful.

[62] According to the dictionary, it is between 7 and 9 pm; however, during the Eagle Shooting Hero project, the source I used described it as between 11 pm and 1 am.

[63] Also known as Emperor Xuanzong of Tang, (685-762, reigned 712-756).

[64] ‘wang’ – king, ‘ba’ – eight, ‘dan’ – egg; strung together, it means ‘b@stard’ or son of a b1tch. ‘Wangba’ can also mean ‘tortoise’ or ‘cuckold’. He was simply increasing the level of ‘b@stardness’ by one degree.

[65] I don’t know if there is any English word for this, basically ‘Cha’ is ‘yes’, used by a subject to the Emperor. (Not that I am an expert, but I’ve watched

enough movies to know this … J)

[66] In mythology or popular fiction, the army of the Dragon King or the Eastern Sea. It simply means ‘useless troops’.

[67] Yue Fei (1102-1142), Song Dynasty’s patriot and fames general. Qin Hui (1090-1155), Song Dynasty official who betrayed General Yue Fei and had him executed.

[68] "Iron-Capped Prince", refers to a royal title, which is hereditary, and, in theory, passed down into perpetuity. For most titles given during the Qing dynasty, the son of the person who was awarded a royal rank would inherit a "diluted" title which is one rank lower than their father's title (and their son would inherit a title one rank lower than their own, and so on and so forth). But those princes who were awarded an "Iron-Capped" title would be able to pass their title down to their children undiluted, and so on and so forth.

[69] Manchurian for Viscount of the Third Class. WXB’s peerage title of *Zì* (子), was actualy only used in the 18th century onwards. Therefore, WXB should be a First Class Jing Qi Ni Ha Pan [一等精奇尼哈番], rather than a First Class Zi [一等子]. (Courtesy of Ace High)

[70] Set of expression, often made up of four characters, or two couplets of four characters each, often alluding to a story or historical quotation.

[71] Orig. ‘luan’ – a mythical bird related to Phoenix.

[72] An – calm/safe/peace, Fu – abundant/mound.

[73] Qian – abbreviation for Guizhou province, Guo Gong – State Duke.

[74] Wu – five, Hua – abbreviation for China/splendor/grand.

[75] Zhong Kui, mythological character, supposed to drive away evil spirit.

[76] The original, ‘Xiang Hao’ (相好) carries a deeper connotation that simply a ‘friend’, but not as deep as ‘beloved’ (亲爱), or (心上人).

[77] Demon in Buddhism, the same ‘Luocha’ as in Yu Luocha (White-haired Demoness), and the Yu Luocha of Luocha Cult (Lu Xiaofeng Book 4, Silver Hook Casino).

[78] Tianshan: Mountain range between Xinjiang and Mongolia and modern day Kyrgyzstan.

[79] League: a subdivision corresponding to prefecture in Inner Mongolia.

[80] Lit. Impoverished (Taoist) priest, referring to self.

[81] The original refers to a move in (a game of) chess.

[82] The character ‘qin’亲 means ‘relatives’. I think it is a prince related by blood to the royal family. Prince Kang was a Qin Wang. I don’t know why Wu Sangui was also a Qin Wang.

[83] King who attacked the East, King who swept the North, and King who stabilized the South, respectively. Reminder: Wu Sangui’s title Ping Xi Wang means King who pacified the West.