金庸

35 作品集

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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 31

Massive army of Luodian formed a deep barrier, great waves boiled in thousand-qing Dianchi

(Translated by Foxs)

The Princess curled in the corner of the bed, her body was covered in embroidered quilt, a snow-white leg was exposed outside the quilt, both of her arms were bare, it was clear that she was naked. Wu Yingxiong's naked body was lying on the floor, motionless. The lower part of his body was bloody; his right hand was grasping a short blade.

After dinner, Wei Xiaobao waited for more than an hour before strolling toward Princess Jianning's room. The Princess had been waiting anxiously; seeing Wei Xiaobao, she angrily said, "Where have you been? I have been waiting for you."

Wei Xiaobao angrily responded, "Your *Gonggong* [father-in-law] held me up to talk to him, he spoke treason and heresy, I argued with him for half a day. If I wasn't anxious to see you, I would still be arguing with him right now."

"What did he say?" the Princess asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, "He said that His Majesty always suspected him as a treacherous court official, he is very upset about it. I said if His Majesty suspected him, how could he send the Princess down here to marry your son? He said that it must be that His Majesty did not like you, he intentionally sent you down the pit to harm you."

The Princess was enraged; she slapped the table heavily and shouted, "The old turtle is talking nonsense, I'll tear off his beard. Tell him to see me quickly."

Wei Xiaobao also put an angry look on his face. "His granny," he cursed, "I was ready to risk my life against him. I said: the Princess is His Majesty's favorite, she is good-looking, and intelligent too; which of your son's quality can surpass her? I also said: you dare to speak such thing, the Princess won't want to get married, we will return to Beijing tomorrow. Based on the Princess' status, I don't know how many men in the world who would fight to have her as his wife. There is something in my heart that I did not speak it out. I really wanted to tell the old turtle: I, Wei Xiaobao, am dying to marry the Princess myself."

The Princess immediately beamed with joy. "Right, right!" she said, "Why didn't you tell him that? Xiaobao, let us go back to Beijing tomorrow. I will tell *Huangdi Gege*: I must marry you."

Wei Xiaobao shook his head, "When the old turtle heard me, he calmed down immediately, saying that just now he was babbling nonsense, he was merely cracking jokes, and that I must not take him seriously; what's more, I must not let the Princess hear anything he had just said. I said: nobody is more loyal to His Majesty and the Princess than I, the one surnamed Wei, I have never dared to speak even half a word of lie to His Majesty and the Princess."

The Princess held her arms around his neck, and gently kissed his face. “I always knew you are very loyal to me,” she said.

Wei Xiaobao kissed her back and said, “The old turtle was so frightened that he almost kneeled down to ask for my help. He also gave me a pair of Luocha people’s guns, he wanted me to do my best to cover up for him.” Finished speaking, he took out the gun, put some gunpowder and an iron bullet, and let the Princess shoot toward the garden.

The Princess opened fire. There was a loud explosion, followed by a large tree branch broke and fell down. She stuck out her tongue and said, “How fierce!”

Wei Xiaobao said, “You take one, I take the other, the two guns were originally a pair.”

The Princess sighed and said, “Two guns, one female one male, sleeping side by side inside this wooden case, how intimate is that? As soon as you separate them, both will be alone and very desolate. I don’t want it, you keep them together.” When saying that, she recalled that in the end, the Emperor’s decree could not be altered. Her desire to marry Wei Xiaobao was eventually an empty word.

Wei Xiaobao held her in his arms and gently comforted her, he whispered some frivolous words into her ears. Listening to the intense emotion, the Princess could not stop her cheeks from blushing red, and she giggled happily. Wei Xiaobao gently undressed her and pulled the brocade quilt over her naked body. He thought, “Why haven’t the big traitor’s subordinate lighted the fire yet? It would be best if when they rush in here to search, they found the Princess to be stark naked. Then the Princess would break out in anger.”

He sat on the bed, caressing the Princess’ cheeks gently, while raising up his ears to listen to the activity outside. The Princess was breathing heavily, she said in an intimate voice, “I … I want to sleep. You … you …”

They heard the gong from the garden announcing the first watch of the night. Wei Xiaobao was waiting impatiently. Suddenly the gong changed to a series of loud ‘tang, tang’, followed by a dozen people shouted, “Fire! Fire!” [Orig. ‘water flow’ or ‘flood’, see note 16 of Chapter 14, also the next occurrences in this Chapter.]

The Princess sat up with a start; she grabbed Wei Xiaobao's neck and said with a trembling voice, "Fire?"

"Damn it," Wei Xiaobao angrily said, "The old turtle must be setting up the fire, he wants to burn you and I, two people to death to shut our mouths, to prevent us from divulging his ridiculous talk today."

The Princess was frightened even more. "What … what should we do?" she asked.

"Don't be afraid," Wei Xiaobao said, "Wei Xiaobao has a red-bellied devotion to you; even if I cannot protect my own life, I still have to protect my beloved Princess to ensure your complete safety." He gently pried her arms from his neck, and walked toward the door. As soon as he saw people rushing in, he would get out of the Princess' bedroom first.

But he heard the noise outside was like 'a boiling cauldron of voices', all around people were shouting, yelling and screaming, "Fire! Fire! Quickly protect the Princess!" Wei Xiaobao looked out the window, and saw a dozen or so people rushing in from the flower garden outside. He mused, "The big traitor's subordinates came this quick. They must have entered Anfu Garden early on, and hid themselves around here; they rushed over as soon as they heard the fire alarm." Turning his head toward the Princess he said, "Princess, it is not such a big fire, you don't have to be afraid. The old turtle is here to catch some adultery."

"Catch … catch what?" the Princess said with a trembling voice.

Wei Xiaobao said, "He must have suspected that you are good to me, hence he is hoping that he could catch us committing adultery." Finished speaking, he pushed the door open and said, "Just lie on the bed, don't get up, I am going to stand outside your door. If there is real fire, I will carry you out to safety."

The Princess was very grateful. "Xiaobao," she said, "You … you are very good to me."

Wei Xiaobao stood outside the door for a moment, and then he raised his voice, "Everybody, protecting the Princess is most important."

Amidst the hubbub, a captain of Ping Xi Wang Mansion guards rushed over.

“Wei *Jueye*,” he called out, “The Garden is on fire, *Shizi* [Heir Apparent] has come here personally to protect the Princess.”

He saw from the northeast corner came two rows of lanterns, a group of people were coming his way. They arrived quickly; he saw that the one in the front was precisely Wu Yingxiong. Wei Xiaobao thought, “To search for that big beard Mongolian, unexpectedly the little traitor himself is leading the effort; obviously they consider the big beard to be very important. The conspiracy with Mongolia and Luocha Country, as well as the rebellion plot must be true.”

While he was still some distance away, Wu Yingxiong called out, “Is Her Highness the Princess alright?”

A guard responded, “Wei *Jueye* is already here to protect her.”

“That’s wonderful!” Wu Yingxiong said, “Wei *Jueye*, sorry for bothering you; *Xiongdi* can’t thank you enough.”

“Why am I bothered?” Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, “Princess and I are embracing each other intimately, was that a bother? Are you thanking me for this? In that case, you are welcome.”

In the meantime, the Imperial Bodyguards, the Valiant Cavalry Brigade chiefs under Wei Xiaobao’s command had also rushed in one after another. They were awakened from their slumber, their clothes were in disarray, some were even barefooted, some had not put on their jacket, they all looked pathetic. When they heard the fire-alarm, their first thought was: “If the Princess is burned to death, I will lose my head.” Therefore, they all rushed over.

Wei Xiaobao ordered his men to guard the perimeter of the Garden. Zhang Kangnian tugged Wei Xiaobao’s sleeve; Wei Xiaobao went with him several steps away from the crowd. “Wei *Fu Zongguan* [deputy chief],” Zhang Kangnian said in a low voice, “There’s something fishy here.”

“What is it?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

Zhang Kangnian replied, “As soon as there was fire-alarm, Ping Xi Wang Mansion guards jumped in over the wall from all directions [orig. four sides, eight directions]; obviously they were already prepared. With their mouths they cry out to fight the fire, but they entered every room searching for something.

Our brothers shouted and scolded them to stop, but it was useless; several of us had already fought with them."

Wei Xiaobao nodded. "Wu Sangui suspected that we know his plan," he said, "I think he is going to rebel!"

Zhang Kangnian was shocked; he cast a glance toward Wu Yingxiong, and then with a low voice said, "Is it true?"

"Let them search," Wei Xiaobao said, "Don't stop them." Zhang Kangnian nodded; quietly he passed on the order to the officers and soldiers who came from Beijing.

By this time they could see a faint blaze of the fire on the southwest and southeast corners of the Garden. A dozen or more fire hoses had already spurting water, but the water was directed to the sky; columns of water swayed in the air, it looked like a large water fountain.

Wei Xiaobao went over to Wu Yingxiong and said, "*Xiao Wangye*, your divine ability to predict the future is indeed very admirable. Zhuge Liang and Liu Bowen[1] of the past are definitely inferior to you."

Wu Yingxiong was startled. "Wei *Jueye* is making fun of me," he said.

"Not at all," Wei Xiaobao said, "It is obvious that you have already predicted that tonight, at the second watch of the night, Anfu Garden was going to catch fire, and may burn the Princess to death. You decided it was not going to be fun; therefore, you have prepared everything well in advance, and kept watch outside the Garden, waiting patiently for the fire. As soon as the fire broke, you gave your command, everybody immediately jumped in to fight the fire. Ha ha … good skill, good skill."

Wu Yingxiong's face reddened; he said, "I did not prepare it beforehand, it was a pure coincidence. Tonight my *Jiefu* [older sister's husband] Xia Guo invited me to dinner; *Xiongdi* was on my way home after eating and drinking, accompanied by my family bodyguards, passing by this place. We happened to see the Garden is on fire."

Wei Xiaobao nodded. "So that's what happened," he said, "I remember a storyteller said: 'In all his life, Zhuge had always been cautious'; I said: *Wangye*

actually surpasses Zhuge Liang. I was not wrong at all. *Xiao Wangye* went to your *Jiefu*'s home to drink wine; bringing along a team of fire fighters is definitely a big plus. Were you thinking of using it here?"

Wu Yingxiong knew that Wei Xiaobao had seen through his ploy; his face turned red again as he sheepishly said, "This time of the year the wind is strong the weather is dry, it is so easy to catch fire. We'd better be a bit more careful; this is called 'preparedness averts peril'."

"Absolutely," Wei Xiaobao replied, "Too bad there is one thing *Xiao Wangye* did not prepare."

"Please advise," Wu Yingxiong said.

"Next time *Xiao Wangye* go to your *Jiefu*'s home to drink wine, it would be best if you also bring a team of bricklayers and carpenters, as well as tiles and bricks, lumber, lime and nails."

"I wonder what for?" Wu Yingxiong asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, "There might be a one in ten thousand chance that your *Jiefu*'s home will catch fire. The fire fighters only spurting water upwards, they are unwilling to put out the fire, unavoidably your *Jiefu*'s house will be burned down to the ground. *Xiao Wangye* can issue an order immediately to have the bricklayers rebuild your *Jiefu*'s multi-story home. Now that, I'll say, is called 'preparedness averts peril'."

"Hey, hey, hey," Wu Yingxiong let out several hollow laughs. He turned to a guard by his side and said, "Wei *Jueye* thinks the fire-fighters are not doing their best in putting out the fire. Go grab the captain and his deputy, and break their dog's legs." The guard complied and left.

"*Xiao Wangye*," Wei Xiaobao asked, "After breaking the fire-fighter team's captain and his deputy's dog's legs, which official post are you going to promote them to?"

Wu Yingxiong was startled. "Wei *Jueye*," he said, "I am afraid I don't understand your words."

"I don't understand either," Wei Xiaobao said, "I thought, 'Hey, *Xiao Wangye* will have to build two more big prisons, so that he can promote these two, the

captain and his deputy, to be the wardens'."

Wu Yingxiong's countenance changed; he thought, "This kid is indeed formidable. Lu Yifeng became the Hei Kanzi prison's warden, unexpectedly you also knew." Pretending to be oblivious of this matter, he laughed and said, "Wei *Jueye* is indeed very good in making jokes, no wonder His Majesty is very fond of you." While in his heart he made up his mind, "As soon as I am back, I will send someone to get rid of Lu Yifeng; let this kid finds that the dead cannot testify."

Soon afterwards, one after another the Ping Xi Wang Mansion guards returned to report that the fire did not spread too far, and that gradually the fire was dying down. Wei Xiaobao listened carefully as these people were giving their report, but he could not detect any code word. He noticed that as Wu Yingxiong listened to each person's report, he did not seem pleased; apparently he knew that Hantiemo had not been found yet. He was wondering if there is a secret signal. Looking at these people's expression as they gave their report, he did not see anything out of ordinary either.

Suddenly he saw an officer rushed over and reported that the fire intensity had increased and that it seemed to be heading their way; it would be best if the Princess was to be awakened and alerted of the fire. Wu Yingxiong nodded.

Wei Xiaobao was standing on the side; he did not seem to be paying any attention, but actually he watched closely the guard's expression and posture. He noticed that Wu Yingxiong was looking down toward the guard's right thigh. Wei Xiaobao followed his gaze, and saw that the guard had the thumb and index finger of his right hand formed a circle, which he placed by his knee. Wei Xiaobao immediately understood, "Turns out two fingers make a circle means they have not found Hantiemo; they do not use any code word at all."

"Wei *Jueye*," Wu Yingxiong said, "The fire is heading this way, we'd better ask the Princess to move her sacred self. If the Princess is frightened, we are guilty and deserve ten thousand deaths."

Wei Xiaobao knew that Ping Xi Wang Mansion guards had looked everywhere and did not find Hantiemo. In the Garden, the Princess' bedroom was the only room they had not searched. Since they already started, they might as well continue to the end; hence they wanted to also search the Princess' bedroom.

Wei Xiaobao could not help but was enraged. In that instant, his childish behavior flared-out, he raised his right hand with thumb and index finger forming a circle, and waved it in front of Wu Yingxiong's face several times.

As soon as he saw this signal, naturally Wu Yingxiong was shocked; the countenance of his subordinates the guards also changed greatly. "Wei … Wei *Jueye*," he stammered, "This … what is the meaning of this?"

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Are you saying that you don't understand the meaning of this signal?"

Wu Yingxiong composed himself and said, "This signal … this signal … um, I got it. That's a copper coin. Wei *Jueye* is saying that you want silver and copper coins before the Princess can move her sacred self."

Wei Xiaobao mused, "The little traitor's brain actually can move very quickly." Thereupon he laughed without saying anything.

Wu Yingxiong laughed and said, "About the silver and copper coins, we are brothers, naturally we can talk over everything."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Since *Xiao Wangye* is so generous, let me thank you on behalf of our brothers here. *Xiao Wangye*, about the moving of Princess' sacred self, please handle it yourself." After a chuckle, he continued, "You are husband and wife, you can talk over everything. In the middle of the night, it is inappropriate for *Xiao Jiang* to enter the Princess' bedroom." He continued in his heart, "So that you can see for yourself whether that Mongolian big beard is in the room or not."

Wu Yingxiong hesitated slightly, and then he nodded, pushed the door open and entered the outer hall. He stopped in front of the bedroom door and spoke in a loud and clear voice, "Subject Wu Yingxiong is here to supervise and lead the fighting of the fire, and to protect the Princess. Currently the fire is spreading this way; would Princess please move, so that we can guarantee your complete safety?"

A moment later they heard a gentle and charming grunt from the inside, "Mm."

Wu Yingxiong thought, "Although you and I have not officially married, I am

the prince consort, it has been officially declared. Right now it is an emergency, by coming into your room, I cannot be considered overstepping my boundary. If I don't investigate clearly this time, in the end it won't be appropriate. Except me, other people should not enter your bedroom." Thereupon he shoved the door open and entered.

Wei Xiaobao and a hundred or so Imperial Bodyguards, Valiant Cavalry officers and Ping Xi Wang Mansion guards were waiting outside the room. A long time passed, they did not hear anything from inside. After another while, they started to 'you look at me, I look at you', a smile started to appear on their eyes and on the corner of their mouths; everybody had the same thought, "This betrothed couple has never seen each other, suddenly they met inside the Princess' lady chamber; it must be a romantic meeting. I wonder what they are talking about. Would *Xiao Wangye* embrace the Princess? Would he hold her in his arms? Would he kiss her?"

Wei Xiaobao was the only one consumed by jealousy; although he knew that Wu Yingxiong's real intention was to look for Hantiemo, and it was unlikely that at this time he was in the mood to be intimate with the Princess, but he also knew that the Princess was a loose woman who could do anything. Whether she was intimate with Wu Yingxiong willingly or not, it would be very difficult to tell.

Suddenly they heard the Princess screamed, "You dare to be rude? You … you … stop! Get out, now!"

Outside, the people looked at each other, some giggled. They all thought, "*Xiao Wangye* cannot bear not to make his move."

They heard the Princess screamed again, "You … you must not … must not take off my clothes. Get out! Aiyo! Help! Help! This man is raping me! He rapes me! Help! Help!"

Everybody could not help but was amused; they thought that Wu Yingxiong was overly anxious, he was also too brazen. Although the Princess would be his wife eventually, they had not yet married; how could he act rashly like that? Several military officers could not refrain from letting out an audible laugh. The Imperial Bodyguards looked at Wei Xiaobao, waiting for his signal, whether they should protect the Princess or not. They all thought, "This fellow Wu Yingxiong is

raping the Princess. Although he is rude, in the end it is a private affair between them, husband and wife. If we as the servants rashly intervene, we will definitely invite trouble for ourselves."

Wei Xiaobao's heart was pounding madly, "This little traitor is so shrewd, how could he fool around like this? Could it be … could it be that he really wants to harm the Princess?" Thereupon he called loudly, "*Xiao Wangye*, please get out quickly; you must not offend the Princess."

The Princess suddenly screamed, "Help!" Her voice was extremely sad and shrill.

Wei Xiaobao was shocked; he waved his hand and shouted, "Forgive my offense, this is an emergency." And then he rushed into the room. Several Imperial Bodyguards and the Mansion guards followed behind him.

They saw the bedroom door was opened wide, the Princess curled in the corner of the bed, her body was covered in embroidered quilt, a snow-white leg was exposed outside the quilt, both her arms were bare, it was clear that she was naked. Wu Yingxiong's naked body was lying on the floor, motionless. The lower part of his body was bloody; his right hand was grasping a short blade. Seeing this scene, everybody was shocked and was momentarily at a loss. The Mansion guards hastily went over to Wu Yingxiong to see whether he was dead or still alive. They checked for breath, and found that he was still breathing, his heart was also still beating, he was merely fainted.

The Princess cried and said, "This man … this man is rude to me … Who is he? Wei *Jueye*, quickly arrest him and kill him."

"He is the Prince Consort Wu Yingxiong," Wei Xiaobao said.

"No, no, he is not," the Princess cried out, "He tore off my clothes, then he took off his own clothes, he raped me … This bad guy, quickly kill him."

The Imperial Bodyguards were angry, the Emperor sent them on a mission to protect the Princess. The Princess was the current imperial younger sister, her noble body was like golden branch, jade leaves, yet this fellow Wu Yingxiong had humiliated her like this. It could be said that they failed in their duty.

The Mansion guards looked awkward; deep in their hearts they were ashamed.

There were several astute and competent men among them, these people thought that since things had come to this, if they could find Hantiemo inside the Princess' room, perhaps they could make a false counter-charge against the Princess, or at least they could somehow deny the accusation or gain a little bit of leeway. Thereupon they busied themselves, pretending to administer first-aid to Wu Yingxiong, while actually they were looking everywhere, including underneath the bed, but how could they find any sign of Hantiemo's?

Suddenly, one of the Mansion guards cried out, "*Shizi* … *Shizi*'s lower body … lower body …" Wu Yingxiong's lower body was drenched with blood, everybody could see that, but at first they thought it was due to his rudeness toward the Princess. But now after they heard the man's cry, they all looked at his lower body. They saw the blood was still gushing out, apparently he was injured. The Mansion guards panicked; those with metal cut medication in their possession busily tried to apply it on his wound.

Wei Xiaobao shouted harshly, "Wu Yingxiong is rude to the Princess, he committed grave offense by greatly disrespectful toward her. Arrest him first, we'll present a memorial to the Emperor, let His Majesty decide on his punishment." The Imperial Bodyguards complied at once, they rushed forward to pull Wu Yingxiong up.

The Mansion guards had heard with their own ears, and seen with their own eyes, that Wu Yingxiong was indeed being rude to the Princess; they simply could not deny it. Hearing Wei Xiaobao, they all groaned inwardly, "Bad, really bad!" Nobody had the heart to offer the slightest resistance. A Mansion guard bowed and said, "Wei *Jueye*, please show mercy. *Shizi* is injured, we are asking Wei *Jueye* to allow *Shizi* to return to the Mansion and have his wound treated. Our *Wangye* will be most grateful. *Shizi* is definitely guilty, but we ask the Princess to be magnanimous. Wei *Jueye*, please plead on his behalf."

Maintaining a wooden expression Wei Xiaobao said, "This kind of grave offense, we do not dare to conceal it from His Majesty, who would dare to plead on his behalf? Let's talk it over outside; we all gather inside the Princess' bedroom like this, where are our manners? How can there be such thing?"

The Mansion guards repeatedly bowed in agreement, they carried Wu Yingxiong out. The Imperial Bodyguards also withdrew, leaving the Princess

alone with Wei Xiaobao.

The Princess suddenly smiled, she beckoned Wei Xiaobao to come over. Wei Xiaobao came to the bed, the Princess wrapped her arms around his shoulder, and whispered in his ear, “I castrated him.”

Wei Xiaobao was shocked. “You … you what?” he asked.

The Princess blew softly into his ear, she laughed in low voice and said, “I pointed the gun to him, forcing him to strip naked, and then using the gun handle I gave his head a knocking, so that he passed out, and then I cut his loathsome thing. From now on, he can only be my eunuch, he can’t be my husband.”

Wei Xiaobao found it amusing, but was also shocking. “You brazenly fool around like that, the disaster you brought is not small.”

“What disaster?” the Princess said, “I did this wholeheartedly for your sake. If I marry him, our marriage would be a fake marriage. In short, I simply cannot let you wear a green cap and be a turtle [i.e. someone whose spouse was cheating].”

Wei Xiaobao’s mind was churning, but this matter was indeed too far beyond his expectation, he did not know how to deal with it.

The Princess continued, “The rape and the rude treatment are all fake, but when I screamed and yelled, you heard it from the outside, didn’t you?” Wei Xiaobao nodded. The Princess smiled and said, “And so, what are we afraid of? Even is Wu Sangui is angry, he only knew that his own son is no good.”

Wei Xiaobao heaved a deep sigh. “If he died because of your cut, then what should we do?” he asked.

“How could he die because of my cut?” the Princess said, “There are several thousand eunuchs in our Palace, which one died because of the cut?”

“Alright,” Wei Xiaobao said, “You will stick to your statement: he was raping you, he took the knife to force you, in your desperate struggle to resist him, you reached out to push him. He had the knife in his hand, and he was stark-naked. One pushing the other wielding, he cut himself.”

The Princess buried his head inside the embroidered quilt to stifle her laughter. “That’s right,” she said in a low voice, “Let’s say it that way: he cut himself.”

Wei Xiaobao went out of the bedroom, and told the Imperial Bodyguards in low voice how with a knife in his hand Wu Yingxiong had threatened the Princess, how the Princess desperately fought to resist him, how in the struggle Wu Yingxiong had castrated himself. The Imperial Bodyguards were shocked and amused at the same time; they all said that Wu Yingxiong’s lust had reached the heavens, hence what happened to him was a retribution well-deserved. There were several of Wu Yingxiong’s guards still lingered around to find out what had happened; they stood on the side and eavesdropped, ashamed look appeared on all their faces.

With such a major event going on in the Anfu Garden, the Mansion guards quickly extinguished the fire, then they flew back to report to Wu Sangui, while at the same time summoning a physician to treat Wu Yingxiong’s injury. The Imperial Bodyguards immediately spread the news about the root cause of Wu Yingxiong’s injury, so that even all the Mansion guards also agreed unanimously that it was because their Heir Apparent was being rude to the Princess.

Inevitably they added some oil and soy paste to the story; some said that they heard it when the Heir Apparent ripped the Princess’ clothes, some described how the Heir Apparent coerced the Princess with the knife in his hand. As for how the Heir Apparent finally got castrated, each storyteller narrated it with ‘living spirit, living image’: how the Heir Apparent put the knife on the Princess’ neck, how the Princess struggled to fight him, how she pushed the Heir Apparent’s hand, how the knife slipped and what a bad luck for him. All kinds of circumstances were described as if they were witnessing it with their own eyes. They were telling the story with gusto, their spittle splattered everywhere, their hands and feet were flailing; the audiences were dumbfounded, and did not stop nodding their heads.

Less than an hour later, Wu Sangui obtained the urgent report; he jumped onto his horse and flew to the Garden, and immediately kowtowed in front of the Princess’ bedroom to beg for forgiveness. Flustered and exasperated, he repeatedly said, “The guilt deserves ten thousand deaths!”

Wei Xiaobao stood by his side, showing concerns. “*Wangye*, please rise,” he

said, “Let *Xiao Jiang* come in to probe the Princess’ mood.”

Wu Sangui took out emeralds, jade and pearls from his bosom, stuffed it into Wei Xiaobao’s hand, and said, “Wei *Xiongdi*, *Xiao Wang* was in a hurry, I did not have time to grab some banknotes; please kindly divide these jewels to the Imperial Bodyguard brothers. In front of the Princess, please urgently request an audience.”

Wei Xiaobao returned the jewels to him and said, “*Wangye*, please set your heart at ease. As long as it is within *Xiao Jiang*’s power, I will definitely do my best; for the time being I cannot accept *Wangye*’s gift. In all honesty, this matter is simply too big, I don’t know what it is that the Princess has in mind. Ay, this Princess is hot tempered and proud, she is ‘three-chaste nine-upright’ [i.e. exemplary in remaining faithful to one's husband until death], a virgin who is pampered and spoiled since childhood, that even the Empress Dowager and His Majesty also yielded to her thirty-percent of the time. *Shizi* is indeed … indeed a bit too daring.”

“Yes, yes,” Wu Sangui said, “Wei *Xiongdi*, please speak to the Princess, I must have an audience with her.”

Wei Xiaobao nodded, his expression was serious, he walked toward the Princess’ door and said in a loud and clear voice, “Reporting to the Princess: Ping Xi Wangye personally came to apologize for the offense, would Princess remember he is an old minister who has rendered great merit, and deal with him leniently.”

Wu Sangui said in a low voice, “Yes, yes! The old minister is kowtowing in here, would Princess deal with me leniently.”

After half a day, they still heard nothing from the Princess’ room. Wei Xiaobao repeated his words. Suddenly they heard crashing noise, sounded like a stool fell down to the floor. Wei Xiaobao and Wu Sangui looked at each other in bewilderment. They heard a palace maid screamed, “Princess, Princess, you must not commit suicide!”

Wu Sangui was so frightened that his face was drained of any color; he thought, “If the Princess really killed herself, although right now everything is not completely ready, I will have no choice but to deploy the troops to stage a

rebellion immediately. How can I face the charge of hounding the Princess to death?”

He heard several palace maids were wailing inside. A palace maid came out hurriedly and said with a cry, “Wei … Wei *Jueye*, Her Highness the Princess hanged herself on the beam, you … you come quickly and help … help her …”

Wei Xiaobao hesitantly said, “The Princess’ bedroom, it is inappropriate for us as the servants to come in.”

Wu Sangui lightly pushed his back and said, “Act according to special circumstances, rescuing the Princess is more important.” Turning toward a Mansion guard, he said, “Quickly summon the physician.” Finished speaking, he gave another push on Wei Xiaobao’s back.

Wei Xiaobao scrambled inside. He saw the Princess was lying on the bed, surrounded by seven, eight palace maids who were weeping around her. Wei Xiaobao said, “I know internal energy, I can help resuscitate the Princess.”

The palace maids stepped aside. The Princess’ eyes were tightly closed, her breathing was weak, and there was really a strip of red mark on her neck. A piece of rope was hanging from the beam, the other half of the rope was lying by her head, and an overturned stool was lying on the floor. Wei Xiaobao laughed inwardly; he thought, “What a performance! This Princess who loves to fool-around blindly is actually not an idiot.” He rushed to the bed and stretched his finger to pinch the ‘renzhong’ [human center] acupoint on her upper lip heavily.

The Princess moaned and slowly opened her eyes. “I … I don’t want to live,” she said vehemently, but weakly.

“Princess,” Wei Xiaobao said, “You are a thousand-gold lady, you have to come to accept an unpleasant fact. Ping Xi Wang is kowtowing outside, begging for your forgiveness.”

The Princess cried and said, “You … you tell him to quickly kill that evil man.”

Blocking the palace maids’ eyes with his body, Wei Xiaobao put his hand inside the quilt and pinched the Princess’ waist a little. The Princess struggled hard not to laugh; she grabbed his arm and ferociously dug her fingernails in his flesh, as she wailed, “I don’t want to live, I … how am I going to conduct myself from now

on?”

Outside the room, Wu Sangui heard the Princess’ cry faintly; learning that her attempt to kill herself was unsuccessful, he could not refrain from heaving a deep sigh. And then he heard her cry, ‘how am I going to conduct myself from now on’, he thought, “I can’t really blame her for getting angry. Young husband and wife fighting with each other using spear or saber is not a big deal, they might injure the other anywhere. It’s just a real bad luck that the knife happened to cut right there. Even if Yingxiong is healed in the future, the Princess will only be a living widow for the rest of her life. Presently we must strive to cover this matter up, and not let it be widely known.”

Half a day later, Wei Xiaobao came out of the room, he did not stop shaking his head. Wu Sangui hastily stepped forward and asked in a low voice, “What did the Princess say?”

“She is not going to die,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “But the Princess is unyielding, if she is determined to do something, she won’t listen to anybody’s advice, she would definitely try to kill herself again. I already instructed the palace maids to wait upon her well, and not to leave her side even for half a step. *Wangye*, I am afraid she would take poison.”

Wu Sangui’s countenance changed. He nodded and said, “Yes, yes. We must guard against that possibility.”

“*Wangye*,” Wei Xiaobao said in a low voice, “If by any chance the Princess met any unexpected misfortune,while *Xiao Jiang* was sent by the Emperor to protect the Princess, this little life of mine will be difficult to protect. If that ever happened, *Wangye*, you must arrange a way out for me.”

Wu Sangui shivered with fear. “What way out?” he asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, “I can’t tell you anything right now, I only hope that the Princess will be safe and sound, everybody will be happy. But her life is her own, if she really wants to die, we may be able to prevent her for three, four days, but we can’t stop her for ten days of half a month. *Xiao Jiang* has a selfish intention: I only hope that the Princess would marry into your Mansion sooner, so that *Xiao Jiang* will be relieved of my responsibility for the most part.”

Wu Sangui was secretly delighted. “In that case, let us have the wedding

immediately," he said, "My son is creating the trouble, he was rushing and thus resulting in this disaster. Wei *Xiongdi* is doing your best to maintain order, *Xiao Wang* is deeply grateful, I won't possibly add another burden on Wei *Xiongdi*'s shoulder." Lowering his voice, he said, "I just don't know if the Princess is still willing … willing to be married?" He was thinking, "My son has become a useless person, I just hope that the Princess' age is young and her experience shallow, she does not understand the matter between men and women yet. The cutting just now, she might not necessarily understands where the knife landed. She will get married confused and ignorant, the timber has turned into a boat, she will have nothing to say. Who knows? Perhaps she still thinks that all men in the world are like that."

Wei Xiaobao also lowered his voice, "The Princess is young, she does not understand this kind of matters. She is a respectable person, she won't say anything."

Wu Sangui was greatly delighted; he mused, "Heroes usually agree [i.e. great minds think alike]." But then he immediately thought, "Damn it, what kind of hero is this kid anyway? How can he discuss things with me on equal terms?" He said, "Yes, yes, let's do it. What happened just now, it's not that we dare to conceal it from His Majesty, but the Lord of Ten-thousand Year has to deal with ten thousand different matters daily, he is taking care of the affairs of the nation, and is extremely busy. We, as the servants, are loyal to our master and love our country, we must not increase His Majesty's concerns. The Empress Dowager and His Majesty treasure the Princess; if they hear this kind of matter, they might not be happy. Wei *Xiongdi*, being government officials, the secret of our success is to report only the good news, not the bad news."

Wei Xiaobao patted his chest and flicked his own hat; he said magnanimously, "Hereafter *Xiao Jiang* will rely on *Wangye* to train me to get promotion. In this matter, I will stake my own little life in handling it according to *Wangye*'s instruction." Wu Sangui repeatedly expressed his thanks. Wei Xiaobao said, "However, there are many people who witness this scandal tonight, if someone else reveals the secret, you can't hold *Xiao Jiang* responsible."

"Naturally," Wu Sangui said. But in his heart he had already formulated a plan: he was going to dispatch his troops and horses, disguised as robbers, deep inside

Guangxi to set an ambush. When Wei Xiaobao's delegation returned to Beijing, he would have them all massacred. Guangxi was Sun Yanqing's territory. His wife Kong Sizhen was the daughter of Kong Youde, the Ding Nan Wang [King who stabilized the South]. The Empress Dowager had taken her as her adoptive daughter, and bestowed her the title of Heshuo Gege [Hoxud or Xoshut *Keke* (princess, Manchu word)]; she was the darling of the Imperial Court. Let Kong Sizhen deal with the criminal charge of disturbance within her territory, robbers killing government officials within her jurisdiction.

Although Wei Xiaobao was quick-witted, he could not match Wu Sangui's rigorous scheme and deep foresight. Seeing Wu Sangui was deep in thought, he still thought that Wu Sangui was worried over this matter might leak out; he laughed and said, "*Wangye*, don't worry. *Xiao Jiang* will do my best to restrain my subordinates, I will order them not to speak thoughtlessly or make irresponsible remark."

Wu Sangui said, "Today Wei *Xiongdi* has helped me with this major problem, it's not enough to thank you with gold, silver and jewels. But the officers and men under Wei *Xiongdi*'s command is not a few, to close their mouths, you must let *Xiao Wang* do my best to send my regards. As soon as I am home, I will send someone to deliver it to you."

"Let me thank you very much then," Wei Xiaobao replied, "I wonder how is *Shizi*'s condition; let us go take a look, I hope his injury is not so serious." Wu Sangui and Wei Xiaobao went to visit Wu Yingxiong.

The physician knitted his brows. "*Shizi*'s life is not in danger," he said, "It's just that … it's just that …"

Wu Sangui nodded and said, "His life is not in danger, that's good." Afraid that Wei Xiaobao might detain his son, he ordered the Mansion guards to immediately escort the Heir Apparent back to the Mansion to recuperate. He personally kept Wei Xiaobao busy, to prevent him from changing his mind. It was not before Wu Yingxiong finally left Anfu Garden did he take his leave.

Wei Xiaobao thought, "When the little traitor regains his consciousness, he will definitely tell what has really happened, but what's the use? Who would believe a golden-branch-jade-leaves Princess would castrate her own husband for no

reason at all? I would think that even the big traitor himself would not easily believe him, most likely he would give his son a severe scolding." He also thought, "When the Princess is married, during our way back to Beijing, I must spend a lot of effort with Ah Ke."

Returning to his quarter, Xu Tianchuan, Xuanzhen, and the others had already obtained the news, nobody did not clap their hands to express their delight. Wei Xiaobao did not wish to tell them the truth, he asked them how their visit to the brothel was. The warriors told them that everything went smoothly according to their plan. Wei Xiaobao thought that tonight an important matter had just happened, if they dispatched troops to return to the Capital right away, the big traitor would definitely suspect that they were going to report to the Emperor. Therefore, it would be best if they waited until things had calmed down before they sent the Mongolian big beard out.

After a flustered night, the warriors were about to withdraw, suddenly the Imperial Bodyguard Zhao Qixian rushed toward the door and said, "Reporting to *Fu Zongguan* [deputy chief]: Ping Xi Wang is attacked by an assassin!"

Wei Xiaobao was shocked. "Assassinated?" he busily asked, "Who is the assassin?" He did not want Zhao Qixian to see the Tian Di Hui warriors in his room very late at night, hence he went outside the door and asked again, "The big han[2] … big … did Ping Xi Wang die?"

"He did not," Zhao Qixian said, "I heard he only suffered light injury. The assassin was arrested on the spot, turned out … turned out she is a palace maid serving the Princess."

Wei Xiaobao was even more shocked. "Palace maid serving the Princess?" he asked, "Which one? Why would she want to assassinate Ping Xi Wang?"

"I don't know the details," Zhao Qixian replied, "As soon as subordinate obtained the news that Ping Xi Wang was attacked by the assassin, I rushed here to report."

"Go quickly, investigate clearly and report back to me," Wei Xiaobao said.

Zhao Qixian complied and left. He had just taken a few steps when Zhang Kangnian walked in in quick steps; he said, "Reporting to *Fu Zongguan*: the

palace maid assassinated Ping Xi Wang is called Wang Ke'er."

Wei Xiaobao's head spun; he said with a trembling voice, "She … she … why did she do that?" Wang Ke'er was Ah Ke's alias, it was the character 'Ke' [珂] divided into character 'Wang' [王] and character 'Ke' [可].

Zhang Kangnian said, "Ping Xi Wang has brought her back to the Mansion, saying that he would personally interrogate her: who was the mastermind behind the attack."

As soon as Wei Xiaobao heard that his beloved was arrested, his mind was in chaos, he could not think anymore.

Zhang Kangnian said, "Everybody says, who else would send her? This Wang Ke'er is only a sixteen, seventeen years old girl, she must be very loyal to the Princess, seeing that Princess was humiliated until she wanted to kill herself, she must be very upset, and thus she went to avenge the Princess to vent off her anger."

In the darkness of his mind, Wei Xiaobao suddenly saw a spark of light. "Right, right," he busily said, "That must be it. Such a beautiful young girl, what enmity might she have against Ping Xi Wang? Even if we wanted to assassinate Ping Xi Wang, we would not send a young girl like her."

Zhao Qixian and Zhang Kangnian looked at each other; they thought, "Wei *Fu Zongguan* must be confused; why would we want to send anybody to assassinate Ping Xi Wang?" Zhang Kangnian said, "I think Ping Xi Wang also did not suspect anybody else. If this matter were known, who would gain from it? Most likely he would quietly send someone to kill this palace maid, and be done with it."

"She must not be killed, she must not be killed," Wei Xiaobao said with a trembling voice, "If he killed her, *laozi* will fight him to the death, I will fight with that old turtle, the big traitor, 'white blade coming in, red blade coming out'."

Zhao and Zhang, two men, looked at each other again; they were doubting in their hearts, "Could it be that Wei *Fu Zongguan* is angry because the Princess was humiliated, and he sent this palace maid to assassinate?" The two of them stood with hands hanging by their sides, they did not dare to say anything.

“What should we do? What should we do?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

Seeing he seemed to be not in his right mind and was extremely anxious, Zhang Kangnian comforted him, “Wei *Fu Zongguan*, this matter is indeed a big trouble, but if we report to His Majesty and have the main offender investigated, it is still Wu Sangui, father and son, who are in the wrong. Raping the Princess, what was he thinking? Besides, Wu Sangui did not die. Even if he investigated who incited the assassination, we can categorically deny that we do not know the person; he can’t do anything.”

Wei Xiaobao shook his head with a bitter laugh, “I swear it was not me who incited her,” he said, “We are brothers, could I be concealing the truth from you?”

Zhao Qixian and Zhang Kangnian were relieved instantly; they heaved a deep sigh together. “It’s easy then,” Zhao Qixian said, “We’ll say that we are asleep, we feign ignorance, and that’s that.”

“No, can’t do,” Wei Xiaobao said, “I am afraid I will have to brother two *Dage*: please take my visiting card to Ping Xi Wang, tell him that Wang Ke’er has offended *Wangye*, which is major offense, and that I am enraged. But she is the Princess’ personal palace maid, I am asking *Wangye* to hand this little girl to you, let me make a report to the Princess, and have her flogged heavily to vent *Wangye*’s anger.”

Zhao and Zhang, two people complied and left. They both felt that Wei Xiaobao was a bit superfluous; it would be better to have Wu Sangui kill this palace maid quietly, ‘the gods do not know, the ghosts are not aware’, everybody’s happy.

Wei Xiaobao hurriedly went to Jiu Nan’s room. When he pushed the door and went in, he saw she had just finished meditating and was still sitting on the bed; he said, “Shifu, do you know that Shijie … Shijie … about Shijie?”

“What about her?” Jiu Nan asked, “Why are you so flustered?”

“Shi … Shijie … she … she went to assassinate the big traitor,” Wei Xiaobao said, “But she … she was caught.”

Rays of light flashed in Jiu Nan’s eyes. “Did she kill him?” she asked.

“She did not,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “But … but Shijie was caught by him.”

“Humph,” Jiu Nan snorted. There was a disappointment on her face. “What a useless thing,” she coldly said.

Wei Xiaobao felt strange; he mused, “She is your disciple, and she is caught by the big traitor, yet you don’t seem to care?” But after thinking it over, he understood. “Shifu,” he said, “You have a way to rescue Shijie, don’t you?”

Jiu Nan stared at him; she shook her head and said, “I do not. She is such a useless thing!”

Along the way, Wei Xiaobao had noticed that his master was always cold and indifferent toward this martial sister, she did not seem to love her dearly, in fact, she did not treat her as well as she treated him. However, even if Shifu did not like her, I, Wei Xiaobao, liked her like crazy. He anxiously said, “The big traitor is going to kill her. I am afraid by this time he has already had her flogged that she is hovering between life and death; he wanted to … to find out who incited her.”

“It was me who incited her,” Jiu Nan coldly said, “If the big traitor has the ability, let him come to deal with me.”

Jiu Nan sent her disciple to assassinate Wu Sangui, Wei Xiaobao was not the least bit surprised. She was the former Ming Dynasty’s Emperor Chongzhen’s daughter, Wu Sangui was the person who delivered the Great Ming’s rivers and mountains on a platter, naturally she hated this man to her bones. Even she herself had tried to assassinate Kangxi on Mount Wutai. But Ah Ke’s martial art skill was mediocre, Wu Sangui had countless martial art experts as his guards by his side. Even if the assassination succeeded, it would be difficult for her to escape. Shifu sent her on this kind of mission, wouldn’t it be clear that she wanted her to deliver her own life?

Wei Xiaobao had myriads of doubts and suspicions in his heart, yet he did not dare to ask her openly. He said, “Shijie will never confess it was Shifu who sent her.”

“Is that so?” Jiu Nan said, and closed her eyes.

Wei Xiaobao did not dare to ask anything anymore, he went out of her room.

Since Zhao and Zhang, two people, went to Wu Sangui to ask for Ah Ke, he did

not expect them to return quickly. He paced back and forth in the hall, until the sky gradually brightened. Three times he sent some Imperial Bodyguards to see if there was any news, but none of them came back to report anything. Finally he could not bear it anymore, selecting a squad of Valiant Cavalry sergeants, he personally led them toward to Ping Xi Wang mansion. About three *li* from Ping Xi Wang Mansion, he stopped at the Fa Hui [lit. Dharma wisdom/intelligent] Temple, and sent several Imperial Bodyguards ahead to find any news.

About the time needed to eat a meal later, he heard the urgent sound of hooves, Zhang Kangnian galloped over and reported to Wei Xiaobao: "Subordinate and Zhao Qixian went to see Ping Xi Wang under *Fu Zongguan*'s order. All along *Wangye* did not receive us. Zhao Qixian is still waiting outside the door."

Wei Xiaobao was anxious and angry at the same time. He stomped his foot and cursed, "Damn it, Wu Sangui is putting on air!"

Zhang Kangnian said, "He is a king holding power over a territory; in the world, other than His Majesty, he is the most powerful. He is not willing to see us, lowly Imperial Bodyguards, this is a very normal occurrence."

Wei Xiaobao angrily said, "I will personally come to see him. All of you come with me!" Wei Xiaobao turned his head toward a Valiant Cavalry *Zuoling* [company commander], "Call all of our troops, have them ready outside Wu Sangui's doghouse, waiting for my order." The Company Commander accepted the order and left.

When Zhang Kangnian and the others heard the order, they all panicked; looking at Wei Xiaobao's flustered and exasperated appearance, it seemed to them that Wei Xiaobao was determined to go into conflict with Wu Sangui. But Ping Xi Wang's troops and horses were numerous, while the people escorting the Princess from Beijing to Yunnan was only a little over two thousands men. If a war broke, perhaps in less than an hour they would all be decimated.

"Wei *Fu Zongguan*," Zhang Kangnian said, "You are an imperial envoy, a high-ranking minister, you received His Majesty's order to come to Kunming. Whatever happens, you must talk it over with him. Ping Xi Wang can't possibly not give you any face. In your subordinate's opinion, there is no harm in us

coming slowly."

"Damn it," Wei Xiaobao angrily said, "What 'thing' is Wu Sangui anyway? If we are coming slowly, he would kill my w … kill Wang Ke'er, and then who's going to save her?"

Looking at his hasty words and stern countenance, Zhang Kangnian did not dare to say anything anymore; he thought, "Killing a palace maid, what's the big deal? She is not your *Meizi* [younger sister], why would you want to mobilize the entire force to go to war?"

"Get the horse, get the horse!" Wei Xiaobao repeatedly called. He turned around and jumped onto his horse, and galloped away toward Ping Xi Wang mansion. Seeing the minister, the imperial envoy's arrival, the guards at the gate busily welcomed him and escorted him into the main hall, while a guard rushed inside to report.

Xia Guoxiang and Ma Bao, two *Zongbing* [Regional Commander] went out to meet him. Xia Guoxiang was Wu Sangui's son-in-law, the head of the ten *Zongbing* under Wu Sangui's banner. After saluting Wei Xiaobao, he said, "Wei *Jueye*, it may be assumed that you have already obtained the news that *Wangye* was attacked by an assassin. *Wangye*'s injury is not light, he is unable to personally welcome you, please forgive his offense."

Wei Xiaobao was shocked. "*Wangye* is injured?" he asked, "Didn't they say he was not injured?"

With concern all over his face, Xia Guoxiang said in low voice, "The pit of *Wangye*'s stomach was stabbed by the assassin's sword, the wound is about three, four *cun* deep …"

"Aiyo!" Wei Xiaobao exclaimed in shock, "That's terrible."

With knitted brows Xia Guoxiang said, "Whether *Wangye* can … can come out alive this time, right now it is still very difficult to say. We are afraid that the people's hearts will be shaken, hence we did not announce it; we only said that he is not injured at all. Wei *Jueye* is one of us, naturally we must not conceal anything from you."

"I want to visit *Wangye*," Wei Xiaobao said.

Xia and Ma, two people looked at each other. Xia Guoxiang said, “Let *Xiaoren* show the way.”

Arriving at Wu Sangui’s bedroom, Xia Guoxiang said, “*Yuefu* [father-in-law], Wei *Jueye* is here to visit you, Senior.”

They heard Wu Sangui groaned behind the curtain several times, but he did not say anything. Xia Guoxiang lifted up the mosquito net. Wu Sangui was frowning with clenched teeth, as if he was suppressing the pain. There were splatters of blood on the quilt and the mattress. His chest was bandaged, from which blood did not stop seeping out. Two physicians were standing by the bed, with knitted brows and worried look on their faces.

Wei Xiaobao did not expect Wu Sangui’s injury to be this heavy. The anger that was filling his heart vanished into thin air in an instant; he could not help but was deeply anxious. He did not care whether Wu Sangui would live or would die, but if he died from his injury, it would be much more difficult for Wei Xiaobao to save Ah Ke. “*Wangye*,” he asked in a low voice, “Is your wound very painful?”

Wu Sangui let out some ‘he, he’ groans, he opened his eyes, there was no luster in them at all. “*Yuefu*,” Xia Guoxiang said said, “Wei *Jueye* is here to visit you, Senior.”

“Aiyo, aiyo,” Wu Sangui groaned several times, “I … I won’t make it. You … go kill Yingxiong … Yingxiong, that little animal. It was he … he who brought me to my death.”

Xia Guoxiang did not dare to reply; he gently laid down the curtain, and went out the room with Wei Xiaobao. As soon as they were outside, Xia Guoxiang covered his face and cried, “Wei *Jueye*, *Wangye* … *Wangye* … won’t make it. All his life the Senior displayed utter loyalty to his country, but he will end up succumbing to this fate. Really … really the Emperor of Heaven does not bless a good man.”

Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, “Display fart loyalty to his country! The Emperor of Heaven does not bless the big traitor, that is indeed the heaven’s law and earth’s principle.” He said, “Xia *Zongbing*, in my opinion, although *Wangye*’s injury is heavy, he won’t die for certain.”

“Thank the Heaven and thank the Earth,” Xia Guoxiang said, “If only it will be

as *Jueye*'s golden mouth said. But I wonder how did you know?"

"I can tell fortune by looking at someone's facial features," Wei Xiaobao replied, "*Wangye*'s appearance is unspeakably noble. In the future, his status will be a hundred times better than it is today. This time he will definitely not die."

Wu Sangui was a Qin Wang [see note 14, Chapter 30], governing all military and civil affairs of two provinces, Yunnan and Guizhou. In term of order of feudal nobility, he had already reached the top, his government official rank was also already at the extreme point. Wei Xiaobao said that in the future his status would be a hundred times better than today; other than the Emperor himself, who would have a status a hundred times better than Ping Xi Wang?

As soon as Xia Guoxiang heard this, his countenance changed greatly. "The Emperor's benevolence is vast and mighty," he said, "Our *Wangye*'s rank and nobility has already reached the peak, he cannot rise higher than he currently is. I just hope that as Wei *Jueye*'s golden mouth said, the Senior will turn misfortune into blessing, from death back to life."

Wei Xiaobao saw his look; he thought, "Wu Sangui is going to rebel, nine out of ten you already knew; otherwise, when I said that he will rise a hundred times higher, why would you look that scared? I might as well scare him some more." Thereupon he said, "Xia *Zongbing*, please set your heart at ease; I look at your facial feature, your appearance is also unspeakably noble. Someday I might ask you for much promotion, for much improvement."

Xia Guoxiang bowed and cupped his fists; he said respectfully, "Imperial Envoy *Daren* words are too heavy. *Daren* has strived to encourage me, *Xiao Jiang* will be loyal and dedicate myself to the service of my country; I do not dare to bear Imperial Envoy *Daren*'s high hope for me."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Hey, hey, you are doing well! Your Heir Apparent becomes the Prince Consort, he is bestowed the titles Shao Bao [young protector] and Taizitaibao [tutor to the crown prince] simultaneously. In the past, Yue Fei, Grandfather Yue, who routed the Jin army at the Zhuxian town, massacred the Jins and drove them scared shitless, was only bestowed the title Shao Bao. Only by being the Princess' husband one would reap this kind of

benefit. Xia *Zongbing*, you are doing well!" They were talking while walking out.

Xia Guoxiang was so scared that the palms of his hands were wet with cold sweat; he thought, "Listening to this kid, it looks like he knew that my father-in-law wants to be the emperor. Could it be … could it be that this matter has leaked out? Or perhaps this kid does not know the immensity of heaven and earth and just casually talking rubbish?"

When they reached the winding corridor, Wei Xiaobao halted his steps and asked, "The assassin who attacked *Wangye*, did you catch him? Who is he anyway? Who sent him? Was it the remaining evil element of the previous Ming? Or perhaps Mu Family people?"

"The assassin was a woman," Xia Guoxiang replied, "Her name is Wang Ke'er. Someone talked nonsense … that she is a palace maid serving the Princess. *Xiao Jiang* does not believe it, most probably she pretended to be a palace maid. Imperial Envoy *Daren*, please understand, *Xiao Jiang* is almost certain that this person was sent by the Mu Family."

Suddenly Wei Xiaobao was frightened, he groaned inwardly, "Not good! They do not dare to offend the Princess, hence falsely accuse Ah Ke as Mu Family people, so that they could execute her at will. This is terrible!" He said, "Wang Ke'er? The Princess indeed has a palace maid serving her by the name Wang Ke'er. The Princess likes her very much, she would not allow her to leave her side even for a short time. Isn't this girl about seventeen, eighteen years old, slim, and very pretty?"

Xia Guoxiang hesitated. "*Xiao Jiang*'s mind was occupied solely by *Wangye*'s injury, I did not pay any attention to the assassin at all. If this woman did not impersonate a palace maid, then she must have used fake name. Imperial Envoy *Daren*, please think: if this woman surnamed Wang is really the Princess' favorite palace maid, then she must have received Princess' instructions; she must be well-educated and understand propriety, gentle and obedient, how can she go and assassinate *Wangye*? It does not make any sense."

The more he asserted that the assassin was not a palace maid serving the Princess, the more Wei Xiaobao was frightened. With a trembling voice he asked, "Have you … have you executed her?"

“Not yet,” Xia Guoxiang replied, “We want to wait for *Wangye* to heal and recover completely, then he can interrogate her in person to ascertain who is the mastermind behind the assassination.”

Wei Xiaobao was relieved. “Take me to see the assassin,” he said, “Whether she is a real palace maid or a fake one, I will know as soon as I see her.”

Xia Guoxiang said, “We do not dare to toil Imperial Envoy *Daren*’s honorable self in this matter. This woman is definitely not a palace maid serving the Princess. There are many rumors floating outside, *Daren* need not pay any attention.”

Wei Xiaobao’s countenance sank; he said, “*Wangye* was attacked by an assassin, his injury is very heavy, supposing there is ‘three-long two-short’ or ‘two-short three-long’[3], nobody would escape the responsibility. When I return to Beijing, His Majesty will definitely ask me in details what happened, who was the assassin, who was the mastermind? If I don’t see it clearly with my own eyes, and His Majesty raises the question, how am I going to respond? Could it be that you want me to talk nonsense? This guilt of deceiving our lord, naturally I cannot take it upon myself. Xia *Zongbing*, hey, hey, I am afraid neither can you.”

As soon as he brought up the Emperor’s name, Xia Guoxiang did not dare to disobey anymore. “Yes, yes,” he repeatedly said, but did not move a single step.

Wei Xiaobao’s face showed his displeasure. “Xia *Zongbing* always uses all sorts of excuses, what trick are you playing?” he said, “If you have any trick, or prepare some trap, there is no harm in bringing it on, let’s see if I, the one surnamed Wei, can handle it or not.”

Because his beloved was captured, he believed unfortunate fate was more likely to befall her than a fortunate one; in his anxiety, in his speech he unexpectedly did not give Xia Guoxiang any leeway, the hypocritical façade of the officialdom was completely ripped down.

Xia Guoxiang anxiously said, “How can *Xiao Jiang* dare play any trick on the Imperial Envoy *Daren*? It’s just that … it’s just that I really have some difficulties.”

“Is that so?” Wei Xiaobao coldly said.

Xia Guoxiang said, “I am being honest to the Imperial Envoy *Daren*, our *Wangye* has always been very strict to his subordinates. *Xiao Jiang* is the Senior’s son-in-law, *Wangye* is twice as strict toward *Xiao Jiang*, so that the other subordinates cannot say behind his back that *Wangye* is unfair.”

Wei Xiaobao smiled and said, “You are his son-in-law, but you do not make a good use of your position. I heard *Wangye*’s queen is called Chen Yuanyuan, the number one beauty under the heavens. Our Great Qing’s rivers and mountains have strong connection with Chen *Wangfei* [wife of a king]. Your mother-in-law has a ‘bashful flower obstructing the moon’ appearance, naturally your wife also has a ‘fish sink, goose alights’ appearance[4]. If you want to take full advantage of your position as the son-in-law, you only need to look at your mother-in-law several times more often, lick your father-in-law’s behind several times more often, you are not doing too bad …”

“*Xiao Jiang*’s wife …” Xia Guoxiang started, but Wei Xiaobao cut him off, he said happily, “As the saying goes: when the mother-in-law sees the son-in-law, her saliva is dripping greedily. In my opinion, however, your mother-in-law is such a beauty, the saying must be reversed: when the son-in-law sees the mother-in-law, he swallows his saliva into his tummy. Ha ha, ha ha …”

Xia Guoxiang looked awkward; he thought, “This kid talk’s rubbish, the way he speaks is just like a marketplace hoodlum, there is not even half a point of high-ranking official’s manners.” He said, “*Xiao Jiang*’s wife is not Chen *Wangfei*’s daughter.”

Wei Xiaobao sighed, “What a pity, what a pity. Your luck is not good.” His countenance sank as he said, “I want to interrogate the assassin, yet you are talking about this and that, even steered the conversation toward your mother-in-law. Hey, hey, it’s really strange.”

Xia Guoxiang’s anger was rising, but he maintained a respectful expression as he said, “Imperial Envoy *Daren* wants to interrogate the assassin, nothing can be better than that. Imperial Envoy *Daren*’s one question surpasses a hundred questions, a thousand questions of ours; but I am afraid *Wangye* … *Wangye* …”

“*Wangye* what?” Wei Xiaobao angrily said, “He won’t allow me to interrogate the assassin?”

“No, no,” Xia Guoxiang hastily said, “Imperial Envoy *Daren* must not misunderstand; if *Daren* can look at the assassin and investigate her background, our *Wangye* can only be grateful to you, he will not detain you, absolutely. Please forgive *Xiao Jiang* for being bold, I have something to say, and ask that *Daren* not to take offense.”

Wei Xiaobao stomped his foot and said, “Ay, you are always humming and hawing, there is not the least bit of real man’s lofty quality. You must be kneeling in front of your wife’s bed a lot. Speak up! Speak up!”

Xia Guoxiang cursed in his heart, “Your surname Wei’s eighteen generation ancestors are b@stards.” He said, “I am only afraid that if by any chance the assassin is indeed a palace maid serving the Princess, when *Daren* sees her, you would take her away, and then when *Wangye* wants to see her, *Xiao Jiang* cannot hand her over; that … that would be terrible.”

Wei Xiaobao mused, “This fellow is very crafty indeed; he wants me to promise in advance that I will not take the assassin away. Your granny, this assassin is my dear wife; how can I let you bully her?” He laughed and said, “But you said the assassin is definitely not the Princess’ palace maid, why worry?”

“That was *Xiao Jiang*’s guess,” Xia Guoxiang said, “As for the actual fact, actually I am not clear myself.”

“So you won’t allow me to take the assassin away?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

“I do not dare,” Xia Guoxiang replied, “Would Imperial Envoy *Daren* please sit down in the hall and make yourself comfortable, let *Xiao Jiang* report to *Wangye*, and then Imperial Envoy *Daren* may discuss this matter with *Wangye* later. If *Wangye* is angry, he cannot blame *Xiao Jiang*.”

Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, “Turns out you are afraid your father-in-law might spank your bottom, you don’t dare to take on the responsibility.” He let out a ‘hey, hey’ laugh, and said, “Alright, go and report. But let me tell you this: I don’t care if *Wangye* is asleep or awake, I want you to come back to me immediately. Your *Wangye*’s health is important, our Princess’ life or death is not a trivial matter either. After Her Highness the Princess was bullied by your Heir Apparent, I don’t know her condition right now, I must hurry back to check on her.” He was afraid Wu Sangui was still unconscious and was not awake, and

thus Xia Guoxiang would stay by his bed and did not come out again.

Xia Guoxiang bowed and said, “I definitely do not dare to harm Imperial Envoy *Daren*’s business.”

“Humph,” Wei Xiaobao snorted. “This is your business, not mine,” he said with a cold laugh.

However, after Xia Guoxiang went in, it was quite a while before he came out again. Wei Xiaobao lost his patience, he repeatedly stomped his feet.

“*Wangye* is not awake yet,” Xia Guoxiang said, “*Xiao Jiang* was afraid Imperial Envoy *Daren* is waiting anxiously, as soon as I finished my report, without waiting for *Wangye*’s instruction I came out to serve Imperial Envoy *Daren* to examine the assassin. Imperial Envoy *Daren*, please.”

Wei Xiaobao nodded, and followed him inside. After passing through several winding corridors, they arrived at a garden. He saw several dozen guards with weapons in their hands, patrolling back and forth; the garden was heavily-guarded.

Xia Guoxiang led him toward a rock garden, where he showed a golden arrow banner of command to the military officer guarding in front of it. “*Wangye*’s order,” he said, “I am here to serve the Imperial Envoy *Daren* to examine the assassin.”

The military officer checked the arrow banner of command, bowed and said, “Imperial Envoy *Daren*, please. *Zongbing Daren*, please.” As he stepped aside to let them pass.

Xia Guoxiang said, “Let *Xiao Jiang* show the way.” And he entered into the cave in the rock garden.

Wei Xiaobao followed in. Only several steps later, he saw a large iron door. Two armed-guards stood on either side of the door. Turned out this rockery was the entrance to a dungeon. They walked through three such doors in succession; the path was sloping down. Finally they arrived in front of a small room. There were thick iron bars in front of the room, behind the bar a young girl was sitting on the floor, with both hands holding her head, she was sobbing quietly. There were several oil lamps hanging on the wall, illuminating the room with its pale yellow

light. Wei Xiaobao rushed forward; with both hands gripping the iron bars, he focused his eyes on the young girl.

Xia Guoxiang shouted, “Stand up, Imperial Envoy *Daren* has some questions for you.”

The young girl turned her head around, the lantern light shone on her face. Wei Xiaobao’s and the girl’s four eyes met, “Ah!” both exclaimed in shock. The girl immediately stood up, the shackles on her hands and feet created clanking noise. “How … how did you get here?” she asked. They were both utterly amazed.

Wei Xiaobao would never expect that this girl was not Ah Ke at all; rather, she was the Mu Family’s *Xiao Junzhu* [young princess, see note 1 of Chapter 10] Mu Jianping.

After calming himself down, he turned his head around to ask Xia Guoxiang, “Why is she locked up in here?”

“*Daren* knows the assassin?” Xia Guoxiang asked, “Is she … is she really a palace maid who serves the Princess?” His shock was not below Wei Xiaobao and Mu Jianping’s.

Wei Xiaobao asked, “Is she … is she the swordsman who assassinate Wu … assassinate *Wangye*?”

“That’s right,” Xia Guoxiang said, “This woman has a gargantuan nerve, she dares to commit this kind of crime, rebelling against the Emperor. In the end, who sent her? Would *Daren* please interrogate her clearly?”

Wei Xiaobao was slightly relieved. “Turns out it’s a big misunderstanding,” he thought, “The assassin who tried to kill Wu Sangui is not Ah Ke; actually, it’s the Mu Family’s Xiao Junzhu. Her father was killed by Wu Sangui. She tried to assassinate him, obviously it is to avenge her father. It’s not surprising at all.” He asked Xia Guoxiang again, “Did she say that her name is Wang Ke’er? And that she is a palace maid serving the Princess?”

Xia Guoxiang said, “After we captured her, we asked her name, surname and origin, as well as who sent her here. But she was unwilling to say anything. However, someone recognized her as the palace maid Wang Ke’er; I don’t know

whether she is or she isn't. We ask *Daren* to verify."

Wei Xiaobao pondered, "Xiao Junzhu is captured, I have to try to save her. She is also my wife, I must not be partial." He said, "Naturally she is a palace maid serving the Princess. Princess is very fond of her." While saying that, he signaled Mu Jianping with his eyes. "Why did you assassinate Ping Xi Wang?" he asked, "Don't you want your little life anymore? Who sent you? Quickly confess, otherwise you will suffer."

Mu Jianping boldly said, "Wu Sangui is a big traitor to Han people, he acknowledge the criminal as his father, he handed over the Great Ming's rivers and mountains to the Tatars. Among all Han people, which one does not wish to take his life? I only feel sorry that I failed to kill this traitor."

"Little servant girl!" Wei Xiaobao pretended to be angry, "You dare to disregard the law and natural morality. You have lived in the Palace so long, unexpectedly you did not understand any rules and regulations, you dare to speak such treason and heresy? Aren't you afraid you might lose your head?"

Mu Jianping retorted, "You have lived in the Palace a lot longer than I have, what rules and regulations do you know? If I am afraid of losing my head, I would not come to Kunming to kill that big traitor Wu Sangui."

Wei Xiaobao took a step forward and shouted, "Quickly confess, who sent you to assassinate? Who else is your conspirator?" While talking, he curled his right thumb, and waved it several times toward his back, indicating that Xiao Junzhu should implicate Xia Guoxiang. His body was covering his thumb; since Xia Guoxiang was standing behind him, he did not see Wei Xiaobao was making signals with his finger and his eyes.

Mu Jianping caught his signals; pointing to Xia Guoxiang, she loudly said, "My conspirator is him! He was the one who sent me here."

Xia Guoxiang was enraged. "Rubbish!" he shouted.

"You still want to deny?" Mu Jianping said, "You told me to assassinate Wu Sangui. You said that Wu Sangui is extremely evil, everybody hates him to the death. You said … you said that after I assassinated Wu Sangui, you would … you would …" She did not know Xia Guoxiang's status, plus she was not good in telling lies, hence momentarily she was at a loss.

Wei Xiaobao prompted, “He would be promoted and gain wealth, and hereafter nobody would beat him or curse him?”

“That’s right!” Mu Jianping said loudly, “He said that Wu Sangui often beats him, scolds him, and is very ruthless to him. In his heart he resents it very much; he had always wanted to personally kill Wu Sangui, but … but he didn’t have the guts to do so.” Xia Guoxiang was cursing and yelling, but Mu Jianping did not pay him any attention.

“Be careful of what you say!” Wei Xiaobao shouted, “Do you know who this general is? He is Ping Xi Wang’s son-in-law Xia Guoxiang, Xia *Zongbing*. Although Ping Xi Wang often beats him, scolds him, it was for his own good.” While saying that, he raised his thumb in front of his chest, indicating that he approved of what she said.

Mu Jianping continued, “This Xia *Zongbing* told me that as soon as Wu Sangui is dead, he himself will be the Ping Xi Wang. He said that whether the assassination is successful or not, he would let me go, that he would not let me suffer the least bit of suffering. But he actually locked me up in here. Xia *Zongbing*, I have obeyed your order, I have finished the mission, when are you going to let me go?”

Xia Guoxiang was extremely angry; he thought, “This stinky girl originally did not know me, it was this kid who told her. This muddleheaded kid is playing a joke with *laozi* in order to save you. Turns out the two of you know each other; I really did not expect it.” He shouted, “If you keep talking nonsense, I’ll beat you until your skin is broken and your flesh lacerated, you are hovering between life and death.”

Mu Jianping was scared; she did not dare to say anything anymore. She thought that if Wei Xiaobao failed to save her, this military officer would definitely deal with her maliciously.

Wei Xiaobao said, “Whatever you want to say, there is no harm in you saying it. This gentleman, Xia *Zongbing* is my good friend. If it is really he who incited you to assassinate Ping Xi Wang, you can honestly tell me, I will not reveal it to anybody.” While saying that, he repeatedly signaled with his eyes.

Mu Jianping said, “But he … he is going to beat me to death, I don’t dare to

speak."

"In that case," Wei Xiaobao said, "What you said earlier was the truth." He sighed, took several steps back, and shook his head.

Xia Guoxiang said, "*Daren* please understand: rebellious-thief slanders senior official is a common occurrence, naturally you must not take her seriously."

Wei Xiaobao hesitantly said, "You are not wrong. However, Ping Xi Wang is usually very strict toward Xia *Zongbing*; Xia *Zongbing* resents him very much, hence you wanted to kill the old man, your father-in-law. I am afraid a little girl like her cannot fabricate baseless rumor like that. After Ping Xi Wang is completely healed from his wound, I will try to persuade him, so that the two of you, father-in-law and son-in-law, will not become … become water something and fire something."

Previously, when Xia Guoxiang heard Mu Jianping slandering him, although he was angry, he did not care too much, because his achievement, riches and honor, everything was actually bestowed by Ping Xi Wang; nobody would believe that he would conspire against him. However, if Wei Xiaobao really brought this matter up in front of Ping Xi Wang, his father-in-law might think that he was harboring a grudge, and that he complained to an outsider about it. For the past few years his father-in-law was short-tempered; he dealt with his subordinates even more strictly. If he heard this kind of talks, very likely Xia Guoxiang would suffer some misfortune. Thereupon he hastily said, "*Wangye* has always treated *Xiao Jiang* with extreme benevolence, he treated me just like his own son, *Xiao Jiang* is very grateful to him. Imperial Envoy *Daren* absolutely must not say such thing to *Wangye*."

Seeing Xia Guoxiang was very anxious, Wei Xiaobao smiled and said, "People do not wish to harm the tiger, the tiger wants to harm people. Biting the hand that feeds him is not uncommon in the world. Ping Xi Wang treats me pretty good, I must warn him to be vigilant, so that he won't fall into his own people's evil scheme. Ping Xi Wang has strong soldiers and sturdy horses, with countless martial art experts to guard him; if there is any outsider wanting to harm him, how could he succeed? However, inside thief is difficult to guard against, if one of his own people is backstabbing him, I am afraid he cannot dodge it."

The more Xia Guoxiang heard it, the more frightened he was. He knew perfectly well that Wei Xiaobao was simply making it up, with the sole intention to save this young girl. But Ping Xi Wang tended to be overly suspicious of everything and everybody. Just a few days ago his own brother Wu Sanmei walked into the rear hall but forgot to take the saber hanging on his waist off. He personally tore the saber off and reprimanded him severely. If Wei Xiaobao ever mentioned anything like 'outside enemy easy to resist, inside thief difficult to guard against'; granted that Ping Xi Wang might not believe him, but these words would plant a root in his heart, and then Xia Guoxiang's future advancement might be greatly hindered. Thereupon he said in a low voice, "Imperial Envoy *Daren*'s advice on my promotion and future advancement, *Xiao Jiang* will forever never dare to forget your, Senior's great kindness and great benevolence. If *Daren* has any order, *Xiao Jiang* will go through water and tread on fire, will not decline under any circumstances. Even if it involves huge responsibility, *Xiao Jiang* will do my best to accomplish it."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "I was just giving you food for thoughts. What this little girl said, the Heaven knows, the Earth knows, you know, I know, plus the little girl herself knows, a total of three people. Actually, you should have killed her early on to close her mouth, nice and clean. But now the words have entered my ears; if you want to eliminate potential informants, then you must kill me as well. I have Imperial Bodyguards and troops and generals under my command, right now they are already on guard against this matter, several thousand people are waiting outside the Mansion. If you kill me, you will still find it difficult to overcome this matter."

Xia Guoxiang's countenance changed; he bowed with cupped fist and said, "*Xiao Jiang* will never dare to do that."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Since you cannot kill us to shut our mouths, sooner or later Ping Xi Wang will hear about this matter. Xia *Zongbing*, you are the leader of the ten Great Regional Commanders, plus you are the Ping Xi Wang's son-in-law; I am afraid among the other nine Regional Commanders, as well as other civil and military officials of the Mansion, there are quite a few people are jealous of you [orig. 'drinking your vinegar']. As the saying goes: When you open the door, among the seven ingredients: firewood, rice, oil, salt,

soy, vinegar and tea[5], there bound to be a few people who drink vinegar, and add some oil and soy paste. As soon as this rumor is leaked, even for a little bit, Ping Xi Wang's ears will not be peaceful. Everybody will speak malicious words about you on the Senior's ears, adding firewood and straw to it, and fan it into flame. Ping Xi Wang is injured; in his illness, how can his temper be good? This … this … ay!" While saying that, he continuously shook his head.

Wei Xiaobao was merely speculating, yet Xia Guoxiang thought that this kid really understood my Mansion's affair clearly; the number of people who are jealous of me was indeed not a few. He said, "*Daren* gives *Xiao Jiang* food for thought, *Xiao Jiang* can't thank you enough, but I wonder what should I do?"

"This problem is actually very difficult to solve," Wei Xiaobao said, "Alright, let me carry some of the responsibility, just hand it over to your friend here. Give this little girl to me, I will take her away, and say that the Princess wants to personally interrogate her." Lowering his voice, he whispered into Xia Guoxiang's ear, "Tonight, I will kill her, and announce that she prefers death than confessing her crime; she is tortured, cannot endure it, and thus she meets her fate. Won't that mean we turn big matter into small, small mater into nothing, clean and clear?"

Xia Guoxiang had already expected that Wei Xiaobao would say those words; he cursed in his heart, "Damn it, muddleheaded stinky kid, you want to save this girl, yet you make it as if you are doing me a favor, that you, the stinky kid, are helping me avoiding big problem. But how did you know this little girl? It really surprises me." He asked, "*Daren*, could you confirm again: is she a palace maid serving the Princess? A while ago *Xiao Jiang* interrogated her, but she does not seem to know the Princess' appearance and age, as well as general situation around the Palace."

"She is unwilling to implicate the Princess, naturally she intentionally did not answer your questions correctly," Wei Xiaobao replied, "This girl is loyal to the Princess, plus she did not fail Xia *Zongbing*'s great trust. Very good, very good."

Xia Guoxiang understood that once again Wei Xiaobao was turning this matter around and put the blame on his head; he hastily said, "*Daren*'s ingenious plan is indeed brilliant. Would *Daren* please put in writing that you order *Xiao Jiang* to

hand over the prisoner, so that *Xiao Jiang* can give account for it in front of *Wangye*?"

Wei Xiaobao laughed and cursed, "Damn it, *laozi* is totally illiterate, what hand order or foot order[6] is there to write?" Puting his hand into his pocket, he drew a short gun and said, "This is a gift from your *Wangye*. Take it and show it to *Wangye*, tell him that I am under the Princess' order to take the prisoner away. This gun is the proof."

Xia Guoxiang received the gun with both hands, and put it inside his pocket. He went out and came back with two military officers; he ordered them to open the iron bars, and removed the shackle on Mu Jianping's feet, but left the handcuffs binding her hands. Xia Guoxiang grabbed the iron chain of the manacles and dragged her out of the Mansion's gate, where he handed the iron chain over to Wei Xiaobao. He also gave the key to the handcuffs to him, and said in a loud voice, "Imperial Envoy *Daren* receives Her Highness, the Princess's order to take the prisoner away for questioning. Everybody must guard the prisoner carefully, don't let her escape."

Wei Xiaobao laughed. "Are you afraid that I would deny taking the prisoner from you?" he said, "Everybody here has seen it, they all have heard it. I cannot deny it even if I wanted to."

Xia Guoxiang bowed and said, "*Daren* is making fun of me. *Xiao Jiang* does not have that intention."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Go tell *Wangye*, I am very concerned about the Senior's well-being, I will come back tomorrow to pay my respect and wish him well."

Xia Guoxiang bowed again and said, "I do not dare."

Wei Xiaobao took Mu Jianping back to Anfu Garden, straight into his room. He bolted the door, and asked with a giggle, "Good wife, what has actually happened?"

Mu Jianping's little face turned deep red from embarrassment; she angrily said, "We have just met and nothing good coming out of your mouth?" She raised her hands, the iron chain of the manacles made 'ding ding dang dang' noise. She said, "Remove this thing first, and then we'll talk."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “I have to enjoy some intimacy with you first. As soon as the handcuffs are removed, you won’t be willing.” While saying that, he wrapped his arms around her slender waist and embraced her.

Mu Jianping was greatly anxious. “You … you are bullying me,” she said.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Alright, I won’t bully you. You can bully me.” He put his cheek toward her lips and touched it gently, and then taking out the key given by Xia Guoxiang, he unlocked the handcuffs. He pulled her to sit side-by-side with him on the bed before he finally asked her about the story behind Wu Sangui’s assassination.

Mu Jianping said, “Hong Jiaozhu and Madame were very delighted to receive the thing that you sent; they let me take the antidote, so that the poison in my body is neutralized. They sent the Scarlet Dragon Vice Envoy to take me here to see you, so that you will work for them loyally. Madame said that Jiaozhu and Madame knew that you missed me, therefore … therefore …”

Wei Xiaobao grabbed her hand and said, “Therefore they sent you here to become my wife?”

“No, not that,” Mu Jianping anxiously said, “Madame said that they were afraid in your heart you were anxious about me, and would not be able to do your work in peace. She really did not say anything else.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Madame must have said it, you are simply concealing it from me.”

Mu Jianping said, “If you don’t believe me, when you see Madame later, you can ask her yourself.”

Wei Xiaobao saw that she was so anxious that her eyes were brimming with tears; afraid that she would cry because of his teasing, he said warmly, “Alright, alright. Madame did not say that; but what about you? Don’t you miss me? Didn’t you want to see me?”

Mu Jianping turned her head away and nodded gently. Wei Xiaobao said, “What about the Scarlet Dragon Vice Envoy? Why did you assassinate Wu Sangui?”

“We arrived at Kunming three days ago,” Mu Jianping replied, “We wanted to

see you right away, but unexpectedly we met my *Gege* and Liu Shifu outside the western gate."

"Ah," Wei Xiaobao exclaimed, "Your *Gege* and Liu Shifu are in Kunming? I did not know that."

Mu Jianping said, "Ao *Shige*, Liu *Shige*, and the others have also arrived; only Wu Shishu did not come because he fell sick. Everybody has arrived at Kunming to set up a mission to assassinate Princess Jianning."

Wei Xiaobao was shocked. "Assassinate Princess Jianning?" he asked, "But why? The Princess has never offended your Mu Family."

"According to my *Gege*," Mu Jianping said, "We want to topple the big traitor Wu Sangui, and right now we saw a very good opportunity. The Tatar Emperor is giving his *Meizi* in marriage to Wu Sangui's son; if we can assassinate the Princess, the Emperor would definitely blame Wu Sangui for not protecting her satisfactorily. If an imperial decree was issued to chastise him, most probably Wu Sangui would be compelled to rebel."

Listening to this, the palm of Wei Xiaobao's hands were wet with cold sweats. He thought, "This plan was very malicious. I was so engrossed in scheming against Wu Sangui that I did not think of protecting the Princess well. If the Mu Palace struck first and gained the upper hand, I would be in a terrible mess." He asked, "And then what happened?"

Mu Jianping said, "My *Gege* told me to dress as a palace maid to get close to the Princess and assassinate her. They were waiting outside to provide support. As soon as I succeeded, they would get me out. The Scarlet Dragon Vice Envoy heard their plan, he told me that since the White Dragon Envoy is in charge of protecting the Princess; if we killed the Princess, perhaps you would be implicated. I thought that he was right, and I wanted to discuss it with you. Unexpectedly Liu Shifu found out about it, he killed the Scarlet Dragon Vice Envoy with a chop of the saber." Speaking to this point, her body trembled slightly; obviously she was recalling the circumstance at that time, and still had lingering fear.

Wei Xiaobao held Mu Jianping's hands tightly and comforted her, "Don't be afraid, don't be afraid. You did that for my sake, I appreciate that very much."

Mu Jianping's tears trickled down her face; sobbing and sniffling she said, "But … but when you saw me, you bullied me, and … and you did not believe me."

Wei Xiaobao lifted her hand and slapped it on his own face. "Scoundrel, you deserve to die, I'll kill you, you son of a wh0re!" he cursed himself.

Mu Jianping hastily pulled his hand and said, "No, I don't want you to beat yourself, to curse yourself."

Wei Xiaobao lifted her hand again and gently slapped it on his own cheek; he said, "Wei Xiaobao still deserves to die. Your good wife, the dear little precious thing from Mu Family was caught by Wu Sangui, why didn't you rescue her earlier?"

"Haven't you rescued me out?" Mu Jianping said, "But we must think of a way to also save *Gege* and Liu Shifu."

Wei Xiaobao was slightly startled. "Your *Gege* and Liu Shifu are also captured?" he asked.

"The night before last," Mu Jianping told him, "The place where we stayed was suddenly surrounded by Wu Sangui's guards. There were so many of them, there were more than twenty among them with superior martial art skill. We were only a few, and were overwhelmed by sheer numbers. Ao *Shige* was killed on the spot. My *Gege*, Liu Shifu and I were captured by them."

Wei Xiaobao sighed and said, "Ao *Shixiong* was killed by the big traitor; what a pity, what a pity." He also asked, "After you were captured, how did you manage to assassinate Wu Sangui?"

"Assassinate Wu Sangui?" Mu Jianping asked, "I did not. Naturally I wanted to kill the big traitor, but … but those evil men put me in fetters and handcuffs, how can I assassinate him?"

The more Wei Xiaobao listened, the more surprised he was. "You were captured the evening of the day before yesterday?" he asked, "Where were you in the last two days?"

"I was always locked up in a dark room," Mu Jianping said, "Just today they took me to be locked up in that dungeon. Not too long afterwards, you came in."

Wei Xiaobao had a nagging feeling in his heart that something was wrong; clearly he had fallen into Xia Guoxiang's big trap, but as for what actually went wrong, he could not say. After hesitating for a moment, he asked, "Today Wu Sangui was assassinated, he received quite a heavy injury; was it you who assassinated him?"

"Of course not," Mu Jianping replied, "I have never seen Wu Sangui. Will he die?"

Wei Xiaobao shook his head, "I don't know," he said, "Have you ever told them your identity or background?"

"I have not," Mu Jianping replied, "I did not say anything. The military officer who interrogated me was very mad; he asked me whether I was mute. Wei *Dage*, you have also said that I was a mute."

Wei Xiaobao gently kissed her cheek; he said, "You are my dear little mute. I also said that I was going to carve a little turtle on your face."

Mu Jianping was shy and delighted at the same time, her eyes were brimming with tenderness, but she did not dare to turn her head to look at him. But Wei Xiaobao was too busy thinking to notice, "Why did Xia Guoxiang want Xiao Junzhu to pretend to be a palace maid? Right, he must be testing me, whether I knew Mu Palace people or not. This time I rescued Xiao Junzhu, it was a clear indication that we belong to the same group. He spread a trap, and luring me to tread on it and fall into it. This time *laozi* was not careful and has fallen into his trap. This is bad; this is really bad. Now that *laozi* is in this big mess, what is my next step to get out of this mess?"

Although he was sharp-witted and crafty, when all is said and done, he was still young. In dealing with a really important matter, he was not Wu Sangui, Xia Guoxiang, those extremely sly old traitors' match. His heart was anxious, his body was drenched in sweats. "My dear good wife," he said, "Please wait here, I must discuss with other people how we are going to rescue your *Gege* and Liu Shifu."

Immediately he went to the western wing. After summoning the Tian Di Hui warriors, he explained the situation clearly. As soon as Xu Tianchuan and the others heard it, they all agreed that there was something really fishy going on.

Xuanzhen said, “Could it be that Wu Sangui was able to see through our stunt of impersonating Hantiemo and have him killed?”

Qian Laoben said, “I wonder how did Wu Sangui get the information that he managed to capture the Mu Palace friends in the middle of the night?”

Wei Xiaobao’s heart was moved. “There is a fellow in the Mu Palace called Liu Yizhou,” he said, “This man harbors a grudge against me, plus his character is ‘greedy for life, afraid of death’. Most likely he was the one who disclose the information under interrogation.”

“Probably so,” Qian Laoben said, “But Wei *Xiangzhu*, you are the Tatar Emperor’s favorite and trusted Imperial Envoy Minister, no matter what the big traitor can’t possibly suspect you to have any connection with the Mu Palace people. There must be something else in this matter …” Knitting his brows, he pondered deeply.

Qi Biaoqing said, “My guess is that the big traitor did not suspect Wei *Xiangzhu* to have any connection with the Mu Palace people; it was just a coincidence.”

Wei Xiaobao busily asked, “What do you mean it was just a coincidence?”

“Most likely the one assassinating the big traitor was indeed that palace maid who served the Princess, Wang Ke’er,” Qi Biaoqing said, “Everybody said the same thing, I don’t think they are making it up.”

“Yes, yes,” Wei Xiaobao said, “That Wang Ke’er is really missing; she must have been caught by the big traitor.”

Qi Biaoqing said, “The big traitor naturally expected that the Princess would send Wei *Xiangzhu* to ask for her maid back. Looking at the Princess and the Imperial Envoy *Daren*’s faces, he won’t have any choice but to release her; but he actually is unwilling to set the assassin free. By lucky coincidence, they caught the Mu Family’s Xiao Junzhu. Hence they say that she was the assassin. When Wei *Xiangzhu* came to the prison and looked at her, naturally you would say that she was not Wang Ke’er. This way, Wei *Xiangzhu* would have your hands bound and would be unable to do anything about it.”

Wei Xiaobao slapped his thigh. “Right, right,” he said, “After all, Qi *San Ge* is a

scholar, your thinking is very clear and logical. Even if they did not capture Mu Family's Xiao Junzhu, they would randomly find a girl and press me to accept it, saying, 'Imperial Envoy *Daren*, here is the assassin, do you, Senior, want her? If you want her, just take her away, don't be polite. She is not a palace maid serving the Princess? That's wonderful!' His granny, at that time, the most *laozi* could say would be that the Princess is missing a palace maid, and ask them to diligently seek for her within the Kunming city walls, but I could not insist on taking the prisoner away. To their surprise, I knew the Mu Family's Xiao Junzhu, it must be beyond their expectation. If the big traitor bring this matter up, it won't be easy for me to dodge the question."

"Wei *Xiangzhu*," Qi Biaoqing said, "Things have come to this, you have no choice but to tough it out with Wu Sangui. Tell him that you have received the Emperor's Imperial Edict to make friends with the Mu Family."

Wei Xiaobao was reminded by his speech; he laughed aloud and said, "That's right, that's right. I released Wu Lishen and his gang, it was indeed …" But speaking to this point, he held his tongue, thinking, "His Majesty personally ordered me to release Wu Lishen and the others, but I definitely cannot tell them this." Thereupon he changed the subject, "Although I can say that I received the Emperor's Imperial Edict, I am afraid I cannot deceive the big traitor."

Qian Laoben said, "To really deceive the big traitor, naturally it won't be easy. But if Wei *Xiangzhu* stick to your statement that it was the Emperor's idea, even if the big traitor do not believe it, he would not have any choice. In short, Wei *Xiangzhu* must not become hostile to him, wait till we are out of Yunnan Guizhou, two provinces, then we won't have to be afraid of him."

Xu Tianchuan nodded and said, "This is a brilliant plan. The big traitor has committed shameful deeds, inevitably he is overly suspicious, he is afraid the young Emperor would find out about his plan to rebel."

Wei Xiaobao said, "The Mu Palace people knew very well that I am on imperial order to protect the Princess, yet they still wanted to assassinate her; indeed they did not uphold *yi qi* too much. If Wu Lishen, Wu *Er Ge* was here, he would definitely not approve."

Qi Biaoqing said, "They knew that Wei *Xiangzhu* 'live in Cao camp but his heart

is in Han camp', it's not that he is really faithful in working for the Tatar Emperor, for this reason, they might have some misgivings in this matter. Although our Tian Di Hui made a bet with the Mu Palace, but everybody unites against a common enemy. Liu Dahong and the others have resounding reputation as real men, we simply cannot watch with folded arms and ignore them."

However, speaking about how to save Mu Jiansheng, Liu Dahong, and the others, this matter was really not easy, the warriors could not come out with the best plan. After discussing it for a long time, Wei Xiaobao said, "I am afraid we cannot use any of these plan. I am going to see the big traitor again, then we'll look for another opportunity."

After the warriors were dismissed, Wei Xiaobao thought, "Perhaps Ah Ke that wife of mine did not really go to assassinate the big traitor, neither was she captured by the enemy. Perhaps it was all false report from outsiders."

He went to Jiu Nan room, but did not see Ah Ke. "Shifu," he asked, "Is Shijie here?"

Jiu Nan only stared at him blankly. "Has Wu Sangui released her?" she asked, "He … he knows?" When speaking the last sentence, her expression looked different, her voice was slightly trembling.

Wei Xiaobao felt strange, "Wu Sangui knows what?" he asked.

Jiu Nan was silent. A moment later, she asked, "How is the big traitor's injury?"

"Very heavy," Wei Xiaobao replied, "Disciple has just gone to see him, he was still unconscious, perhaps he won't live."

A happy expression appeared on Jiu Nan's face briefly; immediately her brows were knitted again as she said in a low voice, "Must really let him know."

Wei Xiaobao wanted to ask what is it that she wanted him to know, but looking at his Shifu's grave expression, he did not dare to ask too much; he then excused himself.

In his heart, he still had a one-in-ten-thousand hope; hence he went around to inquire about Ah Ke's whereabouts. Usually this palace maid 'Wang Ke'er' very rarely made an appearance, in her disguise, her beauty was well covered, hence nobody paid her any attention. All the palace maids, eunuchs and Imperial

Bodyguards in Anfu Garden said that they had never seen her. An Imperial Bodyguard remarked, “Wang Ke’er? Isn’t she the palace maid who went to assassinate Ping Xi Wang? Has Ping Xi Wang released her? But I have not seen her.”

After being busy for the whole day and night, Wei Xiaobao was very tired. Returning to his room, he made some small talk with Mu Jianping, and then put his head down on the bed and fell asleep immediately.

Book note: Luodian (county) is located in central Guizhou (province), it was where Wu Sangui stationed a massive military force. Dianchi is a lake in Yunnan. *Qing* is a unit area, approximately 6.67 hectares (16.5 acres).

Chapter 32

Breaking singing voice continued by string instrument, dancing sleeve capable of listening to prolonged guest's boasting.

(Translated by Foxs)

When she sang the word 'flow', she held the last note long, seemingly unending, while the pipa climbed higher and higher, gradually drowning the singing voice. After a moment, the pipa gradually slowing and softer, like the water trickling down a distant creek, until it finally died down.

The next day he went to find out about Wu Sangui's injury. Wu Sangui's

second son came out to meet him, thanking the Imperial Envoy officer for his visit, telling him that Wu Sangui's condition did not change, that right now he was sleeping peacefully, that it was inappropriate to disturb him. Wei Xiaobao asked about Xia Guoxiang, but was told that he was on duty leading the troops to quell a disturbance, to guard against the unrest among the people, and that there was some changes going on in the city. When asked about Wu Yingxiong's condition, he did not give specific answer.

Wei Xiaobao had a faint feeling that there was great suspicion rising within the Ping Xi Wang Mansion, almost to the point of hostility. If he insist on rescuing Mu Palace people, it would be difficult to succeed. Rescuing Ah Ke would be more difficult than difficult. Perhaps if he stir up the Palace to resort to force immediately he would only deliver his own little life in Kunming.

Another day passed. He was having a discussion with Qian Laoben, Xu Tianchuan, Qi Biaoqing, and the others, when Gao Yanchao walked in, announcing that an old Taoist Priestess was seeking an audience. Wei Xiaobao was surprised. "Old Taoist Priestess? Why is she looking for me? Is she asking for alms?"

"Subordinate asked her the purpose of her visit," Gao Yanchao replied, "She said she received orders to deliver a letter to the Imperial Envoy *Daren*." While saying that, he presented a letter in yellow envelope.

Wei Xiaobao frowned and said, "I must trouble Gao *Dage* to open and look, what is written in there?"

Gao Yanchao opened the envelope and took out a piece of yellow paper, looked at it for a moment, and read, "Ah Ke in trouble …"

As soon as Wei Xiaobao heard those four words, he sprang up and anxiously said, "What Ah Ke in trouble?" The Tian Di Hui warriors did not know about Jiu Nan and Ah Ke; they all just stared at him with a blank look on their faces.

Gao Yanchao said, "That's what's written in this letter. It has neither a head nor a tail, and there is no signature either. It only says for you to come with the bearer, to take the trouble of visiting the writer to discuss a plan to save her."

Wei Xiaobao asked, "Is the Taoist Priestess outside?"

Gao Yanchao has just said one sentence, “She is outside,” Wei Xiaobao had already bolted out the door.

When he reached the side room beside the front door, he saw a grey-haired Taoist Priestess sitting on a wooden bench, waiting for him. The Imperial Bodyguard on duty loudly announced, “Imperial Envoy Minister has arrived.”

The Taoist Priestess stood up and bowed to pay her respect. Wei Xiaobao asked, “Who sent you to see me?”

The Taoist Priestess said, “Would Daren please step out? You will find out at the appointed time.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Where are we going?”

“Please come with *Pindao* [impoverished Taoist, referring to self],” the Taoist Priestess said, “It’s not convenient to talk here.”

“Very well,” Wei Xiaobao said, “I will come with you.” He shouted, “Prepare a carriage, saddle the horse!”

“Would *Daren* take the carriage?” the Taoist Priestess said, “That way we won’t alarm other people.”

Wei Xiaobao nodded. He went out the door together with the Taoist Priestess and climbed into the carriage. Afraid that it was the enemy’s trap, Xu Tian Chuan, Qian Laoben, and the other followed some distance away. The Taoist Priestess gave the direction they were to take, the carriage headed west, and went out of the western city gate. Seeing the landscape was getting more and more desolate, Wei Xiaobao was feeling slightly uneasy; he asked, “Where are we going?”

“We will arrive soon,” the Taoist Priestess replied.

After traveling for more than three *li*, they turned north. The road narrowed, it was barely enough for one carriage. Shortly afterwards they arrived in front of a tiny Buddhist nunnery. “We are here,” the Taoist Priestess said.

Wei Xiaobao jumped down the carriage. He saw a wooden tablet on top of the door to the nunnery. There were three characters written on the tablet, the first one was ‘Three’, the other two he did not recognize. Turning his head and taking

a glance, he saw Gao Yanchao and the others in the distant, presumably they would wait around this place; thereupon he followed the Taoist Priestess into the nunnery.

He saw all around him the nunnery was untainted by even a speck of dust. The courtyard was adorned with several bushes of camellia, and a Chinese redbud tree [Cercis chinensis]. In the middle of the sacrificial hall there was an image of Guanyin [Goddess of Mercy] in white. The image's appearance was very beautiful, in the dignified Buddhist imagery, there was thirty-percent of prettiness.

Wei Xiaobao mused, "I heard among Wu Sangui's wife, there is one nicknamed Four-sided [or Four-Faced] Guanyin, there is also one nicknamed Eight-sided [or Eight-Faced] Guanyin. I wonder if they are really as pretty as Guanyin Pusa [Bodhisattva]. Damn it, the big traitor's luck in love is not shallow."

The Taoist Priestess led him to the eastern side chamber, and served him tea. Wei Xiaobao opened the teacup lid, a burst of delicate fragrance greeted his nostrils. The tea inside the cup was dark green, unexpectedly it was a freshly brewed Longjing tealeaves. He felt a bit strange, "These Longjing tealeaves were brought all the way from Jiangnan to this place, the price would be prohibitive. How can the Taoist Priestesses or Buddhist nuns in this nunnery be this ostentatious?"

The Taoist Priestess returned with a lacquered wooden tray in her hands, with assortment of eight different delicacies, arranged on white tray cloth. There was pine-nut candy, hickory cake, walnut flakes, rose cake, apricot candy, mung bean cake, lily crackers, and osmanthus scented red bayberry preserved in honey. All were Suzhou-style light refreshments, and all were exceptionally exquisite. Wei Xiaobao was not a stranger to this kind of Jiangnan delicacies, when he was at the Yangzhou brothel in the past, when the patrons arrived and the procuress [lit. female brothel keeper] wanted to entertain the guests, taking advantage when nobody was watching, he often nibbled a slice or two pieces. Unexpectedly coming across an old friend in a tiny Buddhist nunnery in Yunnan, he was very happy. "*Laozi* is back at the Yangzhou's Lovely Spring Courtyard," he mused. After serving the light refreshments, the Taoist Priestess withdrew immediately.

There was a copper incense burner on the small side table, a thin wisp of blue

smoke rose up in spirals, the scent was that of precious sandalwood incense. Wei Xiaobao was familiar with this kind of scent; each time he came to see the Empress Dowager at the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful, he would always smell this sandalwood fragrance. Suddenly he sprang up in fear. “Aiyo! Not good! Could it be that the old wh0re is here?”

He heard intermittent sound of footsteps outside the door. A woman walked in. She put her palms together toward Wei Xiaobao and said, “Nun [or Priestess, see footnote] Jijing[7] pays her respect to Wei *Daren*.” Her voice was clear and supple, she spoke in Suzhou accent.

The woman was approximately forty-years old, she was wearing light yellow Taoist gown, she had a beautiful face [orig. ‘like painting’], so clear and attractive that it was difficult to describe with words. In all his life Wei Xiaobao had never seen such a beautiful woman. He was holding the teacup with both hands, and was about to drink; but right now his mouth was open wide, unexpectedly he was unable to close it. In that instant he was dumbstruck and was at a loss to know what to do. The woman smiled and said, “Wei *Daren*, please sit down.”

“Yes, yes,” Wei Xiaobao absent-mindedly replied. His knees went soft, he plopped down into his chair, the tea in his hand splashed, the front piece of his jacket was immediately wet for the most part.

In all her life, the beautiful woman had seen many men all over the world lost their soul and dropped their spirit when they saw her for the first time, hence she was not the least bit surprised; but Wei Xiaobao was only a fifteen, sixteen years old teenager, unexpectedly he was also intimidated by her peerless glowing countenance. The beautiful woman smiled and said, “Wei *Daren* is young yet have great talent. I heard that in the past Gan Luo became the prime minister at the age of twelve, Wei *Daren* actually do not lose to him.”

“I don’t dare,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Aiyo! All those women, Xishi, Yang Guifei[8], are definitely inferior to you.”

The beautiful woman raised her sleeve to cover half of her jade cheek; she smiled sweetly, immediately hundreds of charms grew without restraint.

Following which her countenance turned solemn as she said, “Xishi, Yang Guifei, they all women with cruel fate. *Xiao Nuzi* [little/lowly woman, referring to self] only regrets that the Heaven bestowed me with such countenance, and thus harming the common people under the heavens, making their lives miserable. Because of that I now live with the clear lantern of Buddha as my companion, persistently live in repentance. Ay, even if I strike through the wooden fish [Buddhist instrument] or chant the sutra until it rots, I still cannot redeem even one of the ten thousand sins of my past.” Speaking to this point, her eyes turned red, she could not stop the tears from flowing down.

Wei Xiaobao did not understand what she was talking about, but seeing how when she smiled the divine light was meeting and parting, how in her distress she looked so lovely and moving, he could not help but feeling compassion toward her. He did not even know her background, but the blood in his breast bubbled up, he only felt that even if his body was torn and his bones crushed for her sake, he would take it ‘as sweet as syrup’ [an idiom from the Book of Songs: to endure hardship gladly]. Striking his chest he stood up and fervently said, “Who bullied you? I will stake my life for you. Whatever difficulty you have, please feel free to hand it over to me. If I cannot deal with it, I, Wei Xiaobao, will cut my head and give it to you.” While saying that, he raised his right palm and chopped it heavily on the back of his own neck. Such a lofty spirit of a real man was indeed rare, but this time it was not the least bit superficial.

The beautiful woman stared at him for half a day; she said with a sob, “Wei *Daren*’s righteousness reaches the cloud in the sky, *Xiao Nuzi* does not know how to repay it.” Bending her knees, she suddenly kneeled down and gracefully prostrated herself in front of him.

“Not right, not right,” Wei Xiaobao called out. Promptly he also dropped down on his knees and ‘dong, dong, dong’, kowtowed to her several times, saying, “You are immortal descending into the world, Guanyin Pusa reincarnated; you deserve my kowtows.”

The beautiful woman said in a low voice, “I really don’t deserve this.” Holding out her hands, she pulled his arms and helped him up. The two of them stood up together.

Seeing several drops of tears hanging on her cheeks, sparkling and translucent

like beads of pearl, Wei Xiaobao busily stretched out his sleeve and gently wiped her face. “Don’t cry, don’t cry,” he said tenderly, “Even a gargantuan problem, we will deal with it fair and square.”

Based on that beautiful woman’s age, she could be his mother. But in her appearance, manners, speech and expression, there was sweetness, charm, grace and loveliness that other people could not help but feeling tenderness and pity toward her. “Actually, why are you sad?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

The beautiful woman replied, “After Wei *Daren* saw the letter, you came immediately, *Xiao Nuzi* is really grateful …”

“Aiyo!” Wei Xiaobao exclaimed, as he slapped his own forehead, “Muddle head! It is for Ah Ke’s sake …” He stared blankly at the beautiful woman; suddenly he came into realization, “You are Ah Ke’s Mama!” he loudly said.

The beautiful woman said in a low voice, “Wei *Daren* is very smart. I was not going to tell you, but you have guessed correctly.”

“That was easy,” Wei Xiaobao said, “The two of you look very much alike, but … but Ah Ke Shijie is inferior to … to your beauty.”

A blush appeared on the beautiful woman’s face, her bright, smooth and white, soft skin exuded a tender pink color, as if she had just applied a layer of rouge on her jade-white face. “You call Ah Ke your Shijie?” she asked in a low voice.

“Yes,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “She is my Shijie.” Without concealing anything, he told her how he first met Ah Ke, how he was beaten by her that his arm bones were dislocated, how he did obeisance to Jiu Nan and took her as his master, how they came together to Kunming. He even told her how he adored Ah Ke, but Ah Ke did not even consider him in her eyes; all kinds of feeling and reasons, he calmly gave her a straightforward account. Only about Jiu Nan’s real identity, as well as his intention to bring Wu Sangui’s conspiracy to a bad end, which he thought the implication would be too great, he skipped completely and did not mention even a single word.

The beautiful woman listened quietly. When he finished, she sighed and said quietly, “How can a wife be involved in something of a paramount importance? A hero is helpless to overcome his passion. Young beauty is the source of trouble.

The problem at hand can't be more clear. Wei *Daren* has a future full of promise …"

Wei Xiaobao shook his head. "Not right, not right," he said, "Young beauty is the source of trouble; I have heard the storytellers said the same thing, that Daji[9], Yang Guifei, were responsible for causing the harm of the nation. Actually, if there was no wretched man, no wretched emperor in the world, even if the woman was more beautiful, she can't possibly bring the harm to the country. Everybody said that for the sake of Chen Yuanyuan, Ping Xi Wang surrendered to the Qing Dynasty. In my opinion, if Wu Sangui was really loyal to the Ming Dynasty, eighteen Chen Yuanyuan would not make his granny Wu Sangui surrenders to the Qing Dynasty."

The beautiful woman stood up, gracefully kneeled down and bowed respectfully to him and said, "Thank you Wei *Daren* for seeing clearly, for distinguishing the unredressed injustice that plagued *jianqie*[10] for all eternity."

Wei Xiaobao hurriedly returned the propriety. He wondered out loud, "You … you … Ah … aiyo, that's right, I am indeed a complete muddle head. If you are not Chen Yuanyuan, where in the world would there be such … such … a beautiful woman like you? It's just that, ay, I am more and more confused; aren't you Ping Xi Wang's *Wangfei* [wife of the king]? Why are you here living a pious life? How can Ah Ke Shijie be … be your daughter?"

The beautiful woman stood up and said, "*Jianqie* is indeed Chen Yuanyuan. The story behind it is complicated and not easy to express succinctly; but first, *Jianqie* needs help from Wei *Daren*, hence I do not dare to conceal anything; second, I have just heard how Wei *Daren* is able to recognize *Jianqie*'s unredressed injustice, in my heart I am very grateful. For more than twenty years *Jianqie* has suffered enough insult from the people all over the world, they put the blame of the fall of our country on *Jianqie*'s head. At the present age, only two gifted scholars understand that *Jianqie* has received unjust treatment. One is the great poet Wu Meicun, Wu *Caizi* [gifted scholar]. The other is precisely Wei *Daren*."

Actually, Wei Xiaobao was completely ignorant and did not have any knowledge of national affair, he did not have any clue if Chen Yuanyuan was

wronged or not. It's just that he saw how in her frightened state she did not lose her graceful appearance; he admired her greatly. Plus he utterly detested Wu Sangui, and she was Ah Ke's mother. Even if she had a thousand shortcomings, committed ten thousand mistakes, it was not a mistake at all. In his mind, not even half of it was not Wu Sangui's fault.

Listening to her praising him as a gifted scholar, he was self-conscious; he waved his hand and hastily said, "I don't know a single character as big as a watermelon. If you want to call me a gifted scholar, you might as well add two characters 'dog fart' in front of it, then it will become 'dog fart gifted scholar' Wei Xiaobao."

Chen Yuanyuan smiled and said, "Being able to write verses and literary works will make you no more than little gifted scholar; having knowledge and experience, having responsibility, will put you into the great gifted scholar category."

Hearing these few words of flattery, Wei Xiaobao could not stop the bones in his entire body from going soft; he thought, "She is the world's number one beauty, yet unexpectedly she said I am a big gifted scholar. Ha ha … turns out *laozi*'s talent is really not low. Damn it, ever since I came out of my mother's womb, this is the first time I have ever heard this."

Chen Yuanyuan stood up. "Would *Daren* step inside?" she asked, "Let *Xiao Nuzi* relates everything to you."

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao replied. He followed her along a gravel pathway in the garden, toward a small room.

The room was bare, no table, no chair, but there were two *putuan* [meditation mat] on the floor. A scroll of calligraphy hung on the wall, it looked densely populated with a lot of characters. Next to the scroll hung a *pipa* [Chinese lute].

"*Daren* please sit down," Chen Yuanyuan said.

She waited until Wei Xiaobao was seated on one of the *putuan* before she walked over to the wall and took the *pipa* down, carried it in her arms, and sat down on the other *putuan*. Pointing to the calligraphy scroll on the wall she said softly, "This is the long poem the Great Gifted Scholar Wu Meicun wrote for *Jianqie*. It is called 'Yuanyuan Song' [yuan literally means circle/round]. Today we

are brought together by fate, I'd like to play and sing for *Daren*, but the grime will be clearly heard."

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted. "Wonderful, wonderful," he said, "But when you sing several verses, you must explain it to me, I am a dog fart gifted scholar, my learning is very much so-so."

Chen Yuanyuan smiled. "*Daren* is too modest," she said. Thereupon she tuned the *pipa*, 'ding ding dong dong', she plucked the strings several times, and then said, "I have not played for a long time, please don't blame me for being rusty."

"There is no need to be polite," Wei Xiaobao said, "Even if you played wrong, I would not know."

He heard she lightly and slowly twirled her fingers and plucked several notes, and sang in a drawn-out voice[11], "At that time when the emperor abandoned the human world, Wu crushed the enemy and captured the capital, bearing down from Jade Pass. The six armies, wailing and grieving, were uniformly clad in the white of mourning. One wave of headgear-lifting anger propelled him, all for the sake of the fair-faced one."

Singing these four lines, she said, "It is talking about the time Chong Zhen, the Son of Heaven returned to the heaven, Ping Xi Wang and the Manchurian Qing joined arms, defeating Li Zicheng and advancing into Beijing. The officers and soldiers were all wearing mourning apparel for the Emperor. Hence Ping Xi Wang sent his troops, it was actually for me, this unlucky woman."

Wei Xiaobao nodded and said, "You are such a beautiful woman, Wu Sangui surrendered to the Great Qing for your sake, I can't really blame him. If it were me, Wei Xiaobao, I would surrender as well."

Chen Yuanyuan rolled her beautiful eyes; she thought, "You are just a baby, yet you are also teasing me." However, when she looked at him, she saw his solemn expression and knew that he was being sincere; she could not help but was touched by the friendship shown. She continued to sing, "The fair-faced one, drifting and fallen, was not what I longed for. The offending bandits, smote by heaven, wallowed in wanton pleasures. Lightning swept the Yellow Turban, the Black Mountain troops were quelled. Having wailed for ruler and kin, I met her again."

She explained, “Here he was talking about *Wangye* defeating Li Zicheng. The poem says: Li Zicheng’s endeavor failed because he himself was no good, after he reached Beijing, his conduct was preposterous. When *Wangye* saw this verse, he was very unhappy.”

“That’s right,” Wei Xiaobao said, “The song obviously says that the defeat of Li Zicheng was not his merit at all.”

Chen Yuanyuan said, “The later section of this song tells the story of *Jianqie*’s life.” She sang, “Meeting for the first time going through the field of Dou Family, the singing and dancing of the nobleman’ gate was like flower. Allowing the display of konghou [Chinese harp] craft in the midst of grief, waiting to fetch the General in lacquered carriage. In the Huan Hua [lit. washing/rinsing flower] of hometown Suzhou, little girl Yuanyuan as delicate as openwork silk gauze. Dreaming to roam the Fu Cha’s[12] park, the palace beauty supports the rise of the sovereign king. In the front was a lotus picking person, in front of the door was a strip of pond.”

The melody tender and charming, winding and turning, the sound of *pipa* was undulating slowly, just as a breeze rising and falling, or a gently ripple of the water of the lotus pond.

Chen Yuanyuan said in a low voice, “Here the poem is comparing *Jianqie* to Xi Shi; it’s rather overpraised.”

Wei Xiaobao shook his head and said, “Incorrect comparison, incorrect comparison!”

Chen Yuanyuan was slightly startled. Wei Xiaobao continued, “How can Xi Shi be superior to you?”

A slight blush appeared on Chen Yuanyuan’s face. “Wei *Daren* is making fun of me,” she said.

“I am not making fun of you at all,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “I have a strong reason. I heard people say that Xi Shi was from Zhuji [county level city] of Shaoxing [prefecture], Zhejiang [province]; although she was beautiful, Shaoxing people speak ‘niang ge jian tai ta ta jiao[13]’, how can they compare to you, Suzhou people who speaks coyly and string all words together?”

Chen Yuanyuan laughed sweetly, “Turns out there is that reason,” she said, “Come to think about it, King Wu *Fu Cha* [see previous note] was also a Suzhou native, how could he like Xi Shi?”

Wei Xiaobao scratched his head and said, “That King Wu *Fu Cha*’s ears were not too clear, so it was possible.”

Chen Yuanyuan covered her mouth as she squealed, her face blushed profusely, her glance was graceful, her cherry lips were trembling slightly, her anxious look lasted for a while, yet her overall appearance seemed sweet and charming. Wei Xiaobao only felt comfortably warm, as if he was drunk, and in his confused mind he did not know where he was.

He heard she continued singing, “A pair of oars flying on the surface of the strip of pond, where could the heroic family return to? How could they know that there were not born under an unlucky star? Right now, only tears wetting the clothes. The scent of sweet-smelling grass links the apartments of the Palace, nobody pities the beautiful woman [orig. bright eyes and white teeth]. Insisting on returning home, the Eternal Alley was closed to respectable families, it only leans to let the new sound of guests to enter.”

Singing to this point, she sighed gently, and said, “*Jianqie* came from the windblown dust [i.e. prostitution], I don’t need to conceal my origin …”

“What do you mean coming from the windblown dust?” Wei Xiaobao asked, “Please don’t speak in literary terms with me, I don’t know anything about literary terms.”

Chen Yuanyuan said, “*Xiao Nuzi* was originally a Suzhou house’s prostitute …”

Wei Xiaobao slapped his knee and called out, “Wonderful!”

Chen Yuanyuan’s face looked hurt, she said in a low voice, “That is *Jianqie*’s unkind fate.”

Wei Xiaobao was happy and excited. “You and I are kindred spirits,” he said, “I also came from the windblown dust.”

Chen Yuanyuan opened wide her pair of as-clear-as-water phoenix eyes, she started blankly at him, while saying in her heart, “Obviously he does not understand the meaning of ‘coming from the windblown dust’.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “You came from a brothel, I also came from a brothel; only you are from Suzhou, I am from Yangzhou. My Mama is a prostitute at the Lovely Spring Courtyard of Yangzhou. Only her appearance cannot be compared to you; one is heavenly, the other is down to earth.”

Chen Yuanyuan was greatly surprised; she asked in a tender voice, “You are not joking?”

“Why would I joke with you?” Wei Xiaobao said, “Ay, I was just too busy. I should have sent people to fetch Mama, I should not let her be a prostitute anymore. But I saw that at the Lovely Spring Courtyard, she was living a cheerful life, bustling with noise and excitement; if I brought her to Beijing, I am afraid she would be in low spirit.”

Chen Yuanyuan said, “A hero is not afraid of low family background. Wei *Daren* is open and candid, you do not refuse to talk about it, it is precisely the natural quality of a hero.”

“I only told it to you,” Wei Xiaobao said, “I have never told it to anybody else; otherwise, people would point their fingers at me and call me a wh0re’s b@stard. I can’t take it. In front of Ah Ke, you must not mention it even more. She is already looking down at me; if she found out about it, she would never pay any attention to me forever.”

“Wei *Daren*, don’t worry,” Chen Yuanyuan said, “*Jianqie* won’t talk too much. Actually, Ah Ke, she … her own Mama is not any wise and virtuous woman from a well-known family.”

“It would be best if you do not mention it,” Wei Xiaobao said, “She hates prostitutes the most, she said that this kind of woman is extremely bad.”

Chen Yuanyuan hung down her head and said in a low voice, “She … she said that brothel’s women are … are extremely bad?”

Wei Xiaobao hastily said, “Please don’t feel sad, she was not talking about you.”

Chen Yuanyuan was low-spirited. “Naturally she was not talking about me,” she said, “Ah Ke did not even know that I am her Mama.”

Wei Xiaobao was surprised, “How can she not know?” he asked.

Chen Yuanyuan shook her head and said, “She does not know.”

Cocking her head sideways, she was lost in thought for a moment before slowly said, “The Empress Dowager of the Son of Heaven Chong Zhen was surnamed Zhou, she was also Suzhou native. Son of Heaven Chong Zhen doted on Concubine Tian. The fight between the Empress Dowager and Concubine Tian was very fierce. The Empress Dowager’s father Jia Dingbo bought me out of the brothel and sent me into the Palace, hoping to take away the favor from Concubine Tian …”

“That was a great idea,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Concubine Tian would be in big trouble.”

“It was not such a big trouble,” Chen Yuanyuan said, “Son of Heaven Chong Zhen worried about the affairs of the nation, he was not interested in women. I haven’t lived in the Palace for long when the Emperor ordered the Empress Dowager to send me out of the Palace.”

“Strange, strange!” Wei Xiaobao loudly exclaimed, “I heard that Emperor Chong Zhen had eyes but failed to see; he only believed treacherous officials but had Yuan Chonghuan, a greatly loyal minister, killed. Turned out he did not have any foresight toward men, but he did not have any foresight toward women even more, that he did not want a woman like you. Tsk, tsk, tsk, tsk.” He shook his head repeatedly, thinking that among the strange things in the world, nothing was more strange than this.

Chen Yuanyuan said, “Some men like scholarly honor [in imperial exams] and the riches that come with it. Some like gold, silver and jewels. As the Emperor, he had to think about how to solve the country’s problems. Not everybody loves good-looking women.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “I want scholarly honor and riches, I also want gold, silver and jewels. I want good-looking women even more. One thing I don’t want is being the Emperor; even if it given to me, I won’t do it. Aha! In this city of Kunming, there is a dear friend of mine who is the number one high-ranking official under the heavens, he has become the richest old man in the world, he married the number one beauty in the world, unexpectedly he still toys with the idea of becoming the Emperor.”

Chen Yuanyuan's countenance changed slightly. "Are you talking about Ping Xi Wang?" she asked.

"I won't mention any names," Wei Xiaobao said, "In short, it is not you, Chen Yuanyuan, and it is not me, Wei Xiaobao."

Chen Yuanyuan said, "The next part of the song talks about how I met Ping Xi Wang. After he asked for me from Jia Dingbo, he left for Shanhai Pass to guard the border, leaving me behind at his house in Beijing. Not long afterwards, Li … Li … Li Chuang[14] attacked the Capital."

She sang, "The sitting guest flies the goblet toward the red sunset, the sorrowful song of string, to whom would it complain to? The youngest of Marquis Bai Xitong, looking back, time and again the flowering branch was chosen. The morning brings the frail bird out of the cage, when will it cross the Milky Way? The end of the military document ordering hateful killing was extremely urgent, hurting the people who must be painstakingly left behind. Wanting to meet deep kindness, wanting to see each other is difficult, the dynasty's ant thieves crowd Chang'an. With pity thinking about the willow at the front of the women's storied building, looking at the horizon as white cotton wadding." Singing to this point, the pipa stopped, she stared blankly at the wall, lost in thought.

Wei Xiaobao thought the song had reached its end, he clapped and cheered, "Are you done?" he asked, "You sing well, your singing is wonderful, your singing is top-notch."

Chen Yuanyuan said, "If I died at that time, the song would naturally end here."

Wei Xiaobao's face turned deep red; he thought, "Damn it, *laozi* is uneducated. Li Chuang broke into Beijing, my Shifu's father Emperor Chong Zhen's song has come to an end. But Chen Yuanyuan's song has not ended."

Chen Yuanyuan said in a low voice, "Li Chuang seized me away. Afterwards, Ping Xi Wang snatched me back. I was not a human, I am only an object; whoever is stronger, he can take me away." She sang, "Searching everywhere the green pearl is encircled in the inside, the powerful call of golden eagle coming out of purple-red tree fence. Were it not for the brave soldier achieving

complete victory, would the beautiful woman return on a horse? The woman on the horseback called, the silver hair on the temples stood in fright. The candle flame forge ahead to the battlefield, streak of tears left red marks of makeup across her face. Dreary beating of the drums on a personal expedition toward Sichuan, thousands of riders and chariots heading toward Jinniu [lit. golden ox, district of Chengdu, Sichuan]. Sloping valley going deep above the cloud in the painting on the multi-story building, vanishing beyond the pass toward the sunset as seen through the vanity mirror. The incoming news filling the rivers and villages, red Tallow tree [sapium sebiferum] has gone through ten seasons of frost. The master who teaches singing still has pity, taking the gauze-silk (female) companion down memory lane. Old nest shared by clay swallows, flying to the tip of the branch, they transformed into a pair of phoenix, constantly conveying their deep grief to the respected senior generations; some men arrogate to themselves the marquis king position."

When singing about 'arrogating to themselves the marquis king position', she seemed to be entranced. This time Wei Xiaobao did not dare to ask whether she had finished singing or not; he had made up his mind, "Unless she says that she is finished singing, I am not going to ask too much, so that I won't make a fool of myself."

He heard she said grimly, "I came with Ping Xi Wang when he invaded Sichuan, where he was conferred the title 'King'. When the news reached Suzhou, all my former sisters of the courtyard were envious, saying that my luck was good. They still have to do that kind of shady business in the courtyard until they are old."

Wei Xiaobao said, "When I was at the Lovely Spring Courtyard, I often heard they say something like 'every night there is someone new in the bridal room', 'freshness is exciting', nothing wrong with that."

Chen Yuanyuan cast him a glance; seeing that he did not seem to be sarcastic, she gently sighed and said, "*Daren*, you are still young, you don't understand this kind of distress."

Plucking her pipa, she sang, "At that time receiving reputation by association, noble grief causing famous warrior prolonged struggle. One piece of jewel ten thousand pieces of anxiety, slender waist wandering along the fortresses and mountains along the Great Wall. Misplaced blame like a gale made the flowers

fall, colors of spring without boundary covering the heaven and the earth. Taste and smell of the demise of the nation coming from everywhere, turning-over envoy minister received notoriety. How could a wife consent to shut down such a matter of paramount importance? Reluctant hero is full of affection. The bones of the entire family turn to dust, a generation of festive female clothing reflecting youthful perspiration."

With eyes brimming in tears she stopped her pipa. "Gifted Scholar Wu Meicun knew that although my fame spread all over the world, my heart was in pain," she said while sobbing, "Common people scolded me as the young beauty who brings disaster to the water, harming the Great Ming's rivers and mountains. Gifted Scholar Wu knew that I was a mere young girl, what can I possibly do? Be it good or bad, it's the men who did all these things."

"That's right," Wei Xiaobao said, "When the Great Qing's troops and horses attacked by the thousands and tens of thousands, you are only a delicate and pretty young woman, how could you possibly stop them?" He thought, "She could play and tell stories this well, just like the mister storyteller at Suzhou singing ballad with pipa accompaniment. I could banter with her several sentences, or provide vocal accompaniment to her singing, I can be the assistant to the mister storyteller. If the two of us going to Yangzhou and open a business at the teahouse, I guarantee we will cause a sensation within the Yangzhou city walls, so much so that the teahouse will burst at its seam. I will hold the signage over her head, naturally I would also enjoy the limelight."

While he was feeling very pleased with himself, he heard she continued singing, "The lord did not see, when the baby first rose in the hall, it was like the mandarin ducks lodging for the night. One will never be satisfied to look at the flowery Yue maiden, the cry of bird arose from the fragrant dusty footpath, the wooden shoes were lined with green moss. A thousand *li* of worry moved out of the Palace, pearl song, green jade dance, out of ancient Liang prefecture. For the sake of the lord, do not sing the Wu Palace song, to the southeast day and night the Han River flows."

When she sang the word 'flow', she held the last note long, seemingly unending, while the pipa climbed higher and higher, gradually drowning the singing voice. After a moment, the pipa gradually slowing and softer, like the

water trickling down a distant creek, until it finally died down.

Chen Yuanyuan heaved a deep sigh, tears streaming down her face, with a choking voice she said, “I am displaying a disgraceful performance.”

Standing up, she hung the pipa on the wall, and then walked back to the *putuan* and sat down. She said, “The last part of the song was talking about King Wu *Fu Cha* perishing for the country. I did not understand it in the past, the song was talking about my life’s story, why did it mention the Wu Palace? Even if it was comparing me to Xi Shi, it is already mentioned in the front. Wu Palace, Wu Palace, could it be that it is talking about Ping Xi Wang’s Imperial Palace? In recent years I started to understand. *Wangye* drilled the troops and trained the horses extravagantly, I am afraid … I am afraid … ay, I exhorted him several times, but he was offended and was very angry. I left home in this San Sheng An [three sages nunnery], wearing my hair leading a pious life, repenting of my whole life’s sin, hoping that everybody will live in peace and harmony, spending the rest of my life in here. Who would have thought … who would have thought Ah Ke … Ah Ke …” Speaking to here, she broke into a noiseless sob.

After listening to her song for half a day, Wei Xiaobao was enchanted by her beautiful voice, by the melody of the song, which was very pleasant to listen to, so much so that he completely forgot the purpose of his visit. As soon as he heard her mentioning Ah Ke, he sprang up and asked, “What actually happened to Ah Ke? Did she really assassinate Ping Xi Wang? She is your daughter; that makes her *Wangye*’s Junzhu [princess, see last chapter, Xiao Junzhu]. Aiyo, it’s bad, it’s bad.”

Chen Yuanyuan was startled. “What’s bad?” she asked.

Wei Xiaobao’s mind was in turmoil, “No … nothing,” he casually replied. Actually, he suddenly realized that since Ah Ke had already looked down on him, now that she was Ping Xi Wang’s princess, the distant between she and this son of a prostitute was even farther away.

Chen Yuanyuan said, “When Ah Ke was two years old, she suddenly disappeared in the middle of the night. *Wangye* sent people to search everywhere in the city, but there was no trace of her. I suspected … suspected …” Suddenly she blushed and turned her face away from him.

“What did you suspect?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

Chen Yuanyuan said, “I suspected it was *Wangye*’s personal enemy who kidnapped this girl, perhaps to threaten him, or to blackmail him.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “There are so many martial art experts working as bodyguards and military officers in the Palace, unexpectedly someone was able to sneak in [orig. ‘the gods did not know, the ghosts are not aware’] and stole Ah Ke Shijie away. That person’s ability must be very high.”

“That’s right,” Chen Yuanyuan said, “At that time *Wangye* was so angry, he had two bodyguard chiefs executed; he also had the *Tidu* [provincial commander] and *Zhifu* [prefectural magistrate] envoy of the City of Kunming removed. After searching for several days without finding any clue, *Wangye* was about to kill more people. Finally I managed to calm him down. For the last dozen of years, I have not heard any news about Ah Ke. I thought … I thought she had already died.”

“No wonder Ah Ke says that her surname is Chen,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Turns out she is taking your surname.”

Chen Yuanyuan leaned sideways. “She … she said her surname is Chen?” her voice quivering, “How did she know?”

Wei Xiaobao had a sudden inspiration, “Day and night the old traitor is always afraid that someone would come to assassinate him, the security around him must be very strict,” he mused, “Perhaps kidnapping a baby out of the Palace is more difficult than assassinating him. In this world, other than Shifu Jiu Nan, I am afraid there is nobody else.” He said, “Most likely the person who kidnapped her told her that.”

Chen Yuanyuan slowly nodded and said, “That’s right. But … but why didn’t he say that her surname was … was …”

“That her surname was Wu?” Wei Xiaobao said, “Humph, there is nothing necessarily radiant with Ping Xi Wang’s surname.”

Chen Yuanyuan was gazing out the window, she was staring blankly as if she did not hear him. Wei Xiaobao asked, “And then what happened?”

“I thought about her a lot,” Chen Yuanyuan said, “I hoped the Heaven would

pity me; as long as she did not die, I hoped one day I can see her again. Yesterday afternoon I received news from the Palace, saying that *Wangye* has been attacked by an assassin, and was seriously injured. I hurriedly went to the Palace to see him. *Wangye* was indeed attacked by an assassin, but he was not injured."

Wei Xiaobao was shocked. "So he was only pretending to be seriously injured?" his voice was quivering.

"*Wangye* said," Chen Yuanyuan continued, "He pretends to be seriously injured so that the adversary would act blindly without thinking, and thus he could catch everything in one net."

Wei Xiaobao was greatly taken aback. "He is indeed pretending," he mumbled, "I … I am such a big fool, I should have guessed early on." He said in his heart, "The big traitor is indeed very suspicious of me."

Chen Yuanyuan said, "I asked him what kind of person was the assassin. *Wangye* did not say anything, but he took me to a side room. On the bed sat a young woman, her hands and feet were shackled. I did not need to take a second look, I knew she was my daughter. She looked exactly like me when I was her age. As soon as she saw me, she stared at me blankly, and then asked, 'Are you my Mama?' I nodded; and then pointing to *Wangye*, I said, 'Greet your father[15]'. Ah Ke angrily said, 'He is the big traitor to China, he is not my father. He killed my father, I want to avenge father.' *Wangye* asked her, 'Who is your father?' Ah Ke replied, 'I don't know. Shifu told me that when I see my Ma, Ma will tell me'. *Wangye* asked her who her Shifu was, she was unwilling to talk. But eventually she revealed that she had received her Shifu's order to assassinate *Wangye*."

Listening to here, Wei Xiaobao understood about 70, 80% of the story. He presumed his Shifu Jiu Nan hated Wu Sangui to the bones; killing him alone was not enough to vent her anger, hence she kidnapped her daughter, taught her martial art, and sent her to assassinate her own father [orig. fuqin, formal]. He stood up, went to the window, and thought, "That's right, Shifu has never liked Ah Ke. Although she taught her martial art styles, she did not pass on the least bit of internal energy cultivation. Although Ah Ke's style is indeed brilliant, it is

actually a big mess; it encompasses different martial art styles from all kinds of school and sect. Old Monk Cheng Guan has such profound knowledge, yet he could not figure out her school. Um, Shifu did not let her enter the Tie Jian [Iron Sword] School; I, Wei Xiaobao, am actually the first disciple of Tie Jian School." Thinking about the viciousness of Jiu Nan's revenge, he could not help but shiver with fright.

Chen Yuanyuan said, "Her Shifu has deep plans and distant thoughts, he hated *Wangye* so much that he set up this stratagem. If Ah Ke succeeded in assassinating *Wangye*, his big enmity would be avenged. If the assassination failed, *Wangye* would still find out that the assassin who was trying to take his life was his own flesh and blood daughter; needless to say, his heart must be grieved."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Right now there is no problem. She has not stabbed *Wangye*, your family is reunited instead. You can explain everything to Ah Ke, won't everybody be happy then?"

Chen Yuanyuan sighed. "If only it's that easy," she said, "Then I would thank the Heaven and thank the Earth."

"Ah Ke is your own daughter," Wei Xiaobao said, "Anybody with eyes will be able to see that. If it was not a 'fish sink, goose alights' [see note 5, Chapter 31] mother, you would not give birth to a 'bashful flower obstructing the moon' daughter." In describing beautiful women, the only phrase he knew was 'fish sink, goose alights' and 'bashful flower obstructing the moon', eight characters [chen yu luo yan, xiu hua bu yue], therefore, those were the only phrases he repeatedly used.

After a short pause, he continued, "*Wangye* did not wish to let Ah Ke go, could it be that he wanted to have her flogged? She was kidnapped when she was only two, how could she know her own origin? Therefore, how can he blame her?"

Chen Yuanyuan said, "*Wangye* said, 'Since you don't recognize me, naturally you are not my daughter. Forget the fact that you are not my daughter, even if you were my flesh-and-blood daughter, by committing this kind of rebellious defiance against your superior, disregarding the law and natural morality, I must not let you live.' While saying that, he rubbed his nose."

Wei Xiaobao smiled, “Does he like to rub his own nose?” he asked.

Chen Yuanyuan’s voice trembled, “You don’t know,” she said, “That is *Wangye*’s habit; when he rubbed his nose, that means he wanted to kill people; it never fails.”

“Aiyo!” Wei Xiaobao cried out, “How can that be good? He … has he killed Ah Ke?”

“For the time being he has not,” Chen Yuanyuan replied, “*Wangye* … he wanted to investigate who the mastermind is, he also wants to find out who Ah Ke’s father really is.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “*Wangye* is overly suspicious; really, it’s getting silly. As soon as I saw you, I knew you are Ah Ke’s Mama. How could he not be Ah Ke’s Papa? It must be because Ah Ke was trying to assassinate him, he became very angry.” Speaking to this point, his expression turned serious as he said, “We must quickly think of a way to save Ah Ke. If *Wangye* rubs his nose again, it won’t be too good.”

Chen Yuanyuan said, “*Xiao Nuzi* brazenly invited *Daren* to come over, it was precisely to discuss this matter. I am thinking that *Daren* is the Imperial Envoy Minister, sent by His Majesty himself, *Wangye* would definitely want to give you some face. Ah Ke masqueraded as a palace maid serving the Princess, as long as *Daren* personally appears, saying that the Princess wanted her maid back, I have no doubt that *Wangye* would not refuse.”

Wei Xiaobao bent the index finger of his right hand and continuously tapped it onto his own forehead. “Idiot, idiot,” he said, “I have fallen into his trap.”

“This plan of yours,” he said, “Not only I have thought about it ahead of you, I have even executed it. Who would have thought this big … big *Wangye* is one step ahead of me, he had the little idiot’s hands and feet tied up. I have already asked *Wangye* for the assassin, and *Wangye* has already given her to me, it’s just that she was not Ah Ke.”

Thereupon he told her in details how Xia Guoxiang brought him to the dungeon to identify the assassin, how he saw a well-acquainted young woman, how he believed the rumor was false, *i.e.* the assassin was really not Ah Ke, how he convinced Xia Guoxiang that the young woman was indeed a palace maid

serving the Princess, and how he ended up taking her out of the prison. He also said, “This servant Xia Guoxiang has prepared a scheme beforehand, he spoke in loud voice in front of the several hundred people in front of the Mansion, stating that he has handed over the Princess’ palace maid to me; how could I come back to him and ask for the second person? Needless to say, this servant would definitely talk officiously, saying something like, ‘Wei *Daren*, you must not play a joke with *Xiao Jiang*. The Princess’ palace maid has assassinated *Wangye*, *Xiao Jiang* boldly acted for the sake of Wei *Daren*’s face, risking the cap on my head, risking *Wangye*’s flogging and martial punishment, I let *Daren* take her away. Hundreds and thousands of people in front of the Palace are my witness. *Wangye* has ordered: he is hoping that *Daren* would discipline the palace maid rigorously, that you would investigate who was behind it? Now *Daren* comes again to ask for someone else. This … this joke may be too much.” He was imitating Xia Guoxiang’s accent and mannerism, and was actually doing a pretty good job.

Chen Yuanyuan knitted her eyebrows. “*Daren* is right,” she said, “Son-in-law Xia is indeed that kind of person. Turns out … turns out they have already set up a trap to shut *Daren*’s mouth.”

Wei Xiaobao stomped his foot and cursed, “His granny, that male …” he cast a glance toward Chen Yuanyuan and said, “If they touch a strand of Ah Ke’s hair, *laozi* will fight that big … big b@stard to the death.”

Chen Yuanyuan pulled her sleeve and bowed to him with cupped fist, saying, “*Daren* cherishes my daughter this much, *Xiao Nuzi* wants to express my gratitude in advance. It’s just that …”

Wei Xiaobao hastily returned the propriety and said, “I am going to lead our troops and horses to crash into Ping Xi Wang Mansion, to kill him until he is in a sorry state. If I can’t save Ah Ke out, I will take the big traitor’s surname. *Laozi* won’t have Wei as my surname, my surname will be Wu! Damn it, *laozi* will be Wu Xiaobao!”

Seeing how agitated he was, and how he was speaking nonsense, Chen Yuanyuan was rather scared. She said in a gentle voice, “*Daren*’s good intention toward Ah Ke …”

“What *Daren* or *Xiaoren*?” Wei Xiaobao cut her off, “If you consider me as one of your own, you must call me Xiaobao. I should have called you Auntie[16], but thinking about that damned Uncle, I am seething with rage.”

Chen Yuanyuan walked over and gently put her hand on his shoulder; she said, “Xiaobao, if you don’t look down on me, you can just call me Ah Yi [Auntie[17]].”

Wei Xiaobao was delighted; he said, “I’ll call you Ah Yi. When I was at the Lovely Spring Courtyard in Yangzhou …” Speaking to this point, he suddenly stopped.

Actually, Chen Yuanyuan also understood that at the Lovely Spring Courtyard, he called all the prostitutes ‘Ah Yi’. She understood worldly affairs, and understood Wei Xiaobao’s good intention; she said, “I am extremely happy to have such a good nephew as yourself. Xiaobao, we must not use force against *Wangye*, in the City of Kunming, his troops and soldiers are numerous; even if you defeat him, he could kill Ah Ke with one stab first, and then you and I, two people, will be grieving for the rest of our lives.”

She was speaking with the soft accent of the Wu dialect; first, her voice was very pleasant to listen to, second, in her speech she was treating Wei Xiaobao as one of her own. Upon hearing her, the rage that was filling his heart immediately vanished into thin air. “Good Ah Yi,” he asked, “Then what should we do to rescue Ah Ke?”

Chen Yuanyuan pondered for a moment before saying, “I could urge Ah Ke to admit *Wangye* as her father. Even if he were more heartless, he would not kill his own flesh-and-blood daughter …”

Suddenly from outside the door someone was shouting loudly, “Acknowledging the bandit as one’s father, how can this be so?”

The curtain on the door rose up, a big and tall old monk walked in in large strides. He had a thick steel monk’s staff in his hand, which he stomped onto the floor. The iron rings on the head of the staff created a random ‘dang dang’ noise. The old monk had a square face, he had an ash-grey beard underneath his chin, his eyes were flashing like lightning, his overall appearance was impressive. Just by standing like that, he looked like a small mountain covering the doorway. His

waist was sticking out his back straight, like a tiger or a lion, his grandeur was indeed overwhelming.

Wei Xiaobao was startled; he withdrew three steps back, and almost wanted to hide behind Chen Yuanyuan. Chen Yuanyuan, however, looked happy. Her countenance brightened as she walked over to the old monk and said softly, “You have come!”

“I have come!” the old monk replied. His voice turned lower, his eye turned gentler. Their gaze met, their eyes revealed admiration and joy.

Wei Xiaobao was greatly surprised, “Who is this old monk?” he wondered in his heart, “Could he be … could he be Ah Yi’s lover? An old customer when she was still a prostitute? Monk visits prostitute; that is out of question. Um, not surprising, actually, when *laozi* was a monk, I also went to a brothel.”

“Have you heard?” Chen Yuanyuan asked.

“I have heard,” the old monk replied.

“Thank Heaven and thank the Earth,” Chen Yuanyuan said, “That child is still … still alive. I … Wah!” suddenly she broke out crying and threw herself into the old monk’s bosom.

The old monk reached out with his left hand and gently stroked her hair. “Whatever happens we must save her,” he said consolingly, “Don’t worry.” His majestic voice was brimming with deep emotion. Chen Yuanyuan buried her face in his bosom as she sobbed softly.

Wei Xiaobao was amazed and scared at the same time, he did not dare to move at all. “The two of you regard me as a dead man,” he mused, “*Laozi* better act as a dead man.”

After crying for a while, Chen Yuanyuan sobbed, “You … can you really save that child?”

“I will do everything possible,” the old monk replied in an awe-inspiring voice.

Chen Yuanyuan straightened up and wiped her tears. “What shall I do?” she asked, “Tell me, what shall I do?”

The old monk frowned. “In short,” he said, “We must not let her acknowledge

the traitor as her father."

"Yes, yes," Chen Yuanyuan said, "I was wrong. Because I wanted to save the child, I was not thinking about you. I … I have offended you."

"I understand," the old monk said, "I don't blame you at all. But she must not admit him as her father. She must not, absolutely not." His voice was not loud, but there was strong imposing aura in it that if there were 'thousand troops ten thousand horses' in front of him, they would bow their heads and obey his commands.

Suddenly they heard the sound of thumping boots outside the door, someone let out a long laugh and said in a loud and clear voice, "An old friend has graced Kunming with his presence, *Xiao Wang*'s face is a lot brighter!" It was none other than Wu Sangui's voice.

Immediately Wei Xiaobao and Chen Yuanyuan's countenance changed. The old monk acted as if he did not hear anything, only his eyes suddenly brightened.

'Swish, swish!' out of the blue white light flashed, two swords slashed, the curtain hanging on the door was cut. Wu Sangui appeared at the doorway with a smile on his face. Followed by 'Crash, bang!' plaster, dust, and fragments of wood flew everywhere, the four walls, along with the windows on them, were demolished by men wielding iron sledge-hammers. On each hole several guards appeared, some with strung bows and arrow, some with raised lances in their hands. The tip of the arrows and lances was aimed inside. Wu Sangui only needed to issue an order, the arrows and lances would immediately fly into the bodies of the three people inside, turning them into hedgehogs.

"Yuanyuan, come out!" Wu Sangui shouted.

Chen Yuanyuan hesitated. She took a step forward, stopped, and shook her head. "I won't come out," she said. Turning her head around, she gently pushed Wei Xiaobao's shoulder and said, "Xiaobao, this matter has nothing to do with you, you go out."

Wei Xiaobao knew she sincerely wanted to protect him, and was deeply moved. "*Laozi* won't go out," he said loudly, "Hot piece mama, Wu Sangui, if you have guts, go ahead and kill *laozi* as well."

The old monk shook his head and said, “The two of you go out. The old monk should have died more than twenty years ago.”

Chen Yuanyuan walked over to him, pulled his hand and said, “No, I will die together with you.”

Wei Xiaobao loudly said, “Ah Yi have *yi qi*, do you think Wei Xiaobao is greedy for life, afraid of death? Ah Yi, I will also die together with you.”

Wu Sangui raised his right hand and angrily shouted, “Wei Xiaobao, you conspire with big rebel against the law. I will kill you and present a memorial to the Emperor, explaining everything, my merit will not be small.” Turning to Chen Yuanyuan, he said, “Yuanyuan, why are you so muddleheaded? Still not coming out?”

Chen Yuanyuan shook her head. Wei Xiaobao said, “What do you mean conspiring with big rebel against the law? You are falsely accusing good people.”

In his extreme rage, Wu Sangui laughed instead. “Little baby,” he said, “I’ll say you still don’t know who this old monk is. He has kept you hoodwinked inside a drum. By the time you reach the gate of hell, you still don’t know for whom you have delivered your life.”

The old monk sternly said, “*Laofu* [old man, referring to self] has never changed either my surname or my given name. The Emperor of Heaven has bestowed me the surname Li and given name Zicheng.”

Wei Xiaobao was shocked. “You … you are Li Chuang, Li Zicheng?” he stammered.

“That’s right,” the old monk said, “*Xiao Xiongdi*, you go out! A real man is fully responsible for what he’s done. The Ol’ Li has undergone hundreds of battles, I have lived for more than seventy years; I don’t want a little Tatar official like you to accompany me delivering our lives.”

Suddenly white shadow flashed; someone leaped down from the roof, pouncing toward the top of Wu Sangui’s head. Wu Sangui let out an angry roar; the four guards behind him moved their swords together toward the white shadow.

The shadow flicked his sleeve, a gust of strong wind swept away, jolting the

four guards backwards; followed by a palm strike toward Wu Sangui's back. Wu Sangui could not hold his stand; he was thrown into the room. Just like Wu Sangui's shadow the person also leaped in, his palm hacked down and struck Wu Sangui's shoulder. Wu Sangui grunted and fell sitting down on the floor. The person then put his palm on the 'tian ling' [sky spirit] acupoint on the top of Wu Sangui's head, and barked his order to the guards surrounding them, "Quickly release the arrows!"

This turn of events happened so quickly that the guards were taken by surprise. Seeing their *Wangye* had fallen into the enemy's hand, who dared to make any move?

"Shifu! Shifu!" Wei Xiaobao called out happily. The person who jumped down from the roof and subdued Wu Sangui was precisely Jiu Nan.

When Wei Xiaobao went to the Three-Sage Nunnery, she followed him in secret, and all along she had been hiding on the roof. When Ping Xi Wang's Mansion guards arrived by the thousands and surrounded the Three-Sage Nunnery, Gao Yanchao and the others, who were guarding outside the nunnery, did not dare to move rashly. Jiu Nan's *qinggong* had reached the pinnacle, she curled up underside the eaves, unexpectedly the guards did not detect her presence.

Jiu Nan stared at Li Zicheng. "Are you really Li Zicheng?" she asked in a majestic voice.

"That's right," Li Zicheng replied.

"I heard you were killed on Mount Jiugong, turns out you are still alive today?" Jiu Nan asked.

Li Zicheng nodded. Jiu Nan asked, "Was Ah Ke born to you and her?"

Li Zicheng sighed. He cast a glance toward Chen Yuanyuan, and then nodded.

"I should have known," Wu Sangui angrily said, "Only a traitor and rebel like you can sire that …"

Jiu Nan kicked his back; she cursed, "Both of you are traitors and bandits, 'half-*jin* eight-*liang*' [half-pound eight-ounce]; I don't know which one is a bit more wicked."

Li Zicheng raised his monk staff and stamped in on the ground, ‘Bang! The green brick immediately shattered into several pieces. “Lowly Nun!” he shouted, “Who do you think you are, dare to speak nonsense like that?”

Seeing his Shifu had arrived, Wei Xiaobao’s courage was greatly boosted; although Li Zicheng was intimidating, he did not fear him the least bit. “You dare to offend my Shifu, are you bored of your life?” he shouted back, “You are a traitor and rebel; my Shifu, the Senior has never said anything incorrect …”

Suddenly he heard ‘whoosh, whoosh’ noise; three lances flew in from outside the window, swiftly shooting toward Jiu Nan. Jiu Nan slightly turned her head to evade, the sleeve of her left arm swept, it coiled around two lances, which she then threw back out the window, while with her right hand she caught the third lance. ‘Ah, ah’ two blood-curdling screech were heard outside the window, two guards were hit by the lances on the pit of their stomach, and died instantly. Jiu Nan placed the tip of the third lance right in the middle of Wu Sangui’s back.

Wu Sangui called out, “Don’t act rashly, everybody withdraw ten steps.” The guards chorused their compliance, and withdrew several steps.

With a cold laugh Jiu Nan said, “What a coincidence. In this tiny meditation room today we have the number one big rebel without any equal since time immemorial, and the number one big traitor without any equal since time immemorial.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “And we have the number one beauty without any equal since time immemorial, and the number one martial art master without any equal since time immemorial.”

Jiu Nan could not stop her grave and stern face from revealing a slight smiling expression. She said, “Number one martial art master? How could I dare? But you are the number one little smart-aleck without any equal since time immemorial.”

Wei Xiaobao burst out in laughter, Chen Yuanyuan also chuckled; but Wu Sangui and Li Zicheng pulled their faces, their minds racing, trying to find a way to escape. All their lives these two men were used to lead large armies, they were ambitious and ruthless characters who were used to fighting in one place after another all over the world, God knows the number of dangers, difficulties

and bad risks they had encountered in all their lives; however, in the situation they were currently facing, unexpectedly they were at their wits' end. They racked their brains thinking about dozens different scenarios, yet they felt none would be effective.

With stern voice Li Zicheng shouted to Jiu Nan, "What do you want?"

Jiu Nan laughed coldly and said, "What do I want? Naturally I want to kill you with my own hands."

"This Shitai," Chen Yuanyuan said, "You my daughter, Ah Ke's Shifu, aren't you?"

With a cold laugh Jiu Nan replied, "I took your daughter away, I taught her martial art not because of kindness, I want her to assassinate the big traitor with her own hands." While saying that, she added the strength of her right hand a little bit, the lance sank down, the tip of the lance penetrated about half a *cun* into Wu Sangui's flesh. "Ah!" he could not bear not to cry out in pain.

"This Shifu," Chen Yuanyuan said, "He … he is a total stranger to you, Senior; he has neither grievance nor enmity with you."

Jiu Nan tossed her head backward and laughed aloud. "He … he has neither grievance nor enmity with me?" she said, "Xiaobao, tell her who I am; also make the big traitor and the big rebel, two people, to understand clearly."

Wei Xiaobao said, "My Shifu, the Senior, is the Princess born to the Emperor Chong Zhen of the Great Ming, Princess Changping!"

"Ah!" Wu Sangui, Li Zicheng and Chen Yuanyuan exclaimed together; they were all stunned.

Li Zicheng laughed aloud. "Very good, very good," he said, "I have caused your father's death in the past, today I can die in your hand, it is a hundred times better than dying under this big traitor's hands." While saying that, he took two steps forward, and drove his monk staff to the ground. The tail of the staff went about a *chi* into the floor. With both hands he pulled his clothes, 'rip!' the front part of his robe was torn, exposing his hairy chest. "Princess," he said with a laugh, "Make your move. The Ol' Li didn't die under the traitor's hands, didn't die under the Tatars' hands, but I am losing my life under the Great Ming

Princess' hand; that is very good!"

In all her life, Jiu Nan hated Li Zicheng to the bones, but she always thought that he had already died on Mount Jiugong of Hubei (province), hence it would be difficult for her to avenge this great enmity with her own hand. Today she found out that he was still alive, it was an unexpected delight. However, presently she saw his heroic and open-minded spirit, how in the face of death he maintained his calm and did not show the slightest bit of fear; she could not help but admiring him in her heart. She coldly said, "Sire is indeed a real man. I am going to kill your enemy first today, before taking your life. I'll let you see it with your own eyes your enemy lose his head, so that you can die happily."

Li Zicheng was greatly delighted; he cupped his fist and said, "Many thanks Princess, *zaixia* cannot thank you enough. In all my life my greatest hope is that I will see with my own eyes this big traitor die a violent death."

Seeing Wu Sangui was groaning under the lance, without any strength to resist, Jiu Nan was unwilling to kill him with the spear just like that; she said to Li Zicheng, "You might as well fulfilling the desire of your heart; come and kill him!"

Li Zicheng was delighted. "Thank you very much!" he said. Looking down toward Wu Sangui he said, "Traitor, in the battle of Shanhai Pass, your braided troops helped you, hence I was unfortunate and my troops lost. Right now you are captured by the Princess, if I kill you just like that, it will be too easy for you; even if you are dead, you won't be convinced." Looking up, he said to Jiu Nan, "Your Highness the Princess, please release him, let me stake my life to see who would live and who would die."

Jiu Nan lifted up the lance and said, "I want to see who would kill whom first."

Still crouching on the floor, Wu Sangui groaned several times. Suddenly he sprang up, seized the monk staff, and ferociously swept it across Jiu Nan's waist.

"Reckless thing!" Jiu Nan scolded. The lance in her hand turned around, pressing the monk staff down. She exerted her internal energy, Wu Sangui felt his arm numb and aching, the monk staff fell to the ground. The tip of the lance swiftly moved toward his throat. Although Wu Sangui was a brave soldier, in front of martial art expert with profound internal energy like Jiu Nan, he was as helpless as a baby that he was unable to withstand a single move. His face

turned ash-grey as he repeatedly withdrew, but the tip of the lance was always pointing at his throat.

Li Zicheng stooped down to pick up the monk staff. Jiu Nan turned the lance around and handed it over to Wu Sangui, saying, “The two of you fight fair and square.”

“Alright!” Wu Sangui shouted. His lance went straight toward Li Zicheng. Li Zicheng waved his monk staff to parry, followed by a counterattack with the staff. Thereupon these two men were engaged in a fierce battle in this tiny meditation room.

Jiu Nan pulled Wei Xiaobao away and told him to stand behind her, to guard against the staff and the lance from injuring him.

Chen Yuanyuan withdrew to the corner of the room; her countenance was deathly pale, she closed her eyes tight, yet the scene from her past flashed in her mind, “When I was in the Ming Dynasty Palace, when Chong Zhen came to visit at night fall, he highly praised my beautiful appearance. The next day the Emperor did not attend the morning court, he stayed in the bedroom in my company, he told me to sing songs for him, he told me to put on rouge and powder, he even picked up eyebrow brush and drew my eyebrows for me. He promised me that he would make me an imperial consort, and then in the future he would make me the Empress. He said that from now on, he would not cast another glance toward all the imperial concubines and consorts in the Palace.

The Emperor was very young; when he was laughing joyously and freely, he could suddenly anxiously stop in daze. He was the Emperor, but in my heart, he was no different than those young masters of nobility or rich families who visit the prostitutes at the courtyard. In three days, day and night he did not leave me even for a single step. Early morning the fourth day, I woke up before he did; I saw a bloodless face on the pillow next to me, his cheeks were hollow, his eyebrows knitted closely. He was anxious even in his sleep. I thought, ‘Is this the Emperor? If he is the Emperor, why is he unhappy like this?’

That day, he went to the morning court. When he returned in the afternoon, his countenance was even paler, his eyebrows wrinkled even tighter. He suddenly threw a fit at me, he accused me of interfering with the national affairs.

He said that he was a brilliant ruler, hence he must not lose himself in female charms and turn into a muddleheaded ruler. He wanted to strive harder; therefore, he immediately ordered Empress Zhou to send me out of the Palace. He said that I was a witch who harmed the country, and that while I was in the Palace for three days, the rebel thief Li Zicheng had already broken through three cities.

I was not grieved; men are just like that, whenever something unpleasant happens, they always blame the women. The Emperor was worrying all day, his heart was scared; he was afraid of this man named Li Zicheng. At that time I thought, 'Li Zicheng is such an amazing man, he can make the Emperor afraid; I wonder what kind of man is he?'"

Chen Yuanyuan opened her eyes; she saw Li Zicheng was brandishing his monk staff, striking Wu Sangui again and again. Wu Sangui was dodging and evading, fast and nimble, all along the monk staff failed to hit him. Chen Yuanyuan thought, "His movement is still very fast. These last several years, he still train martial art every day, because … because he wants to be the Emperor, he wants to lead his troops to attack Beijing."

She remembered that when she left the Palace, she returned to the Zhou *Guo Zhang* [lit. the Emperor's father-in-law] Mansion. One day, the Guo Zhang Mansion held a big feast, inviting many guests. She was ordered to come out to sing and dance, to entertain the guests. It was that night that Wu Sangui saw her. To this day, she could still remember it clearly, under the candlelight, she saw his eyes were burning with desire as he stared at her across the banquet table. In all her life she had seen this kind of stare too many times. Following the stare, the man, who was like a beast, may pounce on her, he may embrace her tightly, and may tear away her clothes. It's just that at that time it was a public place with a big crowd …

Suddenly she thought, "When that baby high-ranking official saw me a moment ago, his eyes also revealed that kind of look. It's so funny. Such a young baby also shows a burning desire toward me. Ay! All men are like that, old men are like that, little boys are also like that."

She looked up and cast a glance toward Wei Xiaobao. She saw his face was full of excitement as he watched the fight between Li and Wu, two people. By this

time Wu Sangui had begun to counterattack, the lance in his hand continuously attacked the enemy.

"He asked Zhou *Guo Zhang* for me," she continued her reminiscing, "In just a few days, the Emperor sent him to guard the Shanhai Pass, to defend the border against Manchurian troops' invasion. But Li Zicheng broke through Beijing first, Emperor Chong Zhen hung himself on the Coal Hill. Li Zicheng's troops captured me, and presented me to him. This straightforward man, is he the one the Emperor Chong Zhen dreaded even in his sleep? He had broken into Beijing, but he was very busy. The Ming Dynasty's officials were murdered by him by the dozens. His troops raped and pillaged Beijing, they arrested countless people, tortured them and demanded ransom for them; countless innocent common people were also massacred by them. But every night when he came to accompany me, he was always very happy, his laughter was very loud. His snoring was also very loud, he often woke me up in the middle of the night with the noise of his snoring. The hair on his arms, his legs, and his chest was very long, very thick. I have never seen a man like him.

Actually, Wu Sangui had already surrendered to him. But as soon as he heard that he had snatched me, he borrowed Manchurian troops, leading them to breach the Pass. Ay, this is the 'One wave of headgear-lifting anger propelled him, all for the sake of the fair-faced one' part. Li Zicheng led his army out to meet him, he fought Wu Sangui on a slab of stone. Manchu's elite troops suddenly appeared, Li Zicheng's army was utterly defeated. They said that on the slab-of-stone battlefield there was blood everywhere; along several dozen *li* road, there were dead bodies everywhere. They said that these people died because of me; it was me who caused these several tens of thousands people's death. Have I really heaped such a heinous sin upon myself?

After his defeat, Li Zicheng returned to Beijing and ascended the throne as the Emperor, he called himself the Emperor of the Great Shun Country. He took me fleeing to the west, Wu Sangui was hot on our trail. Although Li Zicheng was defeated, his laughter was still very much straightforward. The soldiers and officers under his command numbered less and less as the days gone by, his situation was more and more unfavorable, but he did not seem to care. He said that he started with nothing, at worst he would end up with nothing; what's so

strange about that? He said that there were three things he was most proud of in all his life: first, he had hounded the Ming Dynasty Emperor to his death, second, he had been an emperor, and third, he had slept with the number one beauty in the world. This man's talk was very vulgar; he said that among those three accomplishments, he was most proud of the third.

Wu Sangui also wholeheartedly wants to be the Emperor; he has never said it, but I know. It's just that in his heart he is afraid, he always hesitates; he thought about making his move, but did not dare to do so. As long as he did not die today, there will come a day that he may become the Emperor. It's all right if he became the Emperor here in Kunming, it's all right if he became the Emperor only for a day.

Emperor Yong Li fled to Myanmar, Wu Sangui pursued him and killed him. People say that three Emperors have died in my hands: Chong Zhen, Yong Li, and this Emperor Li Zicheng of the Great Shun Country. How did I become responsible of Emperor Chong Zhen's account? I wonder if Wu Sangui is going to die today. If he became the Emperor in the future, will they say that I killed another Emperor? The Great Ming's rivers and mountains, several hundred thousand soldiers, several millions common people, plus four Emperors; it was I, Chen Yuanyuan, who killed them all. Yet I have not committed even a single bad deed, I have not even uttered any harmful word to anybody."

Her ears kept hearing the 'bing, bing, bang, bang' of the weapons colliding with each other; when she looked up, she saw Li Zicheng and Wu Sangui were jumping high and crouching low, their fight was very fierce. Although these two men were already old, their movements were still very agile. In all her life, she was most afraid of watching men killing each other, and right now that loathing feeling was evident on her face. She also recalled what happened in the past, "After the crushing defeat, the troops and soldiers under Li Zicheng's command scattered everywhere. Even in the night, he was no longer with me. Wu Sangui's subordinates found me, and hastily presented me to their commander-in-chief. Naturally he was overjoyed. He said that people cursed him as the big traitor, but for my sake, bearing this bad reputation was worth it. I really appreciate his affection. I don't care if he is the big traitor or a big loyal minister, because he was being true to me; for my sake, he would do anything. Other than him,

nobody has ever treated me this way.

At that time I thought that from now on I would live a peaceful and happy life. I don't care about first-*pin* rank Madame, or second-*pin* rank Madame; I only hoped that I would not have to run around in circles from one man's hand to the other. But … but … after living in Kunming for several years, he was bestowed the title *Qin Wang* [Prince], and a *Qin Wang* must have a *fujin* [Manchurian word for 'wife']. His first wife has passed away early on. His younger brother Wu Sanmei came to me and told me that because of this *fujin* matter, *Wangye* was in great distress. By right, he should have taken me as his *fujin*, but everybody in the world knew my family background. If he reported my name so that the Emperor could confer an honorary title by imperial edict, unavoidably he would profane the imperial court. Naturally I understood that as a *Qin Wang*, he resented my background as a lowly woman, a prostitute; that I was not fit to receive honorary title by the Emperor. I did not want to make things difficult for him; without waiting for Wu Sanmei to finish, I told him that it was an easy matter, I told him to ask *Wangye* to pick a wise and virtuous woman from a famous family as his *fujin*, to avoid smearing his reputation. He came to apologize to me, telling me that he had indeed been unfair to me. Humph, becoming *fujin* or not, what's the big deal? It's just that eventually I understood that his affection to me had also reached its end. I moved out from the Mansion, because *Wangye* wanted to officially marry, he had to establish his *fujin*.

Right around that time, Li Zicheng suddenly appeared in front of me. He has become a Buddhist monk. I was scared out of my wits. I thought he had already died, and I was grieving for him for several days; who would have thought that he is still alive? Li Zicheng said that he wore Buddhist monk attire simply to deceive people's ears and eyes, while it also give him the excuse of not shaving his head and wearing the Tatars' attire. He told me that for the last several years he had been thinking about me daily; he had been living in Kunming for more than three years, and had always been looking for an opportunity to see me, until that day. Ay, could it be that his affection to me was a lot deeper than Wu Sangui's?

Every night he came to accompany me, until finally I got pregnant with this little baby girl. I could not see him anymore, I must return to the Mansion

immediately. I told *Wangye* that I missed him very much, and I wanted him to accompany me. *Wangye* has never had heartfelt fondness toward his *fujin* anyway, he happily took me back. Afterwards the baby girl was born. I wonder if he ever had any suspicion.

When the baby girl was a little over two years old, she suddenly disappeared in the middle of the night. Although I hate to part with her, I thought it was Li Zicheng who sent someone to kidnap her. She is his child, if he wanted her, then that's good. He was alone, he must be distressingly lonely, if there was a child by his side, he would not feel so much alone and forsaken. Who would have thought … ay, who would have thought that that was not the case …"

Suddenly a drop of liquid fell on the back of her hand; when she looked down, it was a drop of blood. She was shocked and quickly looked up to the two men who were still fighting. She saw there was blood all over Wu Sangui's face, but he was still brandishing his lance in a hard fighting. The drop of blood naturally was splashed from his face.

Outside the room, the officers and men were shouting and cheering loudly, some were hurling threats toward Li Zicheng and Jiu Nan, but nobody dared to join the fight for fear that they would hurt their *Wangye*.

Wu Sangui was panting continuously; there was fear in his eyes. Suddenly the tip of the lance changed direction and went straight toward Chen Yuanyuan's chest.

"Ah!" Chen Yuanyuan cried out in alarm. "He wants to kill me!" This thought flashed in her mind.

'Dang!' the lance was parried by Li Zicheng. It was as if Wu Sangui had gone mad; he thrust his lance repeatedly, each one was directed to Chen Yuanyuan. Li Zicheng bellowed in rage, while desperately blocking and parrying; he was no longer able to attack Wu Sangui.

Wei Xiaobao was hiding behind his Shifu's back, he was greatly astonished, "Why would the big traitor not attack the monk, but attacking his wife instead?" Bu he immediately understood, "Ah, right; he must be angry that his wife has sneakily met the monk, hence he wants to kill her to vent his anger."

But Jiu Nan had been able to see Wu Sangui's real intention, "This evil man is

extremely treacherous. He cannot beat Li Zicheng, hence he resorted to this evil scheme."

Sure enough, because Li Zicheng wanted to save Chen Yuanyuan, he was flustered and his mind was thrown into disorder, several gaps appeared in the movement of his staff. Wu Sangui's lance changed direction again, 'stab', he suddenly hit Li Zicheng's shoulder. Li Zicheng lost the strength of his right hand, his monk staff fell. Wu Sangui seized this opportunity to pounce, he pointed the lance toward the pit of Li Zicheng's stomach. Laughing maliciously, he said, "Rebel, aren't you going to kneel down and surrender?"

"Yes, yes," Li Zicheng replied. Slowly he bent his knees.

Wei Xiaobao mused, "I always thought that Li Zicheng was such an amazing man, but actually he is greedy for life …" He had just had that thought, suddenly Li Zicheng rolled away to evade the tip of the lance, grabbed his monk staff from the floor, and swept it horizontally toward Wu Sangui's calves. Li Zicheng then sprang up, the monk staff struck down on Wu Sangui's shoulder, and in the third strike the staff shot down onto the top of Wu Sangui's head.

Wei Xiaobao did not know that when the circumstance was unfavorable, surrendering in order to take a breather and then seizing the opportunity to gain an upper hand, was exactly the tactic Li Zicheng was very good at in all his life. When he was leading the rebel troops in the past, on the seventh month of his seventh year Chong Zhen surrounded him and trapped him in the bottom of Juxiang Gorge at Xing'an county of Shaanxi Province, the imperial army laid a siege all around, there was no way out, the troops had no food, the horses had no straw; at a glance it looked like a total annihilation. Li Zicheng surrendered, and was taken into the imperial army. As soon as he was out of the plank road, he rose into rebellion again immediately. When he bent his knees to feign surrender to Wu Sangui just now, it was no more than executing his old trick once again.

Jiu Nan thought, "These two men are equally ruthless and crafty, no wonder the Great Ming's rivers and mountains were lost in these two men's hands."

They all saw that if Li Zicheng's third strike hit, Wu Sangui's brains would burst out. Chen Yuanyuan suddenly jumped and threw herself on top of Wu Sangui's

body, “Kill me first!” she called out.

Li Zicheng was shocked, the momentum of his staff strike was swift and fierce, his right shoulder was injured, he had no strength in his right hand to hold the staff. Immediately his left hand pushed to the right, ‘Bang!’ the iron monk staff struck the wall. “Yuanyuan,” he angrily shouted, “What are you doing?”

“He and I were husband and wife for more than twenty years,” Chen Yuanyuan replied, “In those years he … he was sincerely treating me very well. I cannot let him die because of me.”

“Get out of the way!” Li Zicheng shouted, “He and I have enmity as deep as the ocean. I must kill him.”

“Then kill me too,” Chen Yuanyuan replied.

Li Zicheng sighed. He said, “Turns out … turns out your heart is still leaning toward him.”

Chen Yuanyuan did not answer, but in her heart she thought, “If he wants to kill you, I will also die with you.”

From outside the room, the officers and soldiers saw Wu Sangui fell, they also cried out loudly while surging forward. A general shouted loudly, “Quickly release *Wangye*, or all of you will die.” It was precisely Wu Sangui’s son-in-law Xia Guoxiang. He continued shouting, “Your companions are all here, if you harm a strand of *Wangye*’s hair, their heads will fall to the ground immediately.”

Wei Xiaobao looked outside, and saw Mu Jiansheng, Liu Dahong and the other Mu Palace people, and Xu Tianchuan, Gao Yanchao, Priest Xuanzhen and the other Tian Di Hui people, Zhao Qixian, Zhang Kangnian, and the other Imperial Bodyguards, Valiant Cavalry *Canling* [Regimental Commander] and *Zuoling* [Company Commander]; all of them with hands tied, each of them had a Ping Xi Wang military officer behind his back, with unsheathed saber placed on their neck.

Wei Xiaobao thought, “Even if Shifu could take me out of Kunming, all these friends will inevitably die. We want to kill Wu Sangui, but there is no hurry to do it at this time.” Thereupon he pulled his dagger and put it on Wu Sangui’s back; he said, “*Wangye*, all of us die together, there is no sense in it; it would be better

for us to do a business transaction."

"Humph," Wu Sangui grunted, "What business transaction?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "You promise to let everybody go, my Shifu will spare your life."

Li Zicheng said, "This traitor is a lowly person, a repeat offender; what he says cannot be trusted."

Looking at the people with their hands bound outside, Jiu Nan also felt that she could not kill Wu Sangui today; she said, "You give an order to let everybody go, I will also let you go."

"What about Ah Ke?" Wei Xiaobao said in a loud voice, "That female assassin?"

Xia Guoxiang shouted, "Bring the assassin here."

Two Mansion guards pushed a young woman, which was none other than Ah Ke. Her hands were also tied behind her back, and a glittering saber was also placed on her neck.

Chen Yuanyuan said, "Xiaobao, you … you are always thinking of saving my child's life."

Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, "That's strange, you did not ask your husband, did not ask your lover, but came to ask me. Could it be that Ah Ke was born for me and you?" But as soon as he saw Ah Ke's lovely yet pitiful look, he had made up his mind, even if he did not want his own life, he simply must save her life; on top of that, he now saw Chen Yuanyuan's lovely yet pitiful look as she beseeched him, he did not need to think twice.

"The two of you," he pointed to Li Zicheng, "If you give me your word to allow Ah Ke to be my wife, how could I not save my own wife's life?"

Jiu Nan glowered at him. "In time like this you still talk this kind of frivolous talk!" she shouted.

Although Chen Yuanyuan knew Wei Xiaobao only for a short time, yet her knowledge of his temperament and intention had already far surpassed Jiu Nan's; she knew that if this little smart-aleck did not take advantage of other

people's misfortune, to fish in troubled water, he would not be a high-ranking official in such a young age. Thereupon she said, "Fine, I give you my word."

Wei Xiaobao turned his head toward Li Zicheng and asked, "And you?"

There was an angry look on Li Zicheng's face, he was about to curse, but then he saw the earnest pleading expression on Chen Yuanyuan's face, hence he struggled to suppress his anger. "Humph," he snorted, "Whatever she said, let it be that way."

Wei Xiaobao giggled and turned toward Wu Sangui, "*Wangye*, you and I are 'river water does not interfere with well water', why not get the best of both worlds? You can be the Ping Xi Wang, let me be the Wei *Jueye*?"

"Very well," Wu Sangui said, "What did I do to make life difficult for Wei *Jueye*?"

"Then issue an order to free all of my friends," Wei Xiaobao said, "I will also ask my Shifu to release you. This is just like playing Pai Jiu [pai gow], in the front we have ten, at the back we have supreme, nobody loses nobody wins, nobody kills nobody pays. You are not thinking of making a big kill on the three directions, I will not shovel your bank. Not losing in gambling is better than everybody's head falls down on the ground."

"So be it," Wu Sangui replied, while slowly standing up.

"Please ask *Shizi* to come here, and the Princess as well," Wei Xiaobao said, "I will also have to toil *Wangye* to personally escort us out of the City of Kunming, and I ask that *Shizi* will accompany the Princess to go back to Beijing and bow to the heaven and the earth and get married there. *Wangye*, although we have had the agreement, I still cannot set my heart at ease, I need to have *Shizi* as my guarantee. If you suddenly change your mind and dispatch your troops to give us a chase, we will have no choice but to split *Shizi* with a saber. Wu Yingxiong, Wei Xiaobao, plus Princess Jianning, everybody will happily go together to see Yan Wang. Our journey to the underworld will be exciting and fun."

Wu Sangui thought that this kid was indeed very shrewd; he would not easily let me go based on my words alone. Since he was presently in a dangerous territory, the sooner he escaped the better; therefore, after making a prompt decision he said, "Fair enough, we will do as you said." Raising his voice, he called

out, “Xia *Zongbing*, quickly send someone to fetch the Princess and *Shizi* and bring them here.”

Xia Guoxiang said, “I heard and obey. When *Shizi* heard the news, he promptly led the troops here.”

“Good filial son,” Wei Xiaobao praised, “What a little darling meek, garlic chives sautéed in leek!”

Not too long afterwards, Wu Yingxiong did indeed arrive leading his troops. His injury had not healed, he arrived outside the building, riding on a soft sedan chair carried by eight of his personal attendants.

Wu Sangui said, “*Shizi* has arrived, everybody can go.” He also issued an order, “Untie our friends’ hands.” To Wei Xiaobao he said, “You and Shitai follow me closely, let me take you out. If *laofu* go back on my word, naturally you could stab me on my back. Shitai’s martial art skill is superior, even I cannot escape her Tathagata Buddha’s palm.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed. “Wonderful,” he said, “*Wangye* is indeed frank and straightforward; when you lose, you lose, when you win, you win, you wanted to oppose the Ming, you opposed the Ming, you wanted to surrender to Qing, you surrender to Qing. Indeed there is not the least bit of wishy-washiness in you.”

Wu Sangui’s face turned ashen. Pointing to Li Zicheng he said, “This rebel, I wonder if he is also Wei *Jueye*’s friend?”

Wei Xiaobao cast a glance toward Jiu Nan. Before he could respond, Li Zicheng announced in a loud voice, “I am not this Tatars’ little dog official’s friend.”

“Good,” Jiu Nan praised him, “You, this rebel, actually have hard bones! Wu Sangui, let him go with us.”

Chen Yuanyuan looked at Jiu Nan, her eyes revealed her gratitude, but they also carried a pleading look. “Shitai …” she said. But Jiu Nan turned her head away, she was unwilling to meet her eyes.

Wu Sangui was only concerned over his own survival, he did not care whether he could kill Li Zicheng or not. Walking toward the opening, he called out, “*Shizi* is going to escort the Princess back to the Capital to have an audience with His Holiness, to respectfully escort the holy self of Her Highness the Princess.”

The sergeant under Ping Xi Wang's command blew the bugle, the troops lined up in formation to send them off. Wei Xiaobao and Wu Sangui walked out of the room side-by-side, with Jiu Nan following closely behind them.

Wei Xiaobao walked toward the sedan chair and said, "Whether the goods is genuine or fake, one examination will confirm it." He raised the sedan chair curtain and looked in. He saw Wu Yingxiong's face was completely without color. Leaning inside, he said with a laugh, "*Shizi*, how are you?"

Wu Yingxiong called out, "Father, you … are you all right?"

Of course he was calling out to Wu Sangui, but Wei Xiaobao replied, "Very good, I am all right."

When they were outside the Three-Sage Nunnery, he looked around; east, south, west and north, everywhere was tightly packed with troops and horses, their number could not be counted. "*Wangye*," Wei Xiaobao praised, "Your troops and horses are indeed not a few. If you are going to attack Beijing, I think you already have enough."

With a calm face Wu Sangui said, "Wei *Jueye*, when you see His Majesty, if you talk nonsense, I will certainly also present a memorial to the Emperor, reporting that you are colluding with the rebel thieves Mu Family of Yunnan and Li Zicheng."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Uh, that's strange. Li Zicheng only loves to collude with the number one beauty in the world, how could he collude with me, the number one smart-aleck in the world?" Wu Sangui was furious; he clenched his fist and wanted to punch the bridge of Wei Xiaobao's nose very much.

"*Wangye* must not be angry," Wei Xiaobao said, "You, Senior, must calm down. Being an official for a thousand *li* is only for the sake of wealth. If I talk rubbish to His Majesty, whatever reward His Majesty bestows to me, it will fall short of what you, Senior, send as a gift year after year, what you spend in soldier's pay and provision year after year. The two of us brothers are striking a business deal, when I return to Beijing, I will only praise you as a loyal and devoted minister, matchless under the heavens. I will do my best to protect *Shizi*, at New Year and other holidays, you will send a little bit of gold and silver as a gift to *Xiao Jiang*; what do you say?" While saying that, he walked alongside Wu

Sangui.

“Wealth is merely worldly possessions,” Wu Sangui said, “If Wei *Jueye* really want to use some, I can’t see any reason why you cannot. However, if you really want to make things difficult for me, although *laofu* lives in Yunnan, with a massive military force at hand, I am not afraid of you.”

“Naturally,” Wei Xiaobao said, “With a lance at hand, *Wangye*’s bravery is unstoppable, you killed the rebellious thieves around the world that they piss in their pants in terror. *Xiao Jiang* is taking my leave today, the spending money *Wangye* promised earlier, please bestow it now.”

Listening to him chattering and unceasingly asking for bribe, Jiu Nan was getting more and more annoyed. “Xiaobao,” she shouted, “How could you talk so shamelessly like that?”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Shifu, you did not know, but the number of people under me is quite a lot. When I return to the Capital, the civil and military officials of the imperial court, the imperial concubines and court eunuchs in the Palace, all of them must be given a present. If the gift is unsatisfactory, everybody may put the blame on *Wangye*.”

“Humph,” Jiu Nan snorted, but she no longer say anything.

Actually, as the guest Wei Xiaobao demanded bribe, his main reason was to escape with their lives. He repeatedly talked about bribe with Wu Sangui, his intention was to occupy Wu Sangui’s mind, so that he would not change his mind or have the thought of killing them; besides, after giving the bribe, he could not possibly make things difficult for Wei Xiaobao. It was a standard practice of officialdom. By saying all those things, Wei Xiaobao was trying to make Wu Sangui feel relieved. Naturally Jiu Nan did not understand this reasoning.

As expected, Wu Sangui was really thinking, “He wants the money, this matter is easier to manage.” Turning toward Xia Guoxiang, he said, “Xia *Zongbing*, quickly get 500,000 *taels* of silver for Wei *Jueye* to give to the officers and men of the Imperial Bodyguards; also, prepare a generous gift for Wei *Jueye*, so that when he return to the Capital, he can distribute it for our behalf.” Xia Guoxiang complied, and turned toward his trusted aide to prepare everything.

Wu Sangui and Wei Xiaobao mounted their horses and rode side-by-side. Jiu

Nan also mounted a horse and followed closely behind them. Knowing that this nun's martial art skill had reached perfection, Wu Sangui abandoned all hopes of running away from her; he also thought, "Things ended this way, it is actually very satisfactory. Otherwise, even if I could kill this nun and this little smart aleck, kill Li Zicheng and all those rebellious thieves, injuring an Imperial Envoy carried a maximum penalty; I would be forced to deploy my troops immediately. This moment the help from the outside has not been properly decided; acting with confusion will only result in endangering this matter. Humph, when Beijing is broken later, will I have to be afraid that this little smart aleck would fly to the sky?" Therefore, he did not want to go back on the deal right away; along with Jiu Nan and Wei Xiaobao he went to Anfu Garden to fetch the Princess, and then escorted them out of the City of Kunming.

Although the soldiers had their suspicion, seeing their *Wangye* came out unscathed, they did not have any choice but to obey the orders and did nothing else.

Wei Xiaobao inspected the troops and horses under his command, undoubtedly Ah Ke stayed by his side, the others included Tian Di Hui and Mu Palace people, as well as Imperial Bodyguards, officers and men, nobody was lacking. He turned toward Wu Sangui and said with a laugh, "*Wangye* sends us off a long way out of town, you are extremely courteous. This time we received *Wangye*'s generous treatment, next time *Wangye* come to Beijing, let *Xiao Jiang* invite you."

Wu Sangui laughed aloud and said, "I will definitely disturb Wei *Jueye*."

The two men cupped their fists farewell. Wu Sangui walked toward the Princess' sedan chair to pay his respect and bid her farewell, and then he stuck his head in Wu Yingxiong's sedan chair and whispered something for a while, before leading his troops back to the city.

Although Wu Sangui's troops did not show any sign that they intend to attack, Wei Xiaobao did not feel at ease; he said, "This fellow's words cannot be trusted, let us leave quickly, the farther we are from Kunming the better." Thereupon the group left immediately.

After traveling for more than ten *li* and did not see any troop chasing them,

they stopped for a while to take a rest.

“Princess,” Li Zicheng said to Jiu Nan, “I have received your kindness in saving me so that I did not die under the big traitor’s men’s hands, I really am deeply grateful. Now please make your move.” While saying that, he took the saber he was wearing, reversed the hilt, and handed it over to her.

“Hey,” Jiu Nan mumbled, with an awkward expression on her face; she thought, “He is the big enemy who killed my father, how can I not avenge this enmity? But he has his hands tied waiting for the butcher, I can’t kill him just like that.” Turning her head toward Ah Ke, she cast her a glance, and muttered, “Turns out she … she is your daughter …”

“He is not my father,” Ah Ke said loudly.

“Nonsense,” Jiu Nan angrily said, “Your Mama admitted it herself, how can it be wrong?”

“Naturally he is your father,” Wei Xiaobao busily said, “He and your Mama have betrothed you to me to be my wife; this is called ‘a father and mother’s order …’”

Ah Ke’s heart was filled with resentment and indignation, yet she could not vent it out anywhere; suddenly she sprang up and punched Wei Xiaobao’s face. He was caught off-guard, the punch hit the bridge of his nose; immediately blood flowed in abundance.

“Aiyo,” Wei Xiaobao cried out, “You are murdering your own husband.”

Jiu Nan angrily said, “The two of you stop speaking unreasonable words! Stop making a mess!”

Ah Ke retreated several steps back, her small face was completely red; she pointed her finger to Li Zicheng and angrily said, “You are not my father! That woman is not my mother.” Pointing Jiu Nan she said, “You … you are not my Shifu. You … you are all bad people, you bullied me. I … I hate you …” She covered her face and cried loudly.

Jiu Nan sighed. “You are right,” she said, “I am not your Shifu, I snatched you away from Wu Sangui, not with good intention. You … you can go on your own. But your birth parents, you cannot not acknowledging them.”

Ah Ke stomped her foot and said, “I don’t want to acknowledge them, I don’t want to acknowledge them. I don’t have any father, I don’t have any mother, and I don’t have any Shifu.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “But you have me, your husband!”

Ah Ke’s anger shot to the roof, she picked up a stone and hurled it to him. Wei Xiaobao dodged sideways. Ah Ke turned around and ran along a small path toward the west.

“Hey, hey,” Wei Xiaobao called out, “Where are you going?”

Ah Ke halted her steps, turned around and hatefully said, “There will come a day that you will die in my hands.”

Wei Xiaobao did not dare to pursue anymore; he looked on helplessly as she ran away. Gloomy mood filled Jiu Nan’s heart, she waved her hand toward Li Zicheng without saying anything and rode off.

“Yuefu [father-in-law] *Daren*,” Wei Xiaobao said, “My Shifu won’t kill you, you’d better go quickly.”

In his heart Li Zicheng also felt inexplicably unhappy; he turned toward Wei Xiaobao and glowered at him. Being stared at like that, the hair on Wei Xiaobao’s body stood up; he was scared and withdrew two steps back. “Pei,” Li Zicheng spat on the ground, turned around and strode toward a small path.

Wei Xiaobao shook his head, thinking, “Even her own father and mother Ah Ke does not want to acknowledge, naturally she won’t acknowledge me, her husband, even more.” When he turned around, he saw Xu Tianchuan and Gao Yanchao standing behind him with weapons in their hands. The two men were afraid Li Zicheng would suddenly assault and harm their Wei *Xiangzhu*.

“This man turned the sky and the earth upside down in the past, and ruined out Great Ming’s rivers and mountains,” Xu Tianchuan said, “Until he is old he still carries the lofty quality of a hero like that.”

Wei Xiaobao stuck out his tongue. “He is very fierce,” he said; and then he asked, “Did you bring that Hantiemo?”

“He is a very important character,” Xu Tianchuan replied, “We did not dare to

leave him."

"Very good," Wei Xiaobao said, "Gentlemen must be very careful in taking care of him, don't let him escape along the way."

The party continued their journey northward. Wei Xiaobao went over to Mu Jiansheng, Liu Dahong and the others to exchange some pleasantries. In their hearts Mu Jiansheng and the others were also very unhappy; they all thought, "All our lives were saved by him, from this day onward, how can our Mu Palace strive for superiority against their Tian Di Hui?"

"Wei *Xiangzhu*," Liu Dahong said, "About toppling Wu Sangui or what have you, we cannot compete against Tian Di Hui anymore. Please report to Chen *Zongduozhu* on our behalf, tell him that henceforth the Mu Palace concede defeat to Tian Di Hui. Wei *Xiangzhu*'s kindness in saving our lives, I am afraid in our whole life we will never be able to repay."

"How could Liu *Laoyezi* [old master] say such thing?" Wei Xiaobao said, "All of us were in mortal danger and we escaped alive; we all managed to snatch our lives back."

"That little thief Liu Yizhou," Liu Dahong hatefully said, "There will come a day when I will make mincemeat of him."

"Was it him who disclose your secret?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

"If not him then who else?" Liu Dahong replied, "This kid … this kid …" Speaking to this point, his anger shot up to the heavens.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Did he remain at Wu Sangui's place?"

"Most probably," Mu Jiansheng said, "That day Liu Shifu sent him out to scout the enemy; he was captured by Wu Sangui's men. That very same night, a large number of troops and horses surrounded our residence. The place we stayed was extremely secret, if that man did not tell, there is no way Wu Sangui would ever find us." Speaking to that point, he heaved a deep sigh before continuing, "It's a pity that Ao *Dage* has sacrificed his life for his country." Cupping his fist toward Wei Xiaobao, he said, "Wei *Xiangzhu*, if Tian Di Hui has anything in the future, the one surnamed Mu will obey the order. The green mountain will not change, the crystal-clear water will always flow, let us part here."

“This place is still the big traitor’s territory,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Let us be together, there is strength in number. When we leave Yunnan, we will go our separate ways.”

Mu Jiansheng shook his head and said, “Thank you for Wei *Xiangzhu*’s good intention, if we ever fall head first into the big traitor’s hands again, we will not have any face to live among the people.” Thinking, “Mu Palace is at home in Yunnan, if we still rely on Tatar officers and soldiers for protection, what else can we say?” Therefore, leading the Mu Palace people, he bade his farewell and left.

Mu Jianping walked at the very last of the line; after only a few steps, she turned around and said, “I am leaving, you … you take care of yourself.”

“Yes,” Wei Xiaobao said, “You must do the same.” Lowering his voice, he said, “You stay with your *Gege*, don’t come back to Shen Long [Divine Dragon] Island. I will think about you every day.”

Mu Jianping nodded; she said in small voice, “I will too …”

Wei Xiaobao pulled the horse he was riding and turned the reins over to her hand, saying, “I give this horse to you.”

Mu Jianping’s eyes turned red; receiving the reins, she straddled the horseback and rode away to catch up with Mu Jiansheng and the others.

Chapter 33

Those without chronic disease find it hard to laugh, being distinguished and accomplishment are not the same.

(Translated by Foxs)

The log was chopped into two sections. Feng Xifan fell into the water. Hu Yizhi threw his saber toward Feng Xifan. Submerged in the water, Feng Xifan did not have any way of evading, he quickly threw his sword. 'Clang!' the saber and the sword collided midair; both weapons fell into the river.

After several days of travel, they had left the City of Kunming far behind them.

Since all along they did not see Wu Sangui's troops or horses pursuing, gradually everybody was relieved. One particular day they arrived at Qujing [prefecture, still in Yunnan]. When the night fell, four riders were rushing directly toward them. One rider jumped down for the horse and talked to the Valiant Cavalry vanguard that they had an urgent military intelligence to report to the Imperial Military Minister.

As soon as Wei Xiaobao received the report, he granted them an audience at once. He saw that the one in the front was a thin and small man with dark complexion; he had just about to ask the man what kind of military intelligence, when Qian Laoben, who was standing behind him, suddenly said, "You are Kuang *Xiong*, are you not?"

The man bowed and said, "*Xiongdi* is indeed Kuang Tianxiong. Qian *Dage*, how are you?"

Wei Xiaobao looked at Qian Laoben. Qian Laoben nodded and said in a low voice, "Our own people."

"Very good," Wei Xiaobao said, "Kuang *Laoxiong* has toiled much, let us go sit at the back."

They went to the rear hall; all the attendants were Tian Di Hui brothers. Qian Laoben said, "Kuang *Xiongdi*, this is our Green Wood Hall's Wei *Xiangzhu*."

Kuang Tianxiong bowed with cupped fist; he said, "By Heaven my father and Earth my mother, fighting the Qing restoring the Ming. Scarlet Fire Hall's Gu *Xiangzhu*'s subordinate Kuang Tianxiong pays his respect to Wei *Xiangzhu* and all Green Wood Hall *Dage*."

"Turns out it is Scarlet Fire Hall's Kuang *Dage*, nice to meet you, nice to meet you," Wei Xiaobao said.

Qian Laoben had met this Kuang Tianxiong several times in Hunan in the past; presently he introduced Li Lishi, Qi Biaoqing, Feng Jizhong, Xu Tianchuan, Priest Xuanzhen, Gao Yanchao, and the others to him. In turn, Kuang Tianxiong also introduced his three Scarlet Fire Hall brothers. Everybody knew that the Scarlet Fire Hall was in charge of Guizhou province. In just a few days they would reach Guizhou border. Having made contact with their fellow Society brothers, the Green Wood Hall warriors were very happy.

Wei Xiaobao said, “Last time I parted with Gu *Xiangzhu* in Zhili, and we have not seen each other ever since. Is everything going well with Gu *Xiangzhu*?”

“Gu *Xiangzhu* is well,” Kuang Tianxiong replied, “He instructed subordinate to send his regards to Wei *Xiangzhu* and all Green Wood Hall *Dage*. We have heard that Wei *Xiangzhu* and all *Dage* have accomplished many important matters in recent days, and we admire you very much. Today we can pay a formal visit, this is indeed the blessing of three lifetimes.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “We are all brothers here, there is no need for words of politeness. In just a few more days we are going to arrive at your honorable province, I wish to chat with Gu *Xiangzhu*.”

Kuang Tianxiong said, “Gu *Xiangzhu* instructed subordinate to report to Wei *Xiangzhu* that it would be best if gentlemen change route eastwards, do not go through Guizhou.”

Wei Xiaobao and the warriors were startled. Kuang Tianxiong said, “According to Gu *Xiangzhu*, he also wishes very much to have a chat with Wei *Xiangzhu* and all *Dage*, however, it would be best to meet within Guangxi.”

“And why is that?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

Kuang Tianxiong replied, “We obtained information that Wu Sangui has dispatched troops and horses to Xuanwei [county level city in Qujing], the town of Hongqiao, and Xin Tian Pu district to intercept Wei *Xiangzhu* and all *Dage* to bring you harm.”

“Ah!” all Green Wood Hall warriors exclaimed in surprise. Wei Xiaobao was shocked and angered at the same time. “His granny,” he cursed, “This traitor is indeed unwilling to concede. He is even willing to forfeit his own son’s life.”

“Wu Sangui is very sinister and ruthless,” Kuang Tianxiong said, “He dispatches not a few martial art experts, saying that they are to deal with certain Shitai by Wei *Xiangzhu*’s side, whose martial art skill was extremely high, and then have his son, the Tatar Princess, and Wei *Xiangzhu* captured, while the rest of the people would be killed to shut their mouths. Presently the Shaoguan mountain pass between Qujing and Zhanyi [another county in Qujing] has been closed, nobody could go through. The four of us took a detour through small paths on the mountain to get here; we were afraid that Wei *Xiangzhu* would come too

late and fall into the big traitor's scheme, hence we hurried along day and night to catch up."

Wei Xiaobao saw the four people's eyes were bloodshot, their cheeks hollow, obviously they were extremely weary. He said, "Four *Dage* have toiled very much, we are very grateful."

Kuang Tianxiong said, "Finally we managed to deliver the news in time and have not harmed the important matter." He sounded very relieved.

Wei Xiaobao asked his subordinates, "All *Dage*, what do you think?"

Qian Laoben said, "I wonder if Kuang *Dage* know the total number of troops that Wu Sangui sent to ambush us."

Kuang Tianxiong replied, "Wu Sangui did not have enough time to dispatch his troops from Kunming. I heard he sent the letter via flying pigeon to mobilize northern Yunnan and southern Guizhou's military forces, altogether there will be more than thirty thousand men."

Everybody cursed and swore. The number of troops under Wei Xiaobao's command was no more than two thousand men, less than 10% of the opposite party's force; indeed the few are no match for the many.

Qian Laoben asked again, "Did Gu *Xiangzhu* say where in Guangxi he wants to meet us?"

Kuang Tianxiong said, "Gu *Xiangzhu* has already sent people to notify our Society's Latter Family Hall's Ma *Xiangzhu* in Guangxi; if Wei *Xiangzhu* agrees, the three *Xiangzhu* can meet at Lucheng, Guangxi. From here to Lucheng in the east, the road is not too easy to travel, the distance is farther, but there won't be Wu Sangui's troops guarding it. Latter Family Hall's brothers will provide support along the way, nothing should go wrong."

When he heard that Wu Sangui had deployed more than thirty thousand troops to intercept them, Wei Xiaobao's heart was already trembling in fear; but when he heard that Gu *Xiangzhu* had made appropriate arrangement and Ma *Xiangzhu* would also send people to provide support along the way, his spirit was boosted instantly. "Good," he said, "We are going to Lucheng. That old fellow Wu Sangui, damn it, there will come a day we will show him good." Immediately

he issued an order to change their course southeast. He also ordered Kuang Tianxiong, four people, to sit in a large carriage so that they could rest.

When his troops heard that Wu Sangui was sending his army to intercept and kill them, nobody was not alarmed; knowing that they were in a dangerous place, they all hastened on with their journey. Not daring to alert the local authorities, every night they pitched camp in the wilderness.

One day they arrived at Lucheng. Ma Chaoxing, the *Xiangzhu* of Latter Family Hall and Gu Zhizhong, the *Xiangzhu* of Scarlet Fire Hall of Tian Di Hui, as well as the other brothers holding leadership positions of the two Halls had already waited in Lucheng. As the three Halls' brothers met, the meeting was very warm.

That evening Ma Chaoxing prepared a large banquet to welcome Wei Xiaobao and the Green Wood Hall warriors. During the banquet they talked about how the Mu Palace had conceded to Tian Di Hui; everybody was in high spirit.

After the banquet, the Scarlet Fire Hall's sentry post reported an incoming message: Wu Sangui's troops found out about Wei Xiaobao making a detour into Guangxi, they urgently pursued, and were currently at the Guangxi border, but did not dare to enter. They had already sent urgent report to Kunming, asking for instructions, whether they should disguise themselves as robbers and infiltrated Guangxi to handle this matter.

Ma Chaoxing laughed and said, "Guangxi is not Wu Sangui's territory. If that traitor leads his troops across the border, it will mean open rebellion. If he sends his troops masquerading as robbers, thinking that he could push the blame toward Guangxi's Kong Sizhen, even though he is rushing, it would still be too late."

They rested in Lucheng for one day. Wei Xiaobao still thought that they were too close to Yunnan, he was still afraid, hence he urged his party to continue their journey eastwards. By early morning the third day, he took his leave from Gu Zhizhong and Scarlet Fire Hall brothers, and led his entourage heading to the east. Ma Chaoxing and the Latter Family Hall's brothers accompanied them.

The farther they left Yunnan, the more Wei Xiaobao felt at ease. Along the way, they never stopped more than a day in one place, until they finally reached central Guangxi. After being frightened and were in limbo for a while, the

Imperial Bodyguards and other officers and soldiers reverted back to their old ways, once again they extorted the local prefecture and county officials and harassed the region.

One day they reached Liuzhou [prefecture, Guangxi]. When the local prefectural magistrate heard about the arrival of the Princess, he did his utmost to curry her favor by supplying everything, nothing was too difficult. The Imperial Bodyguards and the Valiant Cavalry officers and soldiers were like fish back in water; they gorged themselves and indulged themselves everywhere in the city.

In the evening of the third day, Wei Xiaobao was having idle talk with Ma Chaoxing and other Tian Di Hui brothers in a side room, when the captain of the Imperial Bodyguards Zhang Kangnian hurriedly walked in, and called in a loud voice, "Wei *Fu Zongguan*," and stopped without continuing, his face looked awkward.

Wei Xiaobao noticed that the left part of his face was swollen, his right eye was black; obviously he had been fighting and lost. Wei Xiaobao thought, "The Imperial Bodyguards don't hit people, others are already happy; who would be brazen enough to beat him up?" He did not want the Imperial Bodyguard to lose face in front of the Tian Di Hui brothers, hence he said to Ma Chaoxing, "Ma *Dage*, please continue sitting at ease, *Xiongdi* must excuse myself for a while."

"You are too kind," Ma Chaoxing said, "Wei *Jueye*, please do as you wish."

Wei Xiaobao went out of the side room, with Zhang Kangnian followed behind him. As soon as they were outside, he said, "Reporting to *Fu Zongguan*, Zhao *Erge* is arrested." What he meant by 'Second Brother Zhao' was the other Imperial Bodyguard captain, Zhao Qixian.

"Damn it," Wei Xiaobao cursed, "Who has the guts to do that? Is it Liuzhou guard? Or prefectural magistrate *yamen*? What did he do? Kill people?" He was thinking that if it were not for major violation, the local authorities would not dare to arrest Imperial Bodyguards.

Zhang Kangnian looked embarrassed. "Not local official," he said, "It's … it's a gambling establishment."

Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud. "His granny," he said, "Liuzhou casino dares to detain Imperial Bodyguards, it's indeed huge news. You lost, didn't you?"

Zhang Kangnian nodded. With a forced laugh he said, “The seven of us went to gamble, it was ‘big or small’. Damn it, that casino has a ghost in it, thirteen times in a row it produced ‘big’; the seven of us lost more than two thousand *taels*. Before the fourteenth throw, Zhao *Erge* and I both said that this time it must be ‘small’ …”

Wei Xiaobao shook his head and said, “Wrong, wrong. Most likely it would be ‘big’.”

Zhang Kangnian said, “Too bad we did not invite *Fu Zongguan* to guide us in gambling, otherwise we would have not fallen into this mess. The seven of us cleaned up our silver and banknotes, and bet everything on ‘small’. Ay!”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “When it was opened, it was ‘big’, wasn’t it?”

Zhang Kangnian spread out his arms with the palm up, gesturing a hopeless situation. He said, “The banker wanted to take our money, we did not allow him; we said that in all gambling establishment under the heavens, there is no way you could have fourteen ‘big’ in a row; they must be cheating. The casino owner came out to help to resolve the dispute, he said this time it did not count, nobody wins, nobody loses. Zhao *Erge* said no, he did not accept; this time it should have been ‘small’, the banker must have been cheating. We have lost such a lot of money, and this time obviously we won big, how could he say it did not count?”

Wei Xiaobao laughed. “Damn it,” he cursed, “You guys have no shame; clearly you lost, yet you still made a scene. Fourteen ‘big’ in a row is nothing, I have seen twenty four ‘big’ in a row.”

Zhang Kangnian said, “The casino owner said the same thing, but Zhao *Erge* said that in Beijing, under the Son of Heaven’s foot, there is no such rule. He threw a fit. I pulled my saber. The casino owner was so scared that his face turned white. He said that he was indebted to the Imperial Bodyguard *Daren* for our visit, he said that for the last several play, how could they dare to win our Imperial Bodyguard *Daren*’s money. Whatever amount the Imperial Bodyguard *Daren* lost, *Xiaoren* would return everything along with his gratitude. Zhao *Erge* said, ‘Alright, we did not lose, you just swindled our money, three thousand one hundred fifty three *taels*. We don’t want the change, just consider it our bad

luck; you can pay us back only three thousand *taels*.'"

Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud. In the meantime, they had reached the garden. "Doesn't it mean that you have just gotten rich?" he asked, "Did he pay?"

Zhang Kangnian said, "The casino boss was also very straightforward, he said that with friends, *yi qi* must be held first and foremost. He presented three thousand *taels* with both hands and handed it to Zhao *Erge*. Zhao *Erge* took it without so much of a thanks, he said that he accepted his gesture, just consider it his good luck. If he cheats again next time, he would not let him go."

Wei Xiaobao knitted his brows and said, "This time it is clear that Zhao Qixian is in the wrong. Others have given you face, plus let you walk out with shining white silver in your hands; not only you have your face intact, you also gain wealth, why would he say such thing?"

"That's right," Zhang Kangnian said, "If Zhao *Erge* said some pleasant talk and thanked him, it would be all right. But, after taking the money he still had to say offensive words …"

"Correct!" Wei Xiaobao said, "We eat and make our living in Jianghu; stealing, robbing, swindling, everything is permissible, but we must never offend our friends. There is a saying, 'When one split the bamboo into two, one must not harm the bamboo shoot.'"

"Yes, yes," Zhang Kangnian replied, but in his heart he thought, "Clearly we make our living in the Palace, you are the Imperial Envoy Minister, first class viscount; how could you say that we eat and make our living in Jianghu?"

Wei Xiaobao asked further, "So how did the fight start? That casino owner's martial art skill is very high?"

"It's not that," Zhang Kangnian replied, "The seven of us took the money, we were about to leave the casino, when one of the casino guests suddenly cursed, 'Damn it, if getting rich is that easy, why would we have to gamble a fart? It would be better if everybody just enter the imperial palace to serve the Emperor … Emperor …' *Fu Zongguan*, when that rebel thief mentioned His Majesty, he spoke very disrespectful words, I do not dare to repeat it."

Wei Xiaobao nodded. "I understand," he said, "This fellow's nerve is indeed

not small."

"Isn't that so?" Zhang Kangnian said, "When we heard him, naturally we were enraged. Zhao *Erge* threw the money onto a table; he drew his saber, and tried to grab that man's chest with his left hand. 'Bang!' that man punched Zhao *Erge* that he passed out. The rest of us, six people, made our move together. This rebel thief's martial art skill is indeed not low. Before I could see clearly, my face was punched; I was thrown out of the casino door, immediately the sky was dark and the earth black. I did not know what happened next. When I woke up, I saw Zhao *Erge* and the five brothers lying on the floor. That man put his foot on Zhao *Erge*'s head and said, 'There are seven animals in here, one thousand *taels* each. You go quickly to get the money to redeem them. *Laozi* will only wait for four hours [orig. two *sichen*]. After four hours, if you don't come back, *laozi* will slaughter them and sell them off. For ten *taels* a catty, if the business is not bad, I can sell one animal for more than a thousand *taels*."

Wei Xiaobao was amused and shocked at the same time; he asked, "Do you know which group this fellow belongs to? Did you manage to find out?"

Zhang Kangnian replied, "This man is very tall, his fist is bigger than a rice bowl, his face is covered in grizzled beard, his clothes were tattered, he almost looks like a beggar."

"How many companions does he have?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Zhang Kangnian replied, "This … this … subordinates is not too clear. There were about seventeen, eighteen guests in the casino at that time, but I don't know if they are his companions or not."

Wei Xiaobao knew that since Zhang Kangnian was beaten by the man that he passed out, naturally he wanted to get away as soon as he could without daring to look around too much. He thought, "This old beggar must be a Jianghu hero; seeing the Imperial Bodyguards gambled shamelessly, he could not refrain from making his move. He would not necessarily want to slaughter them and sell them. I don't think anybody would agree to pay ten *taels* a catty of Zhao Qixian's meat. If I deployed large military force to deal with him, one person, it's not the conduct of a real man."

He thought further, "This old beggar has a very good martial art skill. If I ask

Shifu to help me deal with him, I am sure it would be a cinch; but how could Shifu be willing to spend some effort for the Palace's Imperial Bodyguards? If I let this matter known to Ma *Ziangzhu* and the others, they would definitely laugh at my subordinates, thinking that the Imperial Bodyguards are useless." Hence he also thought that asking for Feng Jizhong, Xu Tianchuan or the other's help would also be inappropriate. Suddenly he remembered two people. "Don't be anxious," he said, "I will personally look at this matter."

Zhang Kangnian's face lit up. "Yes, yes," he said, "I'll get a hundred men, I think it should be enough."

Wei Xiaobao shook his head and said, "No need to bring that many."

"*Fu Zongguan* should be a bit more careful," Zhang Kangnian said, "That old beggar's hands and feet were very fierce."

"No worries," Wei Xiaobao said, "You have me."

Returning to his own room, he fetched a large fold of banknotes, a dozen or so gold ingots, and stuffed everything into his pocket. Next he went to a room in the eastern wing and knocked, "Are the two gentlemen here?" he called.

The door opened, Lu Gaoxuan appeared and said, "Please come in."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Could the two gentlemen come with me? We have something to handle."

Lu Gaoxuan and Fat Toutuo were wearing Valiant Cavalry Sergeant uniform; they always go with Wei Xiaobao as his companions, but in Kunming and along the way, they had not done anything for fear that other people might recognize their identity. Day in and day out they always hid in their room, and were quite bored. Hearing Wei Xiaobao was going to take them on some errand, they followed him enthusiastically.

Seeing Wei Xiaobao was only taking two Valiant Cavalry Sergeants, Zhang Kangnian was greatly disappointed. "*Fu Zongguan*," he said, "Let subordinate call several Imperial Bodyguard brothers to wait upon *Fu Zongguan*."

"No need," Wei Xiaobao replied, "Too many people will be troublesome instead. You brought a hundred people, if he gets us all, a thousand *taels* each, a hundred thousand *taels* total, it is going to hurt me a little bit. But if only four of

us going, it is only four thousand *taels*, merely a trifle, I won't take it to heart."

Zhang Kangnian knew he was only joking, but seeing him casually bringing only two sergeants to face such a serious danger, he thought Wei Xiaobao was pulling his rank too much. "Yes, yes," he said, "But that rebel thief's martial art skill is really high."

"Fine," Wei Xiaobao said, "Let me have a match with him. If I lose, he only needs to cut my flesh in pieces and sell it; it's not such a big deal."

Zhang Kangnian knitted his brows, he did not dare to say anything anymore. He did not know that these two Valiant Cavalry Sergeants were first-class characters of the Wulin world. Any rogue character of the casino, no matter how high his martial art skill, he could not possibly surpass the two martial art experts of the Divine Dragon Cult.

Zhang Kangnian took Wei Xiaobao to the gambling establishment. They had just reached the door when they heard someone inside the casino called out loudly, "I have a pair of seven here, isn't it big enough?"

Another man laughed aloud and said, "Awfully sorry, in *Xiongdi*'s hand, I just happen to have a pair of eight." Followed by a loud slap, apparently the first man slapped his tiles [of card] onto the table, while cursing loudly.

Wei Xiaobao and Zhang Kangnian looked at each other; they thought, "How come they are still gambling inside?" Wei Xiaobao stepped in. Zhang Kangnian cowered behind him. Lu Gaoxuan and Fat Toutuo stepped into the door and stopped at the threshold, waiting for Wei Xiaobao's instruction.

They saw a large platform in the hall, four people were sitting on the four corners, gambling. Zhao Qixian and five Imperial Bodyguards were lying on the floor. On the east sat a man, his face was covered in grizzled beard, his clothes were tattered, from the holes in his garment they could see hairy, dark-colored muscles; he must be the old beggar.

On the south sat a young, handsome scholar. Wei Xiaobao was startled, he recognized the man as Li Xihua, whom he had met in Beijing. His martial art skill was rather good, he was hit by Chen Jinnan's 'Blood Clotting Divine Claw', and since then Wei Xiaobao had never seen him. Unexpectedly now they met again at a Liuzhou gambling establishment.

On the west sat a man dressed as a farmer, a peasant, about fifty years or so, with an anxious expression, drooping eyebrows and lowered eyes; evidently he had lost and could not recover his money.

The one sitting on the north looked very peculiar, he was very short and very fat, his entire body looked like a meatball, but his clothing was extremely luxurious, his long robe and *magua* [buttoned mandarin jacket] were embroidered. The five sense organs on his face [i.e. nose, eyes, lips, tongue, ears] were crowded together, as if someone had taken his head and rubbed it between his palms, turning it into a ball. This short and fat man's hands were holding a pair of dominoes, his pair of big eyes turned into a slit, as he focused his attention to the tiles.

Wei Xiaobao mused, "I wonder if this Li Xihua recognizes me? It has been a long while, plus I am wearing officer's uniform today; most likely he does not recognize me. There is no hurry to greet him." Thereupon he laughed and said, "Four friends look very exciting, *Xiongdi* also wants to play a hand, I wonder if I can?"

While saying that, he walked over to the table. He saw piles of money, about five or six thousand *taels*, and surprisingly, the pile in front of the peasant was the biggest. He was the biggest winner, yet his face carried the biggest loser expression; Wei Xiaobao felt a bit strange.

The short and fat man reached out to slowly draw a tile with his three fat fingers. Suddenly, "Aha!" he yelled. Wei Xiaobao jumped in fright. The short and fat man laughed aloud and said, "Wonderful, wonderful! This time I won't lose to you, will I?" 'Slap!' he slapped the tile onto the table. It was a ten-dot, a 'plum blossom' [i.e. five dots and five dots].

Wei Xiaobao thought, "Most likely the tile in his hand is also a 'plum blossom'; a pair of plum blossoms' chance of winning is very high." The short and fat man was all smiles. 'Slap!' he slapped the other tile onto the table.

As the other people looked at it, they were staring blankly for a moment, and then broke into hearty laugh. Turned out it was a 'four and six', also a ten-dot; ten-dot plus ten-dot was no more than a departing ten. In *Pai Jiu* [paigow], nothing is smaller than a departing ten. He was only a player; even if the banker

also had a departing ten, departing ten beats departing ten, the banker still wins.

The peasant still had a distressed look on his face, it did not have the least bit of smiling expression. Wei Xiaobao looked at the tiles in front of him, it was a pair of nine. Currently he was the banker, hence the difference between his pair and the short and fat man's was 108,000 *li*. Wei Xiaobao thought, "This man has neither word nor movement; he is a very formidable gambler."

"What's so funny?" the short and fat man asked. He turned to the peasant, "My pair of tens beats your pair of nines. A hundred *taels*, quickly pay."

The peasant shook his head, "You lost," he said.

The short and fat man was angry. "Are you nuts?" he cried out, "Count it; this tile has one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, ten dots. That tile also one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, ten dots. Aren't they a pair of tens?"

Wei Xiaobao cast a glance toward Zhang Kangnian; he thought, "This short and fat man will make a good Imperial Bodyguard; winning he takes the money, losing he makes a racket."

The peasant still shook his head, saying, "This is a departing ten. You lost."

The short and fat man could not restrain his rage, he sprang up. However, as he stood up, unexpectedly he was a head shorter than when he sat. Turned out when he sat on the stool, his legs were hanging in the air, hence he was taller compared to when he was standing up. Extending his fat hand, he pointed his finger to the peasant's nose and shouted, "I got an a departing ten, you got a departing nine. Naturally departing ten beats your departing nine."

The peasant said, "Mine is a pair of nines, yours is a departing ten. Departing ten means zero."

The short and fat man said, "Isn't this a plain bullying?"

Wei Xiaobao could not hold his peace much longer. "*Laoxiong*," he interjected, "What you have is not a pair." While saying that, he picked a plum blossom, and a four-and-six from the tiles scattered on the table, then he paired the plum blossom with the other plum blossom, and the four-and-six with the other four-and-six. "Now these," he said, "Are pairs. Your two ten-dots have different

pattern, plum blossom are all black, while four-and-six have some reds on it. They are not a pair."

The short and fat man still refused to accept; pointing to the pair of nines, he said, "Are you saying that your pair of nines has the same pattern? One tile is entirely black, the other has some reds on it, they are not the same. Ten dots is bigger than nine dots."

Wei Xiaobao thought that this man was stubborn and always wanted to win the argument; temporarily he was at a loss as how to make him understand. He said, "This is *Pai Jiu*'s rule, it has been always like that."

The short and fat man said, "Even if it has been always like that, it is still illogical. Anything illogical is out of the question. Are we following reason or not?"

All along, Li Xihua and the old beggar were only sitting quietly with a smile on their faces, they did not interrupt at all. Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Naturally in gambling we must follow the rule; if there is no rule, how can we gamble?"

"Alright," the short and fat man said, "Let me ask you, the little baby: why is it that my ten dots cannot beat his nine dots?" While saying that, he picked a pair of plum blossoms and slammed it in front of him.

"Uh, yours was not this pair," Wei Xiaobao said.

The short and fat man was furious; both sides of his cheeks were bulging, as he shouted, "Muddleheaded kid, who says mine was not this pair?" Picking up the pair of plum blossoms, he casually flipped it over, slapped it onto the table in front of him, flipped it back up, and said, "When I slapped it earlier, it left a mark on the table, just look!"

He saw a clear impression of the tiles on the table, as if the dots of a pair of plum blossoms were embossed on the wood. His hand strength was indeed not weak; Wei Xiaobao was agape and tongue-tied, he was speechless.

The peasant said, "Right, right, *laoxiong* won. Here's a hundred *taels*." He picked a silver *yuanbao* and pushed it to the front of the short and fat man. And then he picked thirty-two tiles and turned them over. After shuffling it for a

while, he arranged the tiles, eight tiles in a row, four rows in total, neat and tidy rows of tiles. Lightly he pushed the rows of tiles to the middle of the table, and then he also pushed the large pile of money in front of him forward.

Wei Xiaobao had keen eyes; he could see a neat and tidy impression of the thirty-two tiles on the table. Although the impression was not as deep as the plum blossoms earlier, it was only a faint and barely visible imprint on the wood, but considering his movement was very light, apparently his martial art skill was not below that of the short and fat man's. As he pushed the tiles forward, most of the imprint was uncovered. In a glance Wei Xiaobao could see pair by pair of 'heaven', 'earth', and 'men' in a row. He knew the peasant was secretly playing tricks.

The short and fat man pushed two hundred *taels* toward the Heaven Gate as his stake. "Throw the dice, throw the dice!" he called out. Turning toward Li Xihua and the old beggar he said, "Quickly put your bet down, why are you so slow?"

Li Xihua laughed and said, "*Laoxiong* is so impatient, why don't the two of you gamble?"

"Very well," the short and fat man said. Turning to the old beggar he asked, "Are you going to make a bet?"

The old beggar shook his head. "I won't. Departing ten beats departing nine, this kind of *Pai Jiu* I don't know how to play."

The short and fat man was angry. "Are you saying I was wrong?" he asked.

"I said I don't know how to play," the old beggar replied, "I have never said you were wrong."

"Damn it," the short and fat man angrily cursed, "You are all not a good thing. Hey, little baby, you are babbling nonsense in here, are you going to gamble or not?" Naturally the last question was directed toward Wei Xiaobao.

Wei Xiaobao laughed. "Let me help the banker," he said, "*Dage* here, I want to form partnership with you to be the banker; can I?" While saying that, he took eight or nine small gold ingots from his pocket and put them on the table. The shiny gold was gleaming, it worth at least a thousand *taels* of silver.

“Alright,” the peasant said, “*Xiao Xiongdi* has good fortune and good luck, we are guaranteed to win.”

The short and fat man angrily said, “Are you saying I am guaranteed to lose?”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “If you are afraid of losing, you may bet a little less.”

The short and fat man was furious. “I want to bet two hundred more *taels*,” he said, while taking two more *yuanbao* and put them on the Heaven Gate.

The peasant said, “*Xiao Xiongdi*’s luck in gambling is good; you throw the dice.”

“Alright!” Wei Xiaobao replied. Picking up the dice, he weighed it in his hands, and to his great delight, he found out that the dice were loaded with lead. He thought, “Unexpectedly the dice in this gambling establishment also have this kind of secret.” At first he was afraid that he was a bit rusty, his hand was out of practice, but as soon as he picked the lead-loaded dice, he felt relieved instantly. His mouth mumbled, “Spirit of Heaven, spirit of the Earth, the first spirit of gambling deity, Bodhisattva, little demon of the dice carrying the *yuanbao*, one by one enter in! Clear kill!” While his mouth was shouting, his fingers turned, he threw the dice into the bowl; as expected, he got seven dots. The Heaven Gate took the first set, the banker took the third set.

By looking at the impression on the table, Wei Xiaobao knew that the short and fat man had a ‘four and six’, and a ‘tiger head’ [i.e. five and six], valued at one dot, while his side got two pairs of ‘earth’ [i.e. double one]. “*Laoxiong*,” he said to the peasant, “I threw the dice, you look at the tiles. Win or lose, it is decided by the mandate of Heaven.”

The peasant picked the tiles, felt it with his fingers, and put it down on the table.

“Ha!” the short and fat man exclaimed as he flipped the ‘four and six’ tile. “Ten dots,” he said, “Wonderful!” And then with another ‘Ha!’ he flipped the ‘tiger head’ and said, “One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven; eleven dots. Wonderful!” Reaching out, the opened up the banker’s tiles and said, “One, two, three, four; four dots altogether. My twenty-one dots eat your four dots. I win!”

Wei Xiaobao and the peasant looked at each other in dismay. The short and fat man said, “Quickly pay!”

Wei Xiaobao said, “More dots win, less dots lose, regardless of heaven or earth, pair or no pair, is that right?”

“Why not?” the short and fat man said, “How can more dots lose to less dots? Your four dots want to win against my twenty-one dots?”

“Alright,” Wei Xiaobao said, “That’s the rule.” He paid the short and fat man four small gold ingots, saying, “Each gold ingot worth a hundred *taels* of silver. Place your bet.”

The short and fat man was very happy; he laughed and said, “I still bet four hundred *taels*, if I bet more, I am afraid you will lose and become anxious.”

Wei Xiaobao looked at the tile imprint on the table, he threw five dots. The banker picked the tiles first, it was a pair of ‘heaven’ [i.e. double six]. The short and fat man got a ‘long three’ [i.e. double three] and a ‘bench’ [i.e. double two]. Both tiles combined, the number of dots was still less than one ‘heaven’ tile. He cursed under his breath, yet he had no choice but to pay. And then he bet four hundred *taels* again.

Three sets of hand later, the short and fat man lost everything, there was not a single *tael* left in front of him. His face was bulging deep red like a blood ball. His short and fat arms groped around his pocket, but he could not find anything that he could bet. Suddenly he pointed to Zhao Qixian, who was still lying on the floor, and said, “This fellow worth several hundred *taels*, doesn’t he? I bet him.” While saying that, he picked Zhao Qixian and put him on the table.

Zhao Qixian’s acupoints were sealed, he could not move a hair. The old beggar suddenly said, “Wait a minute, it was *zaixia* who caught these several Imperial Bodyguards, how could *laoxiong* take them as your bet?”

The short and fat man replied, “I just want to borrow them, can I?”

“If you lost, how are you going to pay me back?” the old beggar asked.

The short and fat man was startled. “I won’t lose,” he said.

“Just in case *laoxiong*’s luck is not good, and you lost?” the old beggar asked.

“That’s easy,” the short and fat man said, “Presently in the city of Liuzhou Imperial Bodyguards are indeed not a few; I’ll just go grab some and pay you back.”

The old beggar nodded. “That will work,” he said.

The short and fat man urged Wei Xiaobao, “Quickly throw the dice.”

By this time the set of tiles had already been used up. Wei Xiaobao said to the peasant, “Would *laoxiong* shuffle and arrange the tiles just like before?”

Without saying anything the peasant shuffled the thirty-two tiles back and forth on the surface of the table. After a while, he arranged the tiles in a square. Wei Xiaobao was startled; not only he did not see any new imprint on the table, even the previous imprint was also erased by him secretly exerting his internal energy while he was pushing and rubbing the tiles around; what’s left was only faint traces of horizontal and vertical lines so that Wei Xiaobao could not distinguish the dots anymore.

If the short and stout man was still betting gold and silver, Wei Xiaobao would not mind too much, he would let the peasant gamble with him; who would win, who would lose, it had nothing to do with him. But right now, placed on the Heaven Gate as the bet was Zhao Qixian, while he could not shirk from being the banker. Since he would not know where the strong suit would be, loaded dice or not, it would be worthless.

“Since only two people gambling,” he said, “Why must we play *Pai Jiu*? Won’t it be better just to play dice? He who has more dots, win.”

The short and fat man shook his round head like a kettledrum, “*Laozi* loves to play *Pai Jiu*,” he said.

“You don’t understand *Pai Jiu*,” Wei Xiaobao said, “What will you play?”

The short and fat man was furious; he grabbed Wei Xiaobao’s chest, raised him up, and gave him a good shaking. “Your granny,” he said, “Are you saying I don’t understand *Pai Jiu*?”

Being shaken randomly like this, the bones in Wei Xiaobao’s body were crackling. Suddenly he heard someone behind him calling out, “Let him go, you must not do that!” It was precisely Fat Toutuo’s voice.

The short and fat man's right hand raised Wei Xiaobao high in the air. "Uh, how can you be here?" he asked in surprise, "Why can't I do this?"

They heard Lu Gaoxuan's voice replying, "This is Wei … Wei *Daren*; he has a very special background, you must by all means not offend him. Quickly put him down."

The short and fat man was delighted. "He … he is Wei … Wei … damn it, he is Wei Xiaobao? Ha ha, wonderful, wonderful! I happen to be looking for him. Ha ha, finally I found him." While saying that, he turned around and headed out toward the door, with his right hand still carrying Wei Xiaobao.

Both Fat Toutuo and Lu Gaoxuan barred his way. "*Shou Zunzhe* [lit. thin revered master]," Lu Gaoxuan said, "Since you already knew Wei *Daren*'s background, why are you still this rude? Quickly put him down."

The fat and short man said, "Even if *Jiaozhu* is here personally, I would still not letting him go. Unless he gives me the antidote."

"Don't make a scene," Fat Toutuo said, "You did not take the leopard … that pill, what do you need the antidote for?"

"Humph," the short and fat man replied, "You don't understand anything. Quickly get out of the way, don't blame me for being impolite to you."

With his body hanging in the air, Wei Xiaobao heard the exchange between these three people, he mused, "So this short and fat man is actually Fat Toutuo's *Shixiong*, Thin Toutuo. No wonder he is unusually fat, and amusingly short."

At the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful the other day, there was a big-meatball-like freak hiding inside the fake Empress Dowager's quilt, who was then ran out stark naked while carrying her out of the Palace. Afterwards Wei Xiaobao inquired of Fat Toutuo and Lu Gaoxuan, and found out that it was Fat Toutuo's martial brother Thin Toutuo. It was because that day he was running away so fast that Wei Xiaobao did not see his appearance clearly, so much so that although he had been gambling with him for half a day, he had not recognized him.

Wei Xiaobao's mind was churning, "Fat Toutuo once said that in the past he and his Shixiong, Thin Toutuo, two men, were sent on a mission overseas by

Jiaozhu, and were unable to return within the appointed time, to such an extent that the leopard embryo tendon-altering pill they took flared up. Fat Toutuo became tall and thin, while thin Toutuo became short and fat. By this time the two of them have already taken the antidote, yet their original stature did not return. So why would this short and fat man want the antidote? Ah, right, the poison of the leopard embryo tendon-altering pill in the old wh0re fake Empress Dowager's body has not been neutralized. This Thin Toutuo slept with her under the same quilt, obviously they are lovers." He said in a loud voice, "You want the leopard embryo tendon-altering pill antidote, yet you still have not put me down?"

As soon as Thin Toutuo heard the five characters 'leopard embryo tendon-altering pill', his entire fat body immediately shivered. Bending his right arm, he put Wei Xiaobao down, stretched out his left hand and said, "Bring it out quickly."

"You are so rude to me, humph, humph! What did you just say to me?" Wei Xiaobao said.

Thin Toutuo suddenly leaped forward, pressed his left hand on Wei Xiaobao's back, and shouted, "Bring the antidote out quickly." The point his fat left hand pressed on was precisely the 'Da Chui' [big hammer/spine] acupoint. If he exerted a bit of strength in his palm, Wei Xiaobao's heart arteries would be shaken and would break immediately.

Fat Toutuo and Lu Gaoxuan called out together, "You must not do that!"

Their voice had not disappeared, three palms already landed on Thin Toutuo's body. The old beggar's palm rested on the 'bai hui' [hundred meeting] acupoint of the crown of his head. Li Xihua's palm was pressing on the 'yu zhen' [jade pillow] acupoint on the back of his head. The peasant's palm was actually pushing on his face, the forefinger and middle finger were pressing above his eyelid. The 'bai hui' and 'yu zhen' were two vital acupoints on a human's body, plus if the farmer exerted slightly more strength onto his fingers, he would be able to dig the Thin Toutuo's eyeballs out. Thin Toutuo, however, was really too short; compared to Wei Xiaobao, he was still half a head shorter, so that when the three of them made their moves together, they had to target his round head, because they could not conveniently reach the vital acupoints on his chest or

back.

When Fat Toutuo and Lu Gaoxuan saw the way the three men move, they knew that these three were martial art experts. If the three of them exerted their strength simultaneously, perhaps Thin Toutuo's fat head would be immediately crushed to pulp. "You must not do that!" they cried out together.

"Short and fat," the old beggar said, "Quickly let him go."

"As soon as he give me the antidote, I'll let him go," Thin Toutuo replied.

The old beggar said, "If you don't let go, I'll exert my strength!"

Thin Toutuo said, "If I have to die anyway, we'll perish together …" Suddenly, Fat Toutuo's right palm moved toward the old beggar's flank, while Lu Gaoxuan's palm went toward the back of Li Xihua's neck.

Fat and Lu, two people, were standing really closed behind them. They were wearing the uniform of Valiant Cavalry Sergeant. Although from the earlier exchange the old beggar and Li Xihua knew that these two men were acquainted with Thin Toutuo, they had never expected that these two people's martial art skill was extremely superior. In just one move they already fell under their control.

Fat and Lu, two people, spoke at the same time, "Everybody let go!"

The peasant suddenly removed his palm from Thin Toutuo's face, and swiftly moved both palms toward Fat and Lu, two people's backs. "You two let go first," he said.

"Ha ha," Li Xihua laughed, "This is fun! Interesting, interesting!" He removed his palm from Thin Toutuo, but quick as lightning the palm landed on the top of the peasant's head.

This way, Wei Xiaobao, Thin Toutuo, Li Xihua, Lu Gaoxuan, Fat Toutuo, the peasant and the old beggar, seven people were under the other's control, each one of them had his vital point under the other's palm. In that instant the seven of them were like clay figurines or wooden statues, nobody dared to make a reckless move. Wei Xiaobao was the only one being threatened, but did not threaten anybody else. He was also the only one who was fully aware of why his vital point was under someone else's control; it was an unfathomable mystery to

the other six people.

“Zhang Kangnian!” Wei Xiaobao called out.

By this time, other than several casino workers huddled at the corner, only Zhang Kangnian remained inside the gambling establishment. “*Cha*!” he replied. ‘Shua!’ he pulled his saber.

“Dog Imperial Bodyguard,” Thin Toutuo yelled, “Come here if you have guts!”

Zhang Kangnian raised his *yaodao* saber; but afraid that this short and fat man might harm Wei Xiaobao, he did not dare to take even one step closer.

Wei Xiaobao was surrounded in the middle. He felt that in among the strange things that had happened to him in his entire life, nothing was more strange than this. “Interesting, interesting!” he called out, “Short and fat, kill me with one palm, it’s not a big deal. You yourself will die, it’s not a big deal. But you will never get the leopard embryo tendon-altering pill’s antidote. That old lover of yours, the flesh of her entire body will rot piece by piece; she will have a rotten bald head first, and then …”

“Stop it!” Thin Toutuo shouted.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Her face will rot, one by one her eyes, nose, ears will fall, the holes will appear …”

Right this moment, suddenly from the entrance of the hall someone said, “In here!” And then someone else said, “Seize them all!” Everybody turned their heads at the same time toward the entrance. Suddenly a white ray flashed; someone with a sword in his hand circled around them. They felt the vital points on their back, flank, waist, shoulder, slightly went numb, as their acupoints were sealed. In an instant, they all went down to the floor.

They saw three people were standing at the door. Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted. “Ah Ke,” he called out, “You have finally come …” But as soon as the word ‘come’ came out of his mouth, his heart sank, and he stopped immediately. He saw two men standing by her side, on her left was Li Zicheng, on her right was the person he loathed the most in all his life, Zheng Keshuang. On the east was a man who had just put the sword back into its sheath, standing with arms akimbo, and a cold laugh on his face; it was none other than ‘One Sword without

Blood' Feng Xifan.

Thin Toutuo, the old beggar, Li Xihua, Fat Toutuo, Lu Gaoxuan and the peasant, six martial art masters had their hands threatening each other's vital points; this one did not dare to move, that one also did not dare to move. Suddenly another martial art master appeared, without expending the slightest effort he managed to paralyze them all; even Zhang Kangnian was also hit by the sword.

Thin Toutuo was sitting on the ground, but compared to when he was standing, he actually did not appear too much shorter. "What kind of 'thing' are you?" he angrily shouted, "You dare to seal *laozi*'s 'yang guan' [positive pass] and 'shen tang' [divine hall] acupoints."

With a cold laugh Feng Xifan said, "Your martial art skill is not bad at all, unexpectedly you know which acupoints of yours are being sealed."

Thin Toutuo angrily said, "Quickly unseal *laozi*'s acupoints, I'll fight you. What kind of damn hero are you, launching a sneak attack like that?"

Feng Xifan laughed, "Are you a hero?" he said, "Damn it, a hero who is lying on the floor, unable to move at all."

Thin Toutuo angrily said, "*Laozi* is sitting on the floor, not lying on the floor. Damn it, don't you have eyes?"

Feng Xifan raised his left foot and lightly pushed on Thin Toutuo's shoulder. Thin Toutuo fell face up. But the fat on his buttocks was unusually thick, the weight on his entire body was concentrated there, so that when he fell down, although he could not exert any strength, his body involuntarily sat back up.

Zheng Keshuang laughed aloud and said, "Ke *Mei*, look, don't you think this roly-poly toy is fun?"

Ah Ke smiled and said, "It's very strange."

Zheng Keshuang said, "You wanted to find this little demon to take revenge, finally your cherished dream has arrived. Are we going to catch him and slowly control him, or just kill him with a stab of the sword?"

Wei Xiaobao was shocked; he thought, "Little demon, these two characters

can only mean me; could it be that Ah Ke is looking for me to take revenge? But I have never offended her."

Clenching her teeth, Ah Ke said, "As soon as I see this man, I get angry; I'll just kill him with a stab of the sword." While saying that, 'shua!' she drew the sword and walked toward Wei Xiaobao.

"Don't kill him!" Thin Toutuo, Fat Toutuo, Lu Gaoxuan, the old beggar, Li Xihua, and Zhang Kangnian, six people shouted together.

"Shijie," Wei Xiaobao said, "I have never …"

"I am not your Shijie!" Ah Ke angrily said, "Little demon, you are always thinking of harming me, of humiliating me!" Lifting her sword, she thrust it toward the pit of Wei Xiaobao's stomach.

Everybody cried out in alarm. But they saw the sword bounced back. Turned out Wei Xiaobao was wearing his treasured vest to protect his body, the sword was unable to penetrate.

Ah Ke was startled. "Pierce his eyes!" Zheng Keshuang said.

"Right!" Ah Ke said. Raising her sword, she thrust it forward again.

Suddenly from the corner of the roof someone flew down and threw himself on Wei Xiaobao's body. The sword stabbed the person's shoulder. Holding Wei Xiaobao in his arms, the person brought him rolling toward the corner of the hall, away from the sword, while pulling the dagger from Wei Xiaobao's boot and held it in his hand. This person was also wearing Valiant Cavalry Sergeant uniform, his movement was nimble, his stature short and small, his face was covered in mud and dirt, hence his appearance was unclear.

Seeing he willingly took the sword on Wei Xiaobao's behalf, everybody thought, "This person is very loyal."

Feng Xifan drew his sword and slowly walked over. He shook his sword that it turned into a flower sword with more than a dozen petals. Suddenly there was a 'Ding!' the sword in Feng Xifan's hand was cut into two, while blood was gushing from the Valiant Cavalry Sergeant's shoulder. Turned out the person used Wei Xiaobao's dagger to break the sword in the opponent's hand; if not for the fact that Wei Xiaobao's dagger was incomparably sharp, perhaps by this time he was

dead. With the sword stab from Ah Ke on his shoulder earlier, his shoulder suffered two sword wounds in a row.

Feng Xifan's countenance turned pale. "Humph," he snorted, and threw the broken sword to the floor. Temporarily he could not make up his mind; should he fetch another sword and attack again or not?

"Ha ha," Wei Xiaobao called out, "One Sword without Blood Feng Xifan, you stab a soldier under my command that he shed this much blood. Your title should be changed, you should be called 'Half Sword with Blood' Feng Xifan."

With his left hand pressing on the wound on his shoulder, with his right hand the Valiant Cavalry Sergeant massaged the acupoints on Wei Xiaobao's chest and back, trying to unseal them.

Fat and Thin, two Toutuo, Lu Gaoxuan, Li Xihua, and the others were controlling each other when suddenly someone else launched a sneak attack and hence all of them had fallen into this plot, in their hearts they all were very dissatisfied. Hearing Wei Xiaobao, they all burst out laughing. The old beggar said in a loud voice, "Half Sword with Blood Feng Xifan, marvelous, marvelous! Speaking about shameless people in the world, Sire can be considered number two."

"Why is he considered number two?" Li Xihua asked, "Would you care to advice?"

The old beggar said, "Compared to Wu Sangui, this Half Sword with Blood's skill seems to be a bit lacking."

They all burst out laughing. Li Xihua said, "In my opinion, the difference is quite a lot."

Feng Xifan had always been extremely proud of his martial art skill; hearing everybody was scoffing at him like that, he could not stop his entire body from trembling. If right now he picked another sword and attacked that Valiant Cavalry Sergeant, to injure him would be as easy as turning his hand over; but of course it would not be fitting to his status. Staring at the sergeant, he asked, "What's your name? I won't take your life today, but next time you come into my hand, I will make you die a miserable and unspeakable death."

The sergeant replied, “I … I …” His voice was very tender and delicate.

“Ah!” Wei Xiaobao cried out in surprise and delight, “You are Shuang’er, my precious, good Shuang’er!” Reaching out, he removed her hat, her long hair fell down, draping over her shoulder. Wei Xiaobao embraced her waist with his left arm, and said, “She is my little servant girl. Half Sword with Blood, you can’t even defeat my little servant girl, yet you are still tooting your horn?”

Feng Xifan was extremely angry; he raised his left foot, ‘Crash! Bang!’ he kicked the gambling table in the middle of the hall, along with all the piles of coins and *yuanbao*, plus Zhao Qixian who was lying on the table. The table flew up and crashed onto the roof. Money and *Pai Jiu* tiles rained down on Thin Toutuo and the others’ heads; they all cursing and yelling. Without saying anything Feng Xifan turned around and left.

Right this moment, two men walked side-by-side through the main gate. “Get out of my way!” Feng Xifan shouted, and pushed with both hands. The two men blocked with their palms; as their two palms met Feng Xifan’s two palms, the three of them made stifled grunts. The two men fell back several steps, their backs crashed heavily onto the wall. Feng Xifan swayed; he took a deep breath, and walked out in big strides. ‘Wah!’ the two men spurted out a mouthful of blood. Turned out they were Feng Jizhong and Priest Xuanzhen.

In quick steps Wei Xiaobao walked over to support Feng Jizhong, while asking Priest Xuanzhen, “*Daozhang* [Taoist priest], are you alright?”

Xuanzhen coughed twice before answering, “I am alright. Wei … Wei *Daren* alright?”

“Not bad,” Wei Xiaobao replied, as he turned his head to look at Feng Jizhong. Feng Jizhong nodded with a forced laugh. His martial art skill actually far surpassed Xuanzhen, but when exchanging palm strike just now, he happened to receive Feng Xifan’s right palm, hence he received a lot stronger palm force, consequently, his injury was heavier than Xuanzhen.

“Wei *Xiongdi*,” Li Xihua said, “In your Valiant Cavalry Regiment the number of capable persons is indeed not a few!” Turns out the clothes Feng Jizhong and Xuanzhen were wearing were also Valiant Cavalry Sergeant uniform.

“Ashamed, ashamed!” Wei Xiaobao replied. He heard more footsteps, Qian

Laoben, Xu Tianchuan and Gao Yanchao, three people also walked in.

Seeing the increasing number of Wei Xiaobao's subordinates, Ah Ke signaled Li Zicheng and Zheng Keshuang with her eyes, she wanted to retreat.

Li Zicheng walked over to Wei Xiaobao, he stomped the monk staff in his hand heavily to the ground, and said in a stern voice, "A real man clearly distinguish gratitude and grudges; the other day your Shifu did not kill me, today I will spare your life. From now on, if you cast a glance toward my daughter, speak a word to her, I will smash your body into mincemeat."

Wei Xiaobao said, "A real man gave his words, so what? The other day at the Three-Sage Nunnery you and your lover Chen Yuanyuan have already promised to give Ah Ke to me in marriage, could it be that you want to renege? You won't allow me to cast a glance toward my own wife, to speak a word to her, how can there be such a father-in-law in this world?"

Ah Ke was so mad that her face turned deep red. "Father," she said, "Let's go. Don't talk rubbish with this kid! He … his dog mouth will never grow ivory, how can he speak anything good?"

"Very good!" Wei Xiaobao said, "Finally you acknowledge him. This is your parents' order, are you going to obey or not?"

Li Zicheng was angry; raising his monk staff up, he shouted, "Little b@stard, you haven't shut up?"

Qian Laoben and Xu Tianchuan charged forward immediately; two sabers went to chop Li Zicheng's back. Li Zicheng swung his monk staff backwards, 'Dang!' he parried the two sabers.

Gao Yanchao had already drawn his saber and held it across his chest, while he stood in front of Wei Xiaobao to protect him. He shouted, "Li Zicheng, in the city of Kunming, who has saved your lives, father and daughter? Forget favors and violate justice, you have no sense of shame!"

In the past Li Zicheng ran amuck in the world, founded a dynasty and called himself the Emperor, nobody in the world did not know that. As soon as Gao Yanchao shouted his name, the old beggar, Thin Toutuo and the others cried out in alarm.

Li Xihua loudly said, “You … you are Li Zicheng? You are unexpectedly not dead? Good, good, good!” His voice was filled with rage.

Li Zicheng stared at him. “What is it?” he asked, “Who are you?”

Li Xihua angrily said, “I wish I could eat your flesh and sleep in your skin. I thought you have died long ago. *Laotianye* have eyes. Very good!”

“Humph,” Li Zicheng snorted. “In all my life *laozi* have killed people like scything flax,” he said with a cold laugh, “I don’t know how many tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands people in the world wanted to kill me to take revenge, yet isn’t *laozi* still alive and well? You want to take revenge, I am afraid it won’t be that easy.”

Ah Ke pulled his sleeve and said in a low voice, “Father, let’s go.” Li Zicheng stomped his monk staff on the ground again, and then he turned around and walked toward the door. Ah Ke and Zheng Keshuang followed behind him.

“Li Zicheng,” Li Xihua called out, “By this time tomorrow, I am waiting for you in here. If you are a hero, come and fight me one on one, we’ll decide who will live and who will die. Do you have the guts?”

Li Zicheng turned his head to look at him, his face showed contempt; he said, “When *laozi* traversed the earth, you, this kid, have not even been out of your mother’s womb. Whether the Ol’ Li is a hero or not, I don’t need Sire to tell me.” Stomping his monk staff, he went out.

Everybody looked at each other in silence; they all thought that there was a truth in what he just said. Li Zicheng killed people like scything flax, common people slandered him much but praised him little. Yet he was a hero who dared to do what he said he would do. Even people who hated him to their bones cannot deny this fact. By this time he was already old, yet he still carried that god-like imposing aura around him. Almost nobody in the hall had weak martial art skill, they were all Jianghu veteran, yet when he swept them with his gaze, they still could not stop fear from creeping up their hearts.

“Damn it,” Wei Xiaobao cursed, “You clearly betrothed your daughter to me to be my wife, but now you denied it. I say you are a coward, a fart hero.”

Seeing Shuang’er was tearing her clothes to wrap the wound on her shoulder,

he helped her attending to her injury. “Good Shuang’er,” he asked, “How did you come? I am lucky that you arrived coincidentally to save me, otherwise my wife would have committed premeditated murder on her own husband, she would have pierced my eyes blind.”

“It was not a coincident,” Shuang’er replied in a low voice, “I have always been by *Xianggong*’s side. It’s just that you did not know.”

Wei Xiaobao was greatly surprised. “You were always by my side?” he repeatedly asked, “How can that be?”

“Hey,” Thin Toutuo called out, “Quickly unseal my acupoints, quickly give me the antidote; otherwise, humph, humph, *laozi* will immediately smash your head into pulp!”

Suddenly the hall was filled with ha ha, heh heh, hey hey, and hee hee laughter. Wei Xiaobao’s subordinate kept coming in, while this extremely short and extremely fat fellow had his acupoints sealed, he was unable to move a single step, yet he unexpectedly uttered some threatening words; everybody thought it was laughable.

Thin Toutuo angrily said, “What are you laughing at? What’s so funny? When my acupoints are unsealed and he still has not given me the antidote, you’ll see if I am going to smash his head into pulp or not.”

Qian Laoben raised a single-blade saber and with a giggle he came over, saying, “Right now if I chop your damn head three times, I wonder if *laoxiong*’s head will burst open or not?”

“Do you have to ask?” Thin Toutuo angrily retorted, “Naturally it will burst open!”

Qian Laoben laughed and said, “While your acupoints are not opened yet, I will smash your head into pulp first, so that when your acupoints are unsealed, you can’t smash my master’s head into pulp.” When the people heard this, they roared in laughter again.

“My acupoints are not sealed by you,” Thin Toutuo angrily said, “If you smash my head into pulp, you can’t be considered a hero.”

Qian Laoben laughed. “Why do I care whether you consider me a hero or not,”

he said, “I am not a hero to begin with.” While saying that, he raised his saber.

Fat Toutuo called out, “Wei … Wei *Daren*, my Shixiong is rude and has offended you, please forgive him, let subordinate apologize on his behalf. Shige, quickly apologize. Wei *Daren* is also your superior; don’t you know it?” He could not turn his neck, so when he talked to Wei Xiaobao and Thin Toutuo, he was unable to face them.

Thin Toutuo said, “If he gives me the antidote, let’s not talk about apologizing, I am even willing to kowtow, or be his ox or his horse. But if he does not give me the antidote, I am going to smash his melon head into pulp.”

Wei Xiaobao thought, “What’s so good about that old wh0re that you unexpectedly show her this much kindness and devotion?”

While they were still talking, suddenly they saw the peasant cupped his fist and walked out from among the crowd, saying, “Everybody, *Xiongdi* must say good bye now.”

All of them were shocked; the eight of them had their vital acupoints sealed by Feng Xifan. Other than Wei Xiaobao who had his acupoints massaged by Shuang’er, the remaining seven people were unable to lift a finger. Feng Xifan’s internal energy entered the acupoint via the tip of his sword, it was very formidable, even people with higher martial art skill would still need two to four hours to be able to move again. This peasant’s appearance was just like ordinary farmer of rural area. When he was playing *Pai Jiu* a moment ago he was able to press the tiles until they created an impression on the table; obviously he was a martial art master with profound internal energy; however, in just a short period of time he was unexpectedly able to open his own acupoints, it was indeed a skill that was seldom heard. They saw him dragging his shoes as he limped away.

Wei Xiaobao told Qian Laoben, “Unseal our brothers’ acupoints. This Li … Mr. Li is also one of our own.” While saying that, he pointed toward Li Xihua.

“Yes,” Qian Laoben complied.

He put the saber back into its scabbard, and was about to unseal Li Xihua’s acupoints when suddenly the old beggar said, “Ming restore Qing fought, mother Earth father Heaven.” [ming fu qing fan, mu di fu tian]

“Ah,” Qian Laoben exclaimed in surprise. Xu Tianchuan stepped forward to massage the old beggar’s back several times, and then he walked around to face the old beggar with the thumbs of both hands bent toward the old beggar’s face.

Tian Di Hui brethren were numerous; it was hard for them to know their fellow brothers. When someone was initiated into the Society, often times they would use the phrase ‘Heaven is my father, Earth is my mother, Fighting the Qing, Restoring the Ming’ [tian fu di mu, fan Qing fu Ming] eight characters to recognize a fellow brethren. But in the presence of outsiders, they must not reveal their secret; hence they usually reversed the eight characters, so that even if the outsiders heard it, they could not make head or tail of it. Xu Tianchuan saluted the old beggar with crooked fingers was also part of the secret signal they used in front of other people.

Qian and Xu, two people successively opened the sealed acupoints of Li Xihua, Fat Toutuo, Lu Gaoxuan, three people. Only Thin Toutuo was left sitting on the floor. His entire face was bulging red, as he shouted, “*Shidi*, why haven’t you unsealed my acupoints? Damn it, what are you waiting for?”

“Unsealing acupoints is not difficult,” Fat Toutuo replied, “But you must not be rude toward Wei *Daren*.”

“Who told him not to give me the antidote?” Thin Toutuo angrily said, “It is he who offends me, not I offend him! If he gives me the antidote, I’ll consider he apologizes to me, *laozi* will let bygones be bygones, and that’s the end.”

Fat Toutuo was hesitant, “This is difficult,” he said.

The old beggar shouted, “You, this short and fat fellow, you keep rambling on and on. Let’s not talk about Wei *Xiongdi* does not give you the antidote, even if he wanted to give, I will urge him not to give.” Stretching out his right hand finger, ‘Chi!’ a gust of strong wind shot toward Thin Toutuo. Followed by two fingers, ‘chi, chi’, the acupoints on Thin Toutuo’s body were immediately opened.

Suddenly a large meatball shot up from the floor and pounced on Wei Xiaobao. ‘Whoosh!’ the old beggar’s palm swiftly struck out, Thin Toutuo’s body was still in the air, his palm also struck out, his body shot up again. His martial art skill

was indeed superior. He flipped midair, and pounced on the old beggar with both palms struck toward the top of the beggar's head. The old beggar's left foot flew up toward Thin Toutuo's lower back. Thin Toutuo swiftly reversed his palms. The force of his palms collided with the force of the old beggar's leg, his fat body flew up to the air.

Thin Toutuo's body stayed in the air like a big rubber ball. The old beggar striking with his palms and kicking with his feet, but all along he failed to hit him. This short and fat fellow looked clumsy and funny, yet he was surprisingly very agile; his feet never touched the ground, yet he was able to turn around as he pleased.

Li Xihua and the Tian Di Hui warriors could be considered experienced and knowledgeable, yet in all their lives they had never seen movements like Thin Toutuo was demonstrating just now. Fat Toutuo and Lu Gaoxuan watched the fight with rapt attention. They saw how in each move the old beggar's strength was swift and fierce; Thin Toutuo's more than two-hundred-catty body was kept fluttering in the air and did not fall down by the old beggar's sheer power.

The two people fought tighter and tighter, the wind from the fists and palms were forcing the spectators to stand with their backs against the wall. Suddenly they heard Thin Toutuo shouted with his strange voice as he launched the move 'five nails opening the mountain'; his left palm struck out first, his right fist followed, both were aimed at the crown of the old beggar's head.

"Good move!" the old beggar shouted. He squatted and launched the move 'the King of Heaven supporting the pagoda', to meet the attack head-on.

Two tremendous forces collided. Thin Toutuo soared back into the air, his back crashed onto the beam. 'Crack! Bang!' The roof tiles, mud and dirt rained down; the dust and sand in the hall rose up. Thin Toutuo pounced down again, the old beggar pulled back to evade. Thin Toutuo's attack hit an empty space, 'Crash!' he fell heavily to the ground.

The old beggar roared in laughter, but before his laugh stopped, Thin Toutuo had already shot up again; fast and nimble beyond belief his head flew toward the old beggar's chest. Everybody could see that this strike carried an overwhelming power. The old beggar sidestepped; his right palm landed on Thin

Toutuo's buttocks, with a loud shout he exerted his internal energy to give him a push.

The momentum of Thin Toutuo's strike was already huge, on top of that, the old beggar's internal strength was also very powerful; two tremendous forces worked together, Thin Toutuo flew even faster, his head crashed into the wall. Everybody thought that his brains would definitely burst open from the impact. They all cried out in alarm. Fat Toutuo grabbed a casino worker standing on the corner and threw him toward the wall. 'Bonk!' Thin Toutuo's head struck his chest and abdomen, penetrated his belly and crashed into the wall, creating a big hole on the wall.

He stood up shakily, his big fat head hung down, dripping with the casino worker's blood and intestines. Frantically he wiped his face with both hands while cursing angrily. "Damn it, what trick was that?"

Everybody was overwhelmed with shock and amazement. The old beggar shouted, "Are we going to continue fighting or not?"

"If my body was still big and tall like in the past," Thin Toutuo replied, "You would not be able to beat me."

"What about now?" the old beggar asked.

Thin Toutuo shook his head. "Now I cannot beat you," he said, "I am finished, I am finished!" Suddenly he leaped and slammed through the wall. With a loud rumble another large hole appeared on the wall, even the casino worker's body also vanished into the hole.

"Shige, Shige!" Fat Toutuo called out, and flew out through the hole.

"Wei *Daren*," Lu Gaoxuan said, "I'll go take a look." With feet first his body flew horizontally out through the hole, he still managed to cup his fist to salute Wei Xiaobao; his style was amazing, the people cheered together.

Xu Tianchuan, Qian Laoben and the others all thought, "Where did Wei *Xiangzhu* get these two subordinates? Their martial art skill is surprisingly amazing; it is ten times higher than ours."

Li Xihua cupped his fist and said, "I can't accompany you much longer." And he left via the main door in quick steps.

Wei Xiaobao cupped his fist toward the old beggar. "*Xiongtai* [another way of saying 'brother']," he said, "Would you let them go?" While saying that, he pointed to Zhao Qixian and the others.

The old beggar chuckled and said, "Sorry for the offense." Casually he pulled Zhao Qixian and the others up. Nobody saw him massaging those men, but with just these grabs, he had opened these Imperial Bodyguards' acupoints.

"Many thanks," Wei Xiaobao said, and ordered Zhao Qixian, Zhang Kangnian and the others to return first.

Xu Tianchuan looked at Shuang'er and asked, "Is this Miss Wei *Xiangzhu*'s trusted friend?"

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao replied, "We don't need to conceal anything from her."

The old beggar said, "Although this Miss is young, her loyalty and righteousness is difficult for others to follow. If she had not acted boldly, disregarding her own safety just a moment ago, protecting her master with devotion, Wei *Xiongdi*'s eyeballs could not be protected."

Pulling Shuang'er's hand, Wei Xiaobao said, "True, true. Luckily she has saved me."

Listening to these two people complimenting her in front of everybody, Shuang'er was bashful; her entire face reddened, she lowered her head and did not dare to meet anybody's gaze.

Xu Tianchuan took a step forward, and spoke to the old beggar in a loud and clear voice, "Five men separately compose a poem, nobody knows the Hong Ying [lit. great courage. See also Chapter 8 for more info on Tian Di Hui] on their body."

The old beggar replied, "Henceforth it is passed on to the brothers, afterwards we will know each other and have a reunion."

When Wei Xiaobao was initiated into the Heaven and Earth Society, the brethren had informed him on all kinds of ceremonial protocol and secret codes within the Society, they also made sure that he memorize everything well. The secret codes were actually very unrefined and common, the sentences seemed to make sense, yet they did not really made any sense. Tian Di Hui brethren were

mostly Jianghu people, more than half came from the same background as Wei Xiaobao; their eyes could not recognize the letter 'T' [i.e. totally illiterate]. If the secret codes were too abstruse, how could the Society brothers remember?

When he heard the old beggar reciting the secret codes to identify each other, Wei Xiaobao immediately caught on, "Entering the Hong Gate for the first time, one swears brotherhood with older brothers; that day the oath was clearly made with sincerity."

The old beggar recited, "Two trees pine and cypress standing on the left and right, in the middle was Hong Flower Pavilion where the oath of brotherhood was made."

Wei Xiaobao continued, "The brothers are in front of the Loyal and Righteous Hall, the elected general with millions of soldiers in the middle of the city."

The old beggar said, "Coming to the front of Fu De [lit. good fortune and virtue] Ancestral Hall willing to swear brotherhood, fighting the Qing restoring the Ming I am Hong Ying."

Wei Xiaobao said, "*Xiongdi* Wei Xiaobao, the current Green Wood Hall *Xiangzhu*; may I ask *Xiongzhang*'s [I don't understand why the Chinese use so many different words for 'brother'] respected surname and great given name? Which Hall do you belong to? And which duty do you currently serve?"

The old beggar said, "*Xiongdi* Wu Liuqi, currently serving as the Red Banner *Xiangzhu* of the Great Obedience Hall. Today I can meet Wei *Xiangzhu* and the other brothers, truly I am delighted."

Everybody was pleasantly surprised to learn that this man was unexpectedly the well-known-throughout-the-world 'Iron Beggar' Wu Liuqi; they all bowed with cupped fist to pay their respect. Xu Tianchuan and the others announced their surname and given name; they all said that they have long admired him.

Wu Liuqi was the provincial governor of Guangdong, commanding the massive military force in the whole province. In the past he was advised by Zha Yihuang, and his 'fighting the Qing restoring the Ming' spirit was aroused; he secretly joined Tian Di Hui, and had held the Red Banner *Xiangzhu* position of the Great Obedience Hall ever since.

Tian Di Hui paid special attention to the character ‘Hong’. First, it was because Ming Taizu’s [first Ming Emperor] regnal name was Hong Qu. Second, the ‘hong’ (洪) character was actually the character ‘han’ (漢) minus the character ‘tu’ [earth] (土); the idea was that our Han people had lost our land, had become captive in an occupied land. Thereupon the Tian Di Hui brethren call themselves ‘Hong Ying’, signifying they would not forget their origin, and that they were determined to restore their land.

The Red Banner *Xiangzhu* was not the official *Xiangzhu*, it did not involve commanding the Hall’s brethren either, but this position was actually above the official *Xiangzhu*, a position that was highly respected in the entire Society, second only to their *Zongduozhu*. The fact that Wu Liuqi was the Red Banner *Xiangzhu* of Tian Di Hui was a top secret, even Xu Tianchuan, Qian Laoben, and the others did not know.

Wu Liuqi pulled Wei Xiaobao’s hand and said with a laugh, “Wei *Xiangzhu*, you went to Yunnan on a mission to deal with the big traitor Wu Sangui, *Zongduozhu* dispatched an order to our Guangdong, Guangxi, Yunnan and Guizhou, four provinces’ brothers to provide support as the circumstances allow. As soon as I received the order, I sent ten competent brothers to Yunnan to provide help in secret. However, Wei *Xiangzhu* handled everything appropriately, Green Wood Hall brothers are also very able, in everything you were able to turn peril into safety; our Great Obedience Hall did not need to help anything. A few days ago we heard that Wei *Xiangzhu* and the brothers have arrived in Guangxi, hence *Xiongdi* put on my disguise to rendezvous with you, brothers.”

“So that’s how it is,” Wei Xiaobao happily said, “My *Enshi* [benevolent master], the Senior is very attentive; Wu *Xiangzhu*’s good intention, your *Xiongdi* is indeed very grateful. Wu *Xiangzhu*’s great name, on the four seas no one has not heard; turns out you are our Society brother, that is a top-notch, made-me-want-to-jump-with-joy, seriously-pleasant kind of news.” Actually, today was the very first time he ever heard of Wu Liuqi’s name, but seeing Xu Tianchuan and the others showed deep veneration to him, their faces lit up with delight, he simply blurted out several bootlicking sentences.

Wu Liuqi laughed and said, “Wei *Xiongdi* killed the big treacherous court official Oboi with your own hand, now *that* is something ‘on the four seas no one

has not heard'. We are all on the same side, no need for words of politeness. I have offended the Imperial Bodyguards under Wei *Xiongdi*'s command, it was only to invite you to come here; please do not blame me."

Wei Xiaobao laughed. "His granny," he said, "Those fellows are dog skin who were unlucky, they lost money yet did not want to accept. Wu *Dage* made them eat a little bit of suffering, you taught them a lesson, so that next time they gamble they would follow the rule. *Xiongdi* still needs to thank you very much." Wu Liuqi roared in laughter.

After they were all seated, Wu Liuqi asked about the Yunnan mission. Wei Xiaobao briefly explained to him. When Wu Liuqi heard that they had obtained conclusive evidence that Wu Sangui was about to revolt, he was greatly delighted, and talked incessantly of his commendation. "When this traitor rises into rebellion, he will definitely attack Guangdong. This time we must go all out with him. When this treacherous bandit has been defeated, we will withdrew the troops again to the north to strike Beijing."

While they were still talking, the Latter Family Hall *Xiangzhu* Ma Chaoxing rushed in; he was introduced to Wu Liuqi, it was a warm meeting. They talked about what had just happened in the gambling establishment. Wu Liuqi cursed Feng Xifan all around, saying that he surreptitiously carried out sneak attack, that he was treacherous and despicable, and that Wu Liuqi would definitely have a good fight with him. Wei Xiaobao also told them about how Feng Xifan was trying to kill Chen Jinnan in Beijing. Wu Liuqi stretched out his hand and heavily slapped the gambling table, saying, "In this case, we will deal with him in here; first, to avenge Guan Fuzi, second, to get rid of one big danger from a trusted aide for *Zongduozhu*, third, to wipe away the humiliation we suffered today from his sneaky scheme." In all his life he seldom met a worthy adversary; this time he unexpectedly fell under Feng Xifan that he was unable to move a finger, no wonder he was incomparably furious.

Ma Chaoxing said, "Li Zicheng was the big rebel who caused the Son of Heaven Chongzhen's death; since he has come to Liuzhou, we must not let him off easily." Tian Di Hui was loyal to the Ming Dynasty. Chongzhen was hounded by Li Zicheng until he finally hanged himself on Coal Hill. Since that time, Tian Di Hui had been regarding Li Zicheng as their enemy.

Wei Xiaobao said, “The Zheng Family of Taiwan flaunts the Great Ming’s Banner, yet this fellow Zheng Keshuang is going the same way as Li Zicheng, in which case he also has become a rebel. Since we started, we might as well carry it through whatever happens, we’ll deal with him as well. We will get rid of one more big danger from a trusted aide for *Zongduozhu*.”

Everybody looked at each other in dismay, nobody said anything. Tian Di Hui was a subordinate of the Zheng Clan of Taiwan. There was no harm in killing Feng Xifan, but they must not kill Zheng *Er Gongzi* [Second Young Master]. Besides, it was very clear in everybody’s mind that Wei Xiaobao wanted to kill Zheng Keshuang, 99% was to use his official authority for private interests.

Wu Liuqi changed the subject by asking Wei Xiaobao about the background of the Fat and Thin Toutuo. Wei Xiaobao gave a vague answer, saying that Fat Toutuo and Lu Gaoxuan were Jianghu friends who were indebted to him, hence those two were very loyal to him. Wu Liuqi admired that peasant who was able to unseal his own acupoints very much, he said, “In all my life *Xiongdi* only submit to very few people, this gentleman’s martial art is extremely brilliant, *Xiongdi* is ashamed of my own inferiority. There are very few people with this kind of skill in Wulin world. I have racked my brain trying to think it over, yet I cannot find out his identity.”

They all discussed it over briefly. Ma Chaoxing sent his Hall’s brothers to investigate where Li Zicheng, Feng Xifan’s and the others were staying, while helping Feng Jizhong, Xu Tianchuan and Shuang’er to tend to their injury.

Wei Xiaobao asked Shuang’er how did she follow him along the way? What happened was that after she lost contact with Wei Xiaobao on Mount Wutai, she looked for him everywhere. Later on she learned from the monks at the Qing Liang Temple that Wei Xiaobao had returned to Beijing, hence she also returned to Beijing, naturally the man Wei Xiaobao sent to summon her could not find her. By that time Wei Xiaobao was heading south, immediately she set on a journey to catch up with him, and managed to overtake him before they even reached the border of Hebei province. Being a young girl, she had different thought; she was worried that after Wei Xiaobao became a high ranking Tatar official, he would not want her to serve him anymore. Thereupon she stole a set of Valiant Cavalry Sergeant uniform, disguised herself and mingled among the

Valiant Cavalry Brigade. She had been following him to Yunnan and back to Guangxi. It was at the gambling establishment did she see Wei Xiaobao was in danger, Ah Ke was about to stab his eyes, that she boldly jumped forward to save him.

Wei Xiaobao was very grateful in his heart, he held her in his arms and kissed her cheek gently. “Silly girl,” he said with a laugh, “How can I not want you to serve me? I want you to serve me for the rest of my life, unless you yourself are not willing to take care of me, you want to go off and get married.”

Shuang’er was happy and bashful at the same time, her face blushed as she said, “No, no, I … I won’t possibly go off and get married.”

That evening Ma Chaoxing arranged a banquet in honor of Wu Liuqi in a Liuzhou brothel. When they were drinking, the Society brothers arrived to report that they have found Li Zicheng and his party, they were in a wooden raft hut on Liujiang River. Liuzhou was rich in lumber. Liuzhou coffins were world-famous. There was a saying, ‘Live in Suzhou, doing business in Hangzhou, eat in Guangzhou, die in Liuzhou.’ The lumber were tied together into rafts, and floated east on Liujiang River. There were countless wooden rafts on Liujiang River. When someone went to hide in one of the raft, it would be difficult for others to find him. If not for the fact that Tian Di Hui had a large number of people locally, perhaps they would be unable to find out.

Wu Liuqi slapped the table and stood up. “Let us quickly go,” he said, “No need to drink the wine.”

Ma Chaoxing said, “It’s still too early, gentlemen may drink slowly. Let *Xiongdi* make arrangement first, they won’t be able to run away.” And he walked out to instruct his subordinates.

By the second watch that night [between 9-11pm], Ma Chaoxing led everybody to the bank of Liujiang River, and they all boarded two boats. The three *Xiangzhu* rode on one boat. Without waiting for any instruction, the boatmen rowed immediately. Soon afterwards, seven or eight boats followed some distance away. After rowing for about seven, eight *li* along the river, the boat stopped. A boatman entered the cabin and said in a low voice, “Reporting to three *Xiangzhu*: the target is inside the wooden raft directly in front of us.”

Wei Xiaobao peeked out from the cabin's curtain, and saw a small cabin on the raft, from which came a flicker of yellow light. He looked around and saw boats to the east, and boats to the west; at least there were thirty, forty boats altogether. Ma Chaoxing said in a low voice, "Those boats are ours."

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted, he thought that if one boat had ten people in it, they had three, four hundred people on their side; even if Li Zicheng and Feng Xifan were more formidable, could they fly up to the sky?

Right this moment, suddenly they heard someone calling out from the river bank while dashing along the same direction the boat was traveling, "Li Zicheng … Li Zicheng … you shrink your head like a turtle, where do you think you can hide? Li Zicheng … come out if you have guts … Li Zicheng …" It was Li Xihua's voice.

From the wooden raft cabin someone shouted, "Who is making a racket in here?"

From the riverbank a shadow leaped toward the wooden raft, the sword in his hand flickered under the cold moonlight. Someone came out of the wooden raft cabin, holding a monk staff in his hand; he was none other than Li Zicheng. "You are bored of living, aren't you? You want *laozi* to deliver your little life away, don't you?"

"I am going to take your life today," Li Xihua replied, "I am just afraid that in your death you will be a confused ghost. Do you know who I am?"

"The Ol' Li killed people by millions," Li Zicheng said, "How could I ask their names one by one? Come up here!" These three words 'come up here' sounded like clap of thunder in the air; it echoed far on the river. With a loud shout the staff swept toward Li Xihua.

Li Xihua leaned sideways to evade, he stuck the flat of his sword against the body of the staff, and leaped up. And then the tip of his sword shot down from the air. Li Zicheng thrust his staff straight up. Since he was still flying in the air, Li Xihua had no way of evading it, his left foot kicked the head of the staff, borrowing the momentum he made a somersault backward and landed on one foot at the edge of the wooden raft.

Wu Liuqi said, "Row the boat closer so we can see clearly." The boatmen pulled

the oars that the boat moved forward.

Ma Chaoxing said, “While someone else is holding him, we’d better make our move.” Turning to a boatman standing at the bow he said, “Send the signal.”

“Yes,” the boatman replied. He took a red lantern from the cabin and hung it on the mast. Immediately from the boats all around them people were slipping into the river.

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted. “Wonderful, wonderful!” he repeatedly exclaimed. His martial art skill was too low, he was not too interested in watching one-on-one combat. This time there were several hundred people on his side besieging two people of the opposite party; it was a ‘grasp it and victory is assured’ situation, exactly where he wanted to be. Moreover, the people on his side were all skilled in water, they only had to swim to the bottom of the raft, cut the ropes connecting the raft, and the logs would immediately separate. Wouldn’t capturing the opposite party be as easy as stretching their hands?

As soon as he thought about the wooden raft disintegrating, he said busily, “Ma *Dage*, there is a young woman in that little cabin, she is *Xiongdi*’s betrothed wife; you must not let her drown.”

Ma Chaoxing laughed and said, “Wei *Xiongdi*, don’t worry, I have already arranged it. Among the brothers going down into the river, ten are specifically tasked with rescuing your Madame. These ten brothers have first-class water skill, even live fish will not escape their grasp; I guarantee there won’t be any accident.”

Wei Xiaobao happily said, “That’s wonderful.” He thought, “It would be best if they let Zheng Keshuang drown.” He wanted to ask Ma Chaoxing to issue an order not to save Zheng Keshuang, but eventually he was unable to say so.

The boat slowly came near. They saw a clump of black shadow and a strip of white shadow circled around and fluttered on the wooden raft in a tight combat. Wu Liuqi shook his head and said, “Li Zicheng has not trained upper-class martial art, he only relies on brute force; in no more than thirty moves, he is going to lose his life under Li Xihua’s sword. It’s hard to imagine that an ambitious and ruthless character of our generation will unexpectedly meet his fate on Liujiang River.”

Wei Xiaobao could not see the fight clearly; he only saw that Li Zicheng was forced to withdraw step by step. Suddenly he heard Ah Ke's voice from the cabin saying, "Zheng *Gongzi*, please ask Feng Shifu to quickly help my father."

"Very well," Zheng Keshuang said, "Shifu, please drive that kid away!" The cabin's door opened, Feng Xifan walked out with a sword in his hand. By this time Li Zicheng had been forced to withdraw to the edge of the raft; just one more step and he would have fallen into the river.

"Hey little kid," Feng Xifan called out, "I am going to stab the 'ling tai' [spirit platform] acupoint on your back." His sword slowly moved forward, it was really going to stab Li Xihua's *ling tai* acupoint.

Li Xihua was about to swing his sword backward to block, suddenly from the cabin's roof someone shouted, "Hey little kid, I am going to stab the *ling tai* acupoint on your back!" White light flashed, like a bird someone pounced down, the weapon in his hand went straight toward Feng Xifan's back.

This turn of events was indeed beyond everybody's expectation; nobody expected someone was hiding on the roof of the little cabin. Feng Xifan could not continue his attack toward Li Xihua, he sidestepped and raised his sword to parry the enemy's blade. 'Dang!' there was a continuous ringing. The weapon in the newcomer's hand was a single-edged saber. As two blades collided, both of them were forced to take a step back. "Who's there?" Feng Xifan shouted.

The man laughed and said, "I know you are the 'Half Sword with Blood' Feng Xifan; don't you know me?"

Wei Xiaobao and the others were able to see clearly by now, the man was wearing coarse homespun cloth clothing, a plain white cloth was wrapped around his head, a strip of wide blue cloth was wrapped around his waist, and a pair of straw sandals on his feet; he was none other than the peasant who was able to open his own sealed acupoints in the gambling establishment earlier that day. Presumably he was unhappy because had fallen under Feng Xifan's sneak attack, and had come to avenge the humiliation by the sword.

Feng Xifan imposingly said, "Based on Sire's skill, why did you act like a nameless character, hiding the head showing the tail, sneaky and evasive like this?"

The peasant replied, “Even if I am a nameless character, I am still better than a ‘Half Sword with Blood’.”

Feng Xifan was furious; he raised his sword and stabbed straight forward. The peasant neither evaded nor blocked the attack, he simply lifted his saber and chopped down on Feng Xifan’s head. It looked like a desperate move in a fight where both side would suffer, but actually while the saber started to move later, it arrived earlier; the speed was extraordinary. The tip of Feng Xifan’s sword was still about a *chi* away from the opponent, the opponent’s saber had already reached his forehead. In great alarm he jumped to the left to evade.

The peasant swept his saber horizontally toward Feng Xifan’s waist. Feng Xifan waved his sword down to parry. The single-blade saber in the peasant’s hand suddenly changed direction, light as feather, hacking down on Feng Xifan’s left arm. Feng Xifan leaned sideways to evade, and counterattack with a stab. Still the peasant did not block, he simply turned his saber toward Feng Xifan’s wrist.

The two of them had exchanged three moves, unexpectedly the peasant had attacked three times. His appearance was simple, wooden and slow, with 30% sign of stupidity, but his saber technique was swift, fierce and ruthless. Saber technique like his was seldom seen in Wulin world. Wu Liuqi and Ma Chaoxing were secretly surprised and amazed.

“Hold on!” Feng Xifan called out suddenly. Leaping two steps back, he said, “Turns out Sire is the Hundred Victory …”

“If you want to fight then fight,” the peasant shouted, “Why talk too much?” Leaping forward, ‘whoosh, whoosh, whoosh’ his saber attacked three times.

Feng Xifan was unable to speak leisurely, he had no choice but to brace himself to counter every move. Feng Xifan’s swordsmanship had also reached profound attainments; since he now focused all his attention to withstand the enemy, the peasant could no longer hold the upper hand. The sword and saber moved sometimes fast sometimes slow, sometimes the two weapons collided with each other several dozen times in rapid succession, sometimes they circled around each other without colliding for even once.

On the other front, Li Zicheng and Li Xihua were still fighting fiercely. Zheng Keshuang and Ah Ke, each with unsheathd weapon in their hand, were standing

close to Li Zicheng, ready to help. Li Zicheng brandished his monk staff to block each attack, the power behind it was ‘hard’ and violent; although Li Xihua’s swordsmanship was exquisite, for a short while he was unable to close the distance.

After fighting for a while, Li Xihua suddenly pulled his arms and legs close to his body, and rolled around. When he rolled close to the enemy’s legs, suddenly the tip of his sword went up diagonally toward Li Zicheng’s lower abdomen. “Do you think you can live pass today?” he shouted.

It was the move ‘lying on overturned cloud’, the unique skill handed down by Song Dynasty’s Liangshan Lake hero Langzi [wanderer] Yan Qing, a very exquisite technique, incomparably fast and nimble, impossible for the opponent to guard against. Ah Ke and Zheng Keshuang were shocked; but by the time they realized Li Zicheng was under the enemy’s control, it was already too late to help.

Suddenly Li Zicheng threw his head back and roared. Everybody was stunned, their ears were buzzing. The power behind this roar was just like a jolt of thunder. Li Xihua was startled, unexpectedly the sword fell from his hand. Li Zicheng’s left leg flew up and kicked him, sending him tumbling away. The head of the monk staff rested against his chest, Li Xihua was pressed in between the staff and the raft, he was unable to move a single step.

In just a split second the victory and defeat was easily flipped; Li Zicheng only had to pound his monk staff and the ribs in Li Xihua’s chest would be broken, his heart and lungs would shatter into pieces, and he would not be alive anymore. Li Zicheng shouted, “If you admit defeat, I will let you live.”

“Just kill me quickly,” Li Xihua replied, “I cannot avenge my father’s big enmity, how can I have the face to live in this world?”

Li Zicheng let out a long laugh, and then said, “Very good!” He was about to send his strength to his arms to push the monk staff into Li Xihua’s body when a ray of clear, cold moonlight from behind happened to illuminate Li Xihua’s face. He saw his face looked tranquil, with a faint smile on his lips; unexpectedly there was not a trace of fear on it. Li Zicheng’s heart was shaken. “Are you a Henan man by the surname of Li?” he shouted.

Li Xihua replied, “It’s a pity that from our surname Li there is someone as

narrow-minded as you are, a coward who failed to accomplish great things."

Li Zicheng's voice was trembling, "Li Yan, Li *Gongzi*, who is he to you?"

"So you know," Li Xihua replied, "That's very good." While saying that he showed a faint smile.

Li Zicheng lifted the monk staff and asked, "You are Li *Xiongdi* … *Xiongdi*'s son?"

Li Xihua said, "It's a shame you still have the face to call my father 'brother'."

Li Zicheng's body swayed several times, his left hand was pressed on his own chest. "Li *Xiongdi* left behind a descendant?" he muttered to himself, "You … you are Hong Niangzi's[18] son?"

Seeing Li Zicheng's monk staff was raised several *chi* up, Li Xihua sternly said, "Quickly make your move! What do you bring these matters up for?"

Li Zicheng withdrew two steps back, he rested the monk staff on the wooden raft, and said slowly, "My first blunder in life was precisely harming your father. You cursed me as narrow-minded, a coward who failed to accomplish great things. You are right, absolutely right! You want to avenge your father, which is only natural. In all my life I, Li Zicheng have killed people beyond counting, and I never take it to heart. But killing your father, I … I am truly ashamed." Suddenly 'Wah!' he threw up a mouthful of blood.

Li Xihua had never expected this turn of events; he leaped up and picked his sword. Seeing Li Zicheng's white beard was full of drops of blood, Li Xihua could not thrust his sword forward. He said, "Since I have seen the shame and remorse in your heart, it beats killing you with the sword." He flew up, his left foot kicked on the very thick rope connecting the wooden rafts, with several leaps he reached the shore, and then after bounding ups and downs several time, he disappeared into the darkness.

"Father!" Ah Ke called out, and rushed toward Li Zicheng to support him.

Li Zicheng shook his hand. He walked to the edge of the raft, his left foot stepped out, his body then went down into the river. "Father!" Ah Ke cried out in fear, "You … you must not …" They all saw no movement on the surface of the

river, and thought that he must have killed himself by drowning; they were all startled and found it surprising.

After a while, they saw the top of Li Zicheng's head appeared on the surface of the river. Turned out he was holding his breath while walking along the bottom of the river. The iron monk staff in his hand was very heavy, hence his body did not float.

They saw his head and shoulder gradually emerged from the river as he treaded on the shallow water of the river bank. Step by step he climbed up the shore, dragging the iron monk staff, hobbling away slowly.

Ah Ke turned around and said, "Zheng *Gongzi*, my father … he … he's gone." 'Wah!' she broke into crying and threw herself into Zheng Keshuang's bosom.

Zheng Keshuang wrapped his left arm around her and gently patted her back with his right hand. "Your father is gone, but you still have me!" he consoled her. But before he could finish, the logs beneath his feet disintegrate. "Aiyo!" they both screamed and fell into the river.

The experts of Tian Di Hui's Latter Family Hall who were proficient in water skill dived into the river and cut the bamboo rope binding the wooden raft; the logs separated immediately. Feng Xifan anxiously leaped up; spotting a large log, he lightly landed on it. The peasant also leaped after him. 'Whoosh!' his saber hacked down on Feng Xifan's head. Feng Xifan brandished his sword to parry. The two of them continued their fierce combat on the log.

This fight was several times more difficult compared to the fight they just had on the wooden raft. The log was rolling continuously on the water, hence it was difficult to get a steady footing, plus they could not use it as the base with which they could jump around; yet Feng Xifan and the peasant were able to fight steadily; saber and sword moved back and forth without slowing down the slightest bit. Brought by the river's current, gradually the log floated to the middle of the river.

"Aiyo!" suddenly Wu Liuqi exclaimed, "I remember now. This *Xiongdi* is the 'Bai Sheng Dao Wang' [Hundred Victory Saber King] Hu Yizhi. He … how did he turn to be like that? Quickly pursue them, row the boat!"

"Hu Yizhi?" Ma Chaoxing asked in surprise, "Isn't he also nicknamed 'Mei Dao

Wang' [Handsome (lit. beautiful) Saber King]? This man is outstandingly handsome; it was said in the past that he was the number one handsome man of Wulin; unexpectedly he disguises himself as a stupid-looking peasant!"

In the meantime, Wei Xiaobao kept asking, "Have you rescued my wife?"

Wu Liuqi showed a displeased expression, he stared hard at him, obviously he was saying, "'Bai Sheng Dao Wang' Hu Yizhi is encountering a powerful enemy, the water surface is treacherous, how can we not immediately go forward to help him? You are only concerned about your woman, you are paying more attention to a lover than friends; it's not a hero's conduct."

Ma Chaoxing called out, "Quickly pass the order: get more people, we must rescue that girl." The boatman on the stern shouted the order.

Suddenly they saw two men appeared on the surface of the river, holding soaking wet Ah Ke. "We got the girl," they called out. Immediately afterwards, someone on the left also appeared, pulling Zheng Keshuang's collar and pushed him up to the boat; the man called out, "We also got the boy." Everybody burst into loud laughter.

Wei Xiaobao felt relieved immediately. Beaming from ear to ear he said, "Let's go to that 'Hundred Victory Saber King', see how he is doing against that 'Half Sword with Blood'."

Under Wu Liuqi's urging, the four oars had already been rowing that the boat rapidly approached the big log on which Hu and Feng, two people were fighting. Under the bright moonlight they saw white rays flashing on the surface of the river; the two of them were still engaged in close combat.

Originally these two's martial art skill was more or less equal, but when Feng Xifan exchanged palm strikes with Feng Jizhong and Priest Xuanzhen earlier during the day, due to Feng Jizhong's strong internal energy, he had already felt the *chi* and blood in the pit of his stomach could not flow unimpeded. This moment, after a prolonged battle, he started to feel a dull ache on the right side of his chest.

Fighting on a continuously rolling log, other than advancing or retreating a step or half step, really there was no room for freedom of action. Hundred Victory Saber King Hu Yizhi's saber technique was dangerous, the power behind

it was fierce, he only attacked and did not defend, each saber strike looked to be a desperate attack with the intention of perishing together. Fighting technique like this, if it was used by someone with mediocre martial art skill, would appear brutish, brazen act of playing dirty; but Hu Yizhi's saber technique was a style of its own, although it looked dangerous, it was actually executed in calmness. His martial art was strange to begin with, and now he was attacking swiftly and fiercely in a seemingly desperate all-out effort with total disregard of his own life, Feng Xifan could not help but was intimidated, plus he also noticed the boat that was coming fast. On the bow stood several men, as he took a quick glance, he was surprised to recognize the old beggar, whom he had met at the casino earlier, was among those men.

Giving a loud shout, Hu Yizhi struck to the left once, and to the right twice, he struck upward once, and downward twice; six saber strikes altogether, one after another. Feng Xifan did everything he could to block, yet in his frantic effort he still managed to counter with two sword strikes. His defense was exceptionally tight.

"Good saber technique! Good sword technique!" Wu Liuqi praised.

Hu Yizhi brandished his saber directly onto Feng Xifan's face. Feng Xifan retreated half a step, while bending his upper body backward to evade, his sword swept to the front to shield his body. By this time his left foot was stepping on the tip of the log, his heel was already in the water, he could not retreat even for half a *cun* more. Hu Yizhi chopped down three more times, Feng Xifan countered with three sword strikes, unexpectedly he did not retreat at all. With a loud shout, Hu Yizhi raised his saber up and hacked down. Feng Xifan leaned sideways to evade, to his surprise, however, Hu Yizhi did not pull back, the saber continued chopping down. 'Crash!' he chopped the log into two sections. Feng Xifan was standing on the tip of the log, as soon as the log was cut, "Ah!" he cried out and fell into the water.

Hu Yizhi threw his saber toward Feng Xifan. Submerged in the water, Feng Xifan did not have any way of evading, seeing the steel saber flying toward him, he also quickly threw his sword. 'Clang!' the saber and the sword collided midair, creating sparks in the dark; both weapons were thrown far away and fell into the river. Feng Xifan dived into the water and disappeared.

Hu Yizhi was secretly alarmed, “This man has a superb water skill; had I fell into the river together with him a moment ago, I would have fallen into his evil scheme.”

Wu Liuqi called in a loud and clear voice, “Hundred Victory Saber King, your name is not in vain! I have witnessed your divine skill today, it has indeed broaden my horizon. How about coming onboard and drink a cup of wine?”

“Thank you for your hospitality!” Hu Yizhi replied, and leaped onto the boat.

The bow was only sinking slightly, unexpectedly the hull did not sway at all. Wei Xiaobao did not understand the difficulty of this jump, but Wu Liuqi, Ma Chaoxing and the others were full of admiration. Wu Liuqi cupped his fist and said, “*Zaixia* Wu Liuqi. This gentleman is Ma Chaoxing *Xiongdi*, this one is Wei Xiaobao *Xiongdi*. We are all Tian Di Hui *Xiangzhu*.”

Hu Yizhi raised his thumb and said, “Wu *Xiong*, the fact that you belong to Tian Di Hui is a top secret; if this matter is leaked out, the lives of your entire family cannot be protected. We just met for the first time today, yet you did not conceal anything to *Xiongdi*. This kind of heroic spirit is worthy of other people’s admiration.”

Wu Liuqi laughed and said, “If I don’t trust Hundred Victory Saber King, won’t that mean *Xiongdi* is a despicable lowly person?”

Hu Yizhi was greatly delighted; he grabbed Wu Liuqi’s hands and said, “These years *Xiongdi* lives in seclusion, growing vegetables, no longer pay any attention to Jianghu matters; yet unexpectedly today I can become good friends with the Iron Beggar Wu Liuqi.” While speaking, they walked hand-in-hand into the cabin. He merely nodded slightly toward Ma Chaoxing, Wei Xiaobao, and the others, and did not pay them any attention.

Seeing he had defeated Zheng Keshuang’s shifu, Wei Xiaobao was full of admiration and gratitude; he said, “Hu *Daxia* [great hero] defeated Feng Xifan and threw him into the river, the turtles and terrapins in the river must be biting his body bloody. The ‘Half Sword with Blood’ has turned into ‘Without Sword with Blood’. Ha ha …”

Hu Yizhi smiled and said, “Wei *Xiangzhu*, your skill in throwing dice is indeed not bad.” In saying that, he was actually mocking Wei Xiaobao in that his martial

art skill was lacking, that he was only skilled in throwing the dice, in cheating those 'cattle'.

But Wei Xiaobao did not think it was an insult; he felt very proud instead. He laughed and said, "Hu *Daxia*'s skill in arranging the tiles is first-class. The two of us brothers working together as the banker, we won not a few of that short and fat fellow's money. Hu *Daxia* owns half, when we return, I will give you your share."

Hu Yizhi laughed and said, "Next time when Wei *Xiangzhu* becomes the banker, *Xiongdi* will still help you. Gambling with you, I will definitely not lose."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Wonderful, wonderful!"

Ma Chaoxing ordered his men to replenish the wine. They drank on the boat together. After drinking several cups, Hu Yizhi said, "Since as soon as we met we hit it off right away, *Xiongdi* does not dare to conceal my problem. Speaking of which, I am actually quite ashamed. For more than twenty years *Xiongdi* has withdrawn from Jianghu, and live in seclusion at the outskirts of the city of Kunming; it was all because of a woman."

"In her song," Wei Xiaobao said, "Chen Yuanyuan did mention some hero's affection. Since he is a hero, naturally he is passionate."

Wu Liuqi knitted his brows; he thought, "Little kid loves to speak nonsense. What do you know anyway?"

Unexpectedly Hu Yizhi's countenance changed slightly; he sighed and spoke slowly, "A hero has no choice but to be passionate. Wu Meicun's poem was very well-written, but that Wu Sangui is not a hero, he is not passionate either; he is no more than a dirty old man." And then he hummed 'Yuanyuan Song' softly, "How could a wife consent to shut down such a matter of paramount importance? Reluctant hero is full of affection." Turning to Wei Xiaobao he said, "Wei *Xiangzhu*, when you were at the Three-Sage Nunnery that day, you listened to Miss Chen singing this song; your ears' good fortune is indeed not shallow. I have lived by her side on and off for twenty-three years, I have heard this song three times. The last time was thanks to your good luck."

Wei Xiaobao asked in surprise, "You have lived by her side for twenty-three years? Are you … are you also Chen Yuanyuan's love … lover?"

With a bitter laugh Hu Yizhi said, “She … she … hey hey, she has never even looked at me straight in the eye. I live in the Three-Sage Nunnery, growing vegetables and sweeping the floor, chopping firewood and carrying water, she only knew me as a countryside farmer.”

Wu Liuqi and Ma Chaoxing looked at each other, they both felt strange, thinking that this ‘Handsome Saber King’ must be infatuated with Chen Yuanyuan’s beauty so much so that he was willing to be her servant. This man’s martial art skill was very high, his prestige was grand; in the past, he was considered as a first-class character of the Wulin world. Unexpectedly he was most willing to humble himself and do servile work; it was indeed very puzzling. Looking at Hu Yizhi, they saw a man with grey hair, his sparse beard had more white than black, his face was full of wrinkles, his skin dark; how could he be called ‘handsome’?

“Hu *Daxia*,” Wei Xiaobao asked in amazement, “Your martial art skill is superb; why didn’t you just grab Chen Yuanyuan and take her go?”

When Hu Yizhi heard this, an angry look flitted through his face, a murderous intent flashed through his eyes. Wei Xiaobao was terrified; his grip loosened, the wine cup in his hand dropped, the wine splashed all over the place. Hu Yizhi lowered his head, sighed and said, “That day I was in Chengdu, Sichuan when inadvertently I caught a glimpse of Miss Chen. Ay, that was a predestined relationship. Since that day my soul and spirit turn upside-down, I can’t no longer free myself. Wei *Xiangzhu*, the ol’ Hu is someone without any future prospect, a man without any ambition. When Miss Chen was in Ping Xi Wang mansion, I became a gardener in the mansion, growing flowers and pulling the weeds for her. When she moved to the Three-Sage Nunnery, I followed her and gathered firewood for her. I have no other desire than to stole a glance of her every morning and evening, and then I would be perfectly contented. How … how could I treat a beautiful woman with the slightest degree of rudeness?”

Wei Xiaobao asked, “In that case, you love her this much, but these past twenty years or so, she did not know?”

Hu Yizhi shook his head with a bitter laugh, “I am afraid to reveal my real identity. Usually, I rarely speak more than three sentences in one day, in her presence I became even more dumbstruck and unable to reply. These past

twenty-three years, I only spoke thirty-nine sentences to her. In return, she has spoken to me fifty-five sentences."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "You remember very clearly."

Wu Liuqi and Ma Chaoxing felt sorrowful, they both thought that he even counted clearly the number of time those two people spoke; it was indeed a case of infatuation to the extreme. Wu Liuqi was afraid Wei Xiaobao would babble more nonsense and hence hurt his feeling, so he said, "Hu *Dage*, our nature is different from each other. Some people like to study martial art like crazy, some love to drink wine, some like to gamble. Chen Yuanyuan is the number one beauty in the world, you appreciate beauty, but your feeling toward her is pure, it is really rare. *Xiongdi* is being bold, I would like to offer an advice, I wonder if it can be accepted."

Hu Yizhi replied, "Wu *Xiong*, please speak."

Wu Liuqi said, "Thinking about that Chen Yuanyuan, naturally in the past her beauty was incomparable, but by this time, she is growing old, it may be assumed that …"

Hu Yizhi repeatedly shook his head, he was unwilling to hear the rest. "Wu *Xiong*," he said, "Some people are ambitious, yet *Xiongdi* is a silly big melon. If you look down upon me, let us part now." While saying that, he stood up.

"Wait a minute!" Wei Xiaobao said, "Hu *Xiong*, Chen Yuanyuan's beauty, no one in the mortal world has it; she is like the eternal, celestial fairy. Fortunately Wu *Xiangzhu* and Ma *Xiangzhu* have never seen her; otherwise, as soon as they saw her, I am afraid they would also be willing to grow vegetable and fetch water for her, and then our Tian Di Hui will be short two *Xiangzhu* …"

Wu Liuqi secretly cursed in his heart, "Damn it, the little demon is speaking without thinking."

Wei Xiaobao continued, "… I have seen her with my own eyes. Her daughter Ah Ke is only half as beautiful as she is, but to be really honest with you, I have already made up my mind that even if I am hacked to pieces, that my body is torn and my bones crushed, I simply have to take her as my wife. At the casino yesterday, she wanted to dig my eyes out, she was vicious and merciless, yet *laozi* did not care. This matter, *laoxiong* has seen it with your own eyes, this is

not a pretense at all."

When Hu Yizhi heard this, he was overwhelmed with the feeling that they were fellow sufferers who empathized with each other. He sighed and said, "In my opinion, that Ah Ke seem to be a bit uninterested in Wei *Xiongdi*."

"What do you mean a bit uninterested?" Wei Xiaobao said, "She practically hates me to the bones. Damn it … Hu *Dage*, please don't misunderstand, I am simply cursing thoughtlessly, I was not cursing her Ma, Chen Yuanyuan … [note: damn it (ta ma de) lit. 'his/her mother'] Didn't that Ah Ke already pierce my chest hatefully with her sword? Later on she also pierced my eyes; if not for my luck was good, she would have murdered her own husband early on. She … she … humph, she has taken a liking to that Zheng *Gongzi* of Taiwan, she is concentrating her thoughts and efforts to be husband and wife with him. Unfortunately that surnamed Zheng did not drown to his death in the river."

Hu Yizhi sat down, held his hand, and said, "*Xiao Xiongdi*, in this world, a matter involving feeling like this cannot be forced. You can meet Ah Ke, and can have Shijie Shidi relationship with her, it was already predestined affinity, not whether you can be husband and wife with her. In all your life, you have already seen her many, many times, you have talked to her many, many times. She beats you, she curses you, she uses blade to stab you, it can be said that in her heart she already has you. This is your share of enormous good fortune."

Wei Xiaobao nodded, "What you said is very true," he said, "If she take no notice and ignore me, that means in this world there is no me; this feeling is definitely very unpleasant. I'd rather she curses me and beats me, using blades trying to kill me; as long as she does not kill me, it's alright with me."

Hu Yizhi sighed and said, "Even if she killed you, that would be very good. If she killed you, she would inevitably feel a little bit guilty. When she is asleep in the night, perhaps she would dream of you; when she is idling with nothing to do during the day, she would occasionally be thinking of you. Don't you agree that it surpasses the thought that she has never had you in her heart?"

Wu Liuqi and Ma Chaoxing looked at each other in amazement; they both thought that this man had brought the word 'sentimental' to the extreme. If not for the fact that they had witnessed his battle against Feng Xifan just now, that

they had also seen his martial art skill, which had reached perfection, they would have not believed that this man was the distinguished and accomplished, the elegant 'Handsome Saber King', whose name was well-known in the four seas.

Wei Xiaobao was nodding his head again and again, however, as he said, "Hu *Dage*, indeed you cannot say those words more clearly than that. I had not thought about it before, but when I like a woman, I am determined to make her my wife; I don't have patience like yours. If Ah Ke really wants me to grow vegetables and fetch water, if she wants me to accompany her for a lifetime, naturally I would do it. But if that Zheng *Gongzi* is also by her side, *laozi* will stab him with the knife that a white blade came in, a red blade came out."

"*Xiao Xiongdi*," Hu Yizhi said, "What you said is not exactly correct. If you like a woman, you must make her happy, for her sake, not for yours. If she wanted to marry that Zheng *Gongzi*, then you should help her accomplish her heart's desire by 'thousand ways, a hundred plans'. If someone is going to harm Zheng *Gongzi*, for the sake of your beloved, you ought to protect Zheng *Gongzi* with all your strength; even if you have to deliver your life in the process, you must not harm the essentials [?? Not sure]."

Wei Xiaobao shook his head and said, "I am afraid I must harm the essentials. Doing business and suffer a loss, *Xiongdi* is not willing to do. Hu *Dage*, *Xiongdi* admires you very much, I really want to bow to you and take you as my master. Not to learn your saber technique, but to learn about your infatuation toward Chen Yuanyuan. This kind of skill, *Xiongdi* is far inferior to you."

Hu Yizhi was greatly delighted. "Bowing and taking me as your master is not necessary, but there is no harm in the two of us brothers compare notes and encourage each other."

Both Wu Liuqi and Ma Chaoxing have never had any regards for women, they thought that the joy houses had no lack of pretty women, as long as they produced white, shiny silver, they could get however many they wanted. It seemed to them that Hu and Wei, these two fellows, had lost their minds and went insane. But the more Hu and Wei, one was old the other young, talked to each other, the more they found out that they shared much in common, they both felt regret of not meeting each other earlier.

Actually, Wei Xiaobao's desire to take Ah Ke as his wife was a firm resolution, he was determined to overcome countless difficulties, and was willing to undergo any hardship to the end; it was completely different from Hu Yizhi's infatuation. One was passionately devoted to Chen Yuanyuan, the other was set on possessing Chen Yuanyuan's daughter. Although their aspirations differed, they found some common ground in this matter. Besides, Hu Yizhi had already concealed this affection in his heart for twenty-three years, he had never revealed it to anyone else. This moment he freely poured out his heart, unexpectedly there was someone nearby who sighed in admiration. Being able to ramble on incessantly, the delight in his heart was unspeakable.

Seeing Hu and Wei, two people were chatting amiably, Ma Chaoxing felt it was inappropriate to break the two people's moods. At first he was still listening to their conversation, but as time went by, he felt it was growing more offensive. Both he and Wu Liuqi frowned secretly, they thought, "Wei Xiangzhu is a little child who does not understand anything, nothing we can do about it. You, Hu Yizhi, are old but do not show respect of your seniority, teaching this youngster bad things." They could not stop the disdain in their hearts to grow several points.

"*Xiao Xiongdi*," suddenly Hu Yizhi said, "You and I feel like old friends at the first meeting. The one hardest to come by in this life is an intimate friend. As the saying goes, 'Finding a good friend, dying will have no regret'. The Ol' Hu used to have acquaintances all over the world, but not one person knew me intimately. Today we are brought together by fate, how about the two of us swear brotherhood?"

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted. "That is very good," he said; but suddenly he hesitated. "I am afraid there is something that is not proper," he said.

"What is it?" Hu Yizhi asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, "In case you and I both accomplish our hearts' desire, you marry Chen Yuanyuan, and I marry Ah Ke, you will be my wife's father. If we become brothers now, it won't be appropriate later."

As soon as Wu Liuqi and Ma Chaoxing heard this, they could not help but bursting into loud laughter. Hu Yizhi's countenance changed, "Ay," he said

indignantly, “You never understand my affection toward Miss Chen. In all my life, I will never raise a finger to touch the corner of her clothes. If I am speaking empty words, let me be like this table.” While saying that, he reached out with his left hand, ‘crack!’ he grabbed a corner of the small table inside the boat’s cabin, and rubbed it between his hands, the piece of wood turned into splinters, which rained down to the floor.

“Good martial art skill!” Wu Liuqi praised.

Hu Yizhi cast him an angry look; he thought, “What’s so good about my martial art skill? My deep love is what’s considered rare. Obviously you are not my intimate friend.”

Wei Xiaobao did not have the ability to copy him grabbing the wood and turning it into dust; he pulled his dagger and lightly cut the other corner of the table, put it on the table, raised the dagger, and conveniently chopped it several times, turning the wood into several small pieces. He said, “If Wei Xiaobao cannot marry Ah Ke to be my wife, let me be like the corner of this tea table, cut by other people into eight pieces, without able to retaliate.”

When the others saw the sharpness of this dagger, they were all amazed, but listening to his oath, they were all amused. Wei Xiaobao said, “Hu *Dage*, in that case, in all my life I won’t be your son-in-law; let’s swear to be brothers then.”

Hu Yizhi laughed heartily. He pulled Wei Xiaobao’s hands to the bow, took him kneeling down side by side toward the moon, and said, “Hu Yizhi today swear to be brothers with Wei Xiaobao. Hereafter blessing will be enjoyed together, difficulties will be faced together. If I violate this oath, let me be drowned in the river.”

Wei Xiaobao repeated the oath, but on the last sentence, he changed it to ‘let me be drowned in this Liujiang River’. He thought, “Definitely I will never betray Hu *Dage*, but if by any chance I commit a mistake, from now on I won’t come back to Guangxi, hence I won’t be drown in this Liujiang River. If it was any other river, it does not count.”

The two of them laughed aloud, and returned to the cabin hand-in-hand; they looked very intimate to each other already. Wu Liuqi and Ma Chaoxing congratulated the two, the four of them made a toast and drank together. Wu

Liuqi was afraid that if these two lovesick sworn brothers would talk about Chen Yuanyuan and Ah Ke again, he would be sick of listening to them, thereupon he said, “Let’s go back.”

Hu Yizhi nodded his head. “Very well,” he said, “Ma *Xiong*, Wei *Xiongdi*, I have a request: I want to bring this Miss Ah Ke back to Kunming.”

Ma Chaoxing did not care. Wei Xiaobao, however, was greatly shocked. “Whatever for?” he busily asked.

Hu Yizhi sighed and said, “That day when Miss Chen saw her daughter for the first time at the Three-Sage Nunnery, that very same night she fell ill. She only called, ‘Ah Ke, Ah Ke, why haven’t you come to see your mother?’ She also said, ‘Ah Ke, mother only have you, my darling, my precious; mother misses you very much.’ I could not endure listening to her, hence I hurried along to catch up with you. Along the way I painstakingly persuaded Miss Ah Ke to come back, to accompany her mother, but no matter what she flatly refused. This matter cannot be forced; my hands are bound and I am unable to do anything. My only choice was to follow her in secret; my only hope is to persuade her to change her mind. Now she has fallen into your hands, if Ma *Xiangzhu* wants her to promise that she returns to Kunming to see her mother before you can release her, perhaps she won’t have any choice but to comply.”

Ma Chaoxing said, “In this matter *Zaixia* does not have any objection; I’ll leave it to Wei *Xiangzhu*’s discretion.”

“*Xiongdi*,” Hu Yizhi said, “You want to take her as your wife, there will be enough time to do that later, but if Miss Chen does not recover from her illness, she may not see her daughter anymore. This … this will be a lifelong regret.” While speaking the last sentence, his voice broke.

Wu Liuqi shook his head secretly; he thought, “This man’s heroic spirit has worn down completely, he had turned into a fainthearted man. For the sake of Wu Sangui’s beloved concubine unexpectedly his spirit and soul have turned upside-down like this; where has the lofty quality of a hero and warrior gone? Chen Yuanyuan is one of the chief offenders who forfeited the Great Ming’s rivers and mountains; next time *laozi* leads my troops to invade Kunming, I will stab her with a knife first.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “*Dage* wants to take her to Kunming, of course you can. But … but let me be honest with *Dage*: she and I have been officially wed, we have bowed to the Heaven and the Earth long ago, acting as the matchmaker was Mu Family’s Shaking-head Lion Wu Lishen. Unfortunately my wife is unwilling to get married with me, she wants to remarry that Zheng *Gongzi*. If she agrees to be husband and wife with me, naturally we can let her go.”

Listening to this point, Wu Liuqi flew into a rage; he could not endure patiently anymore. Raising his palm he slapped the small table heavily, all the wine pot and cups were overthrown. “Hu *Dage*, Wei *Xiongdi*,” he said in loud voice, “This little girl is unwilling to see her mother; she greatly violates filial piety. She and Wei *Xiongdi* have bowed to the Heaven and the Earth, and thus they are bound in marriage contract as husband and wife, yet she still wants that Zheng *Gongzi*, she greatly violates chastity. This kind of unfilial and unchaste woman, why should we let her live in the world? The more beautiful her appearance, the worse her moral quality is. I might as well go and wring her neck, ‘crack!’ and be done with it, so that those who hear it won’t be annoyed, those who see it won’t be provoked to anger.” With a stern voice he ordered the boatmen, “Row faster, row faster!”

Hu Yizhi, Wei Xiaobao and Ma Chaoxing, three people looked at each other with changed countenance. They saw his awe-inspiring presence, his scathing murderous intent, the blue veins on his forehead were bulging; obviously he was extremely angry, who would dare to persuade him?

Their boat gradually approached the river bank. Wu Liuqi called out, “Where are those boy and girl?”

“They are bound in here,” someone on another boat replied.

Wu Liuqi signaled the boatmen, their boat turned easterly toward the other boat. Wu Liuqi said to Wei Xiaobao, “Wei *Xiongdi*, you and I are brothers of the same Society, we are as close as flesh and blood brothers. As your *Gege*, I cannot bear to see you making mistake because of woman’s charm, and thus ruining your life. Today I am going to break it for you.”

With a trembling voice Wei Xiaobao said, “This matter … must be … must be discussed carefully.”

“What is there to discuss?” Wu Liuqi said in a stern voice.

The two boats were getting close to each other. Wei Xiaobao was very anxious as if he was burning inside, he had no choice but to turn to Ma Chaoxing to appeal for help, “Ma *Dage*, please persuade Wu *Dage*.”

“There are a lot of good women in the world,” Wu Liuqi said, “Your *Gege* will guarantee that I will find you a wife from an agreeable home to your satisfaction. Why do you reluctant to part with this kind of lowly woman?”

Wei Xiaobao looked distressed. “Ay, this … this …” he said.

Suddenly, ‘whoosh!’ someone leaped up toward the bow of the opposite boat; it was Hu Yizhi. They saw him entering the cabin, and went out from the stern; there was someone in his arms. His movement was extremely fast and nimble, immediately he leaped onto the shore, and then with several ups and downs he was already several dozen *zhang* away. His voice came from the distance, “Wu *Dage*, Ma *Dage*, Wei *Xiongdi*, I am really sorry for the offense. Someday I will visit you to beg forgiveness and receive punishment.” His voice gradually went far away, but because of his abundant *chi*, it could still be heard clearly.

Wu Liuqi was startled and angry; he was about to jump to chase after him, but then he saw that Hu Yizhi was already far away. After thinking the better of it, he could not help but roaring in laughter. Wei Xiaobao also clapped his hands and cheered; he presumed that Hu Yizhi took Ah Ke away, naturally he was taking her to see Chen Yuanyuan.

Chapter 34

Rise and fall of a document to take care of restoring the deer, thousand years of ash to take the great wild goose from the deep by force.

(Translated by Foxs)

The large white sheet on the table was full of several thousand embroidery needles, the several thousand pieces of skins had been assembled together into a complete, whole large map. What was amazing was that several thousand pieces of skin fit together; there was not a single extra piece, and there was not a single hole either.

Shortly afterwards the two boats drew close to each other. The Tian Di Hui brothers pushed Zheng Keshuang out.

“His granny,” Wei Xiaobao cursed, “You murdered Tian Di Hui brothers, and wanted to harm Tian Di Hui *Zongduozhu*; I must cut your chest and open your belly. Hot piece mama, you know very well that Ah Ke is my wife, yet you dare to fool around with her.” While saying that, he stepped closer and ‘slap, slap, slap, slap’, he slapped him on the face from left and right four times.

Zheng Keshuang had drunk a lot of river water, he had lost the will to resist; seeing Wei Xiaobao’s devilish appearance, he begged, “Wei *Daren*, please consider my father’s face and spare my life. From this day forward, I … I will no longer dare to speak one sentence to Miss Ah Ke.”

“What if she speaks to you?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

“I will not reply,” Zheng Keshuang said, “Otherwise … otherwise …” Whatever it was, momentarily he was not able to decide.

“You speak like you fart,” Wei Xiaobao said, “I’d better cut your tongue first, so that even when you want to speak to Ah Ke, you won’t be able to.” While saying that, he pulled his dagger, and then shouted, “Stick out your tongue!”

Zheng Keshuang was greatly alarmed. He hastily said, “I won’t speak with her; if I speak even one word, I am a scoundrel b@stard.”

Wei Xiaobao was afraid Chen Jinnan might punish him, hence did not really dare to kill Zheng Keshuang. “In the future, if you ever be rude to Tian Di Hui *Zongduozhu* and brothers later, if you ever dare do some dubious thing to my wife, thinking to make a green hat for *laozi* to wear, *laozi* will insert a sword into your adulterer head.” He raised the dagger and lightly tossed it forward. The dagger went straight into the bow of the boat.

“I don’t dare, I don’t dare,” Zheng Keshuang hastily said, “I will not dare to do that anymore.”

Wei Xiaobao turned his head toward Ma Chaoxing and said, “Ma *Dage*, it was your Latter Family Hall who caught him, please deal with him.”

Ma Chaoxing sighed and said, “Guoxing Ye [Koxinga, lit. ‘Master of Guoxing’] is such a hero, his grandson is actually a good-for-nothing kid.”

Wu Liuqi said, “When this man returns to Taiwan, he would surely make things difficult for *Zongduozhu*, we’d better cut him into two, then I guarantee we won’t have any future trouble.”

Zheng Keshuang was greatly alarmed. “No, it won’t happen,” he busily said, “When I return to Taiwan, I will ask my father to make Chen Yonghua, Mr. Chen an officer, a very high-ranking officer.”

“Humph,” Ma Chaoxing snorted, “Do you think *Zongduozhu* will like that?” Lowering his voice, he said to Wu Liuqi, “This man is Zheng *Wangye*’s son; if we kill him, I am afraid the charge of ‘killing the master’ will fall upon *Zongduozhu*.”

Tian Di Hui was founded by Chen Yonghua under Zheng Chenggong’s [Koxinga’s real name] order. Chen Yonghua was the head of Tian Di Hui, but he was still an officer under the Taiwan’s Yanping Jun Wang. If the Society brothers killed Yanping Jun Wang’s son, although Chen Yonghua was not present, he would not escape responsibility.

Wu Liuqi thought he was right; pulling with both hands, he snapped the ropes binding Zheng Keshuang. Standing him up, Wu Liuqi shouted, “Get lost!” and threw him to the shore. Immediately Zheng Keshuang flew out as if he was soaring over the clouds or riding on the mists, crying out ‘wah, wah’ while still in the air; he must have expected that when he dropped, his muscle would be broken and his bones fractured. Who would have thought that as his butts landed on the ground, he slid over a grassy lawn? Although his body was aching from the shock, he was not injured at all. Quickly he crawled up and ran away. Wu Liuqi and Wei Xiaobao roared in laughter.

Ma Chaoxing said, “This fellow disgraced Guoxing Ye’s face.”

Wu Liuqi asked, “How did this fellow murder our Society brothers and harm our *Zongduozhu*?”

“It’s a long story,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “Let’s go ashore, *Xiongdi* will tell *Dage* in details.” Looking at the horizon, he said, “There are black clouds over there, I am afraid heavy rain is coming; let us come ashore quickly.” A burst of strong wind came, it blew everybody’s clothes that it made rustling noise; they mouths and noses were blown by the wind.

Wu Liuqi said, “This storm will be most likely a big one, let us sail to the middle

of the river, we can drink wine and talk in the midst of big wind, big rain; it must be very interesting."

Wei Xiaobao was shocked; he hastily said, "This little boat may not be able to withstand the wind; if it capsized, won't it be bad?"

Ma Chaoxing smiled. "No need to worry about that," he said. Turning his head around, he gave the boatman some orders; the boatman complied, he went to the bow and raised the sail.

By this time the wind was picking up speed, the sail received the full force of the wind, like an arrow the boat sailed to the middle of the river. The waves billowed, the small boat went up and down abruptly, the water from the river splashed into the cabin. Wei Xiaobao bore the nickname 'little white dragon' in vain, since he did not have any water skill. While it's true that he was still 'little', and by now his face was 'white' from the terror, apparently he had nothing to do with the character 'dragon'.

Wu Liuqi laughed and said, "Wei *Xiongdi*, I don't have any water skill either."

Wei Xiaobao was greatly surprised. "You can't swim?" he asked.

Wu Liuqi shook his head, "I never learn," he said, "As soon as I saw water, I am dizzy and light-headed."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Then … then why did you tell the boat to sail to the middle of the river?"

Wu Liuqi laughed and said, "Everything in the world, the more frightening it is, the more I wanted to try it. The worst that could happen is that the billow will overthrow the boat, then everybody will become Liujiang River ghosts; it's not such a big deal. Besides, Ma *Dage*'s nickname is 'Xijiang Divine Dragon[19]'; how excellent do you think his water skill is? Ma *Dage*, let us agree in advance: if the boat did capsize, you must rescue Wei *Xiongdi* first, and then rescue me next."

Ma Chaoxing laughed. "Alright," he said, "It's a deal." Wei Xiaobao felt slightly better.

Presently the wind and waves were getting stronger, the little boat was tossed around, sometimes it went up more than a *zhang* into the air, and then suddenly

dropped straight down as if the boat was heading to the bottom of the river. Wei Xiaobao was thrown up, and then 'bang!' he landed heavily on the cabin's floor. "My goodness; that was serious!" he cried out in a shrill voice.

The sail made a loud flapping noise, the rain poured down, followed by a burst of gale, blowing the lanterns on the bow and the stern of the boat off; the lantern inside the cabin also went off. Wei Xiaobao cried out again, "Aiyo, not good!" From inside the cabin he peered outside, and saw the surface of the river was white with the surging waves. The wind was strong, the rain heavy; there was grandeur in the power of nature.

"*Xiongdi*, don't be afraid," Ma Chaoxing said, "This storm is indeed violent, I will take the helm." Walking to the stern, he shouted at the boatman, ordering them to go into the cabin. The storm was usually bad, the two boatmen had just reached the mast when they were blown by the wind that they nearly fell into the river. They held on to the mast tightly and did not dare to let go.

In the big storm, the boat was suddenly blown that it leaned to one side. Wei Xiaobao was thrown to the left; he screamed in terror, while in his heart he cursed, "This is the old beggar's damned weird idea. You yourself don't know how to swim, you don't want to go someplace else to play, yet you are going to this gale and heavy rain in the river to play a joke? The wind is big the rain is big, your Mama's belly is also big."

The gale brought torrential rain with it. Burst after burst of rain invaded the cabin. Wei Xiaobao was already drenched from head to toe. Suddenly they heard loud crashing noise, the sail mast broke, the hull leaned to the side. Wei Xiaobao was thrown to the right. 'Crash!' his head bumped onto the small table. Suddenly he had a thought, "I have not been unfair to Hu *Dage*, why should I be drowned to death in Liujiang River today? Aiyo, that's right, when I made that oath, I was having evil designs in my heart that someday I would cheat on him. Jade Emperor, Yan Wang of the Ten Palace, Guanyin Bodhisattva who helps those in distress, with all sincerity Wei Xiaobao wants to enjoy blessing and endure hardship together with Hu *Dage*. But what blessing would we enjoy together? If he marry Chen Yuanyuan … could it be that I will also …"

Amidst the wind and the rain, suddenly he heard Wu Liuqi opened his mouth and sang loudly, "Walking to the waterfront, the heart is filled with resentment,

but to whom can I talk to? Old tears are blown by the wind, a lone city walls, the eyes piercing the distance hoping for a rescue, exerting all my strength to destroy the troops in bloody battle. Jumping out the tight encirclement, longing with grief of the old country, who knew the song would end leaving the bamboo mat empty? Along the Chang Jiang [Yangzte River], the head in Wu and tail in Chu in three thousand journeys, home exhausted the surname left behind, the rain turns over the cloud changes. Cold wave rolls up to the east, everything is handed over to the smoke in the air. The spirit moves in a prominently big way, the voice pursues the horizon where the sea meets the sky."

The sound of singing was carried far on the surface of the river; although the wind and the rain were loud, they could not suppress his voice. From the stern Ma Chaoxing did not stop cheering. He called out, "What a good verse! The voice pursues the horizon where the sea meets the sky!"

Listening to him singing fervently, Wei Xiaobao did not understand what he was singing about. He cursed in his heart, "You have such a nice voice, why don't you go up the stage and become an actor [orig. 'hua mian' – flowery/fancy face]? The Old Beggar, with a loud voice calls, 'Master, Madame, please give alms some leftovers and cold rice', then you won't die hungry."

Suddenly from the distance someone with a clear and resonant voice called out, "Throughout the ages the Southern Dynasties' words were passed on, grieving heart and tears of blood scattered on mountains and plains."

The call was coming from a very far distance, yet in the mid of storm it was heard very clearly; obviously that man's internal energy was very profound. Wei Xiaobao was startled. He heard Ma Chaoxing called out, "Is that *Zongduozhu*? *Xiongdi* Ma Chaoxing here."

"Precisely," from the other side came the reply, "Is Xiaobao there?" It was indeed Chen Jinnan's voice.

Wei Xiaobao was pleasantly surprised. " Shifu," he called out, "I am here." But in that storm, how could his voice travel far?

Ma Chaoxing called out, "Wei *Xiangzhu* is here. We also have Great Obedience Hall's Red Banner's Wu *Xiangzhu*."

"Wonderful!" Chen Jinnan replied, "No wonder he sang a song on the river, his

voice resounding into the clouds." From his voice it was evident that he was genuinely happy.

Wu Liuqi said, "Subordinate Wu Liuqi pays his respect to *Zongduozhu*."

"We are all brothers here," Chen Jinnan said, "No need to be polite." His voice sounded closer, the boat he was riding was approaching fast.

The storm had not abated, from inside the cabin Wei Xiaobao looked out, the river was pitch black, with only a dot of light slowly moving on the river's surface toward them, Chen Jinnan's boat still had a lantern on it.

After quite a while, the lantern arrived near them. The bow of their boat sank slightly; Chen Jinnan had already jumped onboard. Wei Xiaobao thought, "Shifu is here, this time my little life will be saved." He rushed toward the cabin entrance, but in the darkness he could not see Chen Jinnan's face, so he only called out again, "Shifu!"

Chen Jinnan pulled his hand and dragged him back into the cabin. "This storm is really bad," he said with a laugh, "Are you scared?"

"Not bad," Wei Xiaobao replied.

Wu Liuqi and Ma Chaoxing also entered the cabin to pay their respect. Chen Jinnan said, "I went into the city, and was told that you went to the river, hence I came to look for you. I did not expect the storm to be this bad. If it were not for Wu *Dage* singing loudly, I would never found you."

Wu Liuqi said, "Subordinate's spirit was aroused, I was only incurring *Zongduozhu*'s ridicule through my poor performance."

Chen Jinnan said, "We, brothers, match each other. The song Wu *Dage* sang, was it the 'Sinking in the River' from the play 'Peach Blossom Fan'?"

"Precisely," Wu Liuqi said, "This song was written about the history of Ge Bujing who loyally fought the enemy, and sacrificed himself by drowning in the river. *Xiongdi* usually love to listen to this song the most. This time the storm flared up on the river, I could not stop myself from singing it."

"You sang very well," Chen Jinnan praised, "Indeed very good."

Wei Xiaobao mused, "Turns out this song is called 'Sinking in the River'. Why

didn't you sing form a good play, but sang this bad luck play instead? If you want to sink into the river, please excuse *Xiaodi* for not keeping you company."

Chen Jinnan said, "The other day on the Jiaxing boat, Zhejiang, I heard Mr. Huang Zongxi, Mr. Lu Liuliang, and Mr. Zha Yihuang, the three Jiangnan scholars telling me about Wu *Xiong*'s past achievements; *Xiongdi* was full of admiration. Although you and I are brothers of the same Society, *Xiongdi* has so many complicated businesses I need to take care of; all along I failed to pay you a visit in Guangdong. Wu *Xiong*'s capacity is unusual, you cannot come to the north either. Unexpectedly today we can be together here; this is indeed a great comfort in my life."

Wu Liuqi said, "Ever since *Xiongdi* entered Tian Di Hui, there was not a day I did not wish to see *Zongduozhu*. There is a saying in Jianghu, 'Whoever never knew Chen Jinnan, he calls himself a hero in vain.' Starting today, I can call myself a hero. Ha ha, ha ha …"

Chen Jinnan said, "Jianghu friends praised me too much, I am really ashamed."

The two of them were genuinely happy to see each other, there was instant bond between them as they talked freely about their long life's aspiration; immediately they forgot the wind and the rain outside the boat.

After chatting for a while, the storm gradually subsided. Chen Jinnan asked about Wu Sangui's affair, Wei Xiaobao told him everything in thrilling details, unavoidably he added spices and soy paste; as well as everything else they had been through, so that it was the first time even for Ma Chaoxing to hear about it. Chen Jinnan was very delighted to hear that they had obtained the Mongolian emissary Hantiemo, a conclusive proof that Wu Sangui would definitely raise arm to rebel. When he heard about Luocha Country was going to respond Wu Sangui from the north by seizing a large of territory outside the Pass, he could not help knitting his brows and did not say anything for half a day.

"Shifu," Wei Xiaobao said, "Luocha Country people have red hair and green eyes, those we do not need to be afraid, at most we won't look at their faces too much and that's the end. Their firearms, however, are very formidable. When their guns explode, no matter what kind of hero or warrior you are, you won't be able to withstand."

“That is the reason I am worried,” Chen Jinnan replied, “Wu Sangui and the Tatars fighting each other until both sides suffer, that is exactly the golden opportunity bestowed by the Heaven to restore our Han people’s mountains and rivers. However, we drive the tiger out from the front door, and let the wolf come in from the back door. We drive away the Tatars, the Luocha Country, who is more ferocious that the Tatars, will come and occupy our beautiful rivers and mountains. How can that be good?”

Wu Liuqi asked, “Is there really nothing we can do to handle the Luocha Country’s firearms?”

“There is one person,” Chen Jinnan replied, “I may introduce him to the two gentlemen.” Walking to the cabin’s mouth, he called, “Xingzhu, come over here.”

From the opposite boat someone replied, “Yes.” He leaped onboard and entered the cabin. He bowed slightly toward Chen Jinnan. This man was about forty years old, his stature was thin and small, his face carried a heroic expression.

Chen Jinnan said, “Please meet Wu *Dage*, Ma *Dage*. And this is my disciple, surnamed Wei.” The man bowed with cupped fist. Wu Liuqi and the others stood up and returned the propriety.

Chen Jinnan said, “This is Lin Xingzhu, Lin *Xiongdi*. He has been in Taiwan working with me, a very competent man. When Guoxing Ye defeated the red-haired devils in the past and captured Taiwan, Lin *Xiongdi* has rendered great merit.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Lin *Dage* has fought with the red-haired devils; that is very good. Luocha devils have firearms, the red-haired devils also have firearms. Lin *Dage* must have a way to deal with them.”

Wu Liuqi and Ma Chaoxing applauded together; they both said, “Wei *Xiongdi*’s brain is very quick.”

At first Wu Liuqi did not take Wei Xiaobao seriously, he thought that it was only because he was the *Zongduozhu*’s disciple that he achieved such a high position as the *Xiangzhu* of the Green Wood Hall. Although for the past few years the Green Wood Hall had accomplished not a few meritorious deeds, it

was not necessarily because of this young fellow. Seeing him to be infatuated with Ah Ke, his despise was elevated by several degrees. However, this time he could not help but admiring him, “This little baby can see matters very quickly, he must have some ability.”

Chen Jinnan smiled and said, “When Guoxing Ye attacked Taiwan in the past, the red-haired devils’ firearms were very formidable, it was indeed extremely difficult to withstand. At that time we built earth embankment, encircling several thousands of the red-haired troops in the city. We cut the water supply to the city, so that they had no water to drink. The red-haired troops could not endure anymore, they charged out of the city. We did not fight during the day, we only engaged them at night. Xingzhu, why don’t you tell everybody how we fought the battle?”

Lin Xingzhu said, “Our Jun Shi’s [lit. army master – military strategist] divine strategy was very clever …” Chen Jinnan was serving Zheng Chenggong as his military strategist, and was able to render great merit, hence the armed forces called him the ‘Jun Shi’.

“Jun Shi?” Wei Xiaobao questioned. He saw Lin Xingzhu was looking at Chen Jinnan, his Shifu smiled; immediately he understood. “Ah,” he said, “Shifu, turns out you are Zhuge Liang. Zhuge Jun Shi defeated the rattan-armored troop, Chen Jun Shi defeated the red-haired troop.”

Lin Xingzhu said, “Guoxing Ye offered sacrifice on the river on the first day of the second month of Yong Li’s fifteenth year, leading all civil and military officials, personal guards and armed self-defense troops. They sailed on battleships, from Ke Luo Bay out to the ocean, and reached Penghu [county, Pescadores Islands, Taiwan] twenty-four days later. By the first of the fourth month they arrived at Taiwan’s Lu Er Men [lit. deer ears gate]. There was sandbar outside the Gate, several dozen *li* long, the red-haired troops drilled holes on their ship and scuttled it to block the harbor, our battleship could not enter. While we were at a loss of what to do that time, suddenly the tide sharply rose, the soldiers’ cry of joy shook the heavens, our battleships rode the water and went ashore at the naval base port. The red-haired troops opened fire. Guoxing Ye told everybody that if we retreated a single step and were driven back to the ocean, it would mean we die without a burial site. Although the red-

haired devils' firearm was formidable, everybody charged forward courageously. The troops followed the order together, with Jun Shi personally led the assault. Suddenly, there was an explosion by my ears, as if several hundreds or thousands thunderclap struck together, a row of the brothers in front fell down. We panicked and ran away."

Wei Xiaobao said, "The first time I heard the red-haired gun exploded, I was also so scared that I collapsed and lost my mind."

Lin Xingzhu said, "Just as I was moving my hands and feet in confusion like a fly without a head, I heard Jun Shi's loud voice, 'After red-haired devils fire their guns, they must reload the gunpowder and the bullet, everybody charge!' I hastily led the brothers to charge forward. Sure enough, for a short while the red-haired devils could not open fire. However, we have just charged forward, the red-haired devils opened fire again. I immediately rolled down on the ground to evade, not a few brothers were killed. There was no other way; we were forced to retreat. The red-haired devils did not dare to pursue. Several hundred brothers died in this battle, we were all crestfallen. Thinking about the red-haired devils' firearms, 'our heart was alarmed, our flesh leaping'."

"And then Jun Shi figured out an ingenious plan?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

"That's right!" Lin Xingzhu shouted, "That evening, Jun Shi came to me and asked, 'Lin *Xiongdi*, you are a disciple of Mount Wuyi's [in Fujian] Di Tang [paradise terrestrial] School, are you not?' I said yes. Jun Shi said, 'When the red-haired devils opened fire earlier, you immediately rolled down on the ground; your movement was very nimble.' I was extremely ashamed; I said, 'Reporting to Jun Shi: *Xiao Jiang* [little/lowly general – referring to self] will not dare to be greedy for life, afraid of death anymore. In the battle tomorrow, I will definitely not dare to roll around to evade, and thus damaging our Great Ming's officers and men's power and prestige. Otherwise, you may just chop my head.'"

"Lin *Dage*," Wei Xiaobao said, "My guess is that Jun Shi did not blame you for being greedy for life, afraid of death; he was praising the way you rolled around to evade as very good, and he wanted you to impart that skill to the other brothers."

Chen Jinnan cast him a glance; there was a hint of smile on his face, apparently

he was praising his disciple. Lin Xingzhu slapped his thigh and loudly said, “That’s right. You are Jun Shi’s disciple, indeed brilliant master produces brilliant student …”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “You are my Shifu’s subordinate, indeed there are no weak soldiers under a capable general.” Everybody laughed.

Lin Xingzhu continued, “That night Jun Shi indeed instructed me just that. He said, ‘You must not misunderstand my meaning. I think your Yan Qing [lit. swallow green] Eighteen Tumble, Flying Squirrel on the Grass’ style will be very useful; you can roll to the enemy, and then use the saber to hack their legs. How’s your mastery of Di Tang Saber Technique?’ When I heard that Jun Shi was not scolding me as a coward who was afraid to die, I was relieved. I said, ‘Reporting to Jun Shi: *Xiao Jiang* did practice some Di Tang Saber Technique. In the past Shifu told me that if I go into battle, I could roll forward and hack the enemy horse’ legs; but the red-haired devils do not ride on horses, I am afraid it is useless.’ Jun Shi said, ‘Although the red-haired devils do not ride horses, we can chop their legs; why can’t we?’ When I heard that, I suddenly saw the light. ‘Yes, yes,’ I repeatedly said, ‘*Xiao Jiang*’s brain did not work, I did not think about that.’”

Wei Xiaobao smiled; he mused, “Just because your Shifu told you that this saber technique could be used to chop horses’ legs, you assumed it cannot be used to chop people’s legs. *Laoxiong*’s [old fellow] brain is really not too bright.”

Lin Xingzhu said, “And then Jun Shi instructed me to demonstrate the saber technique. He praised my mastery as adequate, he said, ‘Your Di Tang School’s saber technique, if you had not had ten summers and winters worth of training, you would not have reached this level. But we must fight the battle tomorrow, if we want everybody to train, there won’t be enough time.’ I said, ‘Yes, *Xiao Jiang*’s training in this Di Tang School Saber Technique is not good, but I have indeed trained it for more than ten years.’ Jun Shi said, ‘We will catch-up by building earth embankment, and defend it with bow and arrow. You will immediately teach the soldiers and generals the technique of rolling and chopping the enemy’s legs. If everybody can learn only three or four styles, that will do. You should not need to teach them the profound martial art of Di Tang School.’ I accepted Jun Shi’s order, and that very same night I taught the troop

of our own team. Early in the morning the next day, the red-haired devils attacked. We returned with bows and arrows. Our team had mastered five moves of the Di Tang Saber Technique, in turn they taught the officers and soldiers of other teams. Jun Shi also instructed everybody to cut down tree branches and tie them together as shields to keep off the red-haired troops' lead bullets. Early morning the fourth day, the red-haired troops launched a large-scale attack. We went up to meet the enemy head-on. Rolling forward, we managed to completely rout the red-haired devils. The battlefield was littered with several hundred hairy legs. Even the head of the red-hairs, Chikan City's garrison commander's left leg was also chopped down. And thus this head of the red-haired devils surrendered. Afterwards, when we attacked the defense cities, we also used the same method."

Ma Chaoxing happily said, "When we fight the war against the Luocha devils someday, we can use this skill to deal with them."

"However," Chen Jinnan said, "The situation is somewhat different. In those days, there were no more than three, four thousand red-haired troops in Taiwan; we kill one, their number decreases by one. If Luocha troops came to invade, at least there would be several tens of thousands people. If they come in a steady stream, we won't be able to kill them all. What's more, Di Tang Saber Technique can only be used in close combat. If Luocha troops used cannon to bombard us, it would be difficult to withstand."

Wu Liuqi nodded his agreement. "In Jun Shi's opinion, what should we do?" he asked. He noticed that when Chen Jinnan introduced him to Lin Xingzhu, he did not address Wu Liuqi as '*Xiangzhu*'; presumably because Lin Xingzhu did not belong to Tian Di Hui. Therefore, he also refrained from addressing Chen Jinnan as '*Zongduozhu*'.

Chen Jinnan said, "Our China's land is vast and its people numerous; if there is no traitor who respond to them from the inside, it will be extremely difficult for foreigners to force their way in."

"Precisely," everybody said, "The Tatars occupies our rivers and mountains, they were entirely dependent upon that traitor Wu Sangui to lead the way."

Chen Jinnan said, "Nowadays Wu Sangui is colluding with the Luocha Country.

When he deploys his troops to rebel, in one vigorous effort we must try to destroy him first. If Luocha Country does not have anybody inside to respond, they will not invade rashly."

Ma Chaoxing said, "But if Wu Sangui is defeated too quickly, he won't fight the Tatars until both sides suffer."

"That is also correct," Chen Jinnan said, "But in term of formidable power, Luocha people are more dreadful than the Tatars."

"That's right," Wei Xiaobao said, "Tatars also have yellow skin, black eyes and flat nose; not much different than us. Their language is also similar. Foreign devils have red hair and green eyes, plus they talk gibberish; who could understand?"

They discussed the affair of the country for a while. The sky gradually brightened, the storm had also abated. Ma Chaoxing said, "Everybody's clothes are wet, please come ashore and drink a cup to drive the cold away."

"Very well," Chen Jinnan said.

The storm had blown the boat more than thirty *li*; by the time they returned to Luizhou, it was already almost noon. They all disembarked from the same dock they left. They saw someone rushed over and called out, "*Xianggong* [young master], you … you are back." It was none other than Shuang'er. Her whole body was dripping wet, but her face looked happy.

"Why are you here?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Shuang'er replied, "There was a big storm last night, and you were travelling by boat; I was really worried. I only hoped *Xianggong* would come back sooner safe and sound."

"And you have been waiting here all along?" Wei Xiaobao asked in surprise.

"Yes," Shuang'er replied, "I … I … was worried …"

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Worried that the boat I ride on would sink?"

Shuang'er said in a low voice, "I know your luck is good, your boat can't possibly sink, but … but …"

A boatman standing nearby on the dock said with a laugh, "This young master,

late at night last night, when the storm was the fiercest, wanted to hire our boat to go to the river, saying that he must look for someone. At first he offered fifty *taels*, nobody took it. And then he offered a hundred *taels*. Zhang *Laosan* [ol' Zhang the third] was greedy for the money; he agreed. But as they were about to set sail, 'crack!' the storm blew his mast and broke it. When that happened, nobody dared to go. He was so anxious that he could only cry."

Wei Xiaobao's heart was touched; he grabbed Shuang'er's hands and said, "Shuang'er, you are very good to me." Shuang'er blushed, and lowered her head.

The party arrived at Ma Chaoxing's temporary lodging and changed their clothes there. Chen Jinnan instructed Ma Chaoxing to send his people out to investigate Zheng *Gongzi* and Feng Xifan's whereabouts. Ma Chaoxing complied. He sent his people to investigate, and then he reported the Latter Family Hall's business.

Ma Chaoxing prepared a banquet and asked Chen Jinnan to sit on the seat of honor, with Wu Liuqi sat on the seat next to him. He asked Wei Xiaobao to sit on the third seat, but Wei Xiaobao said, "Lin *Dage* broke through Taiwan, Di Tang Saber chopped the red-hair's ham. He has established such a great merit, even if *Xiongdi* has to stand up to accompany him drinking, I am most willing. This kind of hero, how could *Xiongdi* dare to sit above him?" He pulled Lin Xingzhu and had him sit on the third seat. Lin Xingzhu was greatly delighted; he thought that although Jun Shi's disciple was young, he was truly a good friend.

After the banquet was over, the four Tian Di Hui men gathered in the side room to discuss official business. "Xiaobao," Chen Jinnan said, "You have an important matter at hand, this time we, master and disciple, still cannot be together too long. Tomorrow you may head north."

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao said, "It's a pity that this time I cannot listen too much to Shifu's instruction. Actually, I also wanted to listen to Wu *Dage*'s heroic exploits, but I have to wait until Wu Sangui is defeated before I can listen to his story."

Wu Liuqi laughed and said, "Your Wu *Dage* does not have any heroic exploits. In all my life, I have actually committed not a few bad things. If not for Mr. Zha Yihuang giving me a lesson, I would have still acted as an accomplice to the tiger,

haplessly giving my life for the Tatars."

Wei Xiaobao took out the foreign-made gun presented by Wu Sangui as a gift, and said to Wu Liuqi, "Wu *Dage*, you have travelled far to see *Xiongdi*, I really can't thank you enough. Please take this Luocha Country's gun as a souvenir." Actually, Wu Sangui gave him a pair. When Wei Xiaobao was rescuing Mu Jianping, he gave the other one to Xia Guoxiang as a proof. And then in his rush to leave Yunnan, he did not have time to ask it back.

Wu Liuqi thanked him and received the gun. He packed the gunpowder and installed a bullet in it. Igniting the fuse, he aimed the gun toward the front courtyard. There was a spark, followed by a loud bang; the green flagstone on the front courtyard shattered, fragments of stone flew everywhere. Everybody was scared.

Chen Jinnan knitted his brows, thinking, "Luocha Country's firearms are surprisingly this sharp; if they send troops to invade, it would be really hard to stop them."

Wei Xiaobao took out four sheets of five thousand *taels* banknote, and gave them to Ma Chaoxing; he said with a laugh, "Ma *Dage*, I will have to bother you to invite your precious Hall's brothers to drink a cup of wine."

Ma Chaoxing laughed and said, "Twenty thousand *taels*? Might be too much. Even if we drink for three years, there will still be some left over." He thanked him and accepted the gift.

Wei Xiaobao kneeled down in front of Chen Jinnan to take his leave. Chen Jinnan reached out to help him up; he patted Wei Xiaobao's shoulder and said with a laugh, "You are very good, you become Chen Jinnan's disciple not in vain."

Wei Xiaobao stood close to him, he could see him clearly; he saw both sides of his temples were graying, his countenance was thin and pallid. Wei Xiaobao thought that his Shifu was always on the go in Jianghu over the past few years, braving the wind and frost and hardships; he could not help but was grieved, and wanted very much to give something to him. He mused, "Shifu does not want money; jewels, curios or toys he also does not like. Shifu's martial art skill is superb, he won't want my dagger or precious clothes." Suddenly he said on impulse, "Shifu, there is something I need to report to you, Senior."

Knowing that those two, master and disciple had something to discuss, Wu Liuqi and Ma Chaoxing withdrew.

Wei Xiaobao reached into his inner pocket, the one closest to his flesh, and took a package. Untying the string outside the package, he uncovered a layer of oilcloth, and then inside there were two more layers of wax paper. Finally he showed the pieces of sheepskin he took from the cover of the eight copies of the Forty-two-chapter Sutra. “Shifu,” he said, “Disciple does not have anything to show filial respect to you, Senior; please accept this package of skin pieces.”

Chen Jinnan was greatly astonished. “What are those?” he asked.

Thereupon Wei Xiaobao told him everything about the history of these pieces of skin. The more Chen Jinnan listened, the more his face turned serious. He heard about the Empress Dowager, the Emperor, Oboi, the Great Lama of Tibet, the one-armed nun Jiu Nan, the Cult Leader of Divine Dragon Cult, and the others, people with special background, not one of those people did not rack their brains trying to get these pieces of skin. He heard about the secret hidden in these skins involving Manchurian Qing Tatars’ dragon vein and large amount of treasure. Not even in his wildest dream would he think about these things. He questioned Wei Xiaobao in details, and Wei Xiaobao told him everything. Naturally some details, like the Cult Leader of Divine Dragon Cult taught him some moves, and that he bowed to Jiu Nan to take her as his Shifu, were skipped.

Chen Jinnan was deep in thought for half a day. Finally he said, “This package is really no small matter; we, master and disciple, could lead the brothers of our Society to dig the Tatars’ dragon vein, take out the treasure, send the troops in an uprising; this is indeed an amazing merit of our age. However, I am about to return to Taiwan to appear before *Wangye*. If I carry this package with me on the sea back and forth, I am afraid I might lose it. For the time being you’d better keep it. When I am back from Taiwan, I am going to Beijing to see you, and then we will attempt to do this important matter together.”

“Alright!” Wei Xiaobao said, “In that case, Shifu, please come to Beijing as quickly as possible.”

“Don’t worry,” Chen Jinnan said, “I won’t stay a moment longer. Xiaobao, your

Shifu has been rushing about all his life, for the sake of conspiring to restore the Ming. I see it with my own eyes that as the days go by, the previous dynasty is gradually fading from the common people's mind. The Tatars' young emperor is running the administration very properly; the great undertaking is getting more and more uncertain. Unexpectedly Wu Sangui is finally going to raise the troops in rebellion, plus you obtained this buried treasure map. This is indeed a huge favorable turn of events." Speaking to this point, his countenance brightened considerably.

His facial features were actually elegant, but he always appeared to be filled with concerns. This moment his spirit was greatly aroused, Wei Xiaobao was very happy to look at him.

"How is the poison in your body?" Chen Jinnan asked, "Is it better?"

"Disciple has taken the antidote given by Shen Long Jiao's Hong *Jiaozhu*," Wei Xiaobao replied, "The poison is completely neutralized."

"That's very good," Chen Jinnan happily said, "You are bearing the ten-thousand catty of great responsibility of fighting the Qing restoring the Ming on your shoulders, in everything you must take a good care of yourself." While saying that, he put his hands on Wei Xiaobao's shoulder.

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao replied, "Disciple is a hideous mess, I don't understand anything. Obtaining these pieces of skin is no more than stroke of luck. Each time it was just like I was being the banker, eating the bounty of the family for free. Heaven's pole eats heaven's pole, departing ten eats departing ten; winning is very easy."

Chen Jinnan smiled. "When you get back to Beijing," he said, "Bolt your door and close your window at night, slowly piece these skins together, construct the map, and then record the map firmly in your mind, memorize it well. After you can remember it without any mistake, disassemble the pieces of skin, divide it into seven or eight packages, and hide them in different places. Xiaobao, there will always be good things and bad things about someone's luck; you can't expect to always have propitious wind throughout the journey. In such an important matter like this, we must not depend on good luck alone."

"Shifu is right," Wei Xiaobao replied, "Just like when I play *Pai Jiu* and become

the banker, until now I have won eight plays; if I happen to lose and have to compensate, this package of pieces of skin might be taken away by other people, won't that be a total defeat of an army, a leveling off of my bank? Therefore, after successively winning eight plays, I have to stop being the banker."

Chen Jinnan thought that this child's gambling character was really strong. He smiled and said, "It's good that you understand this logic. Winning or losing in gambling is not a big deal. In the important matter we are planning, even if we have to deliver our lives, it is also a common matter. But the object in this package involves the lives and properties of million upon millions of people in the world; you must absolutely not lose it."

"That's right," Wei Xiaobao said, "After I won, I brought the money home, and hid it under my bed. I would chop my finger so that I cannot gamble anymore; that way I will never lose."

Chen Jinnan walked to the window and looked up to the sky. "Xiaobao," he softly said, "After hearing this news, even if I had to die immediately, my heart is very happy."

Wei Xiaobao thought, "When I saw Shifu in the former days, he was always in high spirit; why is it this time he is always thinking of dying?" He said, "Shifu, whatever it is that you have to attend to at the Yanping Wang palace, your heart is not too happy; is that right?"

Chen Jinnan turned around with a surprised look on his face. "How do you know?" he asked.

Wei Xiaobao replied, "I can see that Shifu does not appear to be very happy. But I know that in this world, even more difficult things, you have never taken it to your heart. All heroes and warriors of Jianghu are also holding you in high regards. I think that you are not afraid of even the Emperor himself. Throughout the world, only Zheng *Wangye*, one person, could give you reason to worry."

Chen Jinnan sighed. After half a day of silence, he said, "*Wangye* has always treated me with respect, plus he relies on me heavily."

"Um, it must be that fellow Zheng *Er Gongzi* [second young master] who put on damned obnoxious airs and offended you," Wei Xiaobao said.

“In the past,” Chen Jinnan said, “Guoxing Ye’s kindness to me was as heavy as the mountain. I have early on pledged my life to repay it, to bend to a task and spare no effort in attending to his Zheng family’s matters until the day I die. Zheng *Er Gongzi* is young, he may have said some improper things to me, but I do take it to heart. *Wangye*’s heir apparent is wise and loves the people, but he is born of a concubine.”

Wei Xiaobao did not understand, “What do you mean ‘he is born of a concubine’?”

“That means he was not born to the *Wangfei* [wife of a ‘king’, I guess the western equivalent would be a duchess],” Chen Jinnan explained.

“Ah, I understand,” Wei Xiaobao said, “He was born of *Wangye*’s mistress.”

Chen Jinnan felt that Wei Xiaobao’s wording was too vulgar, but remembering that he was uneducated, he did not care too much. “Right,” he said, “In the past, Guoxing Ye’s death was also closely related to this issue, for this reason *Wangtaifei* [mother of the ‘king’] did not like the heir apparent very much. She repeatedly told *Wangye* to depose the heir apparent, and set up the *Er Gongzi* as the heir apparent.”

Wei Xiaobao shook his head vehemently and said, “*Er Gongzi* is a useless muddle head, and he fears death; that won’t do! This fellow is a scoundrel, useless, a damned b@stard son of a b1tch. The other day he was trying to kill Shifu, you, Senior.”

Chen Jinnan’s countenance sank slightly. “Xiaobao,” he reprimanded, “Clean your mouth a bit! Didn’t that mean you were cursing *Wangye*?”

“Ah!” Wei Xiaobao exclaimed, while pressing his hand over his mouth. “I deserve to die!” he said, “I must not curse people with these three characters ‘wang ba dan’ [s.o.b.] casually.”

Chen Jinnan said, “Comparing those two young masters, in everything *Er Gongzi* cannot surpass his *Gege*; only his facial features are smart, his mouth is sweet, he knows how to make his [paternal] grandmother happy …”

Wei Xiaobao slapped his thigh. “That’s right,” he said, “Womenfolk don’t know anything; seeing a pretty boy who knows how to flatter, they thought he is a

treasure."

Chen Jinnan did not know Wei Xiaobao was referring to Ah Ke. He shook his head and said, "*Wangye* has not agreed to change the heir apparent. All the civil and military officials are also urging *Wangye* not to change his mind. Consequently, while it's true that these two young masters have become estranged, oftentimes *Taifei* and *Wangye*, mother and child, are also in disagreement with each other over this matter. Sometimes when *Taifei* is angry, she would summon us to vent her anger."

"This old …" Wei Xiaobao started; he was about to say 'old wh0re', three characters [lao biao zi], but managed to stop just in time. Hastily he changed his statement, "When elderly ladies [orig. lao tai tai] grow old, they become muddleheaded. Shifu, since you cannot solve the Zheng family problem and you cannot offend them, you might as well let each of them sweeping the snow from their own front door, don't care if there is frost on the tiles of their roof."

Chen Jinnan sighed, "My life is no longer mine," he said, "I have already sold it to Guoxing Ye long time ago. In this life, when you receive kindness you ought to repay. In the past Guoxing Ye has entrusted our country's territory to me, I should be responsible for our country's territory to repay him. Presently the number of capable people by *Wangye*'s side is diminishing with each passing day, I simply cannot cultivate my own moral worth and abandoning him. Ay! The great undertaking is difficult. All I can do is to let this matter runs its own course." Speaking to this point, he sounded like he had lost any enthusiasm.

Wei Xiaobao wanted to say something to console him, but momentarily he did not know what to say. After a while he said, "Yesterday we were originally going to …" while saying that, he raised his hand and ran it across his neck, "… with one knife cutting that Zheng Keshuang into two, to get rid of him completely. But Ma *Dage* said that if we do that, we may make Shifu lose your standing, you would be charged with something like 'tearing the master' [si zhu] accusation."

"Yes, 'killing the master' [shi zhu]," Chen Jinnan said, "Ma *Xiongdi* is absolutely right. If you killed Zheng *Gongzi*, how could I have the face to see *Wangye*? Another day in the next world [orig. nine springs], I will have no face to see Guoxing Ye."

“Shifu,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Why don’t you take me to see this *Wangtaifei* of the Zheng Family? Disciple has various techniques to deal with this kind of elderly lady.” He thought that since he managed to deal with the fake empress dowager, that even the real Empress Dowager was very obedient to him, dealing with one *Wangtaifei* should not be any problem.

Chen Jinnan smiled and said, “Don’t fool around!” Holding Wei Xiaobao’s hand, he took him out of the room.

[Book note[20]: Taiwan’s Yanping Jun Wang Zheng Jing’s eldest son, Keshang, was Chen Yonghua’s son-in-law; he was a resolute and decisive man. Zheng Jing appointed him as the heir apparent, and to act as the Regent in military campaigns. As Keshang solidify his power and win public approval, his numerous [younger] uncles and [younger] brothers became resentful of him. They made up a story that his mother pregnancy was with certain Butcher Li. After the deaths of Zheng Jing and Chen Yonghua, Keshang murdered Dong *Taifei* and his numerous [younger] brothers.]

Immediately Wei Xiaobao took his leave from his Shifu, Wu Liuqi and Ma Chaoxing. Wu and Ma, two people, walked him to the door.

“Wei *Xiongdi*,” Wu Liuqi said, “Your little servant girl, Shuang’er, I have sworn brotherhood with her, we are now brother and sister.”

Wei Xiaobao and Ma Chaoxing were stunned. They turned their head to look at Shuang’er, and saw her looking down, but her cheeks were blushing; she looked extremely bashful.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Wu *Dage* is very good at making jokes.”

With a serious expression Wu Liuqi said, “It’s not a joke. My *Yi Mei* [foster/sworn younger sister] is loyal, righteous and brave; she surpasses men. She is precisely the woman of our generation. As her *Gege*, I respect her very much. I saw how you swear brotherhood with the ‘Hundred Victory Saber King’ Hu Yizhi; your brotherhood is very strong. I wanted to follow suit, thereupon I wanted to become the sworn brother of Shuang’er. She said she did not want to, no matter what, saying that she could not climb the social ladder. I told her I am an old beggar, what climbing or descending social ladder? I simply must swear brotherhood with her. She had no choice but to comply.”

Ma Chaoxing said, “So when the two of you had a private discussion in that room a moment ago, you were talking about this brotherhood.”

“Exactly,” Wu Liuqi said, “Shuang’er *Meizi* [younger sister, term of endearment] told me not to say anything about this. Ha ha … becoming sworn brother and sister is just and honorable; why can’t I tell anybody?”

Only after listening to him did Wei Xiaobao realize that he was not joking. He looked at Wu Liuqi, and then he looked at Shuang’er, he felt it was very strange.

“Wei *Xiongdi*,” Wu Liuqi said, “From now on you must view this *Yi Mei* of mine in a new light. If you offend her, I will make life difficult for you.”

“No … that’s impossible,” Shuang’er busily said, “*Xianggong*, he … he treats me very well.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “With a *Dage* like you supporting her, even the Jade Emperor, the old man Yanluo [Yama, King of Hell] would not dare to offend her.” The three of them roared in laughter. They cupped their fists across their chests and bade farewell.

Returning to their temporary lodging, Wei Xiaobao asked Shuang’er about the sworn brotherhood business. Shuang’er was very bashful, she said, “That Wu … Wu *Ye* [master] …”

“What Wu *Ye*?” Wei Xiaobao cut her off, “*Dage* is *Dage*; you have sworn brotherhood with him, don’t tell me it did not count.”

“Yes,” Shuang’er said, “He said that in his opinion, I am not bad; hence he was determined to become sworn brother and sister with me.” From her pocket she took out the gun and said, “He said that he did not bring anything good with him; this gun was presented by *Xianggong* as a gift to him. In turn, he gave this to me. *Xianggong*, please take it to defend yourself.”

Wei Xiaobao shook his hand repeatedly; he said, “It was a gift from your *Dage*, how can you return it to me?”

Remembering Wu Liuqi’s conducts had always been beyond other people’s expectation, he could not help but clicking his tongue in wonder; he also thought, “His name is ‘Liuqi’ [six strange/wonderful/weird]; no wonder, no wonder! I wonder what are the other five?”

The party slowly headed back to the Capital. Along the way Jiu Nan taught Wei Xiaobao a boxing technique, and told him to practice. But Wei Xiaobao was unstable and jumpy, no matter what he just could not concentrate on learning martial art. Jiu Nan told him to demonstrate in her presence, but from her disciple's stance and style, she could tell that he had not learned even half a part of real martial art. She sighed and said, "Although you and I have a master-disciple relationship, but looking at your temper, frankly you are not a martial art practitioner material. Very well, let's do it this way: our Tie Jian Men [Iron Sword School] have a skill called 'Shen Xing Bai Bian' [divine line hundred changes], it was created by my *Enshi* [benevolent master] Priest Mu Sang. It is the chief among the *qinggong* skills in the world. This type of *qinggong* needs profound internal energy as its foundation that even you will not be able to comprehend. You don't have even one school's skill on you; someday when you meet a danger, how would you deal with it? I have no choice but to teach you a technique with which you can escape."

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted; he said, "When the soles of the feet can rub oil, fighting is nothing to worry about. If Shifu teach me the technique to escape, definitely no one can overtake me."

Jiu Nan smiled and said, "'Shen Xing Bai Bian' is incomparable in the world, in those days its prestige shook Wulin, yet now you only want to use it to rub oil on your feet. If under the ground *Enshi* knew, he would not want to acknowledge a lacking-prospect grand-disciple like you. However, apart from this, I have no other skill to pass on to you that you can learn."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Shifu accepted a lacking-prospect disciple like me, you have already shown great favor. However, in gambling there are winning and there are losing; this time Shifu's luck is no good and thus have accepted this kind of disciple. It can be considered that you have lost big. *Laotianye* has eyes; He will bless Shifu so that in the future Shifu will win eight plays in a row, you will accept eight good disciples whose prestige will shake the world."

Jiu Nan let out a 'hey, hey' laugh; she patted his shoulder and said, "Those with good martial art skill are not necessarily good people. You don't like learning martial art, it was your inborn nature; we can't force it. Other than your glib tongue, you can be considered my good disciple."

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted, there was a burst of excitement bubbling up in his heart, and on impulse he wanted to give the sheepskin pieces to Jiu Nan; but then he thought, “I have already given these skin pieces to my man Shifu, I can’t give it to my woman Shifu as well. Fortunately both Shifu wish to drive the Tatars away, to recover our Han people’s rivers and mountains, it does not matter if I give it to one or the other.”

Thereupon Jiu Nan explained a little bit of the stance and footwork of the ‘Shen Xing Bai Bian’ that did not require any internal energy foundation. Strange things happened. Generally, when he learned fist technique or palm technique, he would dabble and stop, and was unwilling to train diligently. Toward this escape technique, however, he showed great interest. The whole journey he learned it with keen interest; as soon as he was free, he would practice. Sometimes he would ask Xu Tianchuan, whose *qinggong* was outstanding, to chase him around, while he would run to the east and flee to the west to evade. Seeing his marvelous movements, Xu Tianchuan was quite impressed. Initially Xu Tianchuan was able to overtake him several times, but as Jiu Nan continuously imparted new tricks, by the time they reached Zhili’s border, no matter what Xu Tianchuan was not able to catch him anymore.

Seeing that Wei Xiaobao seemed to have a predestined affinity to the ‘Shen Xing Bai Bian’ *qinggong*, Jiu Nan herself was also greatly amazed. She said, “Looks like you were born with a natural talent in ‘escaping without a trace’.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Disciple’s training is inadequate. The ‘Shen Xing Bai Bian’ has become the ‘Shen Xing Mo You’ [divine line rubbing oil]; in the end it was not a total failure.”

He poured a bowl of fresh tea and presented it with both hands to Jiu Nan. “Shifu,” he asked, “Since Shizu [ancestor master] Priest Mu Sang has passed away, in the world today, you, Senior, are the number one in martial art?”

Jiu Nan shook her head. “I am not,” she said, “How can I dare to make the claim those six characters ‘the world’s number one martial artist’ [tian xia wu gong di yi] without justification?” She cast her glance outside the window and grimly said, “There is someone who deserves the title ‘the world’s number one martial artist’.”

“Who is that?” Wei Xiaobao hastily asked, “Disciple surely must call to pay my respect.”

“He … he …” Jiu Nan said; suddenly her eyes reddened and she stopped talking.

“Who is this Senior?” Wei Xiaobao asked, “If by fate someday disciple is able to meet him, I will respectfully kowtow several times to him.”

Jiu Nan waved her hand, telling him to get out. Wei Xiaobao was very baffled; he slowly stepped out, while thinking, “Shifu’s expression is very strange. Could it be that this ‘number one martial artist in the world’ was her old lover?”

At this moment Jiu Nan’s mind was precisely on Yuan Chengzhi, who was ten-thousand *li* away across the sea. She had fallen in love to Yuan Chengzhi, but Yuan Chengzhi’s feeling toward her was different. For more than twenty years this feeling had been buried deep at the bottom of her heart, but this time it had resurfaced due to Wei Xiaobao’s provocation.

The next day he came to Jiu Nan’s room to pay his respect, but she had already left, and left only a brief note. Wei Xiaobao took the note and asked Xu Tianchuan to read it for him, it says, ‘Do your best’ [hao zi wei zhi], four characters. Wei Xiaobao felt a twang of heaviness in his heart; he mused, “I asked Shifu yesterday about ‘the world’s number one martial artist’; is it possible that my question have offended her?”

One day the party arrived in Beijing. Princess Jianning and Wei Xiaobao went to have an audience with the Emperor together. Kangxi had already received the memorial to the throne, and had issued an imperial decree to allow Wu Yingxiong to come to the Capital to conclude the wedding ceremony. Upon seeing his younger sister and Wei Xiaobao, his heart was very happy.

Princess Jianning threw herself forward and wrapped her arms around Kangxi. Bursting into tears, she said, “That fellow Wu Yingxiong bullied me.”

Kangxi laughed and said, “That fellow is this brazen, let me spank his bottom later. How did he bully you?”

The Princess cried, “You ask Xiao Guizi. He bullied me, he bullied me! *Huangdi Gege* [big brother emperor], you must back me up.” While crying, she repeatedly stomped her foot.

Kangxi laughed and said, “Alright, why don’t you go back to your room and take a rest. I will ask Xiao Guizi.”

Early on Princess Jianning and Wei Xiaobao had decided on how they were going to report Wu Yingxiong’s rudeness when they saw Kangxi. As soon as the Princess withdrew, Wei Xiaobao then told Kangxi in details.

Kangxi frowned, he listened quietly until Wei Xiaobao finished. After pondering for half a day, he suddenly said, “Xiao Guizi, you are very brazen!”

Wei Xiaobao jumped in fright. “Your servant does not dare,” he said hastily.

“You are in cahoots with the Princess, you dare to deceive me,” Kangxi said.

“I did not,” Wei Xiaobao said, “How can your servant dare to deceive Your Majesty?”

Kangxi said, “Wu Yingxiong being rude to the Princess, you did not see it with your own eyes. How could you report to me in this way based on the Princess’s one-sided statement?”

Wei Xiaobao mused, “My goodness, this is serious. The young Emperor is very formidable; he is able to look through the flaw.” Busily he kneeled down and kowtowed, saying, “Your Majesty can see clearly for ten-thousand *li*. As how Wu Yingxiong was being rude to the Princess, your servant indeed did not see it with my own eyes; but at that time there were many people standing outside the Princess’ window. Everybody could hear it with our own ears.”

“That is even worse,” Kangxi said, “This man Wu Yingxiong, I have met him twice. He is competent and efficient, a talented individual. Plus he is not too young, I don’t know how many good-looking concubines he had in his house; how could he have the audacity to be arrogant and treated the Princess impolitely? Humph, do you think I don’t know the Princess’ temperament? It must be that she had some disagreement with Wu Yingxiong, and she cut … she cut his damned eggs.” Speaking to this point, he could not help but bursting in laughter.

Wei Xiaobao also laughed; he stood up and said, “It’s not convenient for the Princess to tell this kind of matter in details; your servant naturally did not dare to ask too much. Whatever Princess said, that was what your servant reported.”

Kangxi nodded. “You are right,” he conceded. “This fellow Wu Yingxiong has been wronged. Go pass on my edict, tell them to select an auspicious date to conclude the wedding in the Capital. After a full month, they may return to Yunnan.”

“Your Majesty,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Concluding the wedding is not a big deal, that fellow Wu Sangui is about to rebel, you must not let the Princess return to Yunnan.”

Kangxi remained calm and collected; he simply nodded and said, “So Wu Sangui is about to rebel. What did you see?”

Thereupon Wei Xiaobao told in details how Wu Sangui colluded with Tibet, Mongolia, Luocha Country and Divine Dragon Cult. Kangxi listened with serious expression, he was deep in thought and did not say anything. After quite a while, he finally said, “That traitor! Unexpectedly he is colluding with that many foreign powers!”

Wei Xiaobao knew early on that this matter is extremely thorny; hence he did not dare to make a sound.

After a while, Kangxi asked again, “And then what happened?”

Wei Xiaobao told him that they had captured the Mongolian Prince’s emissary. He recounted how he pretended to be Wu Sangui’s younger son and swindle the emissary into spilling everything; how Wu Yingxiong wanted to seize Hantiemo back by setting the Princess’ dwelling on fire, but suffered castration instead; how Wei Xiaobao sent the troops under his command to masquerade as the Palace’s guards, and fight in a brothel over some beauties, and thus gave the impression that they killed Hantiemo.

Kangxi was listening leisurely while stretching on his chair; he said, “That’s much more fun.” He continued, “This man Wu Sangui, I have never seen him. That day there was news spreading in the Palace that when *Fu Huang* [father emperor] returned to Heaven, Wu Sangui led a massive military force to the Capital to offer sacrifice. I wanted to go see him, several regent ministers wanted to guard against him entering the Capital with his soldiers and suddenly revolted; therefore, they told him to mourn and offer sacrifice outside Beijing, they did not allow him to enter Beijing’s city walls.”

Speaking to this point, he stood up, paced back and forth, and said, “That servant Oboi failed to see this matter clearly. If he was worried that Wu Sangui would enter the Capital and revolt, he only need to issue a decree granting them, father and son, to enter the Capital to worship, while his large army must remain outside the city; what could he possibly achieve? If he did not dare to enter the City, that means his etiquette was lacking. By not allowing him to enter the city, the message was clear: ‘We are afraid of your large army, we are afraid that you will enter the Capital and revolt. You must not come in!’ Hey, hey, it was a display of utmost weakness! Wu Sangui must know that the imperial court is suspicious and jealous of him and also afraid of him; how can he not know? Perhaps his rebellion scheme was born because of this incident.”

Listening to Kangxi’s detailed analysis, Wei Xiaobao’s admiration grew from the bottom of his heart. “Supposing he saw Your Majesty that time,” he said, “Your Majesty could enlighten him well, maybe he would not dare to revolt.”

Kangxi shook his head. “At that time I was too young,” he said, “I did not understand military and national affairs. If I did see him, I would not have any formidable things to say to him, he might rise in rebellion sooner.” And then he inquired in details Wu Sangui’s appearance and mannerism. He also asked, “About that white tiger skin in his study, what exactly is that?”

Wei Xiaobao was greatly surprised; he described the appearance of the white tiger skin, and then said, “Even small matter like that Your Majesty also knows.”

Kangxi smiled, but did not say anything. He then asked about Wu Sangui’s troops and horses deployment, about the temperament and talent of the ten great *zongbing* [regional commander] under Wu Sangui’s employment. In these questions, he seemed to have a detailed knowledge of Wu Sangui’s situation; he knew which great general under Wu Sangui was greedy for money, which one was given to lust, which one was courageous, which one was muddleheaded. He clearly understood everything.

Wei Xiaobao was already stunned, now he was full of admiration. “Your Majesty,” he said, “You have not been to Yunnan, yet you know about Ping Xi Wang Mansion’s inside situation better than your servant.” He suddenly realized, “Ah, right, you must have sent not a few spies to Kunming.”

Kangxi laughed and said, “This is called ‘know yourself, know your enemy, emerge victorious in every battle’. He wholeheartedly wants to rebel, do you think we will simply ignore him? Xiao Guizi, your merit this time is very big, you managed to verify Wu Sangui’s collusion with Tibet, Mongolia and Luocha Country. My spies are not able to uncover this big secret. They can only find minor matters, but cannot investigate important matters.”

Wei Xiaobao felt the bones in his body were considerably lighter. “This is all due to Your Majesty’s flood of good fortune fills the heavens,” he said.

Kangxi said, “Bring that Hantiemo into the Palace; let me interrogate him personally.” Wei Xiaobao complied. Leading ten Imperial Bodyguards, he brought Hantiemo to the Upper Study Room.

As soon as Kangxi saw him, he started questioning him in Mongolian. Hantiemo was surprised to hear his native tongue Mongolian was spoken, but he also felt warmness in his heart. Seeing the grandeur of the Palace, he no longer dared to cover up the truth, he told Kangxi everything he wanted to know ‘in fives and tens’.

Kangxi interrogated him for more than four hours; other than about the collusion between Mongolia and Wu Sangui, he also asked in detail about Mongolian military strength and disposition, the monetary, grain and production situation, the mountain and river topography, local conditions and customs, as well as various Mongolian ruling class, the princes and dukes: who were astute, who were mediocre, who had enmity with whom, and who had close relationship with whom.

All along Wei Xiaobao was waiting on Kangxi on the side, listening to these two people talking gibberish incessantly. He saw sometimes Hantiemo looked impressed, some other times he looked afraid, until finally he went down on his knees and kowtowed repeatedly, as if he was expressing a deep gratitude. And then Kangxi ordered an Imperial Bodyguard to take Hantiemo back to prison.

A little eunuch delivered a bowl of ginseng soup. Kangxi received it and drank it. He said to the little eunuch, “Pour another bowl for Wei *Fu Zongguan* [deputy chief].” Wei Xiaobao kowtowed to express his gratitude for the kindness shown, and drank the soup.

They heard the sound of footsteps outside the Study Room. A little eunuch appeared and said, “Reporting to Your Majesty: Nan Huairen[21] and Tang Ruowang[22] are here to serve Your Majesty.” Kangxi nodded. The little eunuch called out the notification. Two big and tall foreigners came in, kneeled down and kowtowed before Kangxi.

Wei Xiaobao was greatly surprised; he mused, “How come we have foreign devils in the Palace? This is really strange.”

After doing their obeisance, the two foreigners both took a scroll from their bosom, and placed the scrolls on Kangxi’s desk. The younger one, the foreigner by the name of Nan Huairen said, “Your Majesty, we are going to discuss about the shooting of the cannon today.”

Wei Xiaobao could hear Beijing dialect in his speech, sharp, clear and fluent; he could not help but exclaiming in surprise. In great amazement he thought, “Strange, strange, very strange; the devils cannot release foreign fart.”

Kangxi laughed at Wei Xiaobao, and then he turned his attention to the scroll on his desk. Nan Huairen stood by Kangxi’s side; with finger on the scroll he made some explanations. Whenever Kangxi saw something he did not understand, he immediately asked.

Nan Huairen talked for about an hour. The other foreigner, the old and white-bearded Tang Ruowang, continued by speaking about astronomy and calendar system; he also talked for about an hour. And then the two of them kowtowed and withdrew.

Kangxi laughed and said, “The foreigners speak our Chinese language, you were surprised, weren’t you?”

“At first your servant felt it was very strange,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “But after thinking about it, I am not surprised anymore. The Sacred Son of Heaven is blessed by a hundred gods. The Luocha Country conspires against you, the Heaven then sent two foreign devils who can speak Chinese language to assist the Sacred Dynasty in manufacturing firearms to sweep away the Luocha.”

Kangxi said, “Your mind is quick. However, the foreign devils can speak Chinese is not due to divine providence. That old man arrived in China during the Ming’s

Tianqi Emperor[23]; he is a German. The younger one is from Belgium, he came during Shunzhi's reign. They are Jesuits clergymen, and came to China to do missionary work. To preach, they need to learn how to speak Chinese."

"So that's how it is," Wei Xiaobao said, "Your servant has always been worried that Luocha Country's firearms are too formidable. After listening to those foreigner talking clearly and logically about those cannon or short gun today, I am relieved."

Kangxi paced back and forth slowly in the Study Room. "Luocha people are humans," he said, "We are also humans. If they can build firearms, we can do the same thing. It's just that all along we did not understand how. When we fought the Ming Dynasty at Liaodong Peninsula in the past, the Ming troops had cannon, we suffered quite a bit of defeat. *Taizu Huangdi* [posthumous title for the founder of a dynasty] was injured by gunfire, he rode the dragon and returned to Heaven. However, didn't we still manage to take the Ming Dynasty's land under the heavens? It can be seen clearly that firearm is important for the people to use, but if the people using it fail to live up to expectations, even a more formidable firearm will be worthless."

"Turns out Ming Dynasty had cannon," Wei Xiaobao said, "I wonder where are those cannons now? We can take them and blast Wu Sangui that old fellow, blast him so that one Buddha get reborn, two Buddhas ascend to heaven!" [not sure about this]

Kangxi smiled and said, "Ming Dynasty's cannons were only a few, they were purchased from Aomen's [Macao] red-haired people. Only buying the devils' firearm is useless. If we fight a battle against the devils, they will refuse to sell it to us, won't that be terrible? We must build it ourselves, then we won't be afraid other people would make us desperate."

"Very true, very true," Wei Xiaobao said, "Your Majesty is still concerned that those Jesuits clergymen would build western cowrie shells to swindle you, thus you personally want to know how to do it. From now on, let those devils give an exaggerated account of things, trying to confuse you [orig. seven meat eight elements], you won't be deceived."

"You understand my intention," Kangxi said, "The technique to build firearm is

very complicated and very difficult. Just to refine the highest quality fine iron is greatly not easy."

"Your Majesty, let me go get all blacksmith inside and outside of Beijing," Wei Xiaobao volunteered, "We call them together, everybody pump the bellows, push and pull, push and pull, refine several million catties of those fine iron."

Kangxi laughed and said, "When you were in Yunnan, we have already refined several tens of thousands catties of fine iron. Tang Ruowang and Nan Huairen are in the process of supervising the building of cannons. When the time comes, you will come with me to take a look."

Wei Xiaobao was delighted. "That is very good," he said. Suddenly he remembered something and said, "Your Majesty, foreign devils are malicious and two-faced, we must guard against either one of those. The place we build cannon will have gunpowder and lots of ironware. Your Majesty must not go personally, let your servant supervise it for you."

"No need to be worried," Kangxi said, "This matter concerns the country's destiny. I won't feel reassured if I do not see it with my own eyes. Nan Huairen is loyal and upright. Tang Ruowang's old life was rescued by me, he is very grateful to me. These two men can't possibly have different feelings toward me."

"Unexpectedly Your Majesty has saved the foreign old devil's old life," Wei Xiaobao said, "That is indeed strange."

Kangxi smiled and said, "Kangxi's third year, Tang Ruowang said that the imperial observatory's calculation of the solar eclipse contains errors; he and the imperial observatory's Chinese officials had a sharp debate. Imperial observatory Chinese official Yang Guangxian[24] argued, but failed to find any flaw in Tang Ruowang's argument; hence he submitted a memorial to the throne, saying that Tang Ruowang formulated the document 'Great Qing Constitution Period Calendar', in which he calculated a total of two hundred years. But our Great Qing has obtained the Heaven's provision, the divine blessing has no bound, our rivers and mountains will last tens of thousands of years. Tang Ruowang's calendar stops at only two hundred years. Isn't that the same as putting a curse on our Great Qing that it will only last for two hundred years?"

Wei Xiaobao stuck out his tongue. "Formidable, formidable! This foreign old

devil can calculate astronomy and geography, but he cannot calculate the trick of the government official."

"Isn't that so?" Kangxi said, "At that time Oboi was in power. That fellow randomly accused Tang Ruowang of cursing the imperial court, hence he deserved to be executed by lingering death. The decree was sent to me to review, immediately I was able to see a flaw in it."

"Kangxi's third year, that means you were only ten," Wei Xiaobao said, "Yet you were already able to see the deceit in it. Indeed the Sacred Son of Heaven is intelligent and wise, a rarity from time immemorial."

Kangxi laughed. "You should pat the horse hindquarters less," he said, "Actually, this case was quite shallow. I asked Oboi, when did Tang Ruowang finish the 'Great Qing Constitution Period Calendar'? He said he did not know. Upon further investigation, he returned with a report that it was finished during Shunzhi's tenth year. At that time the Late Emperor bestowed a commendation by conferring him the title of 'Tong Xuan Jiao Shi' [lit. master/teacher who understands mystery]. I said, 'That's right, because when I was six, seven years old, I have already seen this 'Great Qing Constitution Period Calendar' book in the Study Room. This document was finished ten years ago, why didn't anybody say that he was wrong back then? At this time someone is having a strife with him, isn't that simply settling an old debt? This is not fair. Oboi thought I was right, hence he did not have him killed, but have him locked up in prison. Afterwards I have forgotten about this matter. Only recently Nan Huairen brought it up to my attention, and then I issued a decree to have him freed."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Let your servant put some thoughts in him to create the 'Great Qing Ten Thousand Year Calendar'."

Kangxi chuckled for a moment, and then his expression turned serious as he said, "I have read the previous dynasty's history book; those who cherish common people were sure to reign for a long time, otherwise, what good would it bring to simply say auspicious speech? Since the ancient times, everybody always call the Emperor as Lord of Ten Thousand Years, while in reality, forget ten thousand years, not one of the emperors had ever reached a hundred years. What 'ten thousand years of boundless longevity'? It's all nonsense to deceive people. *Fu Huang* earnestly urged me to obey his particular instruction of 'never

raise taxes'. As long as I observe these four characters [yong bu jia fu], our rivers and mountains will be as strong as iron. All those foreigners' cannon, Wu Sangui's troops and horses, are nothing to worry about."

Wei Xiaobao did not understand all these governing-the-country principles; he only repeatedly nodded and made some noise to voice his agreement. From his pocket he took out the copy of 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra' he stole from Wu Sangui's desk, and presented it with both hands to Kangxi, saying, "Your Majesty, this sutra was indeed embezzled by that old fellow Wu Sangui. Your servant saw it in his study room, hence I led away a goat in passing, and return it to its rightful owner."

Kangxi was greatly delighted. "Very good, very good," he said, "The Empress Dowager is always concerned over this matter. I'll go and present it to her, the Senior, and then take it to the imperial ancestral temple and cremate it there. No matter what secret is hidden inside, henceforth nobody will find out."

Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, "It is best that you are burning it! This is called 'destroy the corpse and leave no trace'. Nobody will ever find out that I stole the pieces of thin leather inside the sutra."

He returned to his viscount mansion. When the night fell, he bolted the door, took out the bundle of skin pieces, and summoned Shuang'er. "I have a 'rubbing the water' job I'd like you to do for me," he told her. And then ordered her to assemble and restore the several thousand pieces of thin leather into its original state.

Bending over the table, Shuang'er slowly looked at the cutting mark, and paired the pieces one by one to see if there was a match. But these several thousand pieces of skin were jumbled together at random; restoring the pieces into the original condition was indeed easier said than done.

At first Wei Xiaobao was still sitting by the table, offering some advice, taking a piece from the east, a piece from the west, trying to find a match. But after doing it for half a day, he could not find even a pair of matching pieces; his interest waned, he went to sleep without saying anything.

When he woke up the next morning, he noticed that there was candlelight in the outside room. With a piece of skin in her hand, Shuang'er was staring at the

table as if she was in daze. Wei Xiaobao tiptoed behind her back, and then ‘Ha!’ he yelled. Shuang’er jumped in fright. She laughed and said, “You are awake?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “These pieces of skin are very troublesome, I don’t need it right away, why didn’t you sleep the whole night? Quickly go to bed!”

“Alright,” Shuang’er said, “I will tidy up first.”

Wei Xiaobao saw a large sheet of white paper on the table, on which about eleven or twelve pieces of skin were pinned down with embroidery needles; the pieces were joined together in a good fit, he was delighted. “You have fitted quite a few pieces,” he said.

“The beginning was the most difficult,” Shuang’er said, “Right now I already understood some logic behind it, later on I should be able to assemble the pieces a bit faster.” She put the pieces back into the bundle and carefully wrapped it with oilcloth, along with the large sheet of white paper, and locked everything inside a gold-painted chest.

Wei Xiaobao said, “These pieces of skin are very useful, we must not let anybody steal it.”

Shuang’er said, “I will stay to guard here, I won’t leave even for half a step. I am only afraid if I fell asleep, something bad might happen.”

“No worries,” Wei Xiaobao said, “I will get a small group of Valiant Cavalry Brigade sergeants to guard outside the room, and guard you as well.”

Shuang’er smiled and said, “I feel much better.”

Wei Xiaobao saw her pair of beautiful eyes was bloodshot, obviously she worked really hard the previous night; he felt tenderness toward her. “Quickly go to sleep, I’ll carry you to the bed.”

Shuang’er’s face blushed of shyness, she repeatedly waved her hand and said, “No, no, not good.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “What do you mean good or not good? You helped me, you worked hard the entire night, I carry you to the bed, what’s the big deal?” While saying that, he reached out to carry her. Shuang’er squealed and slipped out of his arms.

Wei Xiaobao tried to grab her several times, but each time he only caught empty air. He knew that his *qinggong* was far below hers, in his heart he was quite dismayed. Taking a deep sigh, he sat down on a chair. Shuang'er chuckled and came near him, saying, "Let me serve you have a wash and eat light breakfast, and then I'll go sleep."

Wei Xiaobao shook his head without saying anything. Seeing him in low spirits, Shuang'er was worried. "Xianggong," she said in a low voice, "Are you … are you angry?"

"I am not angry," Wei Xiaobao replied, "My *qinggong* is too lacking. Shifu taught me a lot of good techniques, I always cannot learn it. Even a little girl like you I cannot catch, what a useless fart am I?"

Shuang'er smiled and said, "You wanted to carry me, naturally I ran away desperately."

Wei Xiaobao suddenly sprang up and called out, "I must catch you." With arms spreading wide, he threw himself toward Shuang'er. Shuang'er giggled and leaned sideways to evade. Wei Xiaobao pretended he was pouncing to the left, but as soon as she fled to the right, he reached out to grab the corner of her garment. "Ah!" Shuang'er cried out. Afraid that he might tear the garment, Shuang'er did not dare to pull too hard. Wei Xiaobao reached out with both arms and grabbed her waist. Shuang'er only giggled. Wei Xiaobao's right hand went down behind her knees, and carried her horizontally across his chest, and put her on his own bed.

Shuang'er blushed deep red. "Xianggong," she cried, "You … you …"

Wei Xiaobao laughed. "I what?" he said. Pulling the quilt, he covered her body. And then he bent over and planted a gentle kiss on her face. "Quickly close your eyes," he said with a laugh, "Go to sleep." And he turned around, walked out the room, and closed the door behind him. "This girl was afraid that I was angry, she deliberately let me catch her," he mused. When he got to the hall, he ordered his personal guard to summon a squad of Valiant Cavalry Brigade sergeants to guard outside his room.

For the next several days he distributed the money and gifts he received from Yunnan to the imperial concubines, princes and dukes, court ministers, imperial

bodyguards and palace eunuchs; scheming in his heart, “If I said it is a gift from Wu Sangui, that means these people would receive favor from that old fellow. I’d better let *laozi* be the good man.” Therefore, these several hundred thousand *taels* of gold and silver from Wu Sangui became the Imperial Envoy Minister, the Valiant Cavalry Brigade Commander Wei Xiaobao’s gifts. Naturally the recipients of his gifts poured high praise on him. Everybody in the Palace and the Imperial Court said that the Emperor was indeed an enlightened sage, he promoted this astute, capable and experienced young commander into a very fitting official position.

These days, Shuang’er worked hard every day assembling the pieces of sheepskin. Each time she found a matching piece, she would pin it to the sheet of paper with an embroidery needle. Wei Xiaobao watched her every night; he saw the finished section was growing bigger and bigger. As expected, he saw mountains and rivers terrain drawn on the map, there were also curvy characters written on the map. “These are foreign characters,” Shuang’er said, “I do not recognize even one of them.”

Wei Xiaobao had lived in the Palace for a long time, hence he knew that those were Manchurian characters; but since he did not know even Han characters, he could not care less of what were written on the map.

At the evening of the eighteenth day, Wei Xiaobao returned to his residence, and saw Shuang’er with happy expression all across her face. He reached out to stroke her chin, and asked, “What is it that makes you this happy?”

Smiling, Shuang’er said, “Xianggong, go ahead and guess.”

Before he went to sleep the previous night, Wei Xiaobao saw there were still two, three hundred pieces not assembled yet. In this kind of assembling effort, one piece assembled means one piece less remaining, and the task became one part easier. The first one or two days were the most difficult, in one *sichen* [2 hours] she may not necessarily be able to find two matching pieces; afterwards, however, she was able to make a rapid progress.

He guessed that Shuang’er had been able to assemble the entire map, and thus her delight overflowed to the tip of her brows. Wei Xiaobao laughed. “Let me guess,” he said, “Hey, you must have wrapped some Huzhou *zongzi* for me.”

[See chapter 17, first time Wei Xiaobao met Shuang'er.]

Shuang'er shook her head, "Not that," she said.

Wei Xiaobao said, "You found and picked up a treasure from the floor?"

"No," Shuang'er said.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Your *Yi Xiong* [foster/sworn older brother] sent some good things for you from Guangdong?"

"No," Shuang'er replied, "He is so far away, how can he send something for me?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "The Zhuang Family's Third Mistress sent a letter to you?"

Shuang'er shook her head, her eyebrows slightly knitted. "She did not," she said softly, "I wonder how the Zhuang Family's Third Mistress and the others are doing? I often think about them."

"I got it!" Wei Xiaobao exclaimed, "Today is your birthday."

Shuang'er smiled and said, "It's not. My birthday is not today."

"When is it?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Shuang'er said, "It's ninth month ten[25] …" Suddenly she blushed and said, "I forget."

"You lie," Wei Xiaobao said, "How can you forget your own birthday? Right, right, it must be the old monk, your friend when you live by Shaolin Temple, came to visit you."

"Pfft!" Shuang'er stifled her laugh. "Xianggong is funny," she said, "How can I have a Shaolin Temple old monk as a friend? It is you who have some."

Wei Xiaobao scratched his head and muttered, "It's neither this nor that; this is a difficult riddle. I was actually going to guess that you have finished piecing the map together, but last night I saw there were still two, three hundred pieces not joined together yet, at the quickest you will need five, six more days."

Shuang'er's pairs of eyes were gleaming with delight as she smiled and said, "What if I finished it today for real?"

“You are deceiving me,” Wei Xiaobao shook his head, “I don’t believe you.”

“Xianggong,” Shuang’er said, “Come and see, what is this?”

Wei Xiaobao followed her to the table and saw the large white sheet was full of several thousand embroidery needles, the several thousand pieces of skins had been assembled together into a complete, whole large map. What was amazing was that several thousand pieces of skin fit together; there was not a single extra piece, and there was not a single hole either.

Wei Xiaobao cried out in delight, turned around and gave Shuang’er a hug. “It is a great success, you deserve a kiss,” he called out, while planted a kiss on her mouth.

Shuang’er was shy, her face blushed as she turned her head sideways, so that Wei Xiaobao’s kiss landed on her earlobe. Shuang’er felt her body had turned into a jelly. “No, I don’t want it!” she cried out in fear.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and let her go. He pulled her hand and had her stood next to him as they looked at the map together, while he clucked his tongue incessantly and praised her, saying, “Shuang’er, if you did not help me with this task, if I had to do it myself, I am not sure if I would not be able to piece everything together in three years and six months.”

Shuang’er said, “How many important matters you have to manage? How can you find the time to do this kind of stupid effort?”

“Aiyo,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “Did you call this a stupid effort? This is the most brilliant effort in the world.”

Hearing his praise, Shuang’er was very happy.

Wei Xiaobao pointed to the map and said, “This must be a mountain, and this is the river.” He pointed at a bend of a big river, where eight small circles with different colors gathered together, and said, “The entire map is drawn in writing brush, but these eight small circles are red, white, yellow, blue, and there’s yellow circle with red border. Ah, I know, these are Manchu people’s eight banners. The location of these eight small circles must be very special. I wonder what mountain this is, and what river this is.”

Shuang’er took out a pack of thin cotton paper, there were more than thirty

sheets altogether, each sheet had some curvy Manchurian characters. She gave the papers to Wei Xiaobao. “What is it?” Wei Xiaobao asked, “Who wrote it?”

“I did,” Shuang’er replied.

Wei Xiaobao was pleasantly surprised. “Turns out you know Manchurian characters,” he said, “You were deceiving me a few days ago.” While saying that, he stretched out his arms to hug her.

Shuang’er hastily moved aside to evade. “I didn’t deceive you,” she said with a laugh, “I don’t know Manchurian characters. I only put these thin sheets on the map and traced every stroke every line.”

“Ingenious plan, ingenious plan,” Wei Xiaobao delightedly said, “I’ll summon the Manchurian secretary to read it and translated it into our Chinese characters, and then we’ll know what’s written on the map. Good Shuang’er, precious Shuang’er, you are very attentive, you knew this map is a matter of great concern; hence you divided these Manchurian characters into several dozen sheets. I am going to ask several different people, so that the secret won’t be leaked.”

Shuang’er smiled and said, “Good Xianggong, smart Xianggong, as soon as you saw it you have guessed my intention correctly.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “It’s a great success, you deserve a kiss.” As soon as Shuang’er heard him, she turned around and leaped, fleeing outside the room.

When Wei Xiaobao went out to the hall, he ordered one of his personal guards to summon the Valiant Cavalry Brigade’s Manchurian clerk. He took out a sheet from his pocket and asked him the meaning of the Manchurian characters written on it. The clerk replied, “Reporting to Dutong [commander] *Daren*: these are ‘Argun River’, ‘Jing Qili River’, Huma Erwoji Mountain’, they all are our Manchuria place name outside the Pass.”

“What ‘Jili Gulu’ [lit. gibberish] River, ‘Huni Made’ [lit. shouting at your mother] Mountain? Those are so vulgar,” Wei Xiaobao said.

The clerk said, “Reporting to Dutong *Daren*: Argun River, Jing Qili River, Huma Erwoji Mountain are great rivers and great mountain of our Manchuria.”

“Where are they?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

The clerk replied, “Reporting to Dutong *Daren*: they are at the extreme north outside the Pass.”

Wei Xiaobao was secretly delighted, “That’s right,” he mused, “These places must be where the Manchu people hiding their treasure. They moved the gold, silver and valuables outside the Pass, naturally the farther they hide it the better.” He said, “Write these Jili Gulu River and Huni Made Mountain names in Chinese characters.” Following his order, the clerk wrote the names.

Wei Xiaobao took out another sheet and asked, “And what river and what mountain are these?”

The clerk replied, “Reporting to Dutong *Daren*: this is Silimu River, Amur Mountain and Amur River.”

“Damn it,” Wei Xiaobao cursed, “It’s getting stranger and stranger! Are you sure you are not just speaking nonsense? Why didn’t you pick good names, but picked something like Xini Made [lit. admiring your mother], Ama’er [‘amah’], Aba’er [‘abba’]?”

The clerk’s face was filled with terror, he bowed in respect and said, “Lowly officer does not dare to speak nonsense. In Manchurian, those names have different meaning.”

“Alright,” Wei Xiaobao said, “You write down those Ama’er, Aba’er, and that Xini Made River in Han characters on these papers. Later I am going to ask other people, I want to see whether you are talking drivel or not.”

“Yes, yes,” the clerk said, “Even if lowly officer had gargantuan nerve, I would not dare to talk drivel with Dutong *Daren*.”

“Ha, do you have gargantuan nerve?” Wei Xiaobao said.

“No, no,” the clerk replied, “Lowly officer is a coward like a mouse.”

Wei Xiaobao roared in laughter. “Guard,” he called, “Go get fifty *taels* for this friend who is a coward like a mouse. Hey, if you ever mention these Xini Made River, Xini Bade Mountain to other people and I find out about it, I will immediately take your fifty *taels* back, both principal and interest, a total of a

hundred fifty *taels*."

The clerk was overjoyed at the unexpected good news; his monthly soldier's pay was no more than twelve *taels* of silver. Dutong *Daren* bestowed fifty *taels*, busily he bowed to express thanks and repeatedly promised, "Lowly officer will definitely not dare to talk at random." While thinking, "With fifty *taels* capital you want a hundred *taels* interest. My mother, what a heavy interest. Even if you cut my head, I won't be able to pay it."

For the next several days, Wei Xiaobao had asked around seventy, eighty names. When he looked at the map, he found out that those eight small circles in four colors were located north of Heilongjiang, right where Amur River and Heilongjiang [lit. black dragon river] converged, due north of Huma Erwoji Mountain, and northwest of Amur River. There were two Manchu characters written among the eight small circles, when translated into Han characters, they became 'Lu Ding Shan' [Deer and Cauldron Mountain], three characters.

Wei Xiaobao committed the map and the places' names into memory, he also told Shuang'er to memorize it. Thinking that if these pieces of skin were taken away by other people, inevitably the secret would be leaked; thereupon he threw it into the stove to burn it. Seeing the blazing fire, he felt an unspeakable joy in his heart. He thought, "Shifu told me to divide it into several packages and bury it in several different places, but other people might still be able to find it. Right now it is buried in my heart; even if they dig my heart out, they won't find the map inside. It's just that naturally I must not let anybody dig my heart out."

Turning his head around, he saw the flame illuminated Shuang'er's face; she looked rosy and very tender and beautiful. "My little Shuang'er is very beautiful," he praised in his heart.

Being stared by him, Shuang'er was bashful, she lowered her head. "Good Shuang'er," Wei Xiaobao said, "We have pieced together the map, we have found out the places' names, those Xini Made River, Xini Bade Mountain, have also been stored in our hearts; don't you think it was a great success?"

Shuang'er hastily leaped back, and said with a laugh, "Oh no, no … you don't."

"What do you mean I don't?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Shuang'er laughed while rushing out through the door. "I don't know," she

said.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and ran after her. “You don’t know, but I do,” he said.

Suddenly he saw a personal guard hurriedly walked in and said, “Reporting to Dutong: His Majesty summons you, he wants you to come quickly.”

Wei Xiaobao made faces to Shuang’er, and went out to the Palace. He saw a row of Guards of Honor lined up at the Palace gate, Kangxi’s imperial chariot was just coming out from the Palace. Wei Xiaobao circled behind the cavalcade, and knelt and kowtowed by the road. Kangxi saw him; he smiled and said, “Xiao Guizi, come with me to see the foreigners testing the cannons.”

Wei Xiaobao was delighted. “That’s great,” he said, “They managed to finish the cannon very quickly.”

The party arrived at the Long Tan [dragon pool] Artillery Field inside the Zuo’anmen [lit. left peaceful gate]. Nan Huairen and Tang Ruowang had already knelt far away by the street to welcome the imperial chariot. “Rise up, rise up,” Kangxi said, “Where are the cannon?”

Nan Huairen said, “Reporting to Your Holiness[26]: The cannon are outside the city. Respectfully request Your Holiness to take the trouble to visit and do the inspection.”

“Very well!” Kangxi said. He stepped out from the chariot. Surrounded by the Imperial Bodyguards, he went out the Zuo’an Gate and saw three cannon arranged in a row.

Kangxi approached the cannon; he saw the cannon’s body was shiny gunmetal blue, the barrel was thick, the wheel, axle and so on were all built extremely solid. Kangxi was delighted. “Very good,” he said, “Let us try firing the cannon several times.”

Nan Huairen personally loaded gunpowder into the barrel, and packed it solid with iron rod. Picking up a cannonball, he loaded it into the barrel; and then he turned around and said, “Reporting to Your Majesty: this cannon’s firing range is a *li* and a half; the target has been set up over there.”

Following his finger, Kangxi looked up into the distance. He saw about a *li* and

a half away, there were ten earthen blocks standing side by side. He nodded and said, “Good, you may fire.”

Nan Huairen said, “Respectfully request Your Majesty to take the trouble to move ten *zhang* away; that way, you will be completely safe.” Kangxi smiled and withdrew to get out of the way.

Wei Xiaobao volunteered, “Let your servant fire the first shot.” Kangxi nodded. Wei Xiaobao walked toward the cannon’s side and said to Nan Huairen, “Foreign Old Friend, you aim, I ignite.”

Nan Huairen had already calibrated the muzzle’s height, this time he checked the alignment one more time. Wei Xiaobao received the flare; he lighted the fuse and hurriedly jumped back. Casting the flare aside, he lifted his hands to tightly cover his ears.

There was a flash, followed by a loud explosion, black smoke rose up, and then one earthen block in the distant exploded, a column of flame ascended to the sky. Turned out there was a large amount of sulfur hidden inside the earthen block. As the cannonball landed, it ignited the sulfur so that the power of the cannon appeared more astonishing.

The crowd of sergeants cheered in one voice, they turned toward Kangxi and shouted, “Long live, long live, long, long live[27]!”

The three cannon were fired in turn, altogether they shot ten cannonballs, and hit seven earthen blocks; only three blocks were not hit squarely, they leaned sideways, but did not explode. Kangxi was extremely pleased, he bestowed great rewards to Nan Huairen and Tang Ruowang; he promoted Nan Huairen as the Supervisor of the Imperial Observatory on the spot. Tang Ruowang was originally a high-ranking official of the Minister of Ceremonies department and a government communication envoy, with the title ‘Tong Xuan Jiao Shi’. He was removed from office during Oboi’s reign. Later on Kangxi reinstated his office, but changed his title to ‘Tong Wei Jiao Shi’ [lit. master/teacher who understands profound matter]. Kangxi’s given name was ‘Xuan Ye’ [lit. mysterious blaze of fire]; therefore, the character ‘Xuan’ became taboo and must not be used for other people. The three cannon were dubbed the ‘Shen Wu Da Pao’ [Cannon of Supernatural Might].

Returning to the Palace, Kangxi summoned Wei Xiaobao into the Study Room; with a grin on his face he said, “Xiao Guizi, we will work around the clock to build several hundred ‘Shen Wu Da Pao’, set them up in a row, and damn blast that old fellow Wu Sangui. Do you think he will still rebel?”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “With divine strategy and amazing calculation, even if there was no ‘Shen Wu Da Pao’, to Your Majesty, dealing that old fellow Wu Sangui is as easy as stretching a hand and grab it. But with the ‘Shen Wu Da Pao’, it’s like … like … like a dragon that has grown wings.” He was about to say ‘like a tiger that has grown wings’; but then he thought that comparing an emperor with a tiger was very disrespectful.

Kangxi laughed and said, “You said those words without any knowledge. The dragon can fly in the sky, why would it need wings?”

Wei Xiaobao laughed. “Yes, yes,” he said, “It can be seen clearly that even without the cannon, Your Majesty still does not fear Wu Sangui.”

Kangxi laughed, “You always know what to say,” he commented. Suddenly he frowned and said, “Speaking of dragon, I remember something: Wu Sangui colludes with Mongolia, Tibet and Luocha Country, and also with a certain Shen Long Jiao [Divine Dragon Cult]. That old wh0re to committed treason and heresy by masquerading the Empress Dowager, she was sent by Shen Long Jiao to bring filth and chaos in the Palace, wasn’t she?”

“Exactly,” Wei Xiaobao replied.

Kangxi said, “If I don’t catch this rebel and cut her to pieces, how can I avenge the enmity of my queen mother’s murder and the disgrace of Empress Dowager’s imprisonment?” Speaking to this point, he gnashed his teeth, obviously he was extremely enraged.

Wei Xiaobao thought, “From the tone of his voice, the Emperor wants me to catch the old wh0re. But that old wh0re is with that short and fat Thin Toutuo; I don’t know where they are right now. To catch this person is indeed not easy.” In his hesitation, he did not dare to say anything.

Sure enough, Kangxi said, “Xiao Guizi, this matter is top secret, other than sending you to deal with it, I can’t send anybody else."

“Yes,” Wei Xiaobao said, “I was just wondering where did that old wh0re run away? That meatball lover [orig. male adulterer] of hers seems to know some witchcraft.”

Kangxi said, “If the old wh0re ran to some remote mountain or desolate land, naturally catching her will not be easy. But there is a clue you may follow. You lead the troops, go and eliminate the Divine Dragon Evil Cult, arrest the evil cult’s henchmen, interrogate them one by one, you will most likely find the old wh0re’s whereabouts.” Noticing the awkward expression on Wei Xiaobao’s face, he said, “I know this matter is like fishing a needle from the sea, it is very difficult to do. However, one, you are very competent, two, you are a person with tremendous good luck. Other people may find some matters to be extremely thorny, but in your hands, oftentimes it turned into instant success. I won’t set any time limit for you, I will send you outside the Pass first to handle several matters for me. Once you are out of the Pass, you mobilize your force at Fengtian [modern day Shenyang, Liaoning province], and wait for an opportunity to break into Shen Long Island.”

Wei Xiaobao thought, “The Emperor is licking my behind. If I did not accept this mission, it would be inappropriate.” He said, “Your servant’s good fortune was bestowed by Your Majesty. Your Majesty has shown me particularly great favor, naturally my portion of good luck is also great. I only hope that by relying on Your Majesty’s flood of good luck this time, I can capture the old wh0re.”

Hearing that he was willing to go, Kangxi was overjoyed. He patted Wei Xiaobao’s shoulder and said, “Although taking revenge and wiping out old grudge is important, compared to national security, it is a small matter. If you can capture the old wh0re, no doubt it would be the best; but the most important matter is still breaking through the Shen Long Island. Xiao Guizi, outside the Pass was where our Great Qing’s dragon arose. Shen Long Jiao is staring maliciously from the side. If they join hands with Luocha people and occupy the area outside the Pass, the Great Qing will lose its foundation. By breaking the Shen Long Island, it’s just like you are cutting off the stretched-out five fingers of the Luocha people.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Precisely.” Suddenly he raised his voice and cried out, “Ahluowu! Guluhu!” while lifting up his right hand and fling it around

randomly.

Kangxi laughed and asked, “What are you doing?”

Wei Xiaobao replied, “Luocha Country broke its five fingers, naturally they are crying in pain in Luocha language.”

Kangxi burst out laughing. “I promote you to be Viscount First Class,” he said, “And I bestow you the title ‘Ba Tu Lu’ [I think this is Manchurian word, ba – long for/wish/close to/next to, tu – diagram/map/drawing, lu – crass/stupid/rude]. Your mission will be to mobilize the troops and horses stationed to guard Fengtian, to eradicate the rebels of Shen Long Island.”

Wei Xiaobao kneeled down to express his gratitude; he said, “Your servant’s official position is rising higher and higher, my portion of good fortune is also increasing bigger and bigger.”

Kangxi said, “This matter must be kept without any fanfare to guard against Wu Sangui, Shang Kexi and the others knew about it, and then their hearts would be troubled and they may rebel earlier. Everything must be done ‘the gods did not know, the ghosts did not realize’; Shen Long Jiao must be destroyed in complete surprise. Let’s do it this way: tomorrow I will send you as an imperial envoy minister to offer sacrifice at Changbai Mountain. Changbai Mountain is the sacred place where my Aisin Gioro [Manchu: Golden Clan] ancestors were born. I am sending you to offer sacrifice to my ancestors, nobody would suspect anything.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “With Your Majesty’s divine strategy, the Shen Long Jiao’s *Jiaozhu*’s long life will be the same as the insect’s.”

“What do you mean his long life will be the same as the insect’s?” Kangxi asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, “That *Jiaozhu*’s life span will be no more than a small insect’s; he won’t live much longer.”

In Kangxi’s presence Wei Xiaobao braced himself to accept this mission; however, thinking about Cult Leader Hong’s unsurpassed martial art skill, about the martial art masters surrounding him like a cloud, while he would bring some troops who could only whirling the sabers in their hands or shooting some

arrows to attack Shen Long Island, he knew that most likely it would be Wei Xiaobao whose long life the same as the insect's.

Leaving the Palace, Wei Xiaobao was depressed. But then he had a thought, "*Laozi* definitely won't go to Shen Long Island. Even if Xiao Xuanzi treated me better than this, it's not worth losing my life in vain for his sake. My life as a government official has reached the end; as soon as I am outside of the Pass I'd better seize the opportunity to go to Lu Ding Shan north of Heilong Jiang, to dig the buried treasure, to obtain great wealth in one stroke, and then quietly return to Yunnan, to get Ah Ke's hand in marriage. Henceforth I will hide: I will gamble and watch the play every day; won't I be happy, free and unfettered?"

Thinking about this, his anxiety was somewhat reduced. He thought, "Although running away just before the battle is not so brilliant on the face, plus I am turning my back on Xiao Xuanzi's great trust, but this is a matter of life and death; how can I play a joke on it? After digging the buried treasure, I won't dig and cut Manchu people's dragon vein; this way I am also doing the right thing for Xiao Xuanzi."

During the audience with the Emperor the next day, Kangxi proclaimed a decree, raising Wei Xiaobao's official position, and sending him to Changbai Mountain to offer sacrifice to the ancestors. After the court was adjourned, one after another the nobles and the ministers came to congratulate him.

Songgotu's friendship with him stood out from the masses; he especially accompanied Wei Xiaobao back to his viscount mansion to continue their chat. Seeing Wei Xiaobao's enthusiasm was somewhat waning, he said, "*Xiongdi*, going to Changbai Mountain to offer sacrifice is naturally not as lucrative as going to Yunnan to knock on Ping Xi Wang Mansion's bamboo pole; the difference is as far as the Heaven from the Earth. No wonder you are not too interested." [See note 11, Chapter 10 on 'knocking on bamboo pole'.]

Wei Xiaobao said, "Be honest with *Dage*, *Xiongdi* is a southerner, I am always most afraid of cold. As soon as I am thinking about the world of ice and snow outside the Pass, I am already shivering in cold. Tonight I must have my stove burning high and roast myself well."

Songgotu burst into loud laughter; he said consolingly, "You don't have to

worry about that, when I go home, I will send you a fire sable overcoat here, so that *Xiongdi* can resist cold. Inside the warm sedan chair put some coal pots, then you won't feel too cold. *Xiongdi*, going on a mission outside the Pass still has some benefits."

"This Liaodong is a place where people could freeze their noses off," Wei Xiaobao said, "How can I reap any benefit? Would *Dage* please advise?"

Songgotu said, "Our Liaodong has three treasures …"

"That's great," Wei Xiaobao said, "Three treasures. If I can get one, I can spend it all."

Sonngotu laughed. "There is a saying in Liaodong, I wonder if *Xiongdi* has heard it?" he said, "It is called 'Guandong[28] has three treasures: ginseng, mink fur and wula grass'."

"I have never heard it," Wei Xiaobao said, "Ginseng and mink fur are valuable goods. But that wula grass, what's so valuable about it?"

"Wula grass is Kuhaha's treasure," Songgotu explained, "When winter arrives in Guandong, the weather gets cold, the ground gets frozen. Poor people cannot afford mink fur, they cannot take warm sedan chair to travel; if their feet are frozen, who would carry Wei *Xiongdi*'s sedan chair? You can find Wula grass everywhere in Guandong, as long as you pull a handful, dry it in the sun, and pound it into pulp, you can stuff it into your shoes, and your feet will very nice and warm."

"So that's how it is," Wei Xiaobao said, "Wula grass is a treasure, but we have no need of it. But there is no harm in getting several dozen shoulder pole buckets of ginseng and several thousand mink fur to bring back, and then I can divide it to relatives and friends." Songgotu roared in laughter again.

While they were chatting, Wei Xiaobao's personal guard came to report, saying that Fujian's Navy *Tidu* [local commander] Shi Lang had come to pay his respect. Wei Xiaobao immediately remembered Zheng Keshuang had mentioned that Shi Lang was a martial art expert from Wuyi Pai [See also note 2 of Chapter 26], who had taught Zheng Keshuang some martial art; later on he surrendered to the Great Qing. He could not stop his face from changing as he thought about the

possibility of this man surnamed Shi was sent by Zheng Keshuang to make things difficult for him. Feng Xifan was so vicious and formidable, this man surnamed Shi must also be difficult to deal with. “What does he want?” he asked the personal guard, “I don’t want to see him.”

The personal guard complied and went out to inform the guest. Wei Xiaobao still did not feel at ease; he called another personal guard, “Quickly summon Ah San and Ah Liu [ol’ third and ol’ six, respectively].” Ah San and Ah Liu were Fat Toutuo and Lu Gaoxuan’s fictitious names.

“What kind of friendship Wei *Xiongdi* have with Shi Jinghai[29]?” Songgotu asked.

Wei Xiaobao was rather shaken. “Shi … Shi Jing what?” he asked.

Songgotu said, “Shi *Tidu* was conferred the nobility title ‘Jing Hai Jiang Jun’ [lit. the general who pacifies the ocean], don’t Wei *Xiongdi* know him?”

Wei Xiaobao shook his head, “Never met him,” he said.

While they were speaking, Fat Toutuo and Lu Gaoxuan, two people arrived; they stood behind Wei Xiaobao. With these two great martial art masters to protect him, Wei Xiaobao felt a bit better.

The personal guard returned to the inner hall, carrying a tray in his hands. He reported, “General Shi presents the Viscount this gift.”

Wei Xiaobao saw an open brocade box on the tray, inside the box there was a white jade bowl, and inside the bowl there were several rows of characters engraved on the surface. The jade bowl was pure white, it was of extremely fine quality jade, the engraving was also very exquisite. Wei Xiaobao thought, “He gives me a present, apparently he is not here to deal with me; but I must still guard against him.”

Songgotu laughed and said, “This gift is not light, the meticulous effort Old Shi spent must not be small either.”

“What?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

Songgotu explained, “The engraving inside the jade bowl has your, *laodi*[30], respected name, and the four characters ‘jia guan jin jue’ [to confer a title of

official position/to be promoted], and then below it says ‘Junior Shi Lang respectfully present’.”

Wei Xiaobao muttered to himself, “This man and I are total strangers, yet he is this courteous to me, he must be harboring malicious intentions.”

Songgotu laughed and said, “The Old Shi’s intention cannot be more clear. He wholeheartedly wants to attack Taiwan, to avenge his father and mother, wife and children. These last several years is always entangling us, wants us to talk to the Emperor on his behalf. For this matter, he has spent if not twenty thousand *taels*, then at least fifteen thousand *taels*. He knew *Xiongdi* is His Majesty’s most favorite person; naturally he is here to get the right social connection.”

Wei Xiaobao was greatly relieved. “So that’s how it is,” he said, “Why is he bending on attacking Taiwan?”

Songgotu said, “The Old Shi was originally a great general under Zheng Chenggong. Later on Zheng Chenggong suspected that he was about to rebel, hence he was going to be arrested, but he managed to escape. Zheng Chenggong was so angry that he had Shi Lang’s father and mother, wife and children …” he ran his right palm across his neck to the left, signaling execution; and then he continued, “This man is very skilled in naval warfare. After surrendering to the Great Qing, he led a battle against Zheng Chenggong, and unexpectedly he defeated Zheng Chenggong.”

Wei Xiaobao stuck out his tongue. He said, “Even such a hero and warrior like Zheng Chenggong also suffered defeat in his hands; this kind of person, I simply must see.” Turning to his personal guard he said, “If General Shi has not left, tell him that I am coming out.” Turning to Songgotu, he said, “*Dage*, please come with me to see him.”

Although he had Fat and Lu, two people to protect him, there was still dread toward Shi Lang in his heart. Songgotu was an imperial court minister of the first-*pin* rank; with him by his side, supposedly Shi Lang would not dare to play rough without careful consideration. Songgotu laughed and nodded. Hand in hand they entered the main hall.

Shi Lang was sitting on the farthest seat on the right, the lowest seat. As soon as he heard the sound of boots, he stood up. Seeing the two people walking out

from the inner hall, he immediately took several steps forward and bowed respectfully. “Suo *Daren*, Wei *Daren*, lowly officer Shi Lang pays his respect,” he called in a loud and clear voice.

Wei Xiaobao cupped his fist to return the propriety and said with a laugh, “I do not dare to accept the honor. You are a general, I am only a small *Dutong* [commander]; how can I accept the propriety? Please sit down, please sit down; everybody should not use too much formality.”

Shi Lang respectfully said, “Wei *Daren* is so modest, you make other people full of admiration. Wei *Daren* is a first-class Viscount, your nobility rank is a lot higher than lowly officer; much less Wei *Daren* rises to your current rank when you are still young. To be conferred the title ‘Gong’ [Duke] or ‘Hou’ [Marquis] is just a matter of time; in less than ten years, Wei *Daren* will surely be conferred the title ‘Wang’ [king].”

Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud and said, “If that day indeed comes, I should thank your precious words [orig. golden mouth].”

“Old Shi,” Songgotu said with a laugh, “Being in Beijing these past several years, you have learned how to be oily-mouthed and talk smoothly, unlike when you first came to Beijing, you offended people left and right.”

“Lowly officer is an uncouth military man; I did not understand the compass and set square,” Shi Lang replied, “It was entirely due to all *Daren* who tolerated me graciously that now lowly officer can thoroughly rectify my misdeeds.”

“You have learned everything well,” Songgotu said with a laugh, “Unexpectedly you knew that Wei *Daren* is His Majesty’s most favorite officer. By using him to get the right social connection, your chance of success is better than if you ask ten or even a hundred princess and dukes, or various ministers.”

Shi Lang bowed respectfully to the two people and said, “For all two *Daren*’s advice and instructions, lowly officer will be eternally grateful.”

Wei Xiaobao sized Shi Lang up; he estimated his age to be about fifty, his physique seemed to be solid and his eyes bright, indeed he had a heroic aura around him. However, his countenance was wan and sallow, rather like someone who was weary of the wind and the dust. “General Shi gave me that jade bowl; it is very valuable,” he said, “But there is something that is not so good.”

Shi Lang was quite terrified; he sprang up immediately. “Lowly officer is a muddle head,” he said, “I wonder which part of the jade bowl is defective; would *Daren* please advise?”

Wei Xiaobao laughed, “There is no defect,” he said, “It’s just that it is too much of a liability. When I eat rice, I would hold it in my hand with fear and trepidation. I am scared that if I am not careful, I would shatter the rice bowl. Ha ha, ha ha …”

Songgotu also roared in laughter. Shi Lang had no choice but to accompany by letting out some hollow laugh.

“When did General Shi arrive in Beijing?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

“Lowly officer has already been in Beijing for three whole years,” Shi Lang replied.

Wei Xiaobao was surprised. “General Shi is Fujian’s Navy *Tidu*,” he said, “You are not leading the troops in Fujian, but having fun in Beijing instead, why is that? Ah, I know, General Shi surely has a good sister in Beijing brothel, with whom you are reluctant to part.”

“Wei *Daren* is teasing me,” Shi Lang said, “His Majesty summoned lowly officer to the Capital to discuss the strategy to pacify Taiwan. Lowly officer is muddleheaded, I failed the imperial decree, all along His Majesty has not instructed me to proceed. Lowly officer stays in the Capital, it is precisely to wait respectfully on His Majesty’s order.”

Wei Xiaobao thought, “The young Emperor is very astute; among the important matters he is thinking in his heart, other than securing the three borders, is how to attack and seize Taiwan. Even if your speech were not pleasant to hear, as long as you really know what you are doing, His Majesty would definitely tolerate you. There must some other reason behind this.”

Thinking about what Songgotu had told him earlier, he thought, “This man has rendered not a few merits, he must be arrogant. His Majesty summoned him to the Capital, he definitely did not admit being in the wrong at all, and thus has offended not a few people of authority, to such an extent as they deliberately gave him a lot of trouble.”

Therupon he laughed and said, “His Majesty is extremely wise, if he wants General Shi to wait for his decree in the Capital, he must have a profound reason. You don’t need to be impatient, the time has not yet come, worrying is useless.”

Shi Lang stood up and said, “I have received Wei *Daren*’s instruction today, the murky darkness suddenly opens. For the last three years, lowly officer has been terrified in my heart, I was afraid I had been disobedient and offended His Majesty. Turns out His Majesty have some other profound reason, lowly officer feels a lot better. Wei *Daren*’s enlightenment is an immeasurable kindness. When lowly officer return home today, my rice I will be able to eat, my sleep I will be able to enjoy.”

Wei Xiaobao was very good at patting the horse’s back, hence he also did not take other people’s flattering seriously; however, listening to Shi Lang flattering him, he was nonetheless happy. He said, “His Majesty has said that when someone is too arrogant, he will be unfit for anything; hence his arrogance must be set back first. Let’s not talk about His Majesty did not strip you of your official post, even if he take away your troops, have you beaten and put you in prison, it is all to cultivate your good intention.”

Shi Lang repeatedly voiced his agreement; he could not stop the palm of his hands from sweating. Songgotu stroked his beard and said, “That’s right, nothing is more correct than what Wei *Jueye* has just said. If the jade is not cut, it won’t become a utensil. If your jade bowl were not shaped with a lathe and ground, it would stay a block of rough stone; what’s the use?”

“Yes, yes,” Shi Lang said.

“General Shi, please sit down,” Wei Xiaobao said, “I heard you used to be Zheng Chenggong’s subordinate, for what matter did you have fallout with him?”

Shi Lang said, “Responding to *Daren*’s question: lowly officer was originally Zheng Chenggong’s father, Zheng Zhilong’s subordinate, afterward I was transferred under Zheng Chenggong’s command. Zheng Chenggong raised troops in rebellion, lowly officer could not see this matter clearly, in my confusion I followed the order by working for him.”

“Um, you fought the Qing restoring …” Wei Xiaobao started; he was going to say, ‘You fought the Qing restoring the Ming, so you should do what you were supposed to do.’ He was used to be with the Tian Di Hui brothers, hence he was used to the way they speak, and almost reveal his secret; fortunately he managed to stop in time, and hastily said, “And then what happened?”

Shi Lang said, “That year Zheng Chenggong fought a battle in Fujian; originally he was based in Xiamen, the Great Qing’s troops launched a surprise attack and captured Xiamen. Zheng Chenggong had no choice; he was in a very difficult situation. Lowly officer indeed deserve to die ten thousand deaths, not understanding to which king and master I should vow my loyalty and devotion, unexpectedly I led my troops and seized Xiamen back from the Great Qing troops’ hand.”

“Hence you rendered a very great merit to Zheng Chenggong,” Wei Xiaobao said.

“At that time Zheng Chenggong also promoted lowly officer’s rank,” Shi Lang said, “He bestowed not a few gifts. However, because of a minor matter later on, we had a big argument.”

“What matter was that?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

Shi Lang replied, “Under lowly officer’s command there was a low-rank soldier, lowly officer sent him out to spy the enemy. Unexpectedly, not only this person was afraid of death, he was also lazy; he went out to the wilderness and slept for several days. When he returned, he spoke some nonsense. As I listened to him, I knew something was not right. Upon careful investigation, I found the truth. Immediately I ordered him to be locked up and beheaded the next day. Unexpectedly this low-rank soldier was very sly; he escaped in the middle of the night and ran to Zheng Chenggong’s mansion, he complained tearfully to Mrs. Zheng Chenggong, Madame Dong, saying that I have wrongly accused him. Madame Dong’s heart was soft; she sent someone to plead with me, asking me to forgive this low-rank soldier, saying that when I sent someone on a mission, I must not kill my subordinate without authorization, so as not to terrify the soldiers.”

Hearing him mentioning Madame Dong, Wei Xiaobao remembered Chen

Jinnan told him that this Madame Dong favored her grandson Keshuang and that she repeatedly wanted to set him up as the heir apparent. He could not stop his anger from flaring up, “That old wh0re,” he cursed, “What did that woman know about military matter? His granny, important things in the world fail in this kind of old wh0re’s hands. If a soldier violating martial law was not beheaded, everybody would violate martial law; how can you lead troops to war that way? This old wh0re is thoroughly muddleheaded, she only knows how to favor ‘little white face’ [i.e. pretty boy].”

Shi Lang had never expected that when he heard about this matter, Wei Xiaobao would be that angry; immediately feeling of friendship arose in Shi Lang’s heart. Slapping his thigh, he said, “Nothing can be truer than what Wei *Daren* has just said. You are also accustomed to leading the troops, you know martial law is as rigid as the mountain. Subduing the enemy and scoring a victory all depend on strict commands.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “You don’t have to pay attention to that old wh0re; just grab that low-rank soldier or high-rank soldier, ‘ka-cha’, one saber and it is done.”

Shi Lang said, “Lowly officer’s thought at that time was exactly the same as Wei *Daren*’s. I said to the person sent by Madame Dong that the one surnamed Shi was Guoxing Ye’s subordinate, I only accept Guoxing Ye’s military order. My meaning was that I was not Madame Dong’s subordinate, hence I was not obligated to accept Madame Dong’s order.”

“Absolutely right,” Wei Xiaobao was fuming, “Whoever wanted to be the old wh0re’s subordinate must be a big pustule.”

Hearing Wei Xiaobao repeatedly cursing Madame Dong as the old wh0re, Songgotu and Shi Lang were amused; but how could they know that Wei Xiaobao had a different, selfish reason?

Shi Lang said, “That old … that Madame Dong was angry at lowly officer’s reply, unexpectedly she made that low-rank soldier a Mansion’s personal guard, and also sent words to me, saying that if I had the ability, to capture and kill that low-rank soldier myself. Momentarily lowly officer could not endure that kind of words, I personally went to grab that low-rank soldier, and with one chop I

separate his head from his body."

Wei Xiaobao clapped and praised him greatly, "Kill him well, kill him swell, kill him neatly, send him packing to hell, to the satisfaction of everyone."

"After lowly officer killed that low-rank soldier," Shi Lang continued, "I realized I had run into a disaster, hence I thought I would go to Zheng Chenggong to apologize. I thought I had rendered great merit, a troop under my command violated martial law, killing him was not wrong at all. But Zheng Chenggong was listening to the Madame's words, he said I had offended my superior and was insufficiently respectful to her, so he put me in custody. I thought Guoxing Ye was a hero and a broadminded man, momentarily he was upset and had me locked up several days, so I did not mind much. Who would have thought that after quite a long time, my father and my younger brother, as well as my wife and children, were all arrested and put in prison. It was then that I knew this matter was far from good, Zheng Chenggong wanted to chop my head. Taking advantage when the man in charge of me was being negligence, I escaped. Not too long afterwards, I received the news that Zheng Chenggong had executed my whole family that not even one survived."

Wei Xiaobao shook his head and heaved a deep sigh; he repeatedly stated, "It's all because that old wh0re Madame Dong was not good."

Gnashing his teeth, Shi Lang said, "My enmity with the Zheng Family is as deep as the ocean. It's a pity that Zheng Chenggong had already died, it's hard for me to avenge my enmity. Lowly officer has sworn a heavy oath, there will be a day I will kill the Zheng Family, each and every one of them, I will wipe them clean."

Wei Xiaobao was already aware that Zheng Chenggong was an overseas king, a big hero, but hearing that Shi Lang wanted to kill the entire Zheng Clan, which naturally included his big rival Zheng Keshuang, he felt Shi Lang and he were like-minded. Nodding his head repeatedly, he said, "You should kill them, you should kill them! If you do not avenge this enmity, you are not a hero or a warrior."

Ever since Shi Lang was summoned by Kangxi to Beijing, he only saw the Emperor one time, and then he was lying idle in Beijing. His official position was Fujian's Naval *Tidu*, his nobility title was still 'Jinghai Jiangjun' [the general who pacify the ocean], but in Beijing he received his soldier's pay in vain, because he

did not hold any authority; in fact, compared to a lowly officer of Shun Tian[31] *yamen*, his power was still inferior. To an aggressive and grand man like him, naturally being confined in the city with an anxious heart, he was like an ant in a hot pot.

For the last three years, every few days he would go to the Ministry of War to beat around the bush. He gave present excessively, and had spent considerable amount of money; the savings that he accumulated from his career over the years had actually been thrown away into the bottomless pit of Beijing bureaucracy, but the Emperor no longer granted him any interview. He did not even know when would he receive the imperial edict sending him back to his official post in Fujian. Afterwards, when the Ministry of War *yamen* heard Shi Lang's name, they would feel a headache. His personal fund had been depleted, he no longer had money to give gifts, nobody paid him any attention anymore. This time, hearing Wei Xiaobao was in complete agreement with everything he said, he felt that returning to his duty in Fujian was no longer a hopeless desire, his face was full of excitement.

"General Shi," Songgotu said, "Zheng Chenggong killed your entire family, he really should not do that. However, you are also reaping a profit from this disaster: you renounced the dark and sought the light. If this matter did not happen, I am afraid by this time you would still be in Taiwan defying your king and master, committing those treason and heresy."

"Suo *Daren* is right," Shi Lang said.

"Zheng Chenggong killed your entire family, and then in rage, you surrendered to the Great Qing?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

"Yes," Shi Lang replied, "The Late Emperor's benevolence was as heavy as the mountain; when lowly officer surrendered, the Late Emperor sent me to Fujian on a mission. Lowly officer was grateful and seeking to repay the kindness, I dashed on bravely with no thought of personal safety, and set up some minor merits, hence I was promoted to be the *Fujiang* [deputy general] of Tong'an [district of Xiamen city], Fujian. As it turns out, Zheng Chenggong led his troops to attack, lowly officer staked everything I had against him, relying on the Late Emperor's flood of good fortune, I seized total victory. By his great benevolence,

the Late Emperor promoted me to be Tong'an's *Zongbing* [regional commander]. Later on I captured Xiamen, Jinmen and Wuyu; and then in alliance with the red-haired troops, riding large sailing ship and using foreign firearms and ocean cannon, we beat Zheng Chenggong out to the sea. The Late Emperor promoted lowly officer to be the Fujian Naval *Tidu*, and bestowed the title 'Jinghai Jiangjun'. Actually, lowly officer did not have even half a part of contribution; one, I was a dog, enjoying great part of Qing Emperor's good fortune, two, I received appropriate instruction from various *Daren* of the Imperial Court."

Wei Xiaobao smiled and said, "You were formerly in Zheng Chenggong's army, and you have won several tough battles with him in Fujian, naturally you are also very familiar with the situation in Taiwan. His Majesty summoned you here to discuss the strategy to attack Taiwan, what did you tell him?"

Shi Lang said, "Lowly officer submitted a report to His Majesty: Taiwan is sitting alone in the ocean, it is easy to guard, hard to attack. The officers and soldiers of Taiwan are crack troops who have followed Zheng Chenggong in hundreds of battle in the past. If we want to attack Taiwan, our officers and men must be united under one command, there must not be any pulling or elbowing inside, people who act as they see fit; only then we will achieve success."

"Are you saying that you want to take charge in this important task and to let you one man have the authority to boss people around?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

"Lowly officer does not dare to have such arrogance," Shi Lang replied, "But attacking Taiwan must be done when it is the least expected, attack when they are not prepared. The Capital and Fujian are several thousand *li* apart, when the good opportunity to attack Taiwan arises, and we have to submit a memorial to the throne to ask for instruction, by the time the imperial court makes decision, perhaps the good opportunity will be lost. Taiwan's various generals and officers are not a big deal; there is one Chen Yonghua who is full of stratagems, and then there is one Liu Guoxuan who is brave and good at fighting. In all honesty, these two are greatly formidable opponent. If we send the troops in haste, victory will be hard to grasp."

Wei Xiaobao nodded and said, "That is true. His Majesty is extremely brilliant, he would not blame you as saying wrong things. What else did you tell him?"

Shi Lang said, “His Majesty also inquired about the strategy to attack Taiwan. In response to the imperial inquiry, lowly officer reported: Although Taiwan’s troops are exquisite, when all is said and done, their number is small. When the Great Qing attacks Taiwan, we should attack one problem from two angles at the same time [orig. ‘painting using two brushes’]. The first step is to use spies, we scheme to set the people inside to be at odds with each other. It would be best if we could disseminate rumors, saying that Chen Yonghua is harboring the desire to abandon his master and be independent, that he and Liu Guoxuan, two people, are plotting to seize the throne. As soon as Zheng Jing is suspicious, there is a good chance that he would kill Chen and Liu, two people. Even if he did not kill them, he would not put them in important position, he would strip them of any authority. Chen and Liu, two people, one an important figure the other a general, they are indeed Taiwan’s two pillars. If we can deal with both, that is certainly the best. But if we can only get rid of one of them, one of them working alone, a single log cannot support a large building.”

Wei Xiaobao was secretly shocked, “Damn it,” he mused, “You want to harm my Shifu.” He asked, “Isn’t there a certain ‘One Sword Without Blood’, Feng Xifan?”

Shi Lang was greatly surprised, “Unexpectedly Wei *Daren* also know about Feng Xifan.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “I heard His Majesty mentioned it when we were chatting. His Majesty is very clear about Taiwan’s inside story! His Majesty said, ‘Madame Dong is fond of her ‘little white face’ grandson Zheng Keshuang, she does not like the heir apparent Zheng Keshang; she wants her son to change the heir apparent, but Zheng Jing is unwilling. Is there really such thing?”

Shi Lang was startled, but was also full of admiration, “The Holy Son of Heaven is intelligent and wise, indeed a rarity since the dawn of time. He resides deep in the Palace, but can see clearly ten thousand *li* away. His Majesty’s words are not the least bit incorrect.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “You said that there are two ways to attack Taiwan; one is using scheme to kill Chen Yonghua and Liu Guoxuan, what is the other one?”

Shi Lang said, “The other is to attack using naval force. Attacking only in one

direction won't be easy to succeed, we must attack it from three directions at once. From the north attack Jilong Gang [lit. chicken coop port], in the middle attack Taiwan's government seat, from the south attack Dagou Gang [lit. beating a dog port; my dictionary says 'old name for Kaohsiung in southern Taiwan']. As long as one direction succeed, the landing will definitely plant our feet in Taiwan, the people's heart will be thrown into confusion, it will be a clean sweep."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Leading naval forces, fighting naval battle, you are the expert."

Shi Lang said, "In all my life lowly officer has been in the navy, I am well acquainted with naval warfare."

Wei Xiaobao had a brainwave; he pondered, "This man wants to kill the entire family of surname Zheng, hence he will get rid of that kid Zheng Keshuang; that won't be so bad. However, Zheng Chenggong was a great hero, killing his entire family cannot be justified. Much less attacking Taiwan means bringing harm to my Shifu; that won't be good at all. This man is an expert in naval battle, by sending him on this mission, I will kill two birds with one stone."

Turning toward Songgotu he asked, "*Dage*, what do you think we must do?"

Songgotu said, "His Majesty is wise, he stands tall and sees far, his reckoning will not fail. As his servants, all we need to do is just listen to his instruction, and that's that."

Wei Xiaobao thought, "What a crafty fellow you are; you are unwilling to take any responsibility." He picked up the teacup with both hands. The servant waiting on them loudly announced, "See the visitor out!"

Shi Lang stood up, saluted, and took his leave. Songgotu stayed for a short chat, and then he also took his leave.

Wei Xiaobao went to the Palace to see the Emperor, he reported Shi Lang's wish to attack Taiwan. Kangxi said, "Eliminate threats from three borders first, then pacify Taiwan; this is the basic order of priority. This man Shi Lang indeed has talent, but I am afraid after I let him go back to Fujian, this man will become impatient to render merit and take revenge, he would act blindly without thinking, and then Taiwan would be alerted instead; therefore, all along I keep him in Beijing."

Wei Xiaobao was immediately enlightened. “Right, right,” he said, “As soon as Shi Lang reached Fujian, he would want to build battleships and recruit the troops, he would beat the grass to scare the snake. While if we want to attack Taiwan, it has to be ‘the gods did not know, the ghost did not realize’; everybody has to think that we are not attacking, and then we suddenly attack, so that the kid surnamed Zheng will be thrown into confusion.”

Kangxi smiled and said, “That should be the way to move the troops. Besides, dispatching a general is not as good as stimulating a general; I keep Shi Lang in Beijing, so that his strength won’t be used, he will be bored half-dead. By the time I send him out, he will do everything he can to follow my order, and will not dare to goof off.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “This strategy of Your Majesty’s, even Zhuge Liang cannot surpass. Your servant has seen the play ‘Ding Jun Shan’ [lit. Fixing-the-army Mountain], Zhuge Liang stimulated Huang Zhong[32] that he staked everything and fought ruthlessly, and thus with one saber he chopped that ‘chunxiaqiudong’ [spring, summer, autumn, winter – the four season] painted-face.”

Kangxi smiled, “Xia Houyuan,” he said.

“Right, right,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Your Majesty’s memory is really good, you watched the play, and remember that big painted-face’s name.”

Kangxi laughed. “That big painted-face’s name is actually written in the book,” he said, “What did Shi Lang give you?”

Wei Xiaobao was surprised. “Your Majesty knows everything,” he said, “That Shi Lang gave me a jade bowl, but I don’t like it too much.”

“So what’s not good about the jade bowl?” Kangxi asked.

Wei Xiaobao replied, “Although the jade bowl is precious, once it fell it breaks. Your servant has worked for Your Majesty, my pair of hands are holding a golden rice bowl [an allegory to ‘secure and lucrative job’], which for a thousand years won’t break when it fell, for ten thousand years won’t rust. That is the big difference.”

Kangxi burst out laughing. Wei Xiaobao said, “Your Majesty, your servant

suddenly thinks of an idea, would you hear it and tell me if it is possible?"

"What idea?" Kangxi asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, "That Shi Lang said that he is a naval commander, and is very good at naval warfare …"

Kangxi slapped his left hand on the table. "Good idea, good idea," he said, "Xiao Guizi, you are very smart. You may take him to Liaodong, send him to attack Shen Long Jiao."

Wei Xiaobao was very amazed in his heart, he stared at Kangxi for half a day before saying, "Your Majesty must be an immortal descending into the world; your servant had not even said the thought in my mind, Your Majesty already knew."

Kangxi smiled. "Enough patting the horse's butt," he said, "Xiao Guizi, that is a wonderful idea. I was anxious, you are going to attack Shen Long Jiao, I don't know if you will succeed. This Shi Lang is a talent in naval warfare, I'll have him going Shen Long Island to practice first, but he must not leak the secret beforehand."

"Yes, yes," Wei Xiaobao hastily said.

Kangxi sent for Shi Lang at once. When he arrived, Kangxi said, "*Zhen* is sending Wei Xiaobao to Changbai Mountain to offer sacrifice to the Heaven. He highly recommends you, saying that you handled matters competently; he wants to take you along. *Zhen* accepted his words a bit reluctantly, I am not quite convinced yet."

Wei Xiaobao was amused inwardly. "Zhuge Liang is stimulating the Old Huang Zhong," he thought.

Shi Lang repeatedly kowtowed; he said, "Your Servant [orig. 'chen', a minister referring to self in front of the Emperor] will go with Wei *Dutong* on this mission, I will definitely display utter loyalty in obeying his order, I will dash on bravely with no thought of personal safety, in order to repay Your Majesty's as-high-as-the-sky kindness."

Kangxi said, "This is a test for you. If you succeed, I will send you on different mission in the future."

Shi Lang was greatly delighted; he kowtowed and said, “Your Majesty’s kindness ascends the sky, it is broad and powerful.”

Kangxi said, “This is a secret mission, other than Wei Xiaobao one person, nobody else in the Imperial Court knew about it. In everything you are to follow Wei Xiaobao’s order. You are dismissed.”

Shi Lang kowtowed. He was about to withdraw, Kangxi suddenly smiled and said, “Wei *Dutong* treats you well; go, send him a big golden rice bowl.”

Shi Lang complied, in his heart he did not understand a thing, he was unclear of the Emperor’s intention; but seeing ‘the Heaven’s countenance’ was very happy, he believed it must not be a bad thing.

By the time Wei Xiaobao returned to his viscount mansion, he saw Shi Lang was already waiting at the gate, saying a lot of things about gratitude for the promotion. Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “General Shi, this time I have no choice but to wrong you: I would like you to be a tiny *Canling* [Regimental Commander[33]] in my brigade, to protect against outsider knew about this.”

Shi Lang was greatly delighted; he said, “In everything I will follow *Dutong Daren*’s instruction.” He realized that the lower the official position Wei Xiaobao assigned to him, that means the more Wei Xiaobao considered him as his own people, the more opportunity for him to gain meteoric rise [orig. ‘the divine steed Huang flashes past’] in his career later on. If Wei Xiaobao assigned him to be his personal guard, that would be even better. He also said, “His Majesty instructed lowly officer to make a golden bowl and present it as a gift to *Dutong*; I wonder which style *Dutong Daren* likes the most, lowly officer will send for some master artisan to manufacture one overnight.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “That was His Majesty’s grace; no matter what style, we as the servants will hold the golden bowl with both hands to eat our rice, with our hearts full of gratitude for the vast and mighty benevolence of the Emperor.” Shi Lang repeatedly voiced his agreement.

Wei Xiaobao mused, “*Laozi* originally wanted to escape without a trace, to resign and not have anything to do with government anymore. And now I found you, this scapegoat, it would be best if you fight desperately with Hong *Jiaozhu* that both of you perish together; then you two brothers’ long lives will be the

same as the bugs."

After Shi Lang left, Wei Xiaobao summoned Li Lishi, Feng Jizhong, Xu Tianchuan, Priest Xuanzhen, and the other Tian Di Hui brothers; he told them what had happened in details. Li Lishi said, "This thief surnamed Shi rebelled against Guoxing Ye, and he wants to attack Taiwan and frame *Zongduozhu*; it's by the Heaven's providence that he came across Wei *Xiangzhu*. What should we do to manipulate him?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "Shen Long Jiao colludes with Wu Sangui and Luocha Country, presently the Emperor is sending me leading Shi Lang to destroy Shen Long Jiao. Let's let this surnamed Shi fight with Shen Long Jiao until the sky turns dark and the earth black, until both sides suffer, and then we'll come to pick the fish out of the net." Everybody approved this plan in one voice.

Wei Xiaobao said, "This surnamed Shi is astute and competent, I need to rely on him to strike Shen Long Island, so we cannot kill him yet. All *Gege* must be careful, don't let him see through our secret."

Gao Yanchao said, "We will dress as Valiant Cavalry Brigade Tatars; ordinarily we won't see him too much. Even if we do, he won't dare to offend the Tatars."

By the afternoon of the next day, Shi Lang came to the viscount mansion asking for an audience, carrying a brocade box with both hands. Wei Xiaobao opened the brocade box, and sure enough, he saw a big golden rice bowl, weighed at least six or seven *taels*[34]. Shi Lang said, "Lowly officer should make it a bit bigger, but I am afraid … I am afraid it would not be convenient for *Dutong Daren* to use."

Wei Xiaobao weighed the golden bowl with his left hand. "It's heavy enough," he said with a laugh, "General Shi, what do these many characters say?"

Shi Lang said, "The middle four large characters say, 'Gong Zhong Ti Guo' [serving one's country loyally'. This line of little characters above it says, 'Personally presented to Internal Imperial Bodyguard Deputy Minister, simultaneously holding Valiant Cavalry Brigade Plain Yellow Banner *Dutong* position, the wearer of Yellow Magua, Batulu Brave title, First Class Viscount Wei Xiaobao.' Below, in even smaller characters, are 'Made by Minister Jinghai Jiangjun Shi Lang on imperial orders.'"

Wei Xiaobao was very happy; he laughed and said, “Thank you very much for this.” He said in his heart, “That’s right, my golden bowl is bestowed by His Majesty; how can you give me any golden rice bowl [i.e. secure and lucrative job]? This Old Shi is actually not a fool?”

Two days later, Kangxi proclaimed the imperial edict, ordering Wei Xiaobao to take the ten ‘Shen Wu Da Pao’ and set out to sea from Dagu[35], passing through Liaodong Bay to the north; first to offer sacrifice at Liaohai [east and south of Liaoning province], and then to land at Liaodong, travel to Changbai Mountain and set off the cannon to offer sacrifice to the Heaven.

Wei Xiaobao accepted the imperial edict; thinking that since this time they were going to attack Divine Dragon Cult, he could not bring Fat Toutuo and Lu Gaoxuan along, hence he ordered the two of them to stay in Beijing. He brought Shuang’er and Tian Di Hui brothers, leading the Valiant Cavalry Brigade troops, and set off to Tianjin.

Hundreds of civil and military officials welcomed the Imperial Envoy Minister; some of them were respectful and solemn beyond ordinary, a hundred-percent bootlicking; some of them flattered appropriately, it was just perfect. There was only one bearded military officer with haughty air, when he saluted, it was clear that he was saluting half-heartedly, obviously he did not have any regard toward Wei Xiaobao.

Wei Xiaobao was angry, he was about to lash it out immediately when he had a second thought, “His Majesty’s order: this time everything must be kept in strict confidence, must not create too much disturbance and attract unnecessary attention. You look down on me, do you think *Laozi* will look up to your big beard? Let us, two boys, have a contest, whose official position is higher?” And then another official highly praised him for his heroic deed in killing Oboi with his own hand. Wei Xiaobao was immensely proud of himself, and was no longer bothered with the big beard.

That evening Wei Xiaobao invited Tianjin’s Naval *Zongbing* [regional commander] to come over, and showed him Kangxi’s secret order. The Naval *Zongbing* was called Huang Fu. He read the imperial decree ordering him to lead the naval officers and men to board the ships and follow the Imperial Envoy

Minister's direction, in an important clandestine military mission. He received the imperial decree and bowed, saying he was ready to hear the direction. Wei Xiaobao inquired about the strength of the navy: how many sailors they had, how many boats were available, and so on. And then he summoned Shi Lang to join them. He ordered Shi Lang and Huang Fu to discuss the plan to go to sea, while he himself went to the rear barrack and gambled and played *Pai Jiu* with the soldiers.

They stopped over in Tianjin for three days, the Naval Force Brigade loaded food, fresh water, ammunition, bows and arrows and other stuffs onto the ships. Wei Xiaobao led the Naval Force Brigade, the Valiant Cavalry Brigade, ten big battleships, and thirty-eight second-class battleships, to set sail.

It was not until after they left Dagu and reached the open sea that Wei Xiaobao announced the imperial decree, that their mission this time was to eliminate Divine Dragon Island, that all officers and men must follow the order bravely, and that after their success, there would be promotion and rewards all around. The officers and soldiers saw that their side had overwhelming numerical strength, plus the Imperial Envoy Minister had ten western-style cannon, while their opponent on the Divine Dragon Island was no more than a bunch or pirate who illegally occupied the island. With a series of bombardments from the cannon, the pirates would be struck that none will remain. This time meritorious service and promotion were guaranteed. Immediately they broke out in cheers, their spirit was boosted a hundred times.

Wei Xiaobao rode the main ship. He reminisced about the last time he went to the Divine Dragon Island under Fang Yi's deception. Although that young woman was crafty, looking back this time, he was greatly charmed by the warmth of their being together for several days on the ocean. He thought, "As soon as we reach the Island, if the cannon fire randomly, most of the Cult members of Shen Long Jiao will die by the explosion first. Once the several thousand officers and soldiers rush ashore, even if Hong Jiaozhu's martial art skill were higher, he won't be able to resist the enemy. However, if this happens, perhaps my Xiao Niang Pi [little mother skin] Fang Yi will be blasted to death; that will be very far from good. Even if she did not die, if she lost an arm in the explosion, that will be too bad."

Originally, he was afraid of Cult Leader Hong, and only wanted to smear oil to the soles of his feet and would feel very lucky if he could escape alive; but now with Shi Lang in charge plus several dozen battleships deployed to the ocean and ten newly-manufactured 'Shen Wu Da Pao', this battle would only result in victory and not defeat. If only he could find a way to guarantee Fang Yi's safety while destroying the Divine Dragon Cult completely, then he would get the best of both worlds. Thereupon he summoned Shi Lang and asked him about the plan of attacking the Island.

Shi Lang opened the file he brought along in his hand; he took out a large map and spread it out on the table. Pointing to a small island on the map, he said, "This is the Shen Long Island."

Wei Xiaobao noticed that there was a red circle drawn on the island, with three arrows from north, east and south pointing to the red circle. He was full of admiration, saying, "Turns out you have already prepared a plan to attack the Shen Long Island. I only announced the Emperor's secret order after we left Dagu, how could you have a nautical chart ready?"

Shi Lang replied, "Lowly officer heard that *Daren* was going to leave Dagu and proceed toward Liaodong by the sea, thereupon I prepared this nautical chart. Lowly officer has always loved to have a career in the ocean, I am accustomed to look at nautical charts."

"So that's how it is," Wei Xiaobao said, "Apparently in our mission this time we are bound to win a victory on raising the flag, to succeed upon embarking the ships."

"That is entirely dependent on His Majesty's sacred virtue and Wei *Daren*'s prestige," Shi Lang said, "In Lowly officer's humble opinion, we must divide our forces into three groups; we'll launch tree-pronged attack from the north, east and south of the Island, and leave the west side of the Island free of any assault. After the cannon blast, the bandits on the Island won't be able to withstand, most likely they would run to the west of the Island to escape to sea. Behind this little island about thirty *li* or so west of the Island, we prepare an ambush of twenty ships. As soon as the bandit escapees arrived, these twenty battleships will appear to cut their escape route, the cannon blast, the battleships from the north, east and south will catch up, and surround the pirate ship in the middle.

At that time we can catch everything in one net, not one pirate would be able to escape alive."

Wei Xiaobao cheered and applauded, repeatedly saying that it was an ingenious plan. Shi Lang said, "I am asking *Daren* to lead the troops, by setting up a central command and supervise the battle from this nameless island, please do not get on the boat and join the battle. The central command must be as steady as Mount Tai. If there is any slightest damage to the command flagship, the mast is broken by the gale or what have you, inevitably the morale of the troops will be shaken. Lowly officer will lead the battleships to launch the three-pronged attack. Huang *Zongbing* will lead the ambushing ships to intercept the enemy. Ten little ships will come and go to communicate military intelligence. About how the operation should be executed, *Daren* may give orders at any time, Lowly officer and Huang *Zongbing* will follow."

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted; he thought, "This man is actually very perceptive; he knew perfectly well than I am afraid of death, hence he let me assume personal command on this little island more than thirty *li* away, so that I will be absolutely safe. Even if you are completely wiped out, *laozi* will still have enough time to go onboard a ship and make a dash out of there. Ingenious plan, ingenious plan." Thereupon he praised him greatly.

Shi Lang said, "When Lowly officer first heard of Wei *Daren*'s prestige, I found out that Wei *Daren* has killed the Manchu's Number One Warrior Oboi with your own hand, and has snatched the title Manchurian-Han's Number One Warrior; therefore, you were bestowed the 'Batulu' title of bravery, your courage became famous all over the world. Lowly officer is only afraid that in your desire to repay the Heaven's benevolence, *Daren* might dash on bravely in battle with no thought of personal safety. Supposing the cannon harm *Daren*'s one little finger, His Majesty would surely greatly blame Lowly officer. That my whole life career would be ruined is not a big deal, but I would fail to live up to *Daren*'s kindness by entrusting this heavy responsibility to me, a crime that Lowly officer will not be able to redeem by ten thousand deaths. Therefore, I urgently ask *Daren*'s to show understanding by taking a good care of your ten-thousand-gold body."

Wei Xiaobao sighed and said, "Fighting a battle on a ship is a very interesting experience. I originally wanted to personally lead the attack and capture that

Shen Long Jiao's *Jiaozhu*. But since you put it that way, I have no choice but to let you do it."

"Yes, yes," Shi Lang said, "*Daren* is showing understanding, Lowly officer is deeply grateful."

Wei Xiaobao thought, "You were simmering in Beijing for three years, already you are very proficient in the way of the government officials. *Laozi* originally wanted to deal with you, but seeing you this well-behaved, I cannot bear to do it. This is the first time I've ever heard the title 'Manchurian-Han's Number One Warrior'; only you can fabricate such title." He said, "There are several hundred young women on Shen Long Island, including several women who escaped from the Palace. His Majesty instructed that they must be captured alive. When attacking the Island, you must be very careful, the cannon cannot be fired randomly. If those several palace maids die in the blast, His Majesty will definitely blame us; even if you render bigger merit, your merit cannot make up for it. This is most important."

Shi Lang was shocked; he said, "If not for *Daren*'s warning, Lowly officer nearly rush into a disaster. When we attack the Island, as long as it is a female, we will capture her alive, no one can kill or injure them; we'll send them all to *Daren* to be dealt with."

"So be it," Wei Xiaobao said, "I have seen these several palace maids, as soon as I see them, I would be able to recognize them. But this kind of imperial palace's matter, um, you know."

"Yes," Shi Lang replied, "*Daren* please set your heart at ease, Lowly officer will guard my mouth like a closed bottle. The matter of the Palace, who dares to speak thoughtlessly and talk randomly?"

The battleship continued their voyage northeasterly, they happened to meet headwind, hence the progress was very slow. One day Shen Long Island was not too far away ahead. Shi Lang pointed to a small island to the port side and said, "That is the place where *Dutong Daren* will set up your command station. This small island does not have any name, would *Daren* bestow a name to it?"

Wei Xiaobao scratched his head, "You want me to think of a name is like you want me to deliver my old life," he said, "Hmm, this time I am the banker, you

are my subordinate, the banker's assistant who opens the corner of the tiles; we are playing *Pai Jiu*, and we must beat Shen Long Island and sweep it clean. Hence, this small island will be called 'Tong Chi' Island[36]."

Shi Lang laughed. "Wonderful, wonderful!" he said, "Wei *Daren* assumes personal command on Tong Chi Island, indeed it is great luck, great profit; no matter how strong or formidable the enemy is, we will always 'eat' them clean. *Daren* was dealt 'heaven' pair first, this is *Daren*'s own hand. Later you'll be dealt 'supreme treasure', that will be His Majesty's. With these two sets of card, how can we not sweep the deck (of cards) clean?"

Wei Xiaobao burst out in laughter. "Generals!" he shouted, "Move the troops to Tong Chi Island!" He had seen an actor shouted that order on the stage; now he shouted it out, it was indeed majestic, extremely high-spirited and vigorous.

Dozens of battleships all around followed the flagship of their commander-in-chief, slowly sailed to the Tong Chi Island. Suddenly a sailor in one of the smaller ships shouted. Soon afterwards the small ship came near to report, saying that they saw a body floating on the water. Wei Xiaobao frowned; he thought, "It's a bad omen for the deployed troops to come across a floating corpse! Could it be that this time I become the banker I must pay all[37]?"

Shi Lang said, "Congratulations *Daren* on winning a victory on raising the flag; before we even fire the cannon and shoot the arrows, one of the enemy is already dead; this is indeed a greatly lucky omen. Let lowly officer go over to look." Finished speaking, he jumped onto the small ship.

A moment later, Shi Lang returned to the flagship and said, "Reporting to *Dutong Daren*: the floating corpse has its hands and feet tied behind its back. Apparently the pirates killed him for his money and pushed him into the ocean." Just as he spoke, there was another shout from the small ship, saying that they saw two more floating corpse.

Wei Xiaobao's countenance turned really ugly. This time Shi Lang could not say anything auspicious. He jumped onto the small ship again, and when he returned to the command ship, there was a happy expression across his face. "Reporting to *Daren*," he said, "It seems that these three floating corpses came from Shen

Long Island."

"How did you know?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Shi Lang said, "The first corpse did not show anything, but the following two corpses are obviously pirates; their bodies look strong, clearly they knew martial art."

"Could it be that there is an internal strife within the Shen Long Island?" Wei Xiaobao wondered.

Shi Lang said, "The wind is blowing from the Shen Long Island's direction, most probably these three corpses were blown here by the wind. If there is indeed an internal strife within the enemy's rank, this time Wei *Daren* become the banker, you can eat them all as simmer-fried tofu; no need to bite, just swallow them all clean."

Wei Xiaobao cast his gaze to the distance, but fog was rising from the ocean, the white mist filled the air, he was unable to see Shen Long Island. Suddenly he seemed to see something like a ball bobbing up and down on the surface of the water, the ball gradually floated near. "What is that?" he asked.

Shi Lang focused his gaze. "There is something strange about that thing," he said. He transmitted an order to the small ship to fish the object up. Following the order, the small ship sailed away to dredge the object up from the water. The officer on the ship shouted loudly, "Another floating corpse. It's a short and fat guy."

Wei Xiaobao's heart was moved. "Could it be him?" he mused. He said, "Lift it up here, let me look."

Three sailors heaved the floating corpse onto the flagship, and lay it down on the deck. This floating corpse's hands and feet were also bound with leather rope. As soon as Wei Xiaobao saw it, sure enough, it was Thin Toutuo. He was already very fat, and by this time he had drunk a lot of water, his belly was bloated up, just like a fully blown leather ball. He saw sea water gurgling out from his mouth, after a while, his fat tummy started to rise and fall, he started to breathe. The soldiers called out, "The floating corpse came back to live!"

Shi Lang raised Thin Toutuo and propped his lower back on the chain block at

the bow of the ship. With head hanging down, the stream of seawater from his mouth flowed faster. After a while, Thin Toutuo jerked up and cursed, “Your granny!” But then he dropped down again, sitting on the bow. The soldiers were scared, but then they roared in laughter.

Thin Toutuo struggled, but the leather rope was wet with seawater, it became even more tough and pliable, how could he break it? He shook his head with a bewildered look on his eyes “Damn it,” he said, “Is this the Dragon Palace[38], or the underworld?”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “This is the Dragon Palace, and I am Hai Long Wang [sea dragon king].” The officers and soldiers roared in laughter again.

Thin Toutuo opened wide his pair of slit eyes, and stared hard at Wei Xiaobao. “You … you … why are you here?” he said.

For fear that he might reveal his secret, Wei Xiaobao said, “This man is a freak, perhaps he knows the inside information on Shen Long Island. Quickly take him to my cabin, let me interrogate him.” Two personal guards brought Thin Toutuo into Wei Xiaobao’s cabin. “Wait outside,” Wei Xiaobao ordered them, “If you do not hear my call, don’t come in.”

After the personal guards closed the cabin’s door, Wei Xiaobao asked, “Thin Toutuo, your martial art skill is very high, how could you get tied and thrown into the ocean?”

Thin Toutuo said, “*Laozi* is not the number one martial artist under the heavens, why can’t I get tied and thrown into the ocean?”

Wei Xiaobao was taken aback. “Ah, you are unable to defeat *Jiaozhu*,” he said with a laugh.

Thin Toutuo said, “What’s so funny about that? And who can possibly defeat *Jiaozhu*?”

“How did you offend *Jiaozhu*?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

“Who dares to offend *Jiaozhu*, the Senior?” Thin Toutuo said, “Madame said that Mao Dongzhu did not do her best in her mission in the Palace, she deceived *Jiaozhu*, therefore, she was to be sent into the Divine Dragon Cave to be fed to

the dragons. I … I … I …” Speaking to this point, his eyes were bulging, his teeth clenched, the expression on his face showed that he was extremely outraged.

Wei Xiaobao suddenly understood; that night at the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful the fake Empress Dowager, the old wh0re told his Shifu Jiu Nan that she was the daughter of a great general of the Ming Dynasty by the name of Mao something Long, her real name was Mao Dongzhu. He laughed and said, “In the Palace you slept with Mao Dongzhu under the same quilt; that was extremely fun!”

Thin Toutuo looked very pleased with himself. “Isn’t that so?” he said.

“I have saved your life, haven’t I?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

“Just consider it yes,” Thin Toutuo said.

“What do you mean just consider it or not consider it yes?” Wei Xiaobao said, “If you want to say that I did not save your life, isn’t that also very easy?”

“What do you mean very easy?” Thin Toutuo asked.

Wei Xiaobao replied, “I’ll simply push you back into the ocean, then you can consider that I did not save your life; that’s it.”

“That won’t do, that won’t do!” Thin Toutuo yelled, “You drown me, it’s not a big deal, but my Dongzhu *Meizi* [younger sister, term of endearment] won’t stay alive.”

“Whether she will stay alive or not, in any case you are dead,” Wei Xiaobao said.

“That won’t do, that won’t do!” Thin Toutuo yelled.

“If I let you go,” Wei Xiaobao asked, “What are you going to do?”

“Then I will thank you very much,” Thin Toutuo replied, “But I still have to return to Shen Long Island to save my Dongzhu *Meizi*.”

Wei Xiaobao raised his thumb and praised him, “You have both the passion and the righteousness!” while thinking in his heart, “His Majesty wanted me to capture the old wh0re, I was just worried that I could not find her, now I am certain I will find the old wh0re from this fat and short fellow. But this man’s martial art skill is superior; if I let him go, it will be like ‘releasing the tiger is easy,

catching the tiger is difficult'. Can't say for sure, perhaps with an 'Ahoy', he will bite me instead."

Thin Toutuo said, "Luckily there is fighting on Shen Long Island that the sky and earth are turning upside down; it will be a lot more convenient to save someone."

As soon as Wei Xiaobao heard it, his heart was shaken. "How can there be fighting on Shen Long Island that the sky and earth are turning upside down?" he busily asked.

Thin Toutuo said, "The Five Dragon Gates, you hit me, I strike you, they have been fighting for more than ten days. Whoever got caught by the other party would be immediately bound hands and feet and thrown into the sea to feed the Dragon King."

"Why are they fighting?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Thin Toutuo leaned his fat head sideways, he cast a sidelong glance toward Wei Xiaobao and said, "Dongzhu *Meizi* said that you are our Cult's White Dragon Envoy, wielding the Five Dragon Command; how can you not know?"

"I received *Jiaozhu*'s order to go to the Central Plains on a mission," Wei Xiaobao replied, "Hence I am not clear of what's been happening on the Island."

Thin Toutuo suddenly cried out some strange noises. Wei Xiaobao jumped in fright and withdrew two steps back. The four personal guards outside the door heard the strange noise. Afraid that this fat and short man might injure their Commander, with sabers in their hands they burst into the room. Ony after seeing the fat and short man was still bound hands and feet and was sitting nicely on the floor did they feel relieve. Wei Xiaobao waved his hand and said, "You may get out, I am all right." The personal guards withdrew from the room.

Wei Xiaobao asked, "Why did you let out those strange noises?"

"That's bad!" Thin Toutuo said, "You are *Jiaozhu* and Madame's trusted aide, but I've told you everything."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "It's not that bad. You can just consider that I have not saved you, that you are still floating around on the ocean, 'glug, glug', drinking the seawater to your heart's content."

“His granny,” Thin Toutuo said, “That saltwater really does not taste good.”

“If you don’t want to drink saltwater,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Then tell me truthfully, why did the Five Dragon Gates fight each other?”

“By the time Dongzhu *Meizi* and I returned to Shen Long Island, they have already been fighting for a few days,” Thin Toutuo said, “When I asked someone, I was told that the Blue Dragon Envoy Xu Xueting was suddenly murdered one night. There was one bloody saber on the floor. After some investigation, turned out this bloody saber belonged to the Scarlet Dragon Envoy Priest Wugen’s first disciple, He Sheng.”

Hearing that Xu Xueting was murdered, Wei Xiaobao was slightly startled. He immediately thought, “Most likely Hong *Jiaozhu* sent someone to kill him.”

He heard Thin Toutuo continued, “*Jiaozhu* was greatly furious; he asked He Sheng why he plotted against the Blue Dragon Envoy. He Sheng adamantly denied, saying that he did not kill the Blue Dragon Envoy. Afterwards the Blue Dragon Gate’s members avenged their *Zhangmen Shi* [sect leader envoy, see also Note 1 of Chapter 20] and killed He Sheng. And thus the Scarlet Dragon Gate and Blue Dragon Gate are fighting each other.”

“But that is the Scarlet Dragon and Blue Dragon, two Gates’ business,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Why did you say the Five Dragon Gates are fighting each other silly?”

“I don’t know why,” Thin Toutuo said, “But Black Dragon Gate helped the Blue Dragon Gate, Yellow Dragon Gate helped Scarlet Dragon Gate; you kill me, I kill you, they have been fighting to their hearts’ delight.”

“What about my White Dragon Gate?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

Thin Toutuo stared at him; he said, “You are the White Dragon Envoy; how come you did not know your own Gate’s business?”

“I have told you,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “I was not on the Island; naturally I did not know.”

“Your Gate is divided into two factions,” Thin Toutuo said, “Older brothers became one faction, helping Blue Dragon Gate; the younger disciples are the other faction, helping the Scarlet Dragon Gate.”

Wei Xiaobao knitted his brows. “The Five Dragon Gates are beating each other, could it be that *Jiaozhu* does not pay any attention?” he asked.

Thin Toutuo said, “Everybody is rising on their own, *Jiaozhu* is unable to suppress it.”

Right this moment, suddenly they felt that the ship had stopped; they heard the sailors yelled, the chain rattled, dropping the anchor into the sea. They had arrived at the Tong Chi Island.

Wei Xiaobao stepped out to the bow. He saw lush vegetation on the island, rolling hills all around; it was indeed a very good place. Turning to Shi Lang he said, “There are snakes everywhere on the island, you need to send people to scout first whether there are snakes on Tong Chi Island or not.”

Shi Lang complied and transmitted the order. Immediately ten small boats were rowed onto the island. The sailors went ashore and entered the woods to look for snakes. Not too long afterwards they lighted a torch to signal that the island was peaceful and nothing to worry about, there was no footprint, and there were no poisonous snakes.

The vanguard landed first, and put up army tents. One large command banner, embroidered with a large graceful character ‘Wei’, was raised in front of the tents. Wei Xiaobao then disembarked; with Shi Lang and Huang *Zongbing* walking on his left and right he stepped down onto Tong Chi Island. Bugle horns and firecrackers sounded, the troops bowed to salute. With head held high Wei Xiaobao entered the army camp and took his seat. He ordered his personal guard to imprison Thin Toutuo at the back of the tent, and to give him some wine and meat for him to eat, but not to loosen the leather rope binding his hands and feet; instead, he added several links of iron chain to bind him before Wei Xiaobao felt completely safe.

Following which, he issued an order to have Shi Lang leading thirty battleships and attack the Shen Long Island from the east, north and south, three directions; he also ordered Regional Commander Huang to lead the rest of the battleships hiding on the west side of the Tong Chi Island. As soon as they hear Shi Lang’s cannon signal, they were to appear and cut the enemy’s escape route. Which battleship would sail in the front, which battleship would provide support,

how to launch the assault, how to make flank attack. All assignments were laid out clearly and in orderly manner, the directives were very detailed.

Regional Commander Huang, as well as the deputy generals and the regimental commanders of the Navy, the garrison commanders, the Valiant Cavalry Brigade's regimental commanders, the company commanders, and the others military officers, high and low, all gasped in admiration to see that although their *Dutong Daren* was young, he was surprisingly very well versed in naval warfare; his tactic was exquisite, his commands were appropriate. They did not know that it all came from Shi Lang's scheming, this *Dutong Daren* was no more than an actor in front of the stage, singing a *shuanghuang*[39].

That evening the troops stuffed themselves with eve-of-battle dinner. When the night fell, one by one the battleships sailed out. The three-pronged attack was scheduled at dawn, at the *maoshi* hour [between 5-7 am].

The next day at dawn, Wei Xiaobao climbed onto the observation tower the sergeants erected in haste. He looked eastwards, and heard the distant sound of artillery, saw faint flash of sparks, and gusts of thick smoke rising up from the surface of the ocean. He knew that Shi Lang had already started the assault, and could not help but was anxious over Fang Yi's safety. However, thinking that Shi Lang would handle this matter discretely, plus he himself had repeatedly warned Shi Lang not to harm the women on the Island, he presumed Shi Lang would definitely be particularly careful.

After standing on the observation tower for a while, his feet were aching. He returned to the command tent and asked for six dice. He mused, "If we seize total victory this time, let me throw a hall full of red[40]." But when he threw the dice, unexpectedly all were blacks, not even one red dot turned up.

"Damn it," he cursed, "You are messing up with me!" Employing his cheating technique, he held the dice in such a way that all three-dots are facing up, and then using a bit of strength in his hand he rolled the dice. This time, as expected, there were five dice showing reds, all four-dots. There was only one showing blacks, a five-dot. He was fully aware than he cheated, hence it could not be considered as a good throw; yet he was quite happy.

Shuang'er came with a bowl of tea for him. "Xianggong," she said, "Don't be anxious, this time we will definitely have a greatly successful battle."

"How do you know?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Shuang'er said, "We have fired the cannon many times, how can the enemy withstand it?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "Come, Shuang'er, throw the dice with me. If you win, I'll give the control to you. If I win, this can be considered great success."

Shuang'er blushed; she hastily said, "No, I won't come, I won't come."

Wei Xiaobao laughed. "Let's gamble for money then," he said, "If I win, you pay me one *qian* [one-tenth of a *tael*]. If you win, I will pay you one *tael* of silver. Won't you say this way you'll have nothing to lose?"

Shuang'er laughed and said, "I have no money to lose to you."

Wei Xiaobao said, "You want money? That's not easy." But he took out some banknotes from his pocket and gave them to her.

Shuang'er laughed and said, "I have no use of money."

"Ay," Wei Xiaobao said, "You have no gambling nature. I'd better release that fat and short man and have him gamble with me."

Speaking to this point, suddenly they heard repeated cannon shots. Wei Xiaobao sprang up to embrace Shuang'er. "Great success," he said, "You deserve a kiss."

Shuang'er hastily laughed and lowered her head. Wei Xiaobao planted a couple of kiss on the back of her neck. "Your neck is really white!" he said.

They heard the 'toot, toot' of bugle horn, he rushed out of the command tent and climbed up the observation tower. He saw in the distant three columns of flame rose up from Shen Long Island, went up straight to the sky, while the whole island was blanketed in black smoke; presumably the explosion had turned Shen Long Island into a piece of scorched earth. He also saw one by one the battleships were sailing eastwards; he thought, "This fellow Shi Lang calculates like a half smelly cobbler, his 'prophecy with supernatural accuracy' is not worth mentioning, his 'predicting future matter like a ghost' is only so-so."

The battleships went back and forth on the ocean very slowly, he had been standing on the observation tower for half a day, yet did not see any ships from Shen Long Island escaping his way, let alone seeing Shi Lang and Regional Commander Huang's converging attack from east and west; thereupon he returned to the command tent to take a rest.

After waiting for more than four hours, his personal guard came to report that he had just seen fireworks signal, two groups of battleships were reporting their success to *Dutong Daren*. Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted; he thought, "*Laozi* sits quietly in the command tent, my eyes see victory report arrives, my ears hear good news. In this battle victory comes as easy as blowing off dust. I just hope that Fang Yi, that 'little mother skin', won't have even a strand of her hair scorched by the cannon."

Chapter 35

Once following the road east, west, south and north, there is only a fate of ice, frost, rain and snow

(Translated by Foxs)

Wei Xiaobao sprang up and mounted the deer's back, while reaching out to hold onto the antler. Shuang'er lightly and deftly also jumped onto another spotted deer's back. The flock of deer was startled, they kicked their hoofs and leaped away. Spotted deer has tall body and long legs, when they run, their speed is not inferior to that of fine horse.

More than two hours later, the sun was slanting to the west; a personal guard came to report that several boats carrying prisoners were heading toward Tong Chi Island. Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted; he sprang up and rushed to the shore. Sure enough, he saw five boats were sailing to the island. Wei Xiaobao ordered the personal guard to shout the question, “Who are the prisoners?”

The people on the boat shouted back the answer, “These are the women; the men will come later.”

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted, “Shi Lang indeed works reliably.” Focusing his eyes, he tried to look for Fang Yi’s beautiful figure. Naturally it would be best if they could capture the old wh0re alive; if they also caught the ‘thousand-tender hundred-charm’ Madame Hong, so that he could look at her several times a day on the boat, it would be too wonderful for words.

After waiting for a good while, the five boats reached the shore. The Valiant Cavalry Brigade troops cheered; they have captured more than two hundred women. Wei Xiaobao looked at them one by one, he noticed that these women were the young girls of the Scarlet Dragon Gate. They all hung their heads dejectedly, some had tattered clothes, some were injured. But after looking at all of them, Wei Xiaobao did not see Fang Yi at all. Wei Xiaobao was quite disappointed. “Are there any more women?” he asked.

A *zuoling* [company commander] replied, “Reporting to *Dutong Daren*: there are more coming. We have three teams searching around the Island, it’s just that there are too many poisonous snakes, the search was quite slow.”

“Has the Shen Long Jiao’s *Jiaozhu* been captured?” Wei Xiaobao asked, “How did the battle go?”

The *zuoling* replied, “Reporting to *Dutong Daren*: early in the morning today, thirty battleships approached the shore, while firing the cannon at the same time. Everybody was following *Daren*’s instruction; we fired the cannon three times, and then paused. We only hit empty space on the Island. When the people of the Island went out to fight the enemy, we fired repeatedly. *Dutong Daren* predicts things like a deity, using this technique, we only need to fire three times, four, five hundred Cult bandits died of the explosion. Afterwards there was a large group of young men who were not afraid of death came charging in,

their mouths shouted something like ‘Hong *Jiaozhu* emerge victorious in every battle, he lives as long as Mount Nan …”

Wei Xiaobao shook his head, “Wrong,” he said, “It’s Hong *Jiaozhu* will enjoy immortal good fortune forever, his long life the same as the heaven’s.”

“Yes, yes,” the *zuoling* said, “Turns out *Dutong Daren* has already had thorough understanding of the Cult bandits, no wonder as soon as we deploy the troops, we make a clean sweep of the enemy. The Cult bandit shout was indeed ‘his long life the same as the heaven’s’. Lowly officer has spoken incorrectly.”

Wei Xiaobao smiled and asked, “And then what happened?”

The *zuoling* said, “Those young men acted like they were crazy, they charged toward the beach and got into their boats, thinking that they could board our big ship and seize the cannon. We did not pay them any attention; we waited until the several dozen small boats sailed into the ocean, then we fired the cannon. ‘Bang, bang, bang’, more than thirty small boats sank into the ocean, more than three thousand boys, the Cult bandits, were buried at the bottom of the ocean. At the death’s door, those little bandits was still shouting Hong *Jiaozhu*’s long life the same as the heaven’s.”

Wei Xiaobao thought, “You exaggerate military intelligence. Shen Long’s young disciples are at most eight, nine hundred people; how can there be more than three thousand boys? Fortunately, killing more enemy means bigger merit, even if you reported four thousand, five thousand, what harm is there in doing that?”

The *zuoling* continued, “After the children Cult bandits were gone, there was a large group of people fleeing to the west, they got on the boats and ran away. Following *Dutong Daren*’s directive, our battleships chase after them. Lowly officer led my team searching on the Island. Men and women, we caught about three, four hundred of them. Shi *Daren* instructed us to send the women Cult bandits to Tong Chi Island first for *Dutong Daren* to interrogate.”

Wei Xiaobao nodded. Although this battle was a great success, not being able to see Fang Yi, he felt quite uneasy; he wondered if she was killed by the cannon blast. Turning around, he scanned the group of women again. Suddenly he saw a young girl with round face; immediately he remembered that when he was summoned by the Cult Leader to the general assembly the other day, this young

girl had said that Wei Xiaobao was Fat Toutuo's b@stard son; she also pinched his cheek and kicked his butt. Recalling these past events, his mischievous intention was aroused. Walking toward her, he reached out and pinched her cheek as hard as he could.

The young girl screamed and cursed, "Dog Tatar, you … you …"

Wei Xiaobao giggled and said, "Ma, don't you remember your son?"

The girl was greatly surprised. She started at him, and vaguely felt that his face looked familiar; but no matter what she could not remember that this Qing troops' commander was their own Cult's White Dragon Envoy.

"What's your name?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

"Quickly kill me," the girl said, "Whatever you want to ask, I won't answer one word."

"Alright," Wei Xiaobao said, "You don't want to talk? Guards!"

"Cha!" several dozen personal guards immediately responded.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Take this girl down, strip her clothes, her pants, everything, flog her butt a hundred times."

The personal guards chorused again, "Cha!" And stepped forward to drag the girl away.

The girl was so scared that her face was devoid of any color. "No, don't!" she hastily said, "I'll talk, I'll talk!"

Wei Xiaobao waved his hand to stop the guards; he smiled and said, "Alright, what's your name?"

For a few moments the young girl was extremely terrified; only now did she burst into tears. "I … I am called Yun Sumei," she said.

"You are Scarlet Dragon Gate disciple, aren't you?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Yun Sumei nodded. "Yes," she said in a low voice.

"In your Scarlet Dragon Gate there is a certain Fang Yi, Miss Fang, who later on joined the White Dragon Gate. Do you know her?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

"I do," Yun Sumei replied, "After joining the White Dragon Gate, she was

promoted to be a platoon leader."

"Good for her, she is promoted," Wei Xiaobao said, "Where is she now?"

"This morning," Yun Sumei said, "When you … when you opened fire, I still saw Fang *Jiejie*; afterwards … in the chaos that follows, I did not see her anymore.

Hearing that Fang Yi was still on the Island that morning, Wei Xiaobao felt slightly relieved. Thinking that that day you kicked my @ss, today this b@stard son of yours was going to return this one kick to you. Thereupon he circled behind her and lifted his leg. He was just about to kick her when outside the tent a personal guard reported, "Reporting to *Dutong Daren*: another batch of prisoners arrived."

Wei Xiaobao was delighted; his leg did not continue. Rushing toward the beach, he saw a small battleship sailed toward the island. He ordered his personal guard to shout, "Are the prisoners women or men?"

At first, since the distance was still too great, the men on the ship did not hear. A moment later the battleship was close enough that a military officer standing on the bow responded, "There are men and women."

Another moment later, Wei Xiaobao was able to see clearly that there were three or four women standing on the bow, he could vaguely recognize one of them as Fang Yi. In his great delight, he rushed to the water until the water reached his knees. Focusing his eyes, while the battleship was several *zhang* closer, he could see that the woman was indeed Fang Yi.

To say that his delight this time was mild would be a gross understatement. "Quick, quick, make the ship move faster!" he called out.

Suddenly the battleship shook; unexpectedly it spun around. The sailors on the ship cried out, "Aiyo, we hit a shoal, we run aground!"

Suddenly Fang Yi's voice was heard, "Xiaobao, Xiaobao, is that you?"

By this time Wei Xiaobao had already forgotten all about his status as *Dutong Daren*; he called out, "Good *Jiejie*, it's me, Xiaobao is here."

"Xiaobao," Fang Yi called out, "Come quickly and save me. They tie me up. Xiaobao, Xiaobao, come quickly!"

“Don’t worry,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “I am coming to save you.” Jumping into the skiff used to pass on military intelligence, he ordered the sailor, “Quickly row, quickly row.” The four sailors on the skiff raised the oars and immediately rowed away.

Suddenly someone jumped from the shore into the skiff; it was Shuang’er. “Xianggong,” she said, “I am coming with you to take a look.”

Wei Xiaobao was elated. “Shuang’er,” he said, “Do you know who she is?”

Shuang’er smiled and said, “I do. You told me that she is *Shaonainai* [wife of the young master]. That day I called her ‘*Shaonainai*’, but … but this *Shaonainai* was unwilling to respond.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed. “She was just bashful at that time,” he said, “This time you call her, she will definitely respond.”

The battleship was still spinning slowly, the skiff was rowed rapidly toward it. Fang Yi called out, “Xiaobao, it is really you.” Her voice was brimming with happiness.

“It’s me,” Wei Xiaobao called back. He shouted to the military officer standing next to her, “Quickly remove the Miss’ binding.”

“Yes,” the military officer responded. He leaned over to untie the rope on Fang Yi’s hands.

Fang Yi opened her arms wide, waiting for Wei Xiaobao to come over. As the two boats getting closer to each other, the military officer on the battleship said, “*Dutong Daren*, please be careful.”

Wei Xiaobao leaped up, the military officer reached out to pull him up. As soon as Wei Xiaobao reached the bow, he threw himself into Fang Yi’s embrace. “Good *Jiejie*,” he said, “I miss you so much that I feel like dying.” They hugged each other tightly.

Holding Fang Yi’s soft body, smelling the fragrant perfume on her body, Wei Xiaobao’s mind went blurry, he did not know where he was. The last time he came to Shen Long Island with Fang Yi, it was the first time he began to be interested in the opposite sex; also, he did not understand the matter between men and women too clearly yet. Later on during his journey to Yunnan, he

recklessly fooled around with Princess Jianning. This time he was back in Fang Yi's embrace, he could not help but was flushed with excitement [orig. 'face red, ears scarlet'].

Suddenly the hull rocked. Wei Xiaobao was too busy to think about it, he simply held Fang Yi tighter, and even wanted to kiss her lips. Suddenly he felt the back of his neck tightened, someone was grabbing his collar. A sweet and charming voice spoke, "White Dragon Envoy, how are you? This time you brought people to destroy Shen Long Island, your merit is indeed not small."

As soon as Wei Xiaobao heard this, he recognized it as Madame Hong's voice; he felt his soul was flying to Heaven. Knowing that the turn of events was far from good, he struggled hard to free himself, but Fang Yi was holding him tight that he was unable to move a single step. And then there was a stab of pain on his waist, someone sealed his acupoint.

This unforeseen event happened so suddenly, all along Wei Xiaobao felt it was like a dream; the only thought in his mind was, "Bad, bad, this little wh0re Fang Yi swindled me again." However, with his mouth he yelled, "Guards, guards! Come and help me!"

Fang Yi gently let him go and retreated to the side. Since his acupoint was sealed, Wei Xiaobao was not able to stand, he fell dejectedly in sitting position to the deck. He suddenly noticed that the battleship had hoisted its sail and was sailing rapidly to the north; while the skiff he took earlier had already more than ten *zhang* away. Vaguely he could hear the officers and soldiers on the beach were shouting and yelling.

He secretly prayed, "Thank Heaven and thank the Earth, let Shi Lang and Huang *Zongbing* quickly send boats to intercept, just don't let them fire the cannon." However, he heard the voices from Tong Chi Island gradually diminished, until finally he could not hear them anymore. Looking at four directions, what he saw was boundless ocean, unexpectedly not a single ship was in sight. Although the ships under his command were numerous, all of them were sent to attack Shen Long Island, some were stationed between Shen Long Island and Tong Chi Island to intercept the enemy. Let's not say that they did not know that their Commander-in-chief was captured; even if they did, they were separated several dozen *li* away, how could they possibly catch up with him?

Sitting on the cabin's deck he slowly raised his head, and saw several Valiant Cavalry Brigade officers was looking at him with cold laugh on their faces. His brain was muddy; he tried to clear his head, and was able to see clearly. He saw an ugly, fat and round face of Thin Toutuo's, a lean and slim face of Lu Gaoxuan, an extremely long face, almost like a horse's, of Fat Toutuo. He was baffled, "The short winter melon is tied up behind my command tent; he must be rescued by Lu Gaoxuan and Fat Toutuo. But these two are clearly in Beijing; how can they be here?" Turning his head the other way, he saw the beautiful, sweet and pretty face, which belonged to Madame Hong.

She was looking at Wei Xiaobao while chuckling gently; reaching out, she pinched his cheek and said with a laugh, "*Dutong Daren*, you are young yet you are very formidable."

Wei Xiaobao said, "*Jiaozhu* and Madame will enjoy immortal good fortune forever, your long life the same as the heaven's. This time subordinate did not do my job properly, I did not render any merit."

Madame Hong laughed and said, "It's very appropriate, nothing is improper. *Jiaozhu*, the Senior, greatly commended you, saying that you are leading the Qing troops to blast the Shen Long Island's trees and houses to ashes. He, the Senior, has always prophesied with supernatural accuracy, yet this time unexpectedly he was mistaken. He is very full of admiration to you."

Wei Xiaobao understood the trouble he was in; he knew that his life was in their hands, begging for his life would be useless; thereupon his only chance presently was to make up wild stories and act according to the circumstances. He laughed and said, "*Jiaozhu*, the Senior, has the good fortune of always in good health, I long to see him again very much. These days subordinate has always been thinking about Madame; every day I pray that you will grow younger and younger and more good looking, so that when *Jiaozhu* is in your company, he will enjoy immortal good fortune forever!"

Madame Hong giggled and said, "You, this little monkey, are still acting recklessly until now, you are still being oily mouthed and smooth talking to me. Tell me, am I growing younger and younger and more beautiful?"

Wei Xiaobao sighed and said, "Madame, you deceived me so much that I have

to suffer like this."

Madame Hong laughed and said, "In what matter did I deceive you?"

"Just now the Qing troops captured a group of sisters from the Island," Wei Xiaobao replied, "All are Scarlet Dragon Gate's young ladies. And then I was told that there was another boat-load of sisters coming. I stood on the beach to look; I saw Madame, but temporarily could not recognize you. I said to myself, 'Aiyo, since when did the Scarlet Dragon Gate have this kind of young and pretty lady as new member? Is she Madame *Jiaozhu*'s younger sister? Such a beautiful woman, I would have seen her earlier.' Madame, I was so flustered and my heart was in turmoil that I scrambled on to the boat to look at this beautiful girl. Who would have thought that it was you, yourself, Madame."

Hearing this, Madame Hong let out a peal of laughter, her body was shaking uncontrollably. Although she was wearing Valiant Cavalry Brigade's officer's uniform, the clothes could not conceal her outstandingly graceful figure.

Thin Toutuo lost his patience; he shouted, "You, lecherous little demon, in front of Madame you still dare to talk rubbish. Let's see if I don't pull your tendon apart and peel you skin!"

"You are such a muddle head," Wei Xiaobao retorted, "I don't have any desire to talk rubbish with you."

"How can I be a muddle head?" Thin Toutuo angrily said, "You are the muddle head. I pretended to be a corpse floating on the sea, you could not see through my ploy; unexpectedly you rescued me and inquired about the affair of Shen Long Island. I follow *Jiaozhu*'s instruction and talked nonsense to you, yet you accepted it as the truth."

Wei Xiaobao cursed in his heart, "Muddle head, muddle head! This fellow, Wei Xiaobao really deserves to die; how could you not think that Thin Toutuo's internal energy is profound, to pretend to be floating corpse is very easy. Yet unexpectedly I believed his words firmly and had no doubt at all; I believed that on the Shen Long Island an internal strife did indeed arise. I did not guard against him at all." He said, "I have fallen into *Jiaozhu* and Madame's scheme; it was not that I am a muddle head."

"Humph," Thin Toutuo said, "You are not a muddle head, are you saying that

you are smart?”

“Naturally I am very smart,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “But let me tell you this: even the smartest man in the world, as long as he falls into *Jiaozhu* and Madame’s hands, nobody can escape. This is *Jiaozhu* and Madame’s divine strategy and wonderful calculation, none of their calculations failed, sweeping with irresistible force, a great success …” When he spoke about ‘great success’ four character [da gong gao cheng], he could not help but casting his glance toward Madame Hong’s red-like-cherry small lips, which was slightly trembling.

Madame Hong laughed, exposing a row of spotlessly white fine teeth. “White Dragon Envoy,” she said, “You are after all a lot smarter than Thin Toutuo; he will never win arguing against you. Why do you say he is a muddle head?”

“Madame,” Wei Xiaobao said, “This Thin Toutuo has seen you, a young woman whose beauty is like the immortals. Actually, whoever has seen Madame one time, how could he look at the second woman? I said he is a muddle head because I know that in his heart he always remembers and is anxious for the second woman. Thin Toutuo, who is this woman? Do you want me to say it?”

Thin Toutuo roared; he shouted, “You cannot say it!”

Wei Xiaobao laughed. “You don’t want me to say it, then I won’t,” he said, “Your Shidi is a lot smarted than you are; ever since he saw Madame, he said that henceforth he will have no interest in looking at the second woman.”

Fat Toutuo’s horse face blushed; “Nonsense,” he muttered, “How can there be such matter?”

“There isn’t?” Wei Xiaobao asked in surprise, “Are you saying that after you see Madame, you still want to see the second woman?”

Fat Toutuo lowered his head and said, “*Lao Na* [old cassock] has left my home, six purifying from defiling illusion, four elements are vanity, since long ago there is no more man-woman affair in my heart.”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk!” Wei Xiaobao clucked his tongue, “Old Monk recites sutra, but gives lip-service. Your Shige is just the same as you are, he is also a Toutuo; but why does he remember his good friend daily?” While in his heart he said, “I clearly ordered him and Mr. Lu to stay in Beijing waiting for me, how did they get

together with Madame? It's very strange."

Fat Toutuo said, "Shige is Shige, I am me, you cannot lump two different matters together."

"I'll say the two of you are more or less the same," Wei Xiaobao said, "Although your Shige is more muddleheaded than you are, but he is comparably more honest than you. However, you two martial brothers have spoiled *Jiaozhu* and Madame's important matter; indeed your crime is great, your evil extreme."

"Rubbish!" Fat and Thin, two Toutuo said together, "How did we spoil *Jiaozhu* and Madame's important matter?"

Wei Xiaobao laughed coldly, but did not reply. Actually, for the time being he could not find any false accusation to be charged to those two men; however, he needed to lie low first, he had to understand how Fat and Lu, two men could go from Beijing to Shen Long Island before he could fabricate something to accuse them, to rise Madame Hong's suspicion.

He turned his head around to look at the ocean; unexpectedly there was not a single ship to be seen on that vast and boundless ocean. Occasionally he would hear the sound of cannon from a distant, presumably Shi Lang and Regional Commander Huang were still leading the battleships to surround and annihilate the escaping boats from the Divine Dragon Island.

Seeing his twinkling eyes, Lu Gaoxuan said, "Madame, this man is a big criminal of our Cult. Let's report to *Jiaozhu* and then throw him into the ocean to feed the ocean dragon."

Wei Xiaobao was shocked; he mused, "I, the Little White Dragon, am a western cowrie goods [i.e. a fake]; fake white dragon enters the sea, I will lose my life."

Madame Hong said, "*Jiaozhu* still wants to talk to him."

"Yes," Lu Gaoxuan replied. He pushed Wei Xiaobao's back and said, "Go pay your respect to *Jiaozhu*!"

Wei Xiaobao secretly groaned, "In front of Madame, I can still give her graceful words, flowery speech, I can make her roar in laughter. Turns out *Jiaozhu* is also on board, today if the Little White Dragon did not enter the Palace of the Dragon King, it would be indeed an offense to Heaven and to reason."

Casting a glance toward Fang Yi, he saw her wooden expression, completely devoid of any emotion. “Stinky wh0re,” he cursed in his heart, “Little mother skin!” But in his mouth he said, “Miss Fang, congratulations!”

“For what?” Fang Yi asked.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “You have set up great merits for the Cult; didn’t *Jiaozhu* give you promotion?”

“Humph,” Fang Yi snorted, but did not say anything.

Madame Hong said, “Everybody come in.” Lu Gaoxuan grabbed the back of Wei Xiaobao’s neck and carried him into the cabin.

He saw Cult Leader Hong was sitting grandly in the cabin. With his body still hanging in the air, Wei Xiaobao seized the opportunity to say, “*Jiaozhu* and Madame will enjoy immortal good fortune forever, your long life the same as the heaven’s. Subordinate White Dragon Envoy pays his respect to *Jiaozhu* and Madame.”

Lu Gaoxuan put him down. Fang Yi and the others bowed together and chorused, “*Jiaozhu* will enjoy immortal good fortune forever, your long life the same as the heaven’s.” Although they also wanted to win Madame Hong’s favor, but they were accustomed to say these words, they did not have the thicker face to add the three characters ‘Madame Hong’ [Hong Fu Ren].

Wei Xiaobao noticed that Cult Leader Hong’s eyes were gazing at the ocean outside the cabin, as if he did not hear anything. He also noticed that there were four men standing by his side, namely, Scarlet Dragon Envoy Priest Wugen, Yellow Dragon Envoy Yin Jin, Blue Dragon Envoy Xu Xueting, and Black Dragon Envoy Zhang Danyue. Wei Xiaobao had a sudden inspiration. Turning toward Thin Toutuo he shouted, “You, this fellow blindly fabricated rumor, saying that *Jiaozhu* and Madame were in danger. Disregarding everything I rushed over to save their honorable selves; who would have known that *Jiaozhu* and Madame are not in the least bit of trouble? Why did you say that these several *Zhangmenshi* were revolting?”

“What did you say?” Cult Leader Hong coldly asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, “Subordinate received *Jiaozhu* and Madame’s order to

infiltrate the Imperial Palace. I obtained two sutras, and later on I went to Yunnan, Wu Sangui Ping Xi Wang's mansion, and obtained three more."

Cult Leader Hong raised his eyebrows slightly. "You obtained five sutras? Where are they?" he asked.

"The two I obtained in the Imperial Palace," Wei Xiaobao said, "Subordinate has already sent Lu Gaoxuan to present them to *Jiaozhu* and Madame. *Jiaozhu* and Madame said that subordinate handled this matter reliably, and sent Lu Gaoxuan to bestow the immortal medicine."

Cult Leader Hong nodded. Wei Xiaobao continued, "The three copies that subordinate obtained in Yunnan, I keep it in a very secure place in Beijing, and ordered Fat Toutuo and Lu Gaoxuan to guard …"

Fat Toutuo and Lu Gaoxuan's countenances immediately changed greatly, "Did … did not," they said, "How can there be such thing? *Jiaozhu*, you Senior should not listen to this boy's nonsense."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Altogether there are eight copies of sutra. Subordinate has found the trail, I am optimistic to get my hands on the other three. I was prepared that as soon as I obtained the rest, I will present them all together to Shen Long Island. After obtaining those three copies, subordinate was afraid someone might steal them; for that reason I hid them inside the wall. I ordered Lu Gaoxuan and Fat Toutuo to keep an eye on them. Lu Gaoxuan, Fat Toutuo, I ordered you to guard inside the house, you must not come out, why did you come here? If the treasured sutra is lost, we will spoil *Jiaozhu* and Madame's important matter; who would bear this heavy responsibility?"

Fat and Lu, two people looked at each other in dismay, they were at a loss. After a while, Lu Gaoxuan was able to open his mouth, "You did not say anything about sutra inside the wall; how could we know?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "The matter that *Jiaozhu* and Madame entrusted to me, the more secretive it is the better. One more person knows about it, the danger of the secret being revealed will increase by one part. To be frank with you, I do not trust the two of you too much. Every day I wake up I always recite aloud, '*Jiaozhu* and Madame will enjoy immortal good fortune forever, your long life the same as the heaven's.' Every day before I eat, every day before I sleep, I

always recite one time. But ever since the two of you left Shen Long Island, you have never praised *Jiaozhu*'s extensive magical power, 'raw bird fish soup' [niao sheng yu tang]." He did not know that the phrase 'yao shun yu tang' was only applicable to be used in singing praises to the Emperor. But although he said it, nobody else understood his meaning anyway.

Lu Gaoxuan and Fat Toutuo's faces alternated between green and white; they both were secretly shocked. After they left Shen Long Island, they indeed had never recited '*Jiaozhu* and Madame will enjoy immortal good fortune forever, your long life the same as the heaven's'; they did not expect that this boy would use it against them. But when did this boy ever recite it?

Lu Gaoxuan said, "You have committed a monstrous crime, yet at this time still uttering graceful words, flowery speech, desiring to win *Jiaozhu* and Madame's favor so that they would spare your life. Humph, this time the casualties among our brothers on the Island, young and old, are serious. *Jiaozhu*'s dozens of year's painstaking effort in establishing the Cult, everything is destroyed in your hands. You still think of escaping alive? Dream on!"

"You are greatly mistaken," Wei Xiaobao said, "As we throw our lives to be *Jiaozhu* and Madame's subordinates, early on our lives already did not belong to us anymore. Whatever *Jiaozhu* and Madame send us to do, everybody ought to do it with loyalty and dedication, ten thousand deaths should not prevent us. *Jiaozhu* and Madame want us to die, then we will die; *Jiaozhu* and Madame want us to live, then we will live. If you want to make decisions for yourself, that means you are not 'heart is dead, no plans for anything new' enough toward *Jiaozhu* and Madame, you are not displaying utter loyalty enough toward *Jiaozhu* and Madame."

Hearing his speech, Hong *Jiaozhu* stroke his beard and nodded slowly. Turning to Fat and Lu, two people, he said, "You said that White Dragon Envoy led the navy to do some harmful business toward our Cult; what did actually happen?"

Lu Gaoxuan caught the displeased tone in the Cult Leader's voice; he hastily said, "Reporting to *Jiaozhu*: the two of us received the order to keep a close watch over the White Dragon Envoy, to be very careful toward his every movement, to be in constant alert; we did not dare to have the least bit of negligence. The day the Emperor promoted his official position, Navy *Tidu* [local

commander] Shi Lang came to pay him a visit. Subordinates, two people listened to their discussion closely. We have reported this matter to *Jiaozhu*. Not many days later, the White Dragon Envoy went to take Shi Lang on an official business, but he wanted him to pretend to be a lowly official in the Valiant Cavalry Brigade, plus he did not want subordinate and Fat Toutuo to accompany him. In my heart subordinate was very suspicious."

Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, "Good; turned out *Jiaozhu* sent the two of you to spy on me."

He heard Lu Gaoxuan continued, "Several days earlier, subordinate searched the wastepaper basket in White Dragon Envoy's room to find out what's going on; I found a lot of torn scrap papers. When I pieced them together, I saw that it was actually names of places in Liaodong, written in Manchurian and Han characters. The White Dragon Envoy is illiterate, even more, he did not know Manchurian script; naturally these names of places were written by the Emperor for him. Later on I also found out that in this journey, he is to bring many cannon. The two of us subordinates talked it over, and came to the conclusion that White Dragon Envoy received the Emperor's order to travel to Liaodong region, accompanied by high-ranking naval officers, and to bring cannon; naturally he did not have any favorable intention toward our Cult. Therefore, as soon as the White Dragon Envoy left the Capital, subordinates two people rode on fast horses, we travelled day and night to hurry back to the Shen Long Island to report. Madame still said that White Dragon Envoy is devoted and loyal, he could not possibly do this. Who would have thought that one may know a person for a long time without understanding his true nature? This White Dragon Envoy has the heart of wolf and the lungs of dogs [i.e. cruel and unscrupulous]; he failed to live up to *Jiaozhu*'s trust."

Wei Xiaobao sighed; he shook his head and said, "Mr. Lu, you think you are intelligent and competent, but how can you reach ten-thousandth of *Jiaozhu* and Madame's intelligence? Let me tell you: you are wrong. Only *Jiaozhu* and Madame are eternally right."

Lu Gaoxuan angrily said, "You speak non …" As soon as those words came out of his mouth, he knew he had committed a blunder. Although he did not continue, everybody knew that after the word 'non', the next word must be

‘sense’.

“Did you say I spoke nonsense [orig. ‘hu shuo’]?” Wei Xiaobao asked, “I said you are wrong, only *Jiaozhu* and Madame are eternally right. You are not convinced? Could it be that *Jiaozhu* and Madame are eternally wrong, and only you, Mr. Lu is eternally right?”

Lu Gaoxuan’s face turned beet-red. “That’s not what I mean,” he said, “It was you who said it, I didn’t say it.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “*Jiaozhu* and Madame said that I, the White Dragon Envoy am loyal and devoted, and can’t possibly defect. The two Seniors predict like deities, how could they be wrong? Let me tell you, the Emperor sent me to bring naval cannon and go to Liaodong, we said we are going to Changbai Mountain to offer sacrifice, but actually … actually … humph, what do you know?” While his mind was racing, “What should I say, the Emperor sent me to do what?”

“So?” Hong *Jiaozhu* asked, “The Emperor sent you to do what?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “This matter is actually top secret, no matter what I cannot say it; once it leaks, the Emperor would want my head. But since *Jiaozhu* asked, in subordinate’s heart, *Jiaozhu* and Madame are a hundred times higher than the Emperor; he is ‘ten-thousand years’, you are ‘million-years’. He is ‘long live, long, long live’, you are ‘hundred times longer live’. *Jiaozhu* wants me to say, naturally I cannot conceal it.” While thinking, “How should I say it so that *Jiaozhu* and Madame will be convinced?”

Listening to Wei Xiaobao’s wave of flattery, Hong *Jiaozhu* did not have the slightest suspicion; he twirled his moustache with a slight smile on his face. Looking happy and content, he slowly nodded.

Wei Xiaobao continued, “Reporting to *Jiaozhu* and Madame: by his side, the Emperor has two red-haired foreigners. These two men, one is called Tang Ruowang, the other Nan Huairen. They were bestowed official position as supervisors of the Imperial Observatory.”

Hong *Jiaozhu* said, “This name Tang Ruowang, I have heard about it. I heard he understands astronomy, geography, yin and yang calculation, and such science.”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk,” Wei Xiaobao clucked his tongue in praise, “*Jiaozhu* did not go

out, yet you know the matter of the world. After much calculation, this Tang Ruowang has calculated that on the north there is a Luocha Country, who is planning to do some harmful things to the Great Qing."

Hong *Jiaozhu*'s eyebrows rose up. "And then what happened?" he asked.

Wei Xiaobao had heard the big beard Mongolian Hantiemo mentioned that Wu Sangui was colluding with Luocha Country and Divine Dragon Cult. Wu Sangui was in the far away Yunnan, he could not use him to his advantage; however, Luocha Country was next to Liaodong region. Sure enough, at the mention of the three words 'Luocha Country' [luo cha guo] Hong *Jiaozhu*'s expression changed at once. Wei Xiaobao knew that this subject fit the opposite party's concern; he was greatly delighted.

"When the young emperor heard this," he continued, "He was immediately being cautious and worried. He immediately asked Tang Ruowang to calculate the auspicious day, to quickly offer sacrifice. Tang Ruowang presented a memorial to the Emperor: 'Let your minister go back and look at the heavens at night, calculate yin and yang during the day, and calculate everything carefully.' Several days later, he came back to present a memorial: Luocha Country's dragon vein is in Liaodong, on something like 'hu tamade' [shout his mother/crying 'damn it'] mountain, and some 'ama'er' [amah] river."

Hong Antong had lived in Liaodong for a long time, he was very familiar with local mountain and river. Hearing Wei Xiaobao's explanation, he turned to Madame Hong and said with a laugh, "Madame, did you hear this boy said some amusing things? He changed Huma'erwoji Mountain to 'hu tamade' mountain and Amur River [amu'er] to 'ama'er' river. Ha ha, ha ha …!" Madame Hong also squealed in laughter.

"Yes, yes," Wei Xiaobao said, "There is nothing that *Jiaozhu* did not know, there is no place you did not understand; subordinate greatly admires you. That foreign red-haired demon also said a lot other things, which subordinate could never remember. The young Emperor then wrote everything down in Manchurian and Han scripts, and handed it to me. But subordinate is illiterate, these 'hu tamade' mountain and 'ama'er' river, I can never remember."

Hong *Jiaozhu* burst into a 'hee hee' laughter. He turned his head, and shot a

sidelong glance toward Lu Gaoxuan, his gaze was harsh. Lu Gaoxuan and Fat Toutuo groaned inwardly.

Wei Xiaobao said, “That Tang Ruowang said that we must quickly manufacture ten red-haired cannon, and transport them to Liaodong via the ocean, and aimed them at that whatever river and whatever mountain and fire two hundred times to destroy the Luocha Country’s dragon vein; and hereafter for the next two hundred years the Great Qing will have peace and security without any trouble. It is called ‘one cannon shoot guarantees one year of peace and security’. The young Emperor said, ‘In that case, if we fire one thousand cannon, won’t we have one thousand years of peace and security?’ Tang Ruowang replied, ‘On the contrary, too much cannon fire will not work’. He also said something like ‘mysteries of heaven must not be revealed’, yellow way and black way[41], and some other gibberish for half a day. Subordinate did not understand even half a word; listening to them I was bored to death.”

Hong *Jiaozhu* nodded. He said, “That Tang Ruowang authored the book ‘Great Qing Constitution Period Calendar’; there is indeed only two hundred years. Apparently the Manchurian Qing destiny will last at most for two hundred years.”

Wei Xiaobao knew that there is a trick in lying; all the little details must be comprehensive, furthermore, they must be completely verifiable. Only in the significant juncture he could talk a bit of rubbish. He learned this technique from when he was still living in brothel. By lucky coincidence, Hong Antong was a very learned man; he knew the content of Tang Ruowang’s ‘Great Qing Constitution Period Calendar’. Hence Wei Xiaobao’s lie was unexpectedly fit together with the truth.

Madame Hong said, “In that case, the young Emperor is sending you to Liaodong to fire the cannon?”

Wei Xiaobao pretended to be amazed. “Uh,” he exclaimed, “How did Madame know?”

Madame Hong laughed and said, “I’ll say that what you said is not a complete truth. The young Emperor is sending you to Liaodong; how did you end up at Shen Long Island?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “That foreigner said: Luocha people’s dragon vein is an ocean dragon; for this reason these ten cannon must be transported by the ocean. When the cannon are aimed at the dragon’s mouth, and after careful calculation of the best time, waiting for the right time when it just about to take water from the ocean, the cannon will be immediately fired. The dragon’s body will be seriously injured, and it will not be able to move. If the cannon are fired from land, the dragon will eat one cannon and immediately fly to the sky. One cannon guarantees one year of peace and safety, next year we must comeback and fire another one; that would be very troublesome. He said that our cannon must be transported by the ocean, taking the long way around, so that we won’t alert the dragon vein.”

From the beginning, when *fengshui* and divination are mentioned, people always pay particular attention to ‘dragon vein’. But when talking about terrains that look like a dragon, it is not a real ‘dragon’. Therefore, the dragon vein could be alerted and flee to the sky and so on was entirely Wei Xiaobao’s fabrication. When Hong Antong heard this, he could not help feeling half believing and half doubting.

Seeing his changed countenance, Wei Xiaobao realized that he was not too convinced; thereupon he busily said, “That foreign demon can speak Chinese; he drew quite a few pictures to show to the young Emperor. He took several measurements, drew a circle here, a line there, explaining how the dragon vein could flee. Subordinate was too stupid, I did not understand the least bit. But actually the young Emperor was listening with keen interest.”

Hong Antong nodded; he thought that when foreigners practice *fengshui*, they must have different technique, which was superior to Chinese *fengshui*.

Seeing he accepted his explanation, Wei Xiaobao was relieved. He thought, “As soon as this matter passes, later the Buddhist conch will go ‘whoo hoo hoo’; it definitely won’t break!” [Translator note: This is literal translation, I am not sure what it means, I guess he was thinking that his lie wouldn’t be exposed.]

He said, “One day the young Emperor ordered the Imperial Observatory to select a yellow way propitious day, he issued an imperial decree sending me to Changbai Mountain to offer sacrifice to the Heaven. There was a Fujian Navy *Tidu* Shilang, who surrendered from Taiwan, came over. He said that even Zheng

Chenggong had suffered defeat under his hands. This man is adept at firing cannon from the ship. The young Emperor sent him to go with me. He warned repeatedly ten million times that this affair must be kept in the strictest confidence; if it is leaked out, this important matter will be spoiled, maybe the Luocha Country would send seagoing ships to intercept. We were to go out to sea from Tianjin, going around the longer distance, to quietly go to Liaodong. Who would have thought that yesterday afternoon we saw a lot of floating corpses on the sea; some were fake, and among the fakes was this Thin Toutuo. With good intention I rescued him. He said the situation was freakily and desperately serious; the fighting on the Shen Long Island has turning the sky and the earth upside down, Hong *Jiaozhu* has sent someone to murder Blue Dragon Envoy Xu Xueting."

"False!" Thin Toutuon yelled, "I did not say *Jiaozhu* murdered Blue Dragon Envoy!"

Madame Hong's beautiful eyes glowered at him. "Thin Toutuo," she said, "In front of *Jiaozhu*, do not shout and quarrel."

"Yes," Thin Toutuo said.

"You said that the Blue Dragon Envoy was murdered, didn't you?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

"Yes," Thin Toutuo replied, "It was *Jiaozhu* who instructed me to deceive you like that."

"*Jiaozhu* told you to play a joke on me; that is possible," Wei Xiaobao said, "But you said that in order to take revenge, *Jiaozhu* has murdered Blue Dragon Envoy and Scarlet Dragon Envoy. *Jiaozhu* puts the common good above everything with no regard for personal interests, he has great kindness and great righteousness, there is no way he would bear grudges toward his subordinates!"

For each sentence that he said, Thin Toutuo yelled one word, "False!"

Wei Xiaobao said, "You said that in order to take revenge, *Jiaozhu* has murdered Blue Dragon Envoy and Scarlet Dragon Envoy!"

Thin Toutuo said, "False! I did not say that."

Wei Xiaobao said, "*Jiaozhu* puts the common good above everything with no

regard for personal interests."

Thin Toutuo said, "False!"

Wei Xiaobao said, "He has great kindness and great righteousness!"

Thin Toutuo shouted, "False!"

Wei Xiaobao said, "There is no way he would bear grudges toward his subordinates."

Thin Toutuo said, "False!"

Lu Gaoxuan knew that Thin Toutuo was hot-tempered and naïve, he had already set foot in Wei Xiaobao's trap; he did not stop yelling 'False!', each time he shouted that, *Jiaozhu*'s countenance turned one degree uglier. Lu Gaoxuan was afraid that if Thin Toutuo continued yelling, the Cult Leader might lose his temper, it would be beyond redemption; therefore, he tugged Thin Toutuo's sleeve and said, "Just listen to him reporting to *Jiaozhu*, don't interrupt his train of thought."

"This boy spouts nonsense," Thin Toutuo said, "Are you saying that I should let him continue endlessly?"

"*Jiaozhu* is intelligent and wise," Lu Gaoxuan said, "There is nothing he did not know, nothing he did not understand, you don't have to worry, naturally *Jiaozhu* understands clearly."

Thin Toutuo said, "Humph! That may not necessarily …" As soon as he said those words, his mouth stayed open but nothing came out of it; his entire face looked terrified.

Wei Xiaobao's pair of eyes was gazing fixedly at him; suddenly he made faces. Both of them were short, but Thin Toutuo was shorter. When he made faces, Wei Xiaobao was looking down, hence nobody else saw it, but Thin Toutuo could see it clearly. Immediately his temper flared, but he was afraid to enrage the Cult Leader, hence he struggled hard to curb it. His expression looked awkward. In that instant the cabin was quiet, save for Thin Toutuo's labored breathing.

After quite a while, Hong *Jiaozhu* asked Wei Xiaobao, "What else did he say?"

Wei Xiaobao replied, "Reporting to *Jiaozhu*: he also said that *Jiaozhu* stirred up

trouble, inciting disharmony between the Scarlet Dragon Gate and Blue Dragon Gate …"

"I didn't say that …" Thin Toutuo called out.

Hong *Jiaozhu* glowered at him; he spoke harshly, "Can't you shut your beak for me? You squawk one more time, I am going to split you, this short winter melon, into two damn sections."

Thin Toutuo's face bulged purple; Lu Gaoxuan and Fat Toutuo were also overwhelmed with shock that their faces turned white. Everybody knew that Cult Leader Hong was very reserved; ordinarily, whether he was happy or angry, he would not show it on his face. It was very seldom that he spoke roughly or threw a fit. That he cursed Thin Toutuo harshly like that, he must be extremely angry.

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted; he thought that since Thin Toutuo could not open his mouth anymore, whatever Wei Xiaobao said, he could not refute at all. Thereupon he said, "*Jiaozhu*, please stop being angry. This Thin Toutuo did not say anything that dishonor *Jiaozhu*; he only said that *Jiaozhu* was narrow-minded. Last time everybody plotted rebellion but failed, that important matter was spoiled by subordinate, one child; everybody was indignant, but *Jiaozhu* wanted to seize the chance to take revenge. He said that *Jiaozhu* was sending someone named He Sheng to do the deed. This man was Priest Wugen's head disciple. Your disciple actually did not know if there is indeed someone by that name in our Cult."

"There is indeed someone named He Sheng," Madame Hong said, "So what?"

Wei Xiaobao had an idea, "This He Sheng is Priest Wugen's disciple, he must be a young fellow." He said, "Thin Toutuo told me that this He Sheng saw Madame's beautiful appearance, these past several years he always do this and that to Madame; he said many things that are unpleasant to hear. Your disciple was furious, I was angry that he was being disrespectful toward Madame behind her back; I ordered my men to slap his mouth. At that time he was still tied with leather rope, hence he could not resist. After we beat him more than a dozen times, he did not dare to speak anymore."

Madame Hong was so angry that her countenance paled. "Did he really drag me down like that?" she hatefully asked.

Thin Toutuo said, “I … I did not say it.”

“*Jiaozhu* did not let you open your mouth, you should not speak,” Wei Xiaobao said, “I ask you: did you or did you not tell me about this man called He Sheng? If yes just nod your head, if no just shake your head.” Thin Toutuo nodded.

“That’s right,” Wei Xiaobao said, “You told me that He Sheng and Xu Xueting were fighting over jealousy, they strived to win Madame’s favor by fawning on her; thereupon this He Sheng had killed Xu Xueting, and Madame was very happy. He also said that *Jiaozhu* was kept hoodwinked inside a drum; he did not know anything. You said that Blue Dragon Envoy was killed by He Sheng, and that a saber was found lying on the floor inside the room, and that the saber belonged to He Sheng, isn’t that so? Did you or did you not say those things?”

Thin Toutuo nodded his head and said, “But the front …”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Since you already admitted it, that’s enough.” Actually, Thin Toutuo only said the last half, the front half was added by Wei Xiaobao. However, by nodding his head, Thin Toutuo seemed to admit that he did say the whole thing.

Wei Xiaobao said, “You said the Blue Dragon Gate, Scarlet Dragon Gate, Yellow Dragon Gate, Black Dragon Gate, plus my White Dragon Gate, were fighting each other silly. *Jiaozhu* had already lost his authority, that he was completely helpless to put down the fight, yes or no?”

Thin Toutuo nodded his head. Wei Xiaobao said, “You said that everybody on the Shen Long Island revolted, that *Jiaozhu* and Madame were being captured, that Madame’s clothes were stripped clean and she was paraded publicly on the Island. You said that *Jiaozhu*’s beard were pulled clean, and that he was dangled upside down on a tree, and that he was deprived of any food or drink for three days and three nights. These words, I am sure nowadays you are unwilling to admit; isn’t that so?”

To this question, nodding his head would be wrong, shaking his head would also be wrong; Thin Toutuo’s face was bulging very red, as if the blood inside his skin was about to burst. Wei Xiaobao said, “This moment you certainly want to deny, and don’t want to admit that you have said those words; isn’t that so?”

Thin Toutuo angrily said, “I did not say those words.”

“You said that you fought with *Jiaozhu*,” Wei Xiaobao said, “You kicked *Jiaozhu* twice, and struck *Jiaozhu*’s face three times, but *Jiaozhu*’s martial art skill was higher than yours, you were unable to defeat him, hence *Jiaozhu* tied you up and throw you into the ocean, didn’t you? You said that our Cult was in complete chaos that they sky and earth were turning upside down, and that it has collapsed silly. You said that the people, more than half were tied up by *Jiaozhu* and were thrown into the ocean, the rest were you kill me, I kill you; *Jiaozhu* and Madame were already in an extremely sorry condition that even if by now they had not died, they would not live much longer; didn’t you?”

“I … I … I …” Thin Toutuo stammered. He was so confused by Wei Xiaobao that he did not know what to say. He definitely said that he was unable to defeat the Cult Leader, and that the Cult Leader had tied him up and thrown him into the ocean; he also said that on Shen Long Island, the Five Dragon Gates were massacring each other that the Cult had collapsed silly. However, it was definitely not the same as what Wei Xiaobao had said.

Wei Xiaobao said, “Reporting to *Jiaozhu*: Subordinate was originally leading the navy ships toward Liaodong, to blast away the Luocha Country’s dragon’s vein, but as the ships reached here, subordinate was concerned about *Jiaozhu* and Madame, plus that Miss Fang. Because subordinate is thinking … is thinking of taking her as my wife, I wanted to see her; it would be best if *Jiaozhu* and Madame would allow me to take her go. Consequently, I ordered the ships to slowly proceed near the Isand; even if I could only look from the distant, I would be satisfied. If I could see *Jiaozhu* and Madame one time …”

Madame Hong smiled and said, “And that Miss Fang.”

“Yes,” Wei Xiaobao said, “This is subordinate’s selfish desire, I was not wholeheartedly loyal and devoted to *Jiaozhu* and Madame. I indeed deserve to die.”

Cult Leader Hong nodded. “You may continue,” he said.

Wei Xiaobao said, “Who would have thought that Thin Toutuo was rescued from the sea, I did not know what thought he harbored, unexpectedly he unreservedly reviling *Jiaozhu* and Madame. Subordinate was a muddle head; as soon as I heard him, I panicked, and wished very much that I could grow wings

and fly to Shen Long Island, to stand by *Jiaozhu* and Madame's side, and fight to the death against all those renegades. Subordinate immediately opened my mouth to curse, saying that that day *Jiaozhu* has solemnly commanded us that the matter of the past should not be regarded as bad debts, that we are not supposed to even raise it up; how could they harbor hard feelings and rebel against *Jiaozhu*? Subordinate was only worrying about the danger *Jiaozhu* and Madame were in, I thought about *Jiaozhu*, who was hung upside down by the rebels, I thought about Madame, who was stripped naked by them; I could not bear to wait even for a second more. I was really muddleheaded and deserve to die, all along I have never thought that *Jiaozhu*'s magical power is extensive; if some people are rebelling against their superior, *Jiaozhu* only needs to stretch out several fingers, and they would be pinched dead like ants. How could *Jiaozhu* be possibly humiliated by the rebels? It's just that subordinate was anxious, immediately I ordered all our ships to go out to sea to attack Shen Long Island. I instructed them: the good people on the Island are being caught by the bad people, if anybody come out to resist, you may fire at will to bombard them. As soon as you come ashore, quickly search for one majestic Senior, whose appearance grand, who looks like the Jade Emperor, who look like the deity Bodhisattva; that is precisely the Shen Long Jiao's Hong *Jiaozhu*, everybody must listen to his command. Subordinate also told them: the women on the Island must not be offended, especially the young woman who is as delicate as a flower, as refined as a precious jade, whose appearance is beautiful, who looks like immortal descending to the world, who is precisely Madame Hong; everybody must be even more respectful."

Madame Hong giggled and said, "So from what you said, the only reason you sent the troops to attack Shen Long Island was because of your loyalty to *Jiaozhu*? Not only you are innocent, you have rendered merit instead?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "Subordinate does not have the least bit of merit; it's just that seeing *Jiaozhu* and Madame are safe and sound, several *Zhangmenshi* are still loyal and devoted, and still serving *Jiaozhu* and Madame well, my heart is very happy. Subordinate's first hope is that *Jiaozhu* and Madame will enjoy immortal good fortune forever, your long life the same as the heaven's. The second hope is that in our Cult, everybody will display utter loyalty and dedicate ourselves to the service of our country; whatever *Jiaozhu* says, everybody will act

accordingly. The third hope … the third hope …”

Madame Hong laughed and said, “The third hope is to have Miss Fang as your wife.”

“This is a minor matter,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Subordinate has already decided in my heart that as long as I perform my duty with every effort to *Jiaozhu* and Madame’s liking, *Jiaozhu* and Madame naturally will not treat your subordinate unfairly.”

Hong Antong nodded. “Your mouth surely can talk really well,” he said, “But you said you were concerned about me and Madame; why didn’t you lead the troops personally to the Shen Long Island? Why did you send people to open fire and shoot randomly, while you yourself hid faraway in the back?”

This question actually hit the key point, Wei Xiaobao was agape and tongue-tied, momentarily he was speechless, knowing that as long as his answer was not completely convincing, Hong *Jiaozhu* would be suspicious, and then the previous big lie would be exposed, and then even his little life would be difficult to protect. In a moment of desperation, he had no choice but to say, “Subordinate really deserves to die; in all honesty, I was not loyal enough to *Jiaozhu* and Madame. When I heard from Thin Toutuo how vicious the people on the Island were, that even *Jiaozhu* and Madame were caught by them, subordinate was terrified. Last time … last time they betrayed *Jiaozhu*, it was subordinate who spoiled their major effort. If they caught me, they would definitely pull my tendon apart and peel my skin. Subordinate is afraid of death, hence I hid myself faraway in the back and only sent the troops under my command to save *Jiaozhu* and Madame. This … this … I really deserve to die.”

Cult Leader Hong and Madame looked at each other, and nodded slowly. They both thought that since this child admitted that he was afraid of death, he must be telling the truth. Cult Leader Hong said, “Whether you are telling the truth or you are lying, I will examine carefully. If I find out that you are lying, humph, humph, you know what’s coming.”

“Yes!” Wei Xiaobao said, “Whatever punishment *Jiaozhu* and Madame decide, subordinate will accept it delightedly. However, please do not hand subordinate over into Fat Toutuo, Thin Toutuo, and Lu Gaoxuan’s hands. This time … this

time they set up an ingenious plan, swindling the Qing troops into bombarding Shen Long Island, killing not a few brothers and sisters; it was a huge plot. In my subordinate's opinion, this Lu Gaoxuan surely wants to be Lu *Jiaozhu*. When we were in Yunnan, he said, 'I don't want to enjoy immortal good fortune forever, your long life the same as the heaven's; as long as I can enjoy his fifty years of good fortune, it would suffice very much …'"

Lu Gaoxuan roared angrily, "You … you …" Waving his palm, he struck toward Wei Xiaobao's back.

Priest Wugen rushed a step forward with outstretched arm to block. 'Bang!' Lu Gaoxuan was jolted back two steps. Priest Wugen was only shaken that his body swayed. "Lu Gaoxuan," he shouted, "How could you dare to commit violence to injure someone in front of *Jiaozhu*?"

Lu Gaoxuan looked deathly pale. He bowed and said, "*Jiaozhu* please forgive me, hearing this fellow fabricated a lie, subordinate could not hold back; it was indeed very disrespectful."

"Humph," Hong *Jiaozhu* snorted. He said to Wei Xiaobao, "You may go down." Turning to Priest Wugen, he said, "You guard him personally, don't let anybody harm him, and don't let him wander about aimlessly. Don't speak with him. This child is full of devilish tricks and cunning stratagems, you must be particularly careful." Priest Wugen bowed in compliance.

Henceforth for the next several days Wei Xiaobao stayed in the same cabin with Priest Wugen day and night. Early morning every day he saw the sun was rising up on the starboard and setting down on the port side, hence he knew the ship was sailing north. The first day or two he was still hoping that Shi Lang and Huang Fu's navy ships would be able to catch up and rescue him, but as time went by, he lost all hopes. "My nonsense talk," he mused, "*Jiaozhu* and Madame believed about ninety percent; it's just that I led the troops to blast Shen Long Island that it collapsed silly, even if it stemmed from good intention, in the end I am still guilty. Fortunately that short winter melon deceived me by pretending to be floating corpse was *Jiaozhu*'s own idea. Otherwise, there is a good chance that in his anger he might lump me together with the short winter melon and kill us, and make a pot of little treasure [xiao bao] winter melon soup." He also thought, "This ship is sailing to the north; could it be heading toward Liaodong?"

He tried to ask Priest Wugen several times, but Priest Wugen always replied, “I don’t know.”

Wei Xiaobao teased him to talk, Priest Wugen said, “*Jiaozhu*’s order, I must not talk to you.” He also did not allow Wei Xiaobao to leave the cabin even for one step.

Wei Xiaobao was bored, he thought, “That dead girl Fang Yi is clearly on the ship, yet she did not come to accompany *laozi* to divert my mind from boredom.” He recalled that this time he got captured by Divine Dragon Cult was also because of Fang Yi who lured him. “If *laozi* could escape this time,” he mused, “If later on I cast even a glance toward that little mother skin Fang Yi, *laozi* is not surnamed Wei. I have fallen into her trick twice, how could I let myself to fall again the third time?” Yet thinking about Fang Yi’s tender and beautiful appearance, her gentle manner, he could not restrain his heart from being moved. On the second thought, he mused, “So what if I am not surnamed Wei? *Laozi* does not even know my father, what is my real surname anyway?”

The ship continuously sailed northward, the weather was getting colder and colder. Priest Wugen had profound internal energy, he was not affected by the cold. Wei Xiaobao, however, felt so cold that he did not stop shivering, his teeth chattered, making ‘click-click’ noise.

Several days later, the north wind roared, the sky was dark, suddenly heavy snow fell. “I am freezing to death here,” he called out. He thought, “Songgotu *Dage* sent me a mink fur robe, too bad I left it in the camp and did not bring it here. Ay, if I have known that Fang Yi, that little mother skin, was going to swindle me again, I should have worn that mink fur robe when I embraced her, so that I would not freeze to death on the ship. Frozen White Dragon Envoy; it’s terrible indeed.”

The ship sailed into the night. Suddenly he heard continuous clanking noise. After listening carefully, Wei Xiaobao realized that it was the sound of ice on the surface of the sea breaking; he was shocked. “Aiyo, not good!” he cried out, “If the ship freezes in the middle of the ocean, won’t that be terrible?”

Priest Wugen said, “The ocean can’t possibly freeze; we must be nearing land.”

“Have we arrived in Liaodong?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

“Humph,” Priest Wugen snorted, but did not say anything.

The next morning, when he pushed open the cabin window to look outside, Wei Xiaobao saw vast expanse of whiteness; the ocean was full of ice floe, with white snow accumulated on the ice. In the distant he vaguely saw land. That evening, the battleship sailed toward the shore and dropped anchor; it appeared that the next morning they were going to ride the skiff to come ashore.

That night myriads of thought surging through Wei Xiaobao’s mind: how would Hong *Jiaozhu* deal with him? It was not easy to guess. He seemed to believe Wei Xiaobao’s explanation, but did not seem to believe it either. Why did they go to this world of ice and snow?

After thinking for a while, he finally fell asleep. In his sleep he saw Fang Yi suddenly sat by his side; he reached out to embrace her. In his daze, he seemed to hear Fang Yi said, “Don’t make trouble!”

“Dead wife,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “I want to make trouble.” He felt Fang Yi was struggling in his embrace.

Still half-asleep, he heard the person in his bosom said in a low voice, “Xianggong, we have to leave quickly!” It sounded like Shuang’er’s voice.

Wei Xiaobao was startled, and sobered immediately. He felt there was indeed a soft and tender body in his embrace, but since it was dark, he could not see who she was. “Is it Fang Yi? Is it Madame Hong?” he wondered in his heart. There were only those two women on the battleship. He thought, “I don’t care if it is Fang Yi or Madame Hong, I would kiss her first and talk later; I’d better take this advantage!” He held the person in his bosom tighter and tried to kiss her lips. The person laughed softly and turned her head to avoid. This time, although the laugh was soft, it was very clear that she was indeed Shuang’er.

Wei Xiaobao was pleasantly surprised; he whispered on her ear, “Shuang’er, how did you get here?”

“Let’s go quickly,” Shuang’er said, “I will tell you slowly.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “I am freezing to death, you quickly get into my quilt, you are so warm and nice.”

“Ay,” Shuang’er said, “Good Xianggong, you really love to make trouble, and

you also don't want to think about what time it is."

Wei Xiaobao held her even tighter. "Where are we going to flee?" he asked.

Shuang'er said, "We are slipping away from the aft, and row the skiff to come ashore. Even if they find out, they won't be able to pursue."

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted. "Brilliant scheme, brilliant scheme!" he called out, "Aiyo, how about that priest?"

Shuang'er said, "I sneaked into the cabin and sealed his acupoint."

The two of them tiptoed out of the cabin. A burst of cold wind assaulted their faces. Wei Xiaobao's entire body nearly froze; he quickly turned back into the cabin, peeled the Taoist robe from Priest Wugen's body and wrapped it around his own. The sky was cloudy, the moon and stars did not shine, heavy snow was still coming down incessantly. The two of them stealthily went toward the stern, their ears did not hear any noise anywhere. The ship had already dropped anchor, even the helmsman who operate the rudder had also went into the cabin to sleep.

Holding Wei Xiaobao's hand, Shuang'er led him step-by-step to the aft. She said in a low voice, "I jump down first, you follow!" Taking a deep breath, she quietly jumped into the skiff tied behind the ship.

Wei Xiaobao looked down; it was pitch-black and he was scared. Closing his eyes, he jumped down. Shuang'er raised her palms to catch his back and his buttocks. She had to circle around on the skiff to break the momentum of the fall before she could finally set him down.

Suddenly from the hold of the ship someone shouted, "Who's there?" It was the Cult Leader Hong's voice.

Wei Xiaobao and Shuang'er were shocked; they crouched at the bottom of the skiff, did not dare to make any noise. They heard a clatter, then saw flame from the window of the cabin. Shuang'er knew that Hong *Jiaozhu* had heard the noise and lighted a candle to look. Hastily she picked up the wooden oar on the skiff and rowed furiously.

She only rowed twice when Hong *Jiaozhu*'s was shouting loudly, "Who is it? Don't move!" Suddenly the skiff shook and stopped moving forward. Turned out

in their panic they forgot to untie the mooring rope of the skiff. Wei Xiaobao hastily reached out to untie; it was ice-cold. Actually, the skiff was tied to the ship with iron chain.

They heard quite a number of people shouting on the big ship, “White Dragon Envoy disappeared!” “This boy has run away!” “Where did he go? Pursue quickly, pursue quickly!”

Wei Xiaobao pulled the dagger from his boot and swung it forcefully. ‘Shua!’ the iron chain broke, the skiff immediately shot forward. As soon as the noise was heard, one after another Hong *Jiaozhu*, Madame Hong, Fat and Thin Toutuo, Lu Gaoxuan, and the others rushed to the stern. Under the reflection of the light from the ice and snow, they could see the skiff was already several *zhang* away from the big ship. Hong *Jiaozhu* reached out to grab a piece of wood from the ship’s side and hurled it toward the skiff. Although his internal strength was deep, the wood was too light, it was two *chi* short from the skiff. ‘Splash!’ it plunged into the water.

At first Lu Gaoxuan, Fat Toutuo, and the others were unclear of Hong *Jiaozhu*’s intention, they did not dare to shoot secret projectiles for fear that they would harm the White Dragon Envoy and would have to bear the responsibility instead; but when they saw the Cult Leader grabbed the block of wood from the ship’s side and threw it out to strike, they understood his intention. Those with secret projectiles in their possession immediately shot their weapons. However, in such a short period of time the skiff was already rowed two more *zhang* forward. Secret weapons were usually small, it was difficult to reach far. Arrows, steel dart, flying locust stone, and various heavy objects were not close at hand; people could only shoot spring-loaded arrow concealed in their sleeve, poison needles, and so on, which all fell into the ocean.

Thin Toutuo said, “This boy is so sly, I knew it all along that he is not a good person; we should have just kill him with a chop, by letting him alive we only ask for trouble.”

Hong *Jiaozhu* was already furious; with this cynical remark Thin Toutuo was obviously mocking him for not able to see the matter clearly. Reaching out with his left hand, he grabbed the back of Thin Toutuo’s neck and shouted, “Quickly go and catch him back for me.” His left hand went up, he lifted Thin Toutuo up

into the air, with his right hand he grabbed Thin Toutuo's buttocks, and shouted, "Quickly go!" He pulled his arms slightly, and then exerting all the internal energy into his arms, he hurled him out.

Shuang'er gave everything she had to paddle. "Aiyo, not good!" Wei Xiaobao cried out, "Incoming human cannonball!" His cried had not finished, 'splosh!' Thin Toutuo plunged into the ocean. He fell only a few *chi* behind the skiff. As soon he resurfaced, his left hand managed to grab the edge of the skiff.

Shuang'er lifted up the oar and smashed it down as hard as she could, she struck his skull. Thin Toutuo grunted out in pain, but his right hand also grabbed the edge of the skiff. Shuang'er was greatly anxious; she struck down again, 'crack!' the wooden oar broke into two, the skiff immediately spun around. Thin Toutuo was dizzy, he shook his head to clear it up. Wei Xiaobao scratched with his dagger, four of Thin Toutuo's right hand fingers were cut clean. In severe pain, he was unable to hold himself; his right hand loosened, his body bobbed up and down in the water, as he screamed and cursed.

Shuang'er picked up the remaining oar and paddled desperately; the skiff once again sailed toward the shore.

After sailing for a while, they left the big ship far behind, and knew that those people could not possibly overtake them. The big ship only had one skiff. Although Hong *Jiaozhu* and the others possessed high level of martial art skill, they would not dare to jump into the sea and swim to pursue them, not in this weather where the cold penetrated their bones and marrow. Besides, even if they swam faster, they would still be unable to catch up with the skiff.

Wei Xiaobao took out a plank from the bottom of the skiff and helped paddling. They heard the faint noise of people on the big ship cursing angrily. But a moment later, the north wind finally masked the people's voices. Wei Xiaobao let out a deep breath and said, "We finally escaped!"

The two of them rowed for almost an hour before they finally reached the shore. Shuang'er jumped into the water. The water reached her knees. She pulled the skiff by the remaining half of the iron chain to get it closer to the shore. "It's enough!" she said.

Wei Xiaobao jumped out of the skiff and landed on the shore. "Great success!"

he called out.

Shuang'er giggled and retreated a few steps. "Xianggong, please don't fool around," she said, "We must leave quickly, don't let Hong *Jiaozhu* and the others catch up with us."

Wei Xiaobao was startled. "What kind of ghost place is this?" he asked with knitted brows. He looked around, but all he could see was brilliant white snow covering a boundless plain. In the dark of the night he could see nothing else.

"I don't know what kind of place this is," Shuang'er replied, "Xianggong, where do you think we should go?"

Wei Xiaobao was so cold that he did not stop trembling, his brain seemed to be frozen stiff as well, unexpectedly he could not think of even half of a good idea. "His granny," he cursed, "It's all Fang Yi, that dead little mother skin's fault; she harmed us so that we'll freeze to death in this snowy place."

"Let's go," Shuang'er said, "Walking will make our body warmer."

The two of them started to walk toward the snowy area. The snow accumulation was about a *chi* thick, as they stepped into it, their entire calf was submerged; hence taking stride was very difficult.

Although it was a hard going, Wei Xiaobao pressed on, remembering that Hong *Jiaozhu*'s magical power was extensive [i.e. resourceful], he would find a way to come ashore. But on this snowy ground their footprints were really deep, where could they escape? Even if they continued running for several days, most likely that in the end they would still be captured; therefore, he did not dare to pause even for a moment. While they were rushing along, he asked Shuang'er how she ended up in the ship.

Turned out when Wei Xiaobao saw Fang Yi that day, with 'lost soul, dropped spirit' he rushed over to talk to her, while Shuang'er was following him on the skiff. When Wei Xiaobao fell and was captured, while everybody's attention was on him, Shuang'er was very sharp-witted; she immediately hid on the stern. This battleship was seized by Hong *Jiaozhu* and the others from Qing troops' hands, the helmsman, the sailors, everybody on the ship was Qing troops. Shuang'er was wearing Valiant Cavalry Brigade officer's uniform; mingled among the other officers and soldiers, nobody detected her. It was only after the ship reached the

shore that she came out in the middle of the night to rescue him.

Wei Xiaobao greatly praised her intelligence and quick-wit; he said, “Fang Yi that dead girl always swindles me, always do me harm; Shuang’er this sweet treasure always saves my life. I do not want her to be my wife, I want you to be my wife.”

Shuang’er hastily pulled her hands away and drew back several steps. “I am your little servant girl,” she said, “Naturally with one heart one mind I will take care of you.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “To have you as my little servant girl, my previous generation ancestors must have tapped four times seven, twenty-eight wooden fish[42], read over three by seven, twenty-one ‘Forty-two-chapter Sutra’ until they rot. Only then would I have such a good fortune in this life.”

Shuang’er giggled and said, “Xianggong always know how to talk.”

When the dawn arrived, they had walked far away from the shore. Looking back, they saw two sets of clear footprints on the snow, stretching out to the horizon. Looking forward, the plain seemed to be vast and limitless. Although Hong *Jiaozhu* and the others had not caught up with them, it seemed to be just a matter of time.

Wei Xiaobao was very anxious in his heart. “Even if we walk ten more days and nights, in the end they will still overtake us,” he said.

Shuang’er pointed to the right and said, “That looks like a forest; if we enter the forest, it would not be easy for Hong *Jiaozhu* and the others to find us.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “If that is indeed a forest, it would be great, but it does not look like a forest.”

The two of them changed their course; picking up speed, they walked uphill toward the snowy mound. But after walking for two hours, they could see clearly that it was nothing more than a knoll rising up in the middle of the great plain; it was not a forest at all.

Wei Xiaobao said, “Let’s go around the hill, perhaps we’ll see some place we may hide.” By this time he was already panting, his strength had almost gone.

After walking for another hour, they reached the back of the hill, but all they saw was still a vast white plain, just like a snow-covered ocean; there was no place to hide. Wei Xiaobao was weary and was very hungry; he plopped himself down on the snowy ground and said, “Good Shuang’er, if you don’t hug me, give me a kiss, I won’t have any strength to walk anymore.”

Shuang’er blushed; she thought about complying, but she also thought that this matter was very improper. While she was hesitating, suddenly ‘crack’, they heard a noise behind their backs. Turning their heads, the two of them saw seven, eight big deer appeared from behind the small hill.

Wei Xiaobao was delighted. “My tummy is starving to death!” he said, “Do you happen to know a way to catch a deer and kill it? Then we’ll have roast venison to eat.”

“Let me try,” Shuang’er said. Suddenly she leaped toward those several big deer.

Who would have thought that with their four extremely long legs, these Spotted Deer [orig. ‘plum blossom deer’] were able to leap as if they were flying; as soon as they turned around and ran, they already rushed several dozen *zhang* away. It was impossible to run after them. Shuang’er shook her head and said, “I can’t catch them.”

Actually, these spotted deer were not afraid of human; seeing Shuang’er stopped, they also stopped and turned their heads. Wei Xiaobao said, “Let us lie down on the ground, pretend to be dead. Let’s see if the deer would come over or not.”

Shuang’er laughed and said, “Alright, I’ll give it a try.” Finished speaking she immediately lay down on the snowy ground.

Wei Xiaobao said, “I am already dead, my wife good Shuang’er is also dead. The two of us are buried in the grave, cannot move anymore. Good Shuang’er and I had eight sons and nine daughters, they all are in front of the grave, crying loudly, ‘Ah my father, oh my mother …’”

“Pfft,” Shuang’er let out a giggle, her entire small face blushed bright red; she said, “Who is going to give birth to that many sons and daughter for you?”

“Alright,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Eight sons and two daughters are too many, then we’ll have three!”

Shuang’er laughed and said, “Not …”

Several spotted deer slowly walked toward the two, apparently they were very curious. In the animal kingdom, deer’s intelligence is very low, far inferior to dogs, horses and foxes; as a result, there is a saying, ‘stupid like deer and swine’. These several spotted deer lowered their heads to scratch and sniff Wei Xiaobao and Shuang’er’s faces with their nose, while letting out some noises.

Wei Xiaobao called out, “Turn over and get on the horse, Di Qing subdued the dragon!” He sprang up and mounted the deer’s back, while reaching out to hold onto the antler. Shuang’er lightly and deftly also jumped onto another spotted deer’s back.

The flock of deer was startled, they kicked their hoofs and leaped away. Shuang’er called out, “Use your dagger to kill the deer!”

“No hurry to kill,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “We ride the deer and run for our lives, Hong *Jiaozhu* will never catch up with us.”

“Yes, absolutely right,” Shuang’er said, “But we must not separate.” She was afraid that the two deer, one would run to the east, the other rush to the west, then it would be bad for them. Fortunately spotted deer are usually in flocks; these eight big deer ran together for quite a while. And then there were other seven or eight big deer joined the flock. Spotted deer has tall body and long legs, when they run, their speed is not inferior to that of fine horse; it’s just that riding on a deer was very rough, they were jolted and shaken very bad.

The flock ran northwesterly and covered a stretch of several *li* before slowing down. The two deer with riders on their backs were bucking and kicking, trying hard to shake their riders loose, but Wei Xiaobao and Shuang’er held on to the antler tightly, whatever happened they won’t be thrown down. Wei Xiaobao called out, “Once we get down, it would be difficult to get back up; we might as well run away the farther the better. This is called ‘A real man gave his words, live deer cannot chase.’”

That day, although the two of them were so hungry that they almost fainted with blurred vision, they still held on tight to the deer’s neck and grabbed the

antler, letting the flock of deer galloped on the vast and obscure, limitless snow-covered plain. They knew that the longer the flock of deer ran, the farther away they were from Hong *Jiaozhu* and the others, while at the same time the snow would not have their footprints anymore.

By nightfall, the flock of deer entered a forest. Wei Xiaobao said, “Good enough! Let’s get down!” Pulling his dagger, he ran it across the male deer’s neck. The deer ran a few steps before it collapsed to the ground.

Shuang’er said, “One deer is enough, let’s spare my deer.” And she leaped down from the deer’s back.

Wei Xiaobao’s body was weary, his strength exhausted, the bones in his entire body felt like they were about to disintegrate. He was lying on the ground, gasping for breath for quite a while. Finally he crawled toward the stag’s neck and put his mouth on the cut. ‘Glug, glug’ he drank several mouthful of the warm blood. “Shuang’er,” he called out, “Come and drink some.” Quite a bit of deer blood entered his stomach, his spirit was revived, his body was also slowly warming up.

Shuang’er also drank the deer blood. She sheared a deer leg with the dagger, gathered some dry sticks, and built a fire to roast it. “Oh deer,” she said, “You have saved our lives, but we kill you and eat you instead. We have really wronged you.”

After eating the roasted deer leg, the two of them were in high spirit. “Good Shuang’er,” Wei Xiaobao said, “You and I should live in this forest as a pair of huntsman and huntswoman; let’s not return to Beijing.”

Lowering her head, Shuang’er said, “Wherever Xianggong go, I will follow and serve you. I don’t care if you return to Beijing to be a high-ranking official, or live here as a hunter. I will always be your little servant girl.”

The flame shone on her face, Wei Xiaobao saw a rosy, tender, beautiful and cute face. He laughed and said, “In that case, didn’t we achieve great success?”

“Ah!” Shuang’er cried out and leaped onto the pine tree above her head. She laughed and said, “We did not, we did not.”

That night the two of them huddled up by the bonfire, and slept peacefully for

the whole night. The next morning they woke up, Shuang'er roasted some more deer meat. The two of them ate to their hearts' content. During the riding on the deer's back the previous day, Wei Xiaobao's hat fell down. Shuang'er peeled some deer skin and made one for him.

Wei Xiaobao said, "We ran away for a whole day yesterday, it won't be easy for Hong *Jiaozhu* and the others to find us, but there are still some dangers that they would. We'd better ride the spotted deer and rush to the north three, four more days, then I, Wei *Jiaozhu* and you, Madame Shuang'er, would enjoy immortal good fortune forever, our long lives would be the same as the heaven's."

Shuang'er laughed and said, "What Madame Shuang'er? So unpleasant to hear. You want to ride the deer? That won't be difficult, isn't that another flock of deer coming over?"

Indeed they saw more than twenty big deer and little deer from the east strolling over the snowy ground. They stretched out their necks to chew the tender leaves of the trees. Human's footprints were rare in this forest, when the flock of deer saw these two, they were not afraid at all.

"Deer are very good-natured," Shuang'er said, "It would be best if we don't kill them too much. This big deer of yesterday is enough for us to eat for a dozen of days." She cut several large chunks of meat from the dead deer, and using deer skin as ropes she wrapped the meat and divided it between Wei Xiaobao and herself to be carried on their backs; and then they walked slowly toward the deer.

Wei Xiaobao reached out to gently pet a big deer. The deer turned its head around and licked his face; it was not scared at all. Wei Xiaobao called out, "Aiyo! This deer has achieved great success with me."

Shuang'er giggled and said, "You get up first." Only after the two humans leaped onto their backs that the two deer were startled and ran.

The flock of deer ran along the forest. The two humans held on to their antler to steer them to the north, leaving Hong *Jiaozhu* and the others farther and farther away. By this time Wei Xiaobao had learned how to ride the deer; it was not difficult at all. After riding more than four hours, he and Shuang'er jumped

down and let the flock of deer run on their own.

Traveling this way, they rode the deer in the forest for more than ten days. Occasionally they did not meet any deer, in which case they would go on foot slowly. When hungry, they would eat roast venison. Their original clothes were already unbearably tattered by the thistles and thorns of the forest, Shuang'er made new sets of upper garment and underpants from deerskin. Even their shoes were made of deerskin now.

One day they were out of the forest, suddenly they heard the rumbling noise of water. After walking for a while, they reached the bank of a big river. They saw in the river the water was surging up violently, the current was very strong. The two of them had been in the dense forest for more than ten days, suddenly seeing this big river, they felt that the darkness in their heart was suddenly lifted up.

After walking for several hours northward along the river, they suddenly saw three men wearing animal skin clothing; they had hoe and iron fork in their hands, from their appearance, they seemed to be hunters. Wei Xiaobao had not seen any other people for quite a while, he was greatly delighted. Hurriedly he came forward and asked, "Three *Dage*, where are you heading?"

A man about forty something replied, "We are going to the market at Mudanjiang[43]. Where are you going?" His accent sounded very strange.

"Aiyo," Wei Xiaobao said, "So Mudanjiang is that way? We took a wrong turn. Nothing can be better than following the three *Dage*." Immediately they followed the three hunters.

Bit by bit Wei Xiaobao tried to strike conversation with them. Turned out the three men were Tungus people who made a living by hunting and gathering ginseng. They always went to the market at Mudanjiang to do their business with Han people, hence they knew a little bit of Han language.

Mudanjiang was actually a small town of considerable size. Wei Xiaobao had always had the banknotes, he never lost it; he invited the three Tungus men to an inn to drink some wine. While they were still drinking, suddenly he heard someone on the adjacent table said, "This wooden club of yours looks very fine. Last month, there is someone who came down from Huma'erwoji Mountain …"

As soon as Wei Xiaobao and Shuang'er heard the words 'Huma'erwoji Mountain', their hearts were shaken. They looked at each other, and then turned toward the speaker. They saw two old men fiddling with newly picked ginseng, tied with a strip of leaf, in their hands. Wei Xiaobao took out an ingot of silver and handed it over to the waiter, telling him to get more wine and meat, and a large slice of cooked beef, two catties of white wine, and deliver everything to the next table.

The two ginseng pickers were greatly surprised; they wondered why this young hunter was so hospitable, immediately they expressed thanks repeatedly. Wei Xiaobao went over to their table and toasted them several cups. With his eloquence, in just a few words he was able to find out the location of Huma'erwoji Mountain. Turned out it was located due north of where they were, still two, three thousand *li* away; but those two ginseng pickers had never been there either. Wei Xiaobao called Shuang'er over, and told her to ask about some mountain and river's names on the map. The two ginseng pickers gave direction to those places one by one, along with the general situation of those places. Indeed their explanation did not the slightest bit disagree with the information from the map.

After drinking wine and eating their meal, they took their leave from the Tungus men and the ginseng pickers. Wei Xiaobao pondered in his heart, "Turns out that Lu Ding Shan [deer and cauldron mountain] is still several thousand *li* from this place. But since we don't have anything else to do, we might as well go dig some treasure."

Actually, whether to dig or not to dig the treasure, he did not care too much. In the deepest part of his heart, he was afraid to meet Hong *Jiaozhu*, Thin Toutuo, and that bunch of people. Since Hong *Jiaozhu* and the others were in the south, if he went north two, three thousand *li*, no matter what Hong *Jiaozhu* would not be able to find him. He thought further, "If Shuang'er and I wait for him in the wild, mountainous country for ten or eight years, Hong *Jiaozhu* will definitely die. Could it be that his long life is as long as the damn heaven's?"

Thereupon he went to a leather store and bought two sets of fine mink fur coat, which he and Shuang'er put on immediately. Afraid that Hong *Jiaozhu* would still be able to overtake them, outside the mink fur coat they were still

wearing the coarse deerskin clothing. They also used soot to blacken their faces, so that even if they were overtaken, he hoped that they would not be recognized. He hired a large carriage, and travelled north. Inside the carriage he chatted with Shuang'er. Occasionally he would 'achieve great success'; their relation was warm and happy.

They rode the carriage for more than twenty days. The farther north they went, the colder the weather got, until finally the road was covered with ice and snow that the large carriage could not continue. The two of them then bought horses and continued north, until even the horses could not continue anymore, hence just like in the forest before, they continued on foot on snowy ground.

Luckily treasure hunting, along with seeking refuge, was what Wei Xiaobao was good at; seeing the barren hills and treacherous rapids, uninhabited open plain everywhere, he felt safer instead. Shuang'er's memory was very good, following the direction on the map, they searched slowly to the north. Whenever they met hunters or ginseng pickers, they would inquire about the name of the place to verify their location based on the map. The map had eight small circles in four colors, which marked the location of Lu Ding Shan, where two great rivers converged.

One particular day, according to their calculation they were not too far from their destination. The two of them were walking hand in hand in a pine forest. Suddenly there was a loud bang from the northeast direction, it sounded like a firearm was being shot. Wei Xiaobao was startled. "Aiyo, not good!" he cried out, "Hong *Jiaozhu* has caught up with us." Hastily he pulled Shuang'er and hid in the long thick patch of grass behind a tree. And then they heard more than a dozen people were shouting and screaming as they rushed over toward them, followed by the sound of hoof beats.

Wei Xiaobao was only afraid that Hong *Jiaozhu* was coming to capture him, to pull his tendon and peel his skin; this moment, as he heard the noise had nothing to do with Hong *Jiaozhu*, he felt slightly relieved, and looked out from among the thick patch of grass. He saw more than a dozen Tungus hunters screaming wildly while running for their lives. Suddenly there were unending 'bang, bang, bang'; the Tungus hunters fell down, rolled around several times, and died, blood was seeping out from their bodies. Wei Xiaobao gripped Shuang'er's hands; he

thought, “This is foreign devils’ firearms.”

Following the sound of hoof beats, seven or eight riders charged in; the riders were indeed yellow-bearded, blue-eyed foreign troops. Each and every one of them was tall and powerfully built, with fiendish expression. Some were holding guns, some brandishing their cutlass wildly. In just a short period of time the rest of the Tungus hunters were all hacked to death.

The foreign troops laughed aloud, jumped down from their horses, and started raiding the hunters’ belongings; they took away several sheets of mink fur, six or seven silver fox fur, talked gibberish for a while, and then mounted their horses and left.

Wei Xiaobao and Shuang’er waited until the sound of hoof beats go far away before they slowly came out of the thick patch of grass. When they looked at the hunters, they found not one person was alive. The two of them looked at each other in dismay, they both saw abject terror on each other’s eyes. Wei Xiaobao said quietly, “Those foreign devils are robbers.”

“They are more vicious than robbers,” Shuang’er said, “After robbing their belongings, they also killed the people.”

Wei Xiaobao suddenly remembered something. “How could there be foreign robbers?” he wondered aloud, “Could it be that Wu Sangui already arise in rebellion?” He knew Wu Sangui and Luocha Country had made a pact; as soon as Yunnan sent their troops, Luocha Country would attack from the north. This moment they suddenly saw a lot of foreign troops, could it be that for several weeks they did not hear any news from outside, Wu Sangui had already made his move? Thinking about the troops and horses under Wu Sangui’s command were numerous, he could not help feeling anxious for Xiao Xuanzi. Looking at the bodies scattered around on the ground, he only felt worry.

Shuang’er sighed and said, “These hunters are really pitiful; right now their father and mother, wife and children at home must be waiting for them to come back.”

“Oh,” Wei Xiaobao mumbled. Suddenly he said, “I want to see the young Emperor.”

Shuang’er was greatly surprised, “You want to see the young Emperor?” she

asked.

“That’s right,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “Wu Sangui is sending his troops to revolt, the young Emperor must have a lot of things he wanted to talk to me. Even if I cannot offer any ideas, I can still talk to him to relieve his boredom. Let us go back to Beijing.”

“We are not going to Lu Ding Shan?” Shuang’er asked.

“Not this time,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “We’ll go again next time.” Although he was eager to find the treasure, but he had already amassed gold, silver, money and valuable that he did not even know to spend it all. Thinking that Lu Ding Shan was related to Xiao Xuanzi’s dragon vein, in all honesty he did not really want to unearth it; he was afraid that as soon as he dig it out, he would jeopardize Xiao Xuanzi’s life.

He searched and discover the eight copies of ‘Forty-two-chapter Sutra’, found the pieces of sheepskin, assembled the pieces into a map, ascertained the mountains and rivers’ names on the map, all along he was enthusiastic; but by the time he had really arrived on Lu Ding Mountain, suddenly fear overcame his enthusiasm. He was only hoping to find an excuse to go as far as possible. If he said that he really wanted to give careful consideration of *yi qi* toward Kangxi, it might not necessarily be the truth, it’s just that this ‘digging treasure on Mount Lu Ding’ business was simply too great. He only had Shuang’er, one person, by his side; at the last moment, he could not stop cowardice from taking over. If he were leading several thousand of Valiant Cavalry Brigade officers and men, perhaps by this time he would yell, “His granny, send the troops to Lu Ding Shan!”

Shuang’er did not have any idea, naturally she would follow obediently. Wei Xiaobao said, “We go back to Beijing, but must be careful not to bump into any foreign robbers. We’d better follow the riverbank and see if we can catch a boat.”

Immediately they entered the forest and walked toward the east. Traveling until the afternoon, they reach the bank of a big river. In the distant they saw a fortified city wall. Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted; he thought, “When we reach the city, we can either hire a boat or ride on horses. Having money makes

everything easy.” Thereupon he walked faster.

After walking several *li*, they saw another big river winding from the northwest and merged with this turbulent-water big river. Shuang’er suddenly said, “Xianggong, these are Amur River and Heilongjiang [river], and that … that … that must be Lu Ding Shan.” While saying that, she pointed to the fortified city.

“Are you sure you remember correctly?” Wei Xiaobao asked, “This is such a happy coincidence.”

Shuang’er said, “The map is indeed drawn like this, but on the map there were only eight colored circles, it did not say anything about fortified city.”

“There is a fortified city on Lu Ding Shan; that’s really strange,” Wei Xiaobao said, “I’ll say this city cannot be trusted. Let’s not go in there.”

“What do you mean the city cannot be trusted?” Shuang’er asked.

Wei Xiaobao replied, “Look, there is a demon cloud above the city, apparently there is a big demon inside the city.”

Shuang’er jumped in fright. “Aiyo!” she hastily said, “I am most afraid of demon. Xianggong, let’s go quickly.”

Right this moment, suddenly they heard sound of hoof beats, several dozen riders were galloping along the riverbank from the south. All around them was open plain, there was no where they could hide. Wei Xiaobao pulled Shuang’er, the two of them rolled away from the river shore and withdrew behind a large rock by the riverbank. Not too long afterwards, they saw a group of horses sweeping past; the riders were indeed foreign officers and men.

Wei Xiaobao stuck out his tongue; he followed the foreign troops with his eyes until they disappeared into the city wall. “Didn’t I tell you?” he said, “I said this city cannot be trusted, and I was right. Turns out that is not demon cloud, those are foreign cloud.”

Shuang’er said, “We have found Lu Ding Shan with great difficulty, who would have imagined that this mountain has been occupied by foreign robbers?”

“Aiyo,” suddenly Wei Xiaobao exclaimed; he sprang up and cried out, “Bad, bad!”

Seeing the huge change on his face, Shuang'er busily asked, "What is it?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "The foreign robbers must have found out the secret of the map, otherwise how can they be here? The hidden treasure and the dragon vein cannot be guaranteed."

Shuang'er had never heard him mentioning anything about hidden treasure and the dragon vein, but the map was constructed with great difficulty, hence she had already guessed that the secret of Lu Ding Mountain must be concerning something of grave importance. Seeing the deep frown on Wei Xiaobao's face, she said consolingly, "Xianggong, if the foreign soldiers have found the secret first, there is nothing we can do. Foreign robbers have firearms, they are very ferocious, the two of us cannot fight with them."

Wei Xiaobao sighed and said, "I just feel strange, after we put the map together, it was only a few days before we burned it; how did the secret leak? I wonder if the foreign robbers have dug the hidden treasure and broken the young Emperor's dragon vein. We must investigate clearly."

Thinking about the viciousness and ruthlessness of the foreign soldiers when they massacred the people in the woods a moment ago, he could not help but shiver. "I want to go to Lu Ding Shan to investigate clearly," he muttered to himself, "But it's too dangerous. I must think of a better way. Good Shuang'er, let's wait until it is dark before going, that way it won't be too easy for the devils to detect us."

Chapter 36

Predator birds over ten-thousand li of barbarian flower's sky, the beginning of the edge of the clouds over thousand winding snowy roads.

(Translated by Foxs)

Wei Xiaobao leaped up and made somersault in the air and landed on the captain's shoulder. With the forefinger of both hands pressed against the captain's eyes, he steered him back into the Princess' room. Sophia was startled and delighted at the same time; she took the short gun from the captain's side, and pressed it against the captain's back.

The two of them ate some dried venison, and then slept on the beach; by the time the second watch of the night [between 9-11pm] arrived, they quietly moved toward the fortified city. It was quiet all around, that night the moonlight was bright. They noticed that the fortified city was constructed from big lumber and big stones, the circumference was indeed not small; it was definitely not a one-day, one-night effort. Wei Xiaobao thought, “This fortified city was built sometimes ago, so nobody peeked at my map and informed Luocha people to come over here and build the city.”

He saw his own shadow as well as Shuang’er’s on the ground, and could not help but was afraid, thinking that if there were Luocha soldiers guarding on the wall, with several shots, Wei Xiaobao would turn into Wei Sibao [xiao bao – little treasure, si bao – dead treasure]. Thereupon he pulled Shuang’er and crouched on the ground, trying to see if anything was astir. He saw on the southeast corner of the fortified city there was a small log cabin, with light coming out from the window; apparently it was where the guards lived. Wei Xiaobao whispered on Shuang’er’s ear, “Let’s go over there to take a look.” The two of them slowly crawled toward the log cabin.

Just as they were outside the window, suddenly they heard a woman’s laughter from the inside, the laughter sounded so lascivious. Wei Xiaobao and Shuang’er looked at each other; they both felt strange, “How could there be a woman?”

Wei Xiaobao peeked through a small crack on the window. But the weather was cold and the wind strong, all the cracks on the window were tightly sealed; he could not see anything. Yet the voice from the inside continued, one man one woman, they were talking and laughing gibberish that Wei Xiaobao did not understand at all. He knew that this pair of Luocha man and woman was not doing any good deed; his heart was moved. Reaching out, he embraced Shuang’er in his bosom. Shuang’er heard the voices from the inside, she seemed to understand, but not quite understood; there was a vague feeling in her heart that it was improper. When she was held in Wei Xiaobao’s arms, for fear that they would be found by the people inside, she did not dare to make any noise.

To Wei Xiaobao, it was exactly what he wanted. His left arm hugged her even tighter, his right hand gently stroked her cheek. Shuang’er’s body went weak,

she leaned on his bosom. Unexpectedly, since the ground was packed with ice, in his eagerness Wei Xiaobao forgot to mind where he stood; his foot slipped, he could not hold his stand, 'bang!' his head hit the window heavily. "Aiyo!" he could not help but letting out a cry.

The voices inside stopped; a moment later a man's voice shouted a question. Wei Xiaobao and Shuang'er crouched on the ground, and were momentarily at a loss of what to do. They heard a latch being pulled, the wooden door creaked open, someone with a lantern in his hand standing at the door looking outside. Wei Xiaobao sprang out lightly with his dagger going straight into the man's chest. The man did not even grunt; his body slumped and he fell down without any noise.

Shuang'er rushed into the room, but she saw the room was absolutely empty, there was no one inside. "Uh," she exclaimed in surprise, "Where's that woman?"

Wei Xiaobao followed her inside. He saw a *kang* [heatable brick bed] inside, a wooden table, and a wooden trunk; the room was illuminated by a bear fat candle on the table, but the woman had actually disappeared without a trace. "Search her quick, don't let her go announcing our presence." He noticed that other than the front door, this house did not have any other exits.

He dragged the dead body inside and closed the door. He saw the dead man was a foreign soldier, the lower part of his body was naked, he did not were any pants. Wei Xiaobao looked up to examine the beam, but did not see anything out of ordinary, "She must still be here," he said. He rushed to the trunk's side, opened the trunk lid, and quickly stepped aside to guard against the Luocha woman opened fire.

After a moment without seeing anything astir, Shuang'er said, "She is not inside the trunk. This is really strange."

Wei Xiaobao went near the trunk to examine it, and saw the trunk was full with fur clothing. He reached in and scooped some, but underneath it was also fur clothing. Suddenly he sniffed a strong fragrant; obviously it was the smell of women's cosmetics. "Something can't be trusted in here," he said. He grabbed the fur clothing and tossed them all to the ground. To his surprise, there was a

hole at base of the trunk. “In here!” he cried out in delight.

Shuang’er said, “Turns out there is a tunnel in here.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Quickly intercept that Luocha woman. If she talked, a large group of foreign robbers will swarm over, we will be in a terrible mess.” Hurriedly he took off the leather clothing that he bundled up on his body, pulled his dagger, and crawled into the hole. He was very afraid of foreign troops, but he did not take foreign women to heart.

The tunnel was inclining downward, and he could only crawl, but he was slim and agile, he was able to crawl fast and nimble in the tunnel. After crawling for more than ten *zhang*, he heard voices ahead. He increased the strength in his hands and feet, and crawled even faster. The voice ahead was getting closer. He reached out with his left hand and grabbed as hard as he could, and touched a smooth and soft calf. The woman cried out in low voice, and frantically fled forward. Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted; he thought, “If I kill you with one stab, I am not a hero or warrior. Good man does not fight with women, Chinese men do not fight with Luocha demon granny[44]. Foreign male demons I have seen a lot, but what foreign female demons look like, I must take a good look.”

He re-inserted the dagger into its sheath, and charged more than a *zhang* forward. With both hands he grabbed the woman’s calf. Inside the tunnel, the woman was unable to turn around; she crawled forward desperately. The woman’s strength was indeed not small, unexpectedly Wei Xiaobao was unable to pull her back, instead, he was pulled forward about a *zhang* or so. Wei Xiaobao spread his legs toward the tunnel wall to brace himself, only then did he manage to hold himself and not dragged forward by the woman.

The woman struggled hard, Wei Xiaobao’s hands slipped; unexpectedly the woman was able to free herself. She quickly crawled forward. Wei Xiaobao threw himself to her and grabbed her waist. Suddenly he felt his head was free; they had actually reached the part of the tunnel, which was fairly spacious. The woman let out a couple of soft laughter; she turned around and kissed him. But since it was dark, she kissed his nose instead.

A burst of strong fragrant assaulted Wei Xiaobao’s nostrils, the body of the woman in his bosom was smooth and slippery; to his surprise, she did not wear

even one thread. He felt the woman reached back and embraced him; his mind was blurry. He heard Shuang'er asked in a low voice, "Xianggong, what is it?"

Wei Xiaobao hummed and hawed; he was just about to reply when the woman in his bosom suddenly kissed his mouth. Immediately he was unable to speak. Suddenly he heard a voice above his head saying, "We found out that *Zongdu* [governor-general] has arrived at Yakesa[45], therefore, we rushed over to meet him."

As soon as these words entered Wei Xiaobao's ears, it was as if a bucket of iced water was drenched over his head. The speaker was unexpectedly the Divine Dragon Cult's Cult Leader Hong. How could Hong *Jiaozhu* be over his head? And the Luocha woman in his bosom, how could she be so flirtatious and intimate? The number of unusual things he had seen in his life was indeed not small, but what he came into tonight in this tunnel was totally new and unthinkable. The woman in his bosom was like a warm, fragrant soft jade; the Hong *Jiaozhu* in his mind wanted to pull his tendon and peel his skin. In his terror, hastily he pushed away to woman in his bosom, he wanted to turn around and flee; who would have thought that the woman embraced him tightly, and did not want to let him go.

Wei Xiaobao was greatly anxious; he said in her ear, "Jiligulu, xilihuala, hulihutu." He only hoped that she would understand this made-up Luocha language. The woman let out soft laughter, twice, and said a few words in his ear; presumably she was speaking genuine Luocha language. And then she reached out to his cheek and twisted it hard.

Right this moment, a man overhead was speaking a string of gibberish foreign words. When he finished, another man said, "*Zongdu Daren* said, *Jiaozhu* of Shen Long Jiao have honored us with your presence; he wishes to welcome you very much, yet did not come to greet you, it was very lacking in manners, hence he begs for *Jiaozhu*'s forgiveness. *Zongdu Daren* wishes Hong *Jiaozhu*on a long life of a hundred years, great good fortune and great longevity, that everything will be according to your wishes, and wishes to be good friends with Hong *Jiaozhu*, to work with a common purpose, attempting the important matter together."

Wei Xiaobao mused, “This interpreter[46] is uneducated; he changed the ‘enjoy immortal good fortune forever, long life the same as the heaven’s’ into ‘long life of a hundred years, great good fortune and great longevity’.”

He heard Hong *Jiaozhu* responded, “*Biren* [humble one, referring to self] wishes Luocha Country Emperor ten thousand years of boundless longevity, wishes *Zongdu Daren* good fortune, long life, health and peace, and to rise in promotion soon. *Biren* will do my utmost wholeheartedly, to work with Luocha Country on a common goal, attempting the important matter together. From now on blessing will be enjoyed together, difficulty will be faced together, both sides will not renege on this oath forever.” The interpreter spoke for a moment, the Luocha Country governor-general responded with some continuous gibberish.

Wei Xiaobao asked the woman in a low voice, “Who are you? Why aren’t you wearing any clothes?”

The woman laughed in a low voice and said, “Who are you? Why are you wearing some clothes?” While saying that, she reached out to untie Wei Xiaobao’s undergarment.

In this kind of situation, how could Wei Xiaobao have the mood to do this kind of loose, merry-making shady business? He had heard Tang Ruowang and Nan Huairen spoke Chinese; now he heard this Luocha woman spoke Chinese, he was not surprised. “It is very dangerous in here,” he busily said, “Let us get out quickly.”

The woman said in a low voice, “Don’t move! Don’t move! You move, they hear.” Although she spoke Chinese, the tone was very stiff, it sounded very awkward. Thereupon Wei Xiaobao stayed still, he did not dare to make the slightest move.

He heard Cult Leader Hong and the Luocha Country governor-general discussing how as soon as Wu Sangui deployed his troops from Yunnan, Divine Dragon Cult and Luocha Country would attack Manchurian Qing from two sides. They laid out the plan, and sure enough, it was identical to the one explained by the Mongolian big beard Hantiemo. As the discussion progressed, Cult Leader Hong offered an idea, saying that if Luocha Country attacked from Liaodong, not

only the distance was great, the route was tightly guarded by Qing troops. It would be better to take the sea route and land in Tianjian, and then go straight to Beijing with firearms and cannon; that way they might take over Beijing earlier compared to Wu Sangui. The governor-general was greatly delighted; he repeatedly praised it as wonderful plan, he said that Cult Leader Hong was so loyal that in the future he would definitely take control of several provinces of China, and would be established as 'king'. Cult Leader Hong did not stop expressing his thanks.

Wei Xiaobao was startled and angry at the same time; he thought, "This fellow Hong *Jiaozhu* is also a big traitor to China, not the least bit different than Wu Sangui. His plan is very vicious, I must report to the young Emperor and have him install a lot of cannon at the Tianjin seaport. When the Luocha Country warships come to attack, 'bang, bang, bang, bang' we'll blast those damn ships."

He heard Hong *Jiaozhu* said, "*Zongdu Daren* has come from afar to China, we do not have anything good as a present to you; hereby we present a hundred Dadong [district, Liaoning] pearls, a hundred sheets of mink fur, and a hundred catties of ginseng to *Zongdu Daren*. Outside we also have tribute to be presented to Luocha Country Emperor."

Listening to this point, Wei Xiaobao thought, "Unexpectedly this old dog has prepared these many gifts; indeed his magical power is extensive."

Suddenly he felt his face was warm, the woman put her cheek against his, and then he felt she reached out to grope about his body. Wei Xiaobao said in a low voice, "You grope me, I won't be polite to you." He also reached out to grope around her breasts. The woman suddenly let out a squeal, and broke into laughter.

This laughter was not soft, Hong *Jiaozhu* immediately heard it, but he thought that the governor-general hid a woman in his room, it was nothing out of ordinary; thereupon he pretended not to hear. After exchanging some pleasantries, he said that they would discuss everything in more details the next day, and then he took his leave.

Wei Xiaobao suddenly heard a racket above his head, followed by a dazzling light. Turned out he and the woman in his bosom were inside a large wooden

trunk, and the trunk's lid had just been opened by someone.

The woman giggled tenderly, and then jumped out of the trunk. She took a robe to cover her own body, and then said to Wei Xiaobao with a laugh, "Come out, come out!"

Wei Xiaobao slowly stepped out of the trunk. He saw a tall and powerfully built foreign military officer standing by the trunk with his hand pressed on the hilt of a saber hanging on his waist. The woman laughed and said, "There is one more!"

Shuang'er originally wanted to hide inside the trunk, if Wei Xiaobao got into trouble, she would think of a way to rescue him, but since the woman had already called out, she had no choice but to jump out of the trunk as well.

Wei Xiaobao saw the woman's hair was yellow like gold, draped over her shoulder; her pair of dark green eyes looked very lively. Her skin was snow white, her appearance was very beautiful, it's just that her nose was a bit too high, and she was also half a head taller than he was. Wei Xiaobao had never seen a foreign woman before, he could not guess how old she was, but he presumed she must be around twenty.

The woman was looking at Wei Xiaobao with a grin on her face, she said, "You, little child, groped me, scoundrel, hee hee …"

The governor-general's face looked calm and collected; he mumbled something in foreign language. The woman also mumbled something in reply. The governor-general's manner was very respectful, he bowed several times. The woman spoke several sentences, she pointed to Wei Xiaobao. The governor-general opened the door and summoned the Chinese interpreter back into the room. All the time the man and the woman did not stop talking to each other.

Wei Xiaobao noticed the room was furnished with quite a bit of fur, there were quite a few glittering female clothing spread on the couch. Looking at half-exposed woman's snow white, silky breasts, her sparkling and translucent calves and skin, he thought, "I had this woman in my bosom just now, why did I only grope her carelessly and simply let it pass like that? I got a very good pair of cards in my hand, but forgot to make a kill. That Hong *Jiaozhu* has frightened me silly."

He heard the interpreter said, "The Princess and *Zongdu Daren* ask: who are

you?”

Wei Xiaobao was surprised. “She is the Princess?” he asked.

The interpreter replied, “This is the Luocha Country Emperor’s imperial elder sister, Her Highness Princess Sophia. This is His Excellency Governor General Galitzine. Quickly kneel down to pay your respect.”

Wei Xiaobao mused, “Her Highness the Princess, how could she be so wild?” But he immediately recalled Kangxi’s imperial younger sister Princess Jianning was also very wild, in fact, in term of wildness, she was not inferior to this Luocha Country Princess. All the emperors’ imperial older sister or younger sister must be beautiful and wild, so this princess must be a genuine article. Thereupon with a giggle he bowed to pay his respect, saying, “Your Highness the Princess, how are you? You are extremely beautiful, you look like a celestial fairy descending into the world. In our China, there has never been any woman as beautiful as you.”

Sophia knew several most shallow Chinese words; hearing Wei Xiaobao, she knew he was praising her beauty; immediately she beamed up and said, “Little child, very good, must reward.” She went over to the desk, pulled a drawer, took a dozen or more gold coins, and put the coins in Wei Xiaobao’s hand.

“Thank you very much,” Wei Xiaobao said. He held out his hand to receive the coins. Under the candlelight, he saw the Princess’ five fingers were indeed like green jade; he could not stop himself from reaching out to grab her hand, and brought it to his mouth and kissed it.

The interpreter was greatly alarmed; “Don’t be rude!” he shouted. He did not know that the ritual of kissing one’s hand was actually in general use in western foreign country, it was an expression of utmost respect to the ladies of nobility. Wei Xiaobao was acting without thinking, unexpectedly he did the right thing. Only he should have kissed the back of the lady’s hand, but he was grabbing Princess Sophia’s palm and sucked her fingers randomly, hence it appeared rather awkward. Sophia giggled tenderly, but surprisingly she did not pull her hand away.

“Little child,” Sophia asked with a laugh, “What you do?”

Wei Xiaobao replied, “Little child, go hunting.”

Suddenly from outside the door a loud and clear voice said, “This little child is a high-ranking minister under China’s Emperor, don’t be deceived by him.” It was precisely Hong *Jiaozhu*’s voice.

Wei Xiaobao was so scared that his soul had flown to the outer space; pulling Shuang’er’s sleeve, he wanted to dash out of the door. But as soon as he pushed the door open, he saw Hong *Jiaozhu* was blocking his exit with arms spread open. Shuang’er leaped forward with a direct punch. Hong *Jiaozhu* parried with his left hand, while his right hand finger went toward Shuang’er’s waist. Shuang’er groaned and fell to the ground.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Hong *Jiaozhu*, you, Senior, enjoy immortal good fortune forever, your long life the same as the heaven’s. Where is Madame? Has she also come?”

Hong *Jiaozhu* did not reply, his left hand grabbed the back of Wei Xiaobao’s neck, and he brought Wei Xiaobao back inside. “Reporting to Your Highness the Princess and *Zongdu Daren*,” he said, “This person is called Wei Xiaobao, he is a high-ranking minister most trusted by the Chinese Emperor, he is the *Fu Zongguan* [deputy chief] of the Emperor’s Imperial Bodyguards, personal guards’ *Dutong* [commander], Imperial Envoy Minister, and was conferred the title First Class Viscount.”

The interpreter translated these words. Princess Sophia and the governor-general showed incredulous expression. Sophia laughed and said, “Little child, no high-ranking minister. Minister, fake.”

Hong *Jiaozhu* said, “*Biren* has the proof.” Turning his head around, he said, “Bring this kid’s clothes over.”

Wei Xiaobao saw Lu Gaoxuan entered in, carrying a bundle wrapped in cloth. When he opened it, surprisingly it was Wei Xiaobao’s original hat, clothing and personal adornment. Wei Xiaobao was greatly amazed, “How could these clothes end up in his hands? Hong *Jiaozhu*’s magical power is indeed extensive.”

Hong *Jiaozhu* ordered Lu Gaoxuan, “Put the clothes on him.” Lu Gaoxuan complied. He shook off the clothes and put them onto Wei Xiaobao.

These clothes, along with the yellow *magua*, were torn apart by the thistles and thorns of the forest, but put on Wei Xiaobao’s body, obviously it was

extremely well-fitting. The hat, with the peacock feather on it, obviously belonged to a high-ranking minister of the Qing court. If these clothes did not belong to Wei Xiaobao, it would be very difficult to find such a high-ranking official uniform in such a small size on the earth.

Wei Xiaobao giggled and said, “Hong *Jiaozhu*, your ability is indeed not small; I threw those clothes along the way, but you picked them all up from the roadside along the way.”

Hong *Jiaozhu* ordered Lu Gaoxuan, “Search his body, see if you can find anything.”

“No need to search me,” Wei Xiaobao said, “I’ll get everything out.” He pulled a big wad of banknotes from his pocket, the amount was staggering.

The governor-general had lived in Liaodong for a long time, he knew banknotes. Casually he flipped some, and was greatly amazed. He turned to the Princess and mumbled something, as if he was saying, “This child indeed has some background, the money he brings is really a lot.”

Hong *Jiaozhu* said, “This little demon is very crafty, search his body.”

Lu Gaoxuan searched Wei Xiaobao and took everything out of his pocket, including the secret order written in Kangxi’s personal hand writing, which said, ‘Imperial Envoy Minister, Deputy Commander Minister of the Internal Imperial Bodyguards, holder of concurrent office of the Commander of the Valiant Cavalry Brigade of the Manchuria Plain Yellow Banner, has been granted by the Emperor himself bravery title of Batulu, and the right to wear yellow *magua*, the Viscount First Class Wei Xiaobao, is ordered to go to Liaodong region on official business. The civil and military officials along the way are to wait for his instruction and render their assistance.’ The top of this imperial edict bore the imperial seal.

The interpreter read the edict in Luocha language. When Princess Sophia and Governor General Galitzine heard it, they clucked their tongue in praise and amazement.

Hong *Jiaozhu* said, “Reporting to Princess: Chinese Emperor is a young child, and loves to use young children as high-ranking officials. This little child loves to play games and joke around with the Chinese Emperor, he is good at patting the

horse's buttocks, he is good at blowing the cowhide, the young Emperor likes him."

Sophia did not understand 'patting the horse's buttocks' and 'blowing the cowhide'; after asking the interpreter, she giggled and said, "I also like people patting the horse's buttocks and blowing the cowhide." Wei Xiaobao was immediately delighted. But Hong *Jiaozhu*'s countenance turned very unsightly.

Sophia asked further, "Chinese young Emperor, how old?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "Chinese big Emperor, seventeen years old."

Sophia laughed and said, "Luocha big Tsar, is my little brother, is also a child, twenty years old, not a *tou laozi*[47]."

Wei Xiaobao was startled. "What *tou laozi*?" he mused, "Ah, she spoke incorrectly, it must be *laotouzi*[48] and she said *tou laozi*." Thereupon he pointed at her and said, "Luocha beautiful princess, not *tou laozi*, very good." Pointing at himself, he said, "Chinese high-ranking official, not *tou laozi*, very good!" Pointing at Hong *Jiaozhu*, he said, "Chinese bad egg [scoundrel/b@stard], *tou laozi*, not good, not good!"

Sophia bent over with laughter. The Luocha Country governor-general was a young man of about thirty; he also laughed aloud. Hong *Jiaozhu*'s countenance, however, turned iron-grey, he so wished to strike Wei Xiaobao dead with one palm.

Sophia asked, "Chinese high-ranking official, come here, for what?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "Chinese Emperor heard Luocha Country's high-ranking official is coming to Liaodong, he sent me to take a look. His Majesty knew Luocha Country Emperor is not a *tou laozi*, he knew Luocha Princess is a fairy descending to the world, he sent *Xiaoren* to present gifts, to give Princess and *Zongdu Daren* two hundred Dadong pearls, two hundred catties of ginseng. Unexpectedly en route we came across this big robber who took the gifts away …"

Wei Xiaobao had not finished speaking, Hong *Jiaozhu* was already unable to restrain his anger; raising his right palm, he chopped down at the top of Wei

Xiaobao's head. When he was inside the trunk, Wei Xiaobao had heard Hong *Jiaozhu* was presenting not a few precious gifts to the governor-general, thereupon he doubled the amount, and said that it was a gift from the Emperor. When his mouth was busy talking, he paid full attention on Hong *Jiaozhu*. As soon as he saw he raised his palm, he immediately executed the *qinggong* 'Shen Xing Bai Bian' [divine line hundred changes] taught by Jiu Nan, and slipped away behind Princess Sophia.

'Crack, crash!' one wooden chair was destroyed by Hong *Jiaozhu*'s palm strike. Galitzine was shocked; he pulled his short gun and pointed it at Hong *Jiaozhu*, ordering him not to move randomly.

The long speech that Wei Xiaobao had just made, Princess did not understand, she ordered the interpreter to translate. And when he finished, she laughed and said to Hong *Jiaozhu*, "Your gift, snatched from him, you took half, not good!"

Hong *Jiaozhu* anxiously said, "No, no. This kid is very good at talking nonsense, Princess must never believe him." He saw the Luocha governor-general was pointing the gun at him, although western firearm was formidable, but based on his martial art skill, he was not afraid. However, they were in the middle of conspiring on more important matter, he needed the Luocha Country's strong support, he must not offend the governor-general just because he could not control his anger. Thereupon he slowly withdrew toward the door without showing any sign of resistance.

Galitzine pulled back his gun and spoke several sentences. The interpreter said, "*Zongdu Daren* is asking Hong *Jiaozhu* not to be angry. He knew this little child is spouting nonsense. Princess Sophia has come to the east in secret, it's impossible that the Chinese Emperor would find out about it. It is also improbable that the Chinese Emperor would give gifts to a Luocha Country *Zongdu*."

Hong *Jiaozhu*'s anger subsided; he smiled and said, "*Zongdu Daren* is wise, you are able to see things clearly; indeed you would never fall under this kid's deceit."

Galitzine asked about Wei Xiaobao's background. Hong *Jiaozhu* explained to him how Wei Xiaobao had killed the high-ranking minister Oboi, how he was sent

to escort the imperial younger sister to Yunnan to complete the marriage, how he blew cowhide and patted the horse's buttocks, and did many and varied crimes; he also added oil and sprinkled some soy sauce on how Kangxi favored Wei Xiaobao. Finally he said, "This kid is the young Emperor's left and right hands, if we killed this kid, the young Emperor must be very unhappy. We are deploying troops on a great undertaking, chances are our success will come quicker." While he was speaking, the interpreter unceasingly translated it into Luocha language.

With a grin on her face, Princess Sophia was looking at Wei Xiaobao with great interest; apparently, the more Hong *Jiaozhu* said that Wei Xiaobao was unpardonably wicked, the more she was delighted.

Galitzine was deep in thought for half a day before asking, "Chinese Emperor likes this little child very much?"

"That's right," Hong *Jiaozhu* replied, "Otherwise, he is this young, how could he hold a very high official position?"

"This little child must not be killed," Galitzine said, "Send a letter to Chinese Emperor, tell him to get a large quantity of gold, silver and jewels as an exchange if he wants him back."

Sophia was greatly delighted, she pecked a kiss on his left cheek, and then she spoke several sentences. These words were not translated by the interpreter; it may be assumed that she was praising him as being intelligent. Wei Xiaobao was secretly rejoicing, "As long as they don't kill me, then it's good. If they wanted the young Emperor to take gold, silver and jewels to ransom me, that will be very easy." Hong *Jiaozhu* did not look happy at all, but he had no choice.

Wei Xiaobao took the wad of banknotes back and divided it into three packs. One pack he gave to Princess Sophia, the other pack he gave to Galitzine, from the third pack he took two banknotes worth a hundred *taels* each, and gave it to the interpreter, and then he put the rest into his own pocket.

Sophia, Galitzine and the interpreter were very happy. Sophia ordered the interpreter to count the money, she wanted to know how much in total, and then she ordered him to think of a way to send someone inside the Pass to exchange the banknotes into hard cash. Upon counting the banknotes, the total

came to more than a hundred thousand *taels*; suddenly finding unexpected great wealth, they could not help but were ecstatic. She hugged Wei Xiaobao, and repeated kissed his cheeks left and right; she said, “The money is enough, let the child go back!”

Wei Xiaobao thought that if he was let go this time, Hong *Jiaozhu* would definitely pull his tendon and peel his skin; thereupon he hastily said, “Such a beautiful princess, I have never seen one. I want to see you for several more days.”

Sophia giggled tenderly; she said, “We, tomorrow, return to Moscow.”

Wei Xiaobao had no idea what kind of place was this ‘Moscow’, he said, “Beautiful Princess, go to Moscow, little child high-ranking official, also go to Moscow. Beautiful Princess, go to the moon in the sky, little child high-ranking official, also go to the moon in the sky.”

Seeing his wit, Sophia was very fascinated; she nodded and said, “Very well, I take you to Moscow.”

Galitzine knitted his brows slightly; he was about to prevent her, but then he smiled and nodded. “Very good,” he said, “We will take you to Moscow.” And then he waved his hand toward Hong *Jiaozhu*.

Hong *Jiaozhu* did not have any choice but to take his leave. As he walked out the door, he glowered at Wei Xiaobao. Wei Xiaobao stuck out his tongue to him and made faces; he said, “Hong *Jiaozhu* enjoys immortal good fortune forever, your long life the same as the heaven’s.” Hong *Jiaozhu* was extremely angry; he led Lu Gaoxuan and the others leave without saying anything.

Luocha Country Emperor was called the Tsar, that year he was twenty years old, his name was Fyodor the Third[49]. Sophia was his older sister. This Fyodor III was born with disability, he was unable to move freely; day-to-day he handled the national affair from his bed.

Luocha’s social custom was greatly different from China’s propriety, the relationship between men and women was always casual. Sophia’s natural disposition was unrestrained, plus she was beautiful; considerable number of princes and dukes, and high-ranking military officers were her lovers. Governor-

general Galitzine was handsome and elegant, he was the Princess' favorite. He was sent to the East, to two fortified cities Nerchinsk and Yakesa, to attempt to enter and scout China's Mongolia and Liaodong. The city of Yakesa happened to be the place where the Manchurian Eight Banners' treasure was hidden. This place was the major crossroad where two great rivers converged; unexpectedly as if by prior agreement Manchu people and Luocha people picked this very same place.

By nature the Princess was very active and always wanted to have a good time, hearing that the East was mysterious and strange, plus she missed her lover, she went so far as to come after him, traveling tens of thousands *li* from Moscow to this remote place. Although Sophia liked Galitzine, she would never dream of being faithful and single-minded. That day she discovered the tunnel inside Galitzine's room, her interest was piqued, hence she went down to investigate. The tunnel went outside of Yakesa city, it was connected to the sentry post cabin; originally it was prepared by the governor-general as an escape route for fear that there was a rebellion in the city. When Sophia saw that guard, she spoke to him and teased him, and then fooled around with him.

At this time hearing that Wei Xiaobao wanted to go to Moscow with her, she thought that it was a fascinating idea, hence she decided to take him and Shuang'er along. Sophia had a team of two hundred Cossack soldiers as her escort; sometimes they rode horses, sometimes they sat on sleds, journeying westward every day on the boundless great snowy plain.

After traveling for more than twenty days, they had left Yakesa city very far behind, Hong *Jiaozhu* could not possibly catch up with them anymore. When Wei Xiaobao asked, to his surprise he learned that Moscow was still more than four months away; he could not help but was shocked. "Isn't that at the ends of the earth?" he asked, "Traveling for four more months, Chinese little child will turn into foreign *tou laozi*."

"Do you want to go back to Beijing?" Sophia asked, "Are you tired of looking at me?"

"Looking at beautiful princess for a thousand years, ten thousand years, I will never tire," Wei Xiaobao replied, "But I am scared of a journey this far."

During the last twenty days or so, Sophia had been chatting with Wei Xiaobao to relieve boredom; she learned quite a bit of Chinese words. Wei Xiaobao was intelligent and sharp, he also learned not a few of Luocha words. The two of them on a lonely journey, one was originally not a chaste woman, the other was not a gentleman at all; one already failed to keep herself pure, the other was unwilling to sit quietly without letting his mind wandered randomly. Inevitably they were 'tying some misty water marriage affinity' with each other. [This is literal translation, I am sure the reader would understand what it means.]

Now that Sophia heard that he wanted to return to Beijing, she could not help but feeling somewhat reluctant to part with him. "I won't allow you to go," she said, "You escort me to Moscow, accompany me for a year, then I let you go back."

Wei Xiaobao groaned inwardly. After being together with her for the last several days, he knew that the Princess was resolute; if he did not follow her wish and decided to simply leave, most likely she would send the Cossack soldiers to kill him. Thereupon with smile across his face, he repeatedly said that he was utterly delighted.

That evening, he quietly discussed with Shuang'er whether they might have an opportunity to escape. Shuang'er said, "Whatever Xianggong thinks is the best, I will follow your instruction."

Wei Xiaobao turned his gaze toward the boundless snowy plain, and heaved a deep sigh. He shook his head, knowing that if the two of them run away without enough provision, even if Sophia did not send anybody to pursue them, they would definitely freeze or starve to death in this great snowy plain. Previously, in the forest and snowy plain of Liaodong, although it was desolate and frigid, they could still go hunting and look for food. This time, even small birds were barely seen; sometimes they travelled for a whole day without seeing a single track of animal footprints, let alone spotted any deer. Without any other choice, they had to follow Sophia to the west.

At first Wei Xiaobao was worried about the young Emperor, whether Wu Sangui had started the rebellion, whether that beautiful little girl Ah Ke was in Kunming or not; he also wondered where Hong *Jiaozhu* and Fang Yi had gone. But after traveling on the great snowy field for more than a month, even these

thoughts had gradually faded away. In this world of ice and snow, it seemed like his brain had also frozen into ice. Luckily his natural disposition was cheerful and carefree without any worries; sometimes he spent time with Sophia telling nondescript Luocha jokes, sometimes he told Shuang'er some crazy tale that he invented himself, this way he did not feel too lonely.

One day they finally reached the outskirt of Moscow. By that time it was already the fourth month, the weather was getting warmer, ice and snow had already melted. He noticed that although Moscow city wall was solid, thick and gigantic, the construction was very crude. Looking far toward the city, he saw that the buildings inside were also filthy, simple and crude. Forget about comparing it to Beijing, Yangzhou or other big cities, even compared to Central Earth's small and medium-sized towns, it was still far inferior. Only several big cathedrals with domes and spires looked magnificent.

As soon as Wei Xiaobao saw all these, he held Luocha Country in contempt, "Dog-fart Luocha Country, what's so great about it? In our China, this kind of place is only fit to raise cattle and raise pigs. Yet along the way this Princess has always been tooting her horn about the bustling city of Moscow."

When they were still several dozen of *li* from Moscow, the Princess' guards had already galloped into the city to report. They heard the bugle, from the city a squad of soldiers carrying firearms came out on their horses. By nature Luocha people loved to invade and occupy, and annex their neighboring countries, as a result, their territory was vast, from east to west the distance was several tens of thousands *li*. The people were mixed. The nation's elite troops were Cossack cavalry; they charged to the east and fought to the west, besieging towns and seizing lands, subduing people of various races. The other one was firearm battalion, a brigade of sharp-shooters; they were the Tsar's personal guards who surround and protect the national capital.

When these gunmen[50] galloped near, Sophia was shocked because she saw black feathers on the numerous officer and soldiers' hats and black cloth hanging from their guns. It was the sign of national mourning. Hastily she galloped her horse forward and asked loudly, "What happened?"

The firearm brigade captain dismounted and stepped forward; he bowed and

said, “Reporting to Princess: His Majesty has suffered the misfortune of being summoned by God, and has left the country and its people to go to the Paradise.”

Sophia was deeply grieved; with tears in her eyes she asked, “When was that?”

The captain said, “If Princess were to arrive four days earlier, you would be able to bid farewell to His Majesty.”

Although Sophia was aware that her Tsar brother was weak and she knew that he would not live long, but suddenly receiving this terrible news, she was still unbearably grieved; she bent down on the saddle and cried bitterly.

Seeing the Princess suddenly cried, Wei Xiaobao asked the interpreter, and learned that the Luocha Country Emperor had passed away. He was inwardly delighted, “Luocha Country Emperor did not enjoy immortal good fortune, the country must be chaotic for a period of time; it won’t be easy for them to dispatch troops to attack China.”

Sophia and her retinue followed the captain entering the city; she wanted to go straight to the Palace. The captain said, “Empress Dowager instructed me to ask the Princess to rest in the Hunting Palace outside the city.”

Sophia was both startled and angry. “What Empress Dowager?” she shouted, “Which Empress Dowager wants to deal with me?”

The captain waved his left hand, the gunmen raised their firearms and took aim at the guards escorting the Princess, telling them to surrender their swords and spears and ordering the guards to dismount.

The Princess angrily said, “You want to rebel?”

The captain said, “Empress Dowager is afraid that when Princess is back, you won’t obey the new Emperor’s imperial decree, thus she ordered *Xiao Jiang* [lowly general] to protect Princess.”

Sophia’s face was bulging red. “New Emperor?” she said angrily, “Who is the new Emperor?”

The captain replied, “New Emperor is His Majesty Pyotr the First.”

Sophia tossed her head backward and laughed aloud. “Pyotr?” she said, “Pyotr

is a ten-year old little child, what kind of Tsar can he be? You said about Empress Dowager, are you talking about Natalya?”

“Precisely,” the captain replied.

Sophia’s father, Tsar Aleksey Mikhailovich married two empresses. The first empress gave birth to many sons and daughter, the former Emperor Fyodor the Third and Princess Sophia were her offspring, she had another little child names Ivan. The second empress Natalya was a lot younger, she only gave birth to one child, which was Pyotr.

Sophia said, “Take me to the Palace, let me see Natalya to reason with her. My younger brother Ivan is older than Pyotr, why not set him up to be the Tsar? What about the cabinet ministers in the imperial court? Don’t anybody talk reason anymore?”

The captain said, “*Xiao Jiang* only follow Empress Dowager and Tsar’s order, Princess please don’t take any offense.” Finished speaking, he took the bridle of Sophia’s horse and led it eastwards.

Sophia was seething in anger; in all her life, who dared to be this rude to her? Raising her horsewhip, she lashed it out on the captain’s head. The captain simply smiled and moved sideways to evade. He jumped onto his own horse, and then led his troops to surround the Princess, along with Wei Xiaobao and Shuang’er, and took them to the Hunting Palace outside the city. The firearm brigade then set up a perimeter guard to prevent anybody from going out.

Sophia was crazy with rage; she trashed the furniture and whatever she could find in the bedroom. The Hunting Palace chef had already prepared food and beverage for her, it was also thrown onto the chef’s face.

After several days like this, they saw the guarding outside the Hunting Palace was not the least bit relaxed. Sophia summoned the captain, she asked how long they would shut her off in this Palace. The captain said, “Empress Dowager’s order: Princess is to rest in here until His Majesty Pyotr the First celebrate his fiftieth year of ascending the throne. By that time Princess is going to be released to participate in the celebration.”

Sophia was furious, “What did you say?” she asked, “Pyotr celebrates his fiftieth anniversary of ascension, won’t that mean I will be confined here for fifty

years?”

The captain smiled and said, “*Xiao Jiang* will turn forty this year, I believe I won’t be able to serve the Princess for fifty years. In ten or fifteen years, there will be a younger captain who is going to take my place.”

Thinking that she would be confined in this place for fifty years, Sophia shivered all over although it was not cold. Forcing a laugh, she said, “Come here Captain, I think you are exceptionally handsome.” She was thinking of enticing him by her beauty, let the captain grovel under her flowing skirt, and then in his confused state of mind he would let her go.

The captain bowed deeply and took a step back instead. He said, “Princess please forgive me. Empress Dowager has issued an imperial decree: all the officers and men of the firearm brigade, whoever touches just one of Princess’ fingers will be beheaded immediately. If the captain is killed, deputy captain will rise to take his place; if the deputy captain is killed, the first squad’s platoon leader will rise to take his place. Everybody wants to get promoted, they are watching everybody else very closely.” Turned out the Empress Dowager had known for some time that the good-looking Sophia was a loose woman; if she did not issue this stipulation, perhaps they would not be able to lock her up.

After the captain withdrew, Sophia had no strategy left to try, she could only crouch on the bed and cry, while continuously hurling curses to Empress Dowager.

After being locked up in the Hunting Palace for many days, Wei Xiaobao saw that the Princess was throwing a temper tantrum every day, the musketeers who were guarding them were also very rude and cruel; he thought that it was only natural that a demon place like this would have demonic air. He talked it over with Shuang’er several times, they both felt that to escape from this Hunting was achievable; however, if they wanted to return to the Central Earth, it would be more difficult than difficult. If they had no one to guide them, they could be lost in the great prairie. Forget about riding on a carriage or on horseback for four to five month to reach Beijing, they would be confused and disoriented only after four or five days of travel, and would not know east from west or south from north. The two of them were at their wit’s end. With nothing better to do, Wei Xiaobao spouted nonsense endlessly just to win Shuang’er’s laughter and to

ease the load in their minds.

One particular day he was telling the story of Tang Xuanzang leading Sun Wukong, Sha Wujing and Zhu Bajie to the Western Paradise to fetch the Sutra. Wei Xiaobao said, “I’ll wager that the Western Paradise that Tang Xuanzang visited was not as far as Moscow. Therefore, I am more formidable than Tang Xuanzang. If you don’t believe me, let’s make a bet.”

Shuang’er had no interest in gambling at all; she said, “If Xianggong says that you are more formidable than Tang Xuanzang, then so be it. I don’t want to bet with you. I am not as formidable as Zhu Bajie.” While saying that, she pursed her lips and laughed.

Suddenly from the Princess’ room they heard the noise of things thrown down, the rattling of the bed, the stomping of feet, and the sound of crying. Wei Xiaobao sighed and said, “I’ll go to console her; always crying and making noise, what’s the use?” Going to the Princess’ room, he said, “Princess, don’t cry. Let me tell you some jokes.”

Sophia was lying face down on the bed, her feet kicking randomly. “I don’t want to hear, I don’t want to hear,” she said while crying, “I want the Tsaritsa [English: tsarina or czarina] to go to hell, I want Tsaritsa Natalya to go to hell.”

Wei Xiaobao did not understand the meaning of ‘Tsaritsa’, upon inquiring, he learned that it means ‘Tsar’s Mama’; instantly he was very happy. “I wonder what kind of evil person a Tsaritsa was, turns out she is the Empress Dowager,” he said, “Let me tell you: Chinese Tsaritsa was called the old wh0re; she was also a greatly evil person. Later on I thought of a way to drive her out of the Palace. The Emperor was very happy, hence he made me high-ranking official.”

Sophia was greatly delighted; she turned around and sat up. “How did you do that?” she asked.

Wei Xiaobao thought, “I expelled the old wh0re just because she was the fake Empress Dowager. Your Luocha old wh0re is actually genuine goods at fair prices, the real Tsaritsa. Naturally my way won’t work here.” He said, “I was in cahoots with the young Emperor in dealing with Chinese Tsaritsa.”

Sophia knitted her brows, “Pyotr loves his mama very much, he won’t listen to me to fight against the Tsaritsa. If only … if only …” She shook her head, got out

of bed, and paced back and forth barefooted on the carpet, while biting her lip in deep thinking.

Wei Xiaobao said, “In China we had a female emperor, called Wu Zetian[51]. This female emperor married many male empresses and male wives, she was very merry. Princess, I’ll say you are more or less the same as she was, it would be better for you to be the female Tsar.”

Sophia’s heart was moved. She had never thought about it, Luocha Country had never had female Tsar, she always thought that women could not be Tsar. If China has had female emperor, why can’t Luocha Country have female Tsar? Ever since she was kept prisoner in the Hunting Palace, she was frightened and angry; her brain had never stopped churning, but she was only thinking about how to escape the Palace. Even if she had to go east to Yakesa and be with Governor-general Galitzine, it would be much better than being imprisoned by the Empress Dowager in this place. Hearing Wei Xiaobao bringing up ‘female Tsar’ just now, it was as if a new heaven and earth had just appeared before her eyes.

She turned around, with sparkle in her eyes she placed her hands on Wei Xiaobao’s shoulders, planted a light kiss on his left cheek, and said with a smile, “If I become a female Tsar, I will make you my empress.”

Wei Xiaobao’s heart jumped in fright; he thought, “This absolutely must not happen.” He said hastily, “I, Chinese, cannot be Luocha Country’s male empress; you can make me high-ranking official.”

Sophia said, “You can be the empress and high-ranking official at the same time.”

Wei Xiaobao thought, “You don’t even know if presently your life can be guaranteed, yet you are exhausting your delight by making me the empress and high-ranking official at the same time.”

Sophia said, “Quickly think of a way to make me female Tsar.”

Wei Xiaobao frowned; speaking about important military or national matters, his knowledge and experience was indeed very shallow. Undoubtedly compared to Kangxi it was like the difference between the heaven and the earth; but

compared to Chen Jinnan, Songgotu, Wu Sangui, and the others he was still far too inferior. “Princess,” he said, “This matter is very difficult, I cannot think of anything. Let me go back to Beijing immediately, and ask our young Emperor, let him come up with an idea. And then I will come back here with a group of highly skilled people to catch that Tsaritsa Luocha old wh0re, and catch young Tsar Pyotr; it will be a great success.” When he spoke about ‘great success’, four characters [da gong gao cheng], he could not stop himself from embracing Sophia and kissing her.

“Oh,” Sophia exclaimed, “That won’t do! That won’t do! You return to Beijing and come back to Moscow, a year won’t be enough. I will be dead by then, go to Paradise.”

Wei Xiaobao thought she was right; he sighed and said, “Beautiful Princess, go to Paradise, Chinese little child high-ranking official, also go to Paradise.”

Sophia pushed him back gently, she said, “Chinese little child, know how to speak and deceive people. Joyous roar of the crowd, useless. Pat … pat cow’s buttocks, blow horse’s skin.”

Hearing her saying ‘pat horse’s buttocks, blow cow’s skin’ [both idioms mean ‘to flatter’ or ‘boot-licking’] backward, Wei Xiaobao could not help but roared in laughter. But then he saw the despising look on her eyes, obviously she was looking down on him; he was enraged. He pondered hard, “How can I make her a female Tsar? How did Wu Zetian become female emperor? There is no harm in us in Luocha Country to leave our mark in history [orig. make a stamp on the board]. Too bad it’s too far away from Beijing, there’s no way for me to ask young Emperor or Suo *Dage*.”

Wei Xiaobao’s literary knowledge came from, one, listening to the storytellers, two, watching the opera. Ever since he became a high-ranking official, he did not listen to the storytellers too much anymore, although he had watched operas more. However, he had never heard or watched the tale on how Wu Zetian became a female emperor.

Gazing out window, he stared blankly and was lost in thought. Myriads of stories and plays flashed through his mind: “Female emperor I do not know, how about the male emperors? How did they become emperors? Zhu Yuanzhang

[Ming Dynasty founder] appeared to the world by fighting, under his command there were great generals Xu Da, Chang Yuchun, Hu Dahai, Mu Ying …" He gleaned this fact from the tale 'Legend of Heroic Deed of Ming Dynasty'. He also thought, "Li Zicheng led his troops to attack Beijing, thus my Sifu's Papa, Emperor Chongzhen was forced to hang himself, and Li Zicheng became the Emperor. Qing troops then defeated Li Zicheng, old master emperor Shunzhi ascended the throne to become the Emperor. Wu Sangui wants to be the emperor; hence he raises troops to revolt. It seems that no matter who wants to be the emperor must raise arms and fight a great war, must kill until the sandstorm rolled on, until the blood flow and become a river, until the bones pile up like mountain."

As soon as he thought about war, he was scared. He thought further, "We are being locked up in here, what troops do we have? What war do we fight? If we don't fight the war, how can we become the emperor?" His knowledge of China's history was indeed very limited, he only knew that the only person who became the Emperor without fighting a war was the young Emperor Kangxi, and that was because the old Emperor left home and abdicated the throne for him. Naturally he could not use this method.

He thought further: in the many operas that he watched, there was this story 'Beheading Yellow Robe', in which the Song Dynasty Emperor Zhao Kuangyin [Song Dynasty founder] killed the great general Zheng En. His wife and children raised the troops to avenge their husband and father. Zhao Kuangyin was no match for them, he was forced to entreat piteously. He took off his yellow robe and let her chopped it with a saber into two pieces, it was considered a substitute for the Emperor to let Madame Zheng venting her anger. The Emperor was greatly humiliated.

And then there was this historical opera 'Hatred of the Deer Platform', about the tyrannical King Zhou. Jiang Taigong[52] helped raising the troops for Zhou [different spelling] Wuwang[53], forcing King Zhou to be burned to death on Deer Platform, and thus Zhou Wuwang became the Emperor. (Book note: naturally Wei Xiaobao did not know that at that time there was no 'Emperor' yet.)

How about Cao Cao[54]? How did that big white face treacherous court official

become the Emperor? The historical opera ‘Fording the River Free and Unfettered’ depicted Cao Cao leading his troops to hound Emperor Han something to death, and then he rose to the throne to be the new Emperor. The great generals under his command, Zhang somebody, and Xu somebody, were very formidable. (Book note: Wei Xiaobao remembered it wrong, Cao Cao did not become the emperor.)

And then there was Liu Bei; how did he become the Emperor? Wei Xiaobao did not know. It must be Guan Gong, Zhang Fei, and Zhao Yun helped him fighting the battle.

In short, to become the Emperor, one must fight. Even after one become the Emperor, if he was unable to defeat other people, then other people may snatch the Emperor position away, or if other people did not snatch it away, they may humiliate the Emperor and he would have bad luck.

The storytellers told the tale of ‘Military Instructor Lin’s fiery alliance with Wang Lun’ of the ‘Water Margin’ [Outlaws of the Marsh], Chao Ge wanted to become the leader of the bandits, he colluded with Lin Chong to kill the original big boss of the Liangshan Marsh, Wang Lun. It can be clearly seen that even to become the boss of the bandits, one must fight.

Seeing him gnashing his teeth and punching the air with clenched fist Sophia laughed and asked, “What are you doing?”

Wei Xiaobao was startled and awakened from his deep thought. “Want to be the Emperor, one must fight,” he said.

Sophia stared at him blankly. “Fight?” she asked, “Fight whom?”

“Naturally fight Luocha old wh0re,” Wei Xiaobao replied.

Sophia heard him saying ‘the Luocha old wh0re’ several times, but did not understand what ‘the old wh0re’, three characters [lao biao zi] mean. She was just about to ask, suddenly the door was pushed open, the firearm brigade captain entered the room. He grabbed Wei Xiaobao’s chest, while speaking some gibberish, and then dragged him out and kicked him heavily on the butts.

The captain burst into loud laughter, and sent another kick to him. Wei Xiaobao was furious, suddenly he leaped up and made somersault in the air and

landed on the captain's shoulder. It was precisely the 'Di Qing Subduing the Dragon', one of the three moves to save his life taught by Hong *Jiaozhu*. Actually, he had not trained this move perfectly, if it was used against a martial art master, it would be far too inferior; however, how could this Luocha captain know Central Earth martial art? Although Wei Xiaobao carelessly and haphazardly turned over and leaped, unexpectedly he still succeeded. With the forefinger of both hands pressed against the captain's eyes, he shouted, "Don't move! Eyes, dead!"

He wanted to say 'Don't move, otherwise I'll dig your eyes out' in Luocha language, but did not know how; without any better option, he simply said, "Eyes, dead!" But the captain's perception was not weak, unexpectedly he understood. In great shock he stopped moving altogether.

With his right hand Wei Xiaobao pulled the captain's right ear and shouted, "Go!" Then, just like riding a horse, he steered him back into the Princess' room. "Close door! Firearms, take."

Sophia was startled and delighted at the same time; busily she closed the door and took the short gun from the captain's side, and pressed it against the captain's back. Wei Xiaobao jumped down from his shoulder. He loosened the captain's waistband to tie up his feet, and then he loosened up the belt of his pants to tie his hands behind his back. As soon as the belt was taken off, the captain's pants fell down, exposing his naked lower part of the body. Sophia and Wei Xiaobao roared in laughter. The captain's entire face blushed deep red; he gnashed his teeth in extreme anger.

The door was pushed gently, Shuang'er stuck her head inside and asked, "Xianggong, is everything alright?"

Wei Xiaobao beckoned her to come in and close the door. Seeing the captain's distressed situation Shuang'er was amused and puzzled at the same time. Sophia asked, "We caught the captain, what for?"

Actually, Wei Xiaobao caught the captain simply because he was furious, he did not expect to use him for anything. But now that Sophia asked, a bright idea suddenly occurred. "Tell him to led the troops to rebel," he said. He did not know how to say the word 'rebel' in Luocha language, hence he said it in Chinese. He

also said, “Tell him to kill Tsaritsa, kill Tsar, you, become female Tsar.”

Sophia did not understand the Chinese word ‘rebel’, but she understood the sentence ‘kill Tsaritsa, kill Tsar, you, become female Tsar’ perfectly well. She was taken aback, but was immediately delighted. Turning toward the captain, she spoke some gibberish.

Wei Xiaobao did not understand a word of Luocha language the two were speaking in, but he saw the captain repeatedly shook his head; presumably he was unwilling to comply. Wei Xiaobao called out, “He doesn’t want to listen to you, kill him.” From his boot he pulled his dagger and swiped it on the captain’s left cheek. ‘Chi!’ a large clump of beard was shaved instantly.

“What a sharp dagger,” Sophia said with a laugh.

The captain was so scared that his face turned ash grey; he thought, “Turns out this little barbarian still has a dagger hidden in his leather boot; that’s really strange, why didn’t he use it that time?”

“Are you willing to surrender or not?” Sophia asked, “And support me as the female Tsar?”

The captain said, “It’s not that I don’t want to support Princess, but the troops under my command won’t possibly obey my order. Moscow has twenty firearm brigades; we are only one of them. Even if we revolt, we cannot fight the other nineteen brigades.”

When Sophia heard this, she had to agree that what he said made sense; however, she had a hard time explaining it to Wei Xiaobao. Without better option, she had to resort to sign language; when she tried to explain about the twenty firearm brigades, ten fingers were not enough, she had to take off her shoes and used her ten toes before she could count to twenty.

With great difficulty finally Wei Xiaobao was able to understand her. He thought that it was a very difficult matter indeed. Sitting on a chair, he painstakingly pondered, “This captain is unwilling to rebel, killing him would be useless.” He said to Sophia, “Captain unwilling, get the deputy captain to rebel.”

“Deputy captain?” Sophia asked.

“Right,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “Call the deputy captain.”

Sophia pushed the captain toward the door; with the gun on his back, she said, “Call the deputy captain in! If you warn him, I’ll shoot you immediately.” The captain had no choice, he called loudly to summon the deputy captain.

A moment later, the deputy captain pushed the door and came in. Shuang’er had already hidden behind the door, as soon as the deputy captain came in, Shuang’er stretched out her finger to jab at his back several times, sealing his acupoints, rendering him immovable. “Xianggong,” Shuang’er said delightedly, “Foreigner devils’ acupoints are just the same as ours; I was afraid the devils’ acupoints would be different.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Foreign devils also have eyes, have nose, have hands and feet; naturally they also have acupoints.” He drew the girdle ornament saber the captain wore on his waist, and said to Sophia, “Tell him to kill the captain and rebel. He is unwilling, call the platoon leader here to kill him.”

Sophia thought it was a wonderful idea; she said to the deputy captain, “Kill the captain, lead the firearm brigade, you become the captain, obey my command. You are unwilling to kill the captain, I’ll get the platoon leader to kill you and the captain, and I’ll make the platoon leader captain. Will you kill or not?”

“Shuang’er,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Open the acupoints on his body, but do not untie the ones on his legs.” Following Wei Xiaobao’s order, Shuang’er unsealed the acupoints on the upper part of his body; she also handed the saber over to him.

Sophia asked one more time. The captain swore and repeatedly threatened her. Ordinarily the deputy captain was not in a good term with the captain. When he was asked to rebel, he was actually scared, but hearing the captain’s malicious swearing, he thought, “If I don’t kill you, the first platoon leader who wants to be captain will definitely kill you, and then I will also lose my life.” Thereupon he raised the saber, ‘Ca!’ he chopped the captain’s head.

As the saber chopped down, Sophia, Wei Xiaobao and Shuang’er, three people cheered at once. It’s just that Sophia was cheering in Russia, “Helaxiao!” while Wei Xiaobao and Shuang’er naturally cheered in Chinese.

Sophia held the deputy captain’s hand and repeatedly praised his bravery and

loyalty. She promoted him to be the firearm brigade on the spot, saying, “Sit down, we will discuss it in details.”

The deputy captain knitted his brows; pointing to Wei Xiaobao and Shuang’er, he said, “These two foreign children used magic; the lower part of my body cannot move.”

Sophia turned to Wei Xiaobao and said, “Please, magic, gone!” Shuang’er smiled and unsealed the acupoints on the deputy captain’s lower body.

Sophia ordered the deputy captain, “Go, call three platoon leaders and their deputies, I want the Chinese children to use their magic so that their hands can move, but their legs cannot.” And she repeated her words in Chinese to Wei Xiaobao and Shuang’er.

The deputy captain complied and left. Not too long afterwards, six platoon leaders and their deputies were lining up outside the door. The deputy captain called them to come in one by one. One by one Shuang’er sealed the ‘zhi she’ [abandon hope] acupoint on their waist and the ‘huan tiao’ [jumping the hoop] acupoint on their thigh.

Sophia said, “The deputy captain is determined to support me to be the female Tsar; we are going to dispatch the troops to kill Tsaritsa. Will you obey or not?”

The six platoon leaders and their deputies saw the captain’s body lying on the floor, they knew that the situation was far from good; listening to Sophia, they were even more fearful and apprehensive, and could only looked at each other in dismay, nobody dared to say anything.

Wei Xiaobao thought, “When the Manchurian Qing entered China and robbed our rivers and mountains, in the ‘Ten Days of Yangzhou’, Tatar troops killed and burned, raped and pillaged, and thereupon the old emperor became the Emperor. Damn it, I’ll have them do ‘Ten Days of Moscow’, stir the whole country in rebellion, the more chaotic the better. Monk holding an umbrella, no hair no sky! [i.e. no protection from the law, ‘fa’ (hair) sounds like ‘fa’ (law, Buddhist teaching)] If we did not do this, how can we become the Emperor?” He said to Sophia, “Tell them to enter Moscow and fight, kill people, set fire, promise them that they will become generals and high-ranking officials, plus lots and lots of gold and silver, everybody can seize beautiful women as their wives!”

Sophia thought it was not a bad idea; she said to the deputy captain, “Go gather all the gunmen, I want to speak to them.”

More than 600 gunmen assembled on the Hunting Palace square. The deputy captain sent for twelve gunmen and had them carried the six platoon leaders and their deputies, whose acupoints were still sealed, to the square.

Sophia stood on the stone steps and spoke loudly, “Gunmen, you are Luocha Country’s brave warriors, you have rendered great merits for the country, but your pay is too low; you have no beautiful women, no money to spend, not enough wine to drink, the house you live in is too small, too uncomfortable. Inside Moscow there are many rich people, they have big houses, with lots of servants, and lots of beautiful women, which you do not have. Is this fair?”

When the numerous gunmen heard this, they all shouted together, “It’s not fair! It’s not fair!”

“Those rich people are fat and stupid,” Sophia continued, “Probably they eat fat pigs every day. If they have a duel with you, can they beat you? Can those wealthy people’s marksmanship surpass yours? Can their swordsmanship surpass yours? Have they rendered any merit to the country? To the Tsar?”

For each question she asked, the crowd of gunmen replied in loud voice, “Niante!” [I think this is supposed to be ‘nyet’, Russian word for ‘no’] Wei Xiaobao heard the crowd responding with ‘Niante’ after ‘Niante’; he knew that in Luocha language, this word means ‘no’. He did not understand what Sophia was saying, he thought the Princess was still trying to persuade the gunmen to rebel, but the crowd was unwilling to listen and obey; he could not help but was worried.

Sophia continued, “You deserve to be generals, to be rich! Each and every one of you deserves to be promoted and gain wealth.”

The crowd of gunmen cheered loudly. Someone asked, “Princess Sophia, what can you do to make us get promoted and gain wealth?”

“Do you want to be generals?” Sophia asked.

“We do!” the crowd of gunmen shouted.

“Do you want to have lots and lots of money?” Sophia asked.

“Of course we do!” the crowd of gunmen shouted.

“Do you want to have beautiful women?” Sophia asked.

The crowd of gunmen roared in laughter; “We do! We do!” they shouted even louder.

“Alright!” Sophia said, “All of you, go to Moscow, enter the city and tell the other nineteen firearm brigade that you are under Princess Sophia’s order, I am the female Tsar, the entire Luocha Country must obey my command. I am allowing you, every gunman, to pick a wealthy man’s house, challenge that big fat pig rich man for a duel; whoever can kill him, that rich man’s big house, his gold and silver, his beautiful women, carriage, steed, clothes, servants, maids, fine wine, everything will belong to that brave gunman. Do you have the guts? Are you a man, a real man? Do you dare to kill people, to seize their money, their women?”

The crowd of gunmen yelled with one voice, “We dare, we dare, we dare! Killing people, seizing their money, seizing their women, why should we be afraid?”

Sophia was greatly delighted. “That’s very good,” she shouted, “I was afraid you are all cowards, you don’t dare to do great things! Quickly get the vodka! Hey, go to the cellar, bring the best vodka out.”

There were several bottles of decades-old vodka stored in the cellar of the Tsar’s Hunting Palace, very famous and valuable; originally it was intended for the enjoyment of the Tsar, the Empress, the Princess, the Prince, as well as the aristocrats and high-ranking ministers, how could these gunmen ever have a taste? Upon hearing Sophia’s order, the crowd of soldiers exploded in cheers; immediately several dozen of them rushed to get the wine.

Shortly afterwards, the soldiers in the square drank bottle after bottle of vodka to their hearts’ content; they yelled in delight, “Sophia, female Tsar, Wula, wula, wula! Sophia, female Tsar, Wula, wula, wula!”

In Luocha tongue, ‘Wula’ means ‘long live’ [orig. ten thousand years]. Although Wei Xiaobao did not understand, seeing the crowd of soldiers yelling ‘Sophia, female Tsar, Wula, wula, wula!’ incessantly, he guessed they were giving their allegiance to her. Tugging Sophia’s sleeve, he said, “Tell them to kill the twelve

platoon leaders and their deputies, there will be no turning back." [I checked both the online text and the book, and both have 'twelve'; I think Jin Yong made a mistake here.]

Sophia nodded again and again; she called out in a loud and clear voice, "Luocha Country's handsome and strong warriors! Everybody listen to me: I order you to kill wealthy men, seize their money, seize their women, but the Tsaritsa won't allow you, she sent these scoundrels to control you so you won't commit any crime!" While saying that, she pointed to the twelve platoon leaders and their deputies.

Immediately a dozen or so gunmen drew their sabers and shouted, "Kill the scoundrels!" More than a dozen sabers chopped down, hacking the six platoon leaders and their deputies to their death.

Luocha people were originally violent and insolent; now that they drank some vodka, their body temperature rose. Immediately the flesh and blood of the twelve platoon leaders and their deputies flew everywhere; these people were even more uncontrollable. They yelled, "Kill the scoundrels, seize their money, seize their women!"

Sophia said, "Go to Moscow, tell the other nineteen firearm brigades to do this together. Whichever captain is not willing, kill him immediately. Whichever aristocrat, general, or high-ranking minister does not allow you, kill him immediately, seize the gold, silver, beautiful wives and daughters in their homes and divide it among yourselves. Set those scoundrels' homes in fire."

The crowd of soldiers cheered loudly; one after another they drew their long sabers, slung their firearms, pulled their rides, and turned around and mounted their horses. A moment later, they heard the hoof beats as the soldiers galloped toward Moscow.

Sophia said to the deputy captain, "Why don't you go too? Why be polite? The most important thing is: don't have any conflict with the other firearm brigades, everybody must fight together. You led your people into Kremlin, arrest the Tsaritsa and Pyotr. Have everybody seize all the gold, silver and jewels, and beautiful maids in the Palace, as much as possible; I am bestowing everything to you all." The deputy captain was greatly delighted; he complied and mounted his

horse and left.

Sophia sighed, she felt her entire body was devoid of any strength, she sat down on the stone steps and said, “I am so tired!”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Let me help you to rest inside.”

Sophia shook her head. After a while, she said, “Let us go to the watchtower to look.”

The entire Hunting Palace was constructed of thick granite, the watch tower was about eight or nine *zhang* high [about 80, 90 feet], it was intended to be used to observe the enemy situation. Before Luocha Country was established, it was originally called the Grand Duchy of Moscow, where Moscovian dukes and independent warlords established themselves as Tsars. The previous dynasty’s tsars was afraid that when they went hunting, the enemy would seize the opportunity to attack, therefore, they built the Hunting Palace outside the city of Moscow, so that when the enemy arrived, they would be prepared to help in defending the city.

Sophia took Wei Xiaobao and Shuang’er to climb the watchtower. Looking to the west, they faintly saw dots of light inside Moscow’s city wall. In the dark of the night, the city looked very tranquil. Sophia started to worry. “Why haven’t they fought? They, afraid?”

Wei Xiaobao did not know Luocha soldiers’ character, he was not sure if they would cower in battle or not; he had no choice but to console her, “Don’t worry, don’t worry.”

Sophia asked, “How did you know that by telling the soldiers to kill people, to seize their money and seize their women, they will kill Tsaritsa and Pyotr?”

Wei Xiaobao smiled and said, “Chinese are always like that.”

He recalled what happened in Yangzhou city in the past; he had listened when older people telling about how the Manchurian Qing soldiers besieged the city. After the Manchurian Qing entered the Pass, they met fierce resistance by the Han people in places such as Jiangsu and the others, especially Yangzhou, which held fast to their defense. The Qing army commander-in-chief hence permitted the soldiers, after they broke the city defense, to rape and pillage for a total of

ten days. This ‘Ten Days of Yangzhou’ was incomparably tragic and atrocious. Wei Xiaobao grew up in Yangzhou; how the Manchurian Qing troops besieged the city without being able to break it, how the commander-in-chief gave permission to the common soldiers to seize money and women, how the Qing troops assaulted relentlessly, he had heard all these stories since his childhood, a lot.

Afterward, when he was in Beijing, he also listened to people telling the story of how Li Zicheng’s soldiers also robbing money and seizing women; how Zhang Xianzhong[55] always promised his troops that when they broke the city’s defense, they would be allowed to plunder for three days. Apparently, if they wanted the rebellion to succeed, they must incite the whole country into rebellion. To incite the whole country into rebellion, they must allow the common soldiers to rob money and seize women. Therefore, when he saw that the firearm brigade troops did not dare to revolt, he automatically mentioned the five magic words ‘seize money seize women’ [qiang qian qiang nu ren]. Sure enough, Luocha troops and Chinese troops were just the same; as soon as the five magic words were uttered, it did work like magic.

After waiting for a long time, in the darkness they suddenly saw fire in the city of Moscow. Sophia was greatly delighted. “They have made their move!” she shouted. Hugging Wei Xiaobao, she kissed him while jumping up and down.

Wei Xiaobao happily said, “They have started the fire. This will work. Killing and burning will definitely work in tandem.”

Shortly afterwards, they saw fire sprang up everywhere in the city, black smoke arose on the east side, flame blazed on the west side. Sophia clapped her hands and cheered, “Everybody is killing and burning. Xiaobao, you are really smart, the stratagem you thought is very clever.”

Wei Xiaobao smiled; he thought, “Speaking about killing and burning, rising in rebellion, our Chinese people’s skill is a hundred times better than your Luocha demons’. What’s so strange about this stratagem? We have always done it this way.”

Sophia said, “You told everybody to kill the captain, kill the platoon leaders, everybody did not have any choice but to continue; even if they wanted to turn

back, they cannot. Little child, very smart, Chinese high-ranking official, amazing."

Wei Xiaobao said, "It is called 'throwing away one's good name/reputation' [tou ming zhuang]."

"What 'throwing/losing one's life' [diu ming shang]?" Sophia asked.

Wei Xiaobao roared in laughter, "Yes, they are throwing away their lives, they have to fight desperately." In his heart he scolded Luocha people as being unlearned.

In the Chinese *lulin* [green wood, crime world], when someone was about to join the band of bandits, the bandit chief would definitely send the new brother to make a legal case, oftentimes by killing someone. After this person committed major crime of homicide, henceforth he would not inform the authority against the band of bandits. In the 'Shui Hu Zhuan' [Water Margin/Outlaws of the Marsh], when Lin Chong went up Liangshan Marsh to join the group, Wang Lun ordered him to kill someone and hence made a legal case; it was called 'throwing away his good name'. Wei Xiaobao had heard many stories from the storytellers, he was well-accustomed to this practice; he thought, "Our Chinese people's way of doing things, Luocha demons did not understand even one. It seems that although these Luocha people are vicious, harsh and rough, in the end it's not that hard to deal with them."

Seeing the fire in Moscow was getting bigger and bigger, and it spread all over the place, Sophia started to worry again; she was not sure what the situation would be after the firearm brigades officers and soldiers finished their random killing and pillaging. She asked Wei Xiaobao, "After killing and burning, seizing money and women, and then what?"

Wei Xiaobao was taken aback; he only knew that to rebel one must incite the soldiers to kill and burn, rob money and seize women; but what happen after that, he had no idea. Without anything better to say, he said, "That? When they rob enough money, they will stop robbing. When they kill enough people, they will stop killing."

Sophia knitted her brows; she thought that it was not what she meant, but momentarily she was also left with nothing else to do. The three of them

watched for a while, and then they returned to the Palace to quietly wait for the news.

Early in the morning the next day, the deputy captain of the firearm brigade returned to the Hunting Palace, accompanied by a small group of riders, to report to Sophia: the previous night all twenty firearm brigades obeyed the female Tsar's order; they rampaged for the entire night, and gained gold, silver and beautiful women that their number cannot be counted; they had also killed the Tsaritsa Natalya.

Sophia was greatly delighted; she sprang up and called out, "Natalya is killed? How about Pyotr?"

The deputy captain said, "Little Pyotr is arrested and is being locked up in Kremlin's wine cellar."

"Helaxiao! Helaxiao!" Sophia yelled.

They heard sound of hoof beats, a large number of riders was rushing over. Sophia's countenance changed. "Who are they?" she asked in alarm.

The deputy captain replied, "Moscow's princes and dukes, cabinet ministers and generals are coming to ask Your Majesty to ascend the throne, to be Luocha Country's female Tsar."

Sophia was ecstatic; she hugged Wei Xiaobao and repeatedly kissed his cheeks left and right. "Chinese little child," she called out, "Good strategy!"

They heard the sound of hoof beats stopped outside the Hunting Palace, followed by the sound of leather boots striking the ground; a group of people entered the Palace. The leader was the chancellor, Prince Bodonich. He walked to Sophia, bowed and said, "The nobility, ministers and generals have reached unanimous agreement to ask Princess Sophia to return to the Palace to preside over the present situation, to pacify the upheaval and restore peace and order."

With smile all across her face, Sophia nodded her agreement. She asked, "The renegade faction chief Natalya, has she been killed already?"

Prince Bodonich reported, "Natalya disturbed the country, she murdered loyal subjects, she arrogated power out of selfish ambition, she harbored evil intentions. She had already obeyed the Heaven's decree and was executed to

the satisfaction of everyone."

"Very good," Sophia said, "We go to Kremlin." The numerous ministers and the firearm brigade soldiers flocked behind Sophia to go to Moscow.

In short moment, the Hunting Palace was deserted with only Wei Xiaobao and Shuang'er remained. In his heart Wei Xiaobao was furious. "Damn it," he cursed, "This Luocha Princess crossed the bridge and pulled the plank; the bride and groom entered the chamber, the matchmaker is pushed aside to the wall. She has become the female Tsar, now she does not want us."

Shuang'er smiled and said, "You want the female Tsar to make you a male empress, don't you?"

"Ah, you are making fun of me?" Wei Xiaobao said, "You think I cannot catch you?" Finished speaking, he pounced on Shuang'er. "Pfft!" Shuang'er laughed and leaped sideways to evade.

By this time it was already summer, the weather was sunny and warm, mass of flowers covered the Hunting Palace ground like brocade, hundreds of birds were singing. Only Luocha Country's flowers and plants, birds and bugs are greatly different from the ones in China, the flowers' beauty and fragrance, as well as the chirping of the birds, was considerably different. Wei Xiaobao grew up as uncouth marketplace boy, he did not pay any attention to such distinctions. Together with Shuang'er he roamed around the Hunting Palace ground, nobody came to disturb him; contrary to his expectation, he was quite enjoying himself.

After spending seven or eight days in peace and quiet, Sophia suddenly sent a squad of soldiers to take the two of them to the Palace. As Wei Xiaobao entered Sophia's bed chamber, he saw her hair was in a mess, she was walking around kicking the furniture that everything was crashing down in loud noise; she was throwing a fit. When she saw that Wei Xiaobao had arrived, immediately her face looked happy. "Chinese little child, quickly come," she called out, "Make a plan, think of a way."

In his heart Wei Xiaobao said, "If you did not come across difficult problem, you would not think of me. This time I have to knock the bamboo pole [See Chapter 10]; I should not help you thinking of any stratagem that easily." He asked, "Your Majesty Female Tsar, what difficult problem do you have?"

Sophia continuously shook her head. “I, female Tsar, no. They, don’t agree, I, female Tsar, cannot do.”

After talking for half a day Wei Xiaobao finally understood. Turned out Luocha Country had always followed the rule that women cannot be the Tsar. Although the Empress Dowager Natalya had died, a large number of generals were still throwing their support to the young Tsar Pyotr, they resolutely refused to depose him as the Tsar. By this time the riots in the city had already been stilled. Although Sophia still had the firearm brigades supporting her, the numerous ministers were well-prepared, they stationed a large number of Cossack cavalry outside the city, ready to respond by entering the city at any time. It would not be easy for Sophia to summon the firearm brigade to rise in revolution again.

For the last few days the princes and dukes, cabinet ministers and generals were having a general assembly in Kremlin, they were divided into two factions; one faction supported Sophia, the other faction supported Pyotr. Each side refused to concede to the other. The people who supported Tsar Pyotr were mostly cabinet ministers and generals who were already in power; they were afraid that when the female Tsar ascended the throne, she would stripped away their power and gave it to new people. The ones who supported Sophia were dissatisfied aristocrats and businesspeople who were hoping that with the new ruler rising to power, they would be able to fish up some oil from the water. Sophia was fortunate enough to have the firearm brigades’ support, to have the military power in her hands, so that the monarchists [‘emperor defenders’] did not dare to be reckless. But the monarchists had control over the Cossack cavalry, whose strength must not be ridiculed. If the two factions clashed, victory or defeat would be hard to tell.

Wei Xiaobao thought, “This kind of national affairs, I don’t have a clue; what kind of fart stratagem can I think of? I’d better slip away, roll the damn salted duck egg, so that when those two factions engage in free fight, Wei Xiaobao will not be blasted away and turn into Luocha caviar.”

Rolling his eyes, he said, “That’s very easy; naturally I have an idea. But I have … I want to knock on bamboo pole.” He wanted to say, ‘I have a condition’, but he did not know how to say that in Luocha language, hence he just said it in Yangzhou dialect, ‘knocking on bamboo pole’ [qiao zhu gang].

“What is ‘knocking on pig’s jar’ [also ‘qiao zhu gang’; different characters, different intonation]?” Sophia asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, “Knocking on bamboo pole is … this … the idea that I have, it’s not enough to simply give it to you. You give me something, lots and lots of things, then I will give you my idea.”

Sophia was greatly delighted. “Very good, very good,” she busily said, “Knocking on pig’s jar; we will knock on pig’s jar together! Whatever you want, I give you. You want to be my male empress?”

Wei Xiaobao was startled. “This, I do not dare to oblige, thank you,” he mused, “If I want to take a wife, Ah Ke is much better than you. Even Shuang’er that little servant girl is a lot better than you, Luocha woman whose whole body is hairy.” He laughed and said, “To be your male empress is naturally very good, but if this happens, you cannot be female Tsar.”

Hastily Sophia asked the reason. Wei Xiaobao said, “Because … this … that hot piece mama does not blossom!” [**辣块妈妈不开花** (la kuai mama bu kai hua)] Temporarily he could not think of strong enough reason, hence he simply blurted out some Yangzhou slang. How could Sophia understand something like ‘what a little darling meek, garlic chives sautéed in leek’? [I am making it up, the original is **乖乖龙的东, 猪油炒大葱** (guai guai long de dong, zhu you chao da cong), which if translated word by word won’t make any sense.]

Sophia asked, “Are you saying if Chinese man becomes male empress, Luocha people won’t be happy?”

“That’s right!” Wei Xiaobao hastily replied, “Luocha men, they say they, themselves, are good-looking, cannot be male empress. They will hate you, beat you.”

Sophia thought he was right, Luocha men would be jealous. She said, “You won’t be my male empress. Whatever else you want, I’ll give you.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “First, I want to be Luocha high-ranking official.”

“That’s easy,” Sophia replied, “After I become the female Tsar, I will bestow you the title of Earl, ruling over the eastern Tatars. You have yellow face, low nose; Tatars also have yellow face, low nose. They will submit to you.”

“Second,” Wei Xiaobao continued, “You and Chinese Emperor must not go to war. You write a letter, I will deliver it to Beijing. The female Tsar of Luocha and Chinese Emperor, be good friends, kissing each other, hugging each other. Chinese soldiers are very formidable, everybody knows magic, once they point their fingers, Luocha soldiers cannot move. If you go to war, Luocha people will die. I love you, you die, I cry!”

When Sophia heard this, she was deeply touched. Shuang’er made her move by sealing acupoints, the firearm brigade’s deputy captain and the six platoon leaders and their deputies immediately could not move; Sophia had seen it with her own eyes. She did not know that it was Chinese’s upper-class martial art skill, it was extremely difficult to learn that even Wei Xiaobao could not do it. She thought that everybody in China knew this enchantment; she thought that if she went to war against the Chinese Emperor, she would only lose without any chance of victory. She was even more touched that this Chinese little child expressed his true feeling to her; immediately she reached out to hug him and planted a deep kiss on his lips. “Chinese little child,” she said, “I love you too. Very well, Luocha troops cannot defeat Chinese troops, everybody won’t fight, we’ll be good friends.” Clicking her tongue, she kissed him again, and then asked, “What else you want to knock on the pig’s jar? Knock again, knock again!”

Wei Xiaobao thought for a while, and then said, “Nothing else.”

“Very well,” Sophia said, “Quickly teach me, how to become female Tsar.”

Wei Xiaobao thought that it was not an easy task; he had no choice but talking about this and that, inquiring the affair of the imperial court, but still could not come up with an idea, hence he pretended not to understand her.

Sophia gradually sensed that he was using deceit; her countenance turned ugly as she said, “If you lie to me, I’ll kill you.”

Wei Xiaobao was greatly anxious. “No lies, no lies!” he busily said.

Sophia said, “In that case, I want to be the female Tsar; how?”

“This … this …” Wei Xiaobao stammered.

Sophia was furious. “What ‘this’ or ‘that’?” she said, “In the court, one faction supports me, the other faction opposes me. If these two factions fought each

other and my faction lost, what do I do?”

Wei Xiaobao suddenly remember that once, the young Emperor told him that in the past, Manchurian *Taizu* Huangdi [Great Ancestor Emperor, *i.e.* the founder of the dynasty] set up four *Beilei* [see chapter 13]. The first *Beilei* was Daishan, second *Beilei* was Amin, third *Beilei* was Manggu’ertai, fourth *Beilei* was Huang Taiji[56]. (Book note: it was only natural that Wei Xiaobao was not able to remember the names of the four *Beilei* correctly.) At that time all four *Beilei* had his own power; hence there was power-struggle among them. Afterwards the fourth *Beilei* Huang Taiji won the support of the first *Beilei* Daishan, and then he was able to overpower the opposition, and was able to seize the great position. For this reason Daishan still had a tie with the throne, and was able to maintain his power somewhat. The prominent Prince Kang was precisely Daishan’s descendant.

Thinking about this matter, he said, “Don’t fight, take your time. You and Pyotr can be the Tsars. In the future, the cabinet ministers and generals who oppose you, one by one, you can kill slowly. And then you can kill Pyotr, and be the female Tsar.”

Sophia thought that this idea was actually very brilliant, but the ministers repeatedly said that women could not be Tsar; she was exasperated, hence she told Wei Xiaobao the situation.

Wei Xiaobao thought that when the Qing Dynasty was first founded, Emperor Shunzhi was still a young emperor; the real power lay on the Regent Dorgon’s hands. Thereupon he said, “You cannot be the female Tsar, you can become the Prince Regent first.”

“What is Prince Regent?” Sophia asked.

“Prince Regent is not the Tsar,” Wei Xiaobao explain, “But he can issue a decree to kill people, beat people’s buttocks, can give reward, promote their official position. Tsar, fake, no power. Prince Regent, real, has power; can kill people, beat people’s buttocks, can promote their official position, can give rewards, everybody is afraid, everybody listen to Prince Regent, does not listen to the Tsar.”

Sophia was greatly delighted. “Helaxiao! Helaxiao!” she shouted.

The number of princes, dukes and generals who supported Sophia was actually in the minority. Sophia summoned the leaders into the Palace to discuss the strategy presented by Wei Xiaobao. Sophia had the military leadership of Moscow in her side, but she could not ascend the throne to become female Tsar, the main reason being because there was no precedent. When the numerous ministers heard the idea of 'regency', they thought that it was a brilliant strategy. As long as they had the power in their hands, becoming the Tsar or not would not make any difference.

After deliberating for quite a while, they came up with another idea: set up Sophia's sibling, younger brother Ivan as the senior Tsar, let Pyotr still be the Tsar, but he was the junior Tsar. Senior and junior Tsars ruled side-by-side, to avoid opposition from the faction of supporters of Pyotr. Princess Sophia became the 'Queen Regent', she would handle all imperial court politics.

As soon as the decision was made, Sophia immediately gathered the firearm brigades, and summoned all princes, dukes and ministers, and declared the new system. She also made a guarantee to all ministers that no one would be recalled or removed from his post, and that everybody who supported the new system would be promoted and rewarded. Seeing that their authority and interest would not be harmed, plus the previous dynasty's custom would not be broken, none of the numerous princes, dukes and ministers raised any objection.

Someone from the 'Sophia supporter faction' took the initiative to step forward and bow to Queen Regent Sophia; the rest of the people followed. Sophia was greatly delighted, she sent someone to invite her younger brother Ivan, and release the Junior Tsar Pyotr from the wine cellar, and have the two of them sat side-by-side as the Tsars; while she herself sat on the right hand seat of her two younger brothers. The hundreds of ministers' affairs: memorial to the throne, promotion and reward, dismissal and appointment, everything was adjudicated by the Queen Regent. That time Ivan was sixteen, Pyotr was ten; they were young and their knowledge shallow, in everything they listened to their elder sister's advice.

Sophia was in a position of power; she thought that in this matter, that Chinese little child high-ranking official had rendered a great service. If he did not repeatedly come up with these several ingenious ideas, at this time she would

have been still locked up in the Hunting Palace, and then several months later, most probably the Empress Dowager Natalya would force her to leave the secular world to become a nun and would be hidden and locked up in some convent for the rest of her life. Thinking about this tragic fate, the warm sunny days would immediately turn into severe winter. Immediately she sent for Wei Xiaobao and praised him greatly.

Wei Xiaobao thought, those methods of mine are not the least bit special to Chinese people; in China, I was a stinky cobbler, but in Luocha Country, I turned into Zhuge Liang, this is really funny. He was thinking of tooting his horn a bit, but then he suddenly realized that it was not a good idea; if from now on this Luocha Princess wants me to be the 'Luocha Zhuge Liang', and wants me to remain by her side and will never allow me to return home, won't it be desperately serious? Therefore, he said, "Lady Queen Regent, you have become the Regent, to become female Tsar in the future is very easy. Only you must observe one thing, and everybody will submit to you."

"What is it?" Sophia asked, "Tell me quickly."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Once you give your word, three-horse chariot cannot pursue it." Actually, Luocha people's horse-drawn carriage only used three horses to pull, unlike Chinese carriages, which used four horses. For this reason, Chinese saying 'a team of four horses cannot pursue', in Luocha Country it became 'three-horse chariot cannot pursue'.

Sophia did not understand. "What is 'three-horse chariot cannot pursue'?" she asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Once you gave your word, you must keep your promise. In China, our Emperor's words are called the Emperor's golden mouth, he must never go back on it."

Sophia was suddenly enlightened; she laughed and said, "My promise to you, you are afraid I might renege, aren't you? My darling Chinese little child, Luocha Queen Regent's word is precious stone mouth; it is more precious than your Chinese Emperor's golden mouth."

Immediately she proclaimed an edict in the name of the senior and junior Tsars, conferring Wei Xiaobao the title of Earl, governing the Eastern Tatar. She

also ordered a minister to write an imperial document to be delivered to the Chinese Emperor. She sent Wei Xiaobao off, accompanied by a Russian ambassador, escorted by two squads of Cossack cavalry, bringing gold, silver and precious objects, and not a few of rewards. The several tens of thousands *taels* banknotes that Wei Xiaobao bribed her was returned to him. In addition, she also sent a lot of presents to the Chinese Emperor, such as mink fur, precious stones and other Luocha Country special products.

By this time Sophia had already picked several good-looking Luocha Country men to accompany her, so she was not intimate with Wei Xiaobao anymore. But when the day Wei Xiaobao was taking his leave arrived, Sophia remembered the affection of the past several months, she was also grateful for his great merit in establishing her as the ruler, hence she was really reluctant to part with him.

According to Russian true historical record, the firearm brigades' rebellion lasted for three days between the fifteenth and the seventeenth of the fifth month. By the twenty-ninth of the fifth month, the firearm brigades, under Sophia's prompting, presented a petition requesting Ivan and Pyotr to be joint Tsars, and asked Sophia to be the Princess Regent, adjudicating the military and national affairs. By the time the chaos was resolved, it was already the middle of the sixth month.

The weather was sunny and warm; Wei Xiaobao was striding over a fine horse, under the protection of two squads of Cossack cavalry, speeding eastwards along the great Siberian prairie. The gentle breeze stroked his face; the sound of hoof beats filled his ears. Glancing to his left he saw his smart servant girl Shuang'er, with skin as white as snow and lips like cherry. Looking to his right he saw the Luocha Country Ambassador with his bluish green eyes and yellow beard. Mink fur and gifts, in fully loaded carts, followed behind them. Wei Xiaobao was extremely high-spirited; he thought, "This time I escape alive from mortal danger, not only my little life is protected, I also rendered great service to the Luocha Princess; and it was all because *laozi* had heard many stories and watched a lot of plays."

China has been established for several thousand years, in terms of struggles to gain imperial power as the emperor, rebellion and massacre, it has abundant experience, unequalled throughout world. What Wei Xiaobao knew was

superficial knowledge circulated among the common people, yet it was enough to strike awe in foreign land; unexpectedly he was able to help someone scheming against the imperial court and usurping the throne, bringing peace and order to the country.

Actually, this matter was not surprising at all; the founding commander-in-chief of the Manchurian Qing was an uncouth, unlearned man. The strategies he used in marching the troops into battle mainly came from the novel 'The Romance of The Three Kingdoms'. In those years *Qing Taizong* [founder of Qing Dynasty] employed the stratagem of sowing dissension, he swindled Emperor Chongzhen into destroying the Great Wall by killing his great general Yuan Chonghuan. The stratagem was copied from the story in 'The Romance of The Three Kingdoms', in which Zhou Yu ordered Cao Cao to behead his own navy's commanding officer.

In the real historical record, Zhou Yu swindling Cao Cao into killing his naval unit commander did not exist; it was fabricated by the novel writer. Unexpectedly, later on the novelist's words became a fact, shaping China's destiny for several hundreds of years. The things in life are strange, even stranger than the story in the novel. After the Manchus entered the Pass, they opened up new territory and expanded their lands, tripling the original China's territory during the Ming Dynasty, far surpassed the Tang Dynasty, where the history of Han people was at its peak. Until today, the merit of novel, play, storytelling, *et cetera* has not died.

(Book note: Russian gunmen rebellion, Ivan and Pyotr, Senior and Junior Tsars' co-existence, Sophia became Queen Regent, and so on, were historical facts. However, Wei Xiaobao's involvement in this matter was considered by Russian people to be morally offensive and brought disgrace to their national prestige; therefore, history books did not have any written account on this matter. In the meantime, since Chinese court recorders have not witnessed it, plus it was a strange occurrence in some barbarian foreign land, it was considered nothing more than hearsay, not suitable to be recorded in China's history, so much so that this matter had passed into oblivion.)

Chapter 37

Whoever in Yamen submits a plan to pacify the barbarian, the imperial court will suggest to send out an Imperial Edict of Sichuan Document first.

(Translated by Foxs)

Wei Xiaobao took a brocade bag from his pocket and held it up high above his head. Everybody could see that the bag was embroidered with four red characters, 'Ping Xi Wang Fu'. He opened up the bag's mouth and poured out the contents, several dozens of valuable objects scattered on the Hall's floor. The pearls sparkled the gems shone, the light dazzled everybody's

eyes.

One day Wei Xiaobao and the Luocha Country Ambassador arrived in Beijing. Seeing his return, Prince Kang, Songgotu and all the other princes, dukes and ministers were surprised and delighted at the same time. Ever since he went out to sea with the Navy, nobody knew his whereabouts. Several times the imperial court sent expeditions trying to locate him, all came back saying that on the boundless ocean there was no track of him at all, unexpectedly not a single battleship, not a single soldier came back. Kangxi thought that the fleet came across hurricane in the ocean and everybody perished; each time he remembered this, he was always downhearted. As the news reached the Palace, Kangxi immediately summoned Wei Xiaobao for an audience.

Wei Xiaobao saw smile all across Kangxi's whole face; after kowtowing to him, Wei Xiaobao summarized his experience straight away. This time Kangxi sent him out to sea, the primary mission was to exterminate Divine Dragon Cult and capture the fake empress dowager. At this moment, as he heard that the Divine Dragon Cult was destroyed, although the fake empress dowager had not been captured, they had forged an alliance with the Luocha Country. Ever since Kangxi interrogated Hantiemo, the Mongolian envoy who was sent to visit Kunming, and learned that Wu Sangui was colluding with Luocha Country, Mongolia, and Tibet, three strong allies, Kangxi was deeply concerned. As for Shang and Geng, two border defenses, as well as Taiwan rebel Zheng Clan, he merely consider them as secondary. Seeing Wei Xiaobao returned safe and sound, he was already genuinely delighted, now that he learned about the arrival of the Luocha Country Ambassador to cultivate friendship, he was even more pleased. Busily he asked for more details.

Wei Xiaobao told him from head to tail, about how he taught Sophia to instigate the firearm brigades to rebel, how he taught her to set up two little Tsars, while she herself became the regent. Kangxi laughed aloud and said, "Damn it, you have learned our Great Qing's shrewdness, and was able to teach this Luocha Country's female demon."

The next day during the morning audience, Kangxi summoned the Luocha Country Ambassador. In the imperial court, Wei Xiaobao was the only one who understood Luocha language. Actually, Luocha language was very difficult to

learn, in those short several months, he only learned limited numbers of Luocha words, while the Luocha Country Ambassador's words were full of eulogy. Out of ten words, he did not understand nine of them. Taking advantage of the fact that the others did not understand either, he fabricated the speech, he went as far as to recite the inscription made up by Lu Gaoxuan the other day, such as 'In a thousand years, the Great Qing will be loved', and 'its supernatural spirit reaches out to relieve, its grand, awe-inspiring might is all powerful'; subsequently he recited several sentences.

While reciting, he stole a glance to see Kangxi's expression, but he saw Kangxi was beaming with smile; hence Wei Xiaobao knew that the inscription had come in useful. Thereupon he continued with a loud voice, "Subduing monsters conquering demons like a rising sun. The feathered wings support his rule, breathing out stale air and breathing in fresh air. Ten thousands luck a hundred good fortune, there will never be a year without plentiful harvest. Immortal happiness will be enjoyed forever, all the world will venerate. Its long life will be the same as the Heaven's, a kind sage of both pen and sword. In a moment, in the sky …"

As the words 'in the sky' came out of his mouth, he stopped talking immediately; thinking that if he continued, he would expose the fox's tail[57]. Therefore, he said, "Luocha Country young Tsar, the Queen Regent, respectfully wish Chinese Great Emperor, the Lord of Ten Thousand Years, the Holy Sage, good health."

These sentences were originally composed by Lu Gaoxuan as a eulogy to the Cult Leader Hong, and now Wei Xiaobao recited it out; although it felt a bit nondescript, but 'all the world will venerate', or 'sage of both pen and sword' and so on were well-disposed praise and good wishes. As they heard it, the numerous ministers repeatedly nodded their heads.

Kangxi knew that in his belly Wei Xiaobao did not have this kind of speech, he did not have these ancient and elegant sentences, hence it was impossible that he translated these sentences on the spot; Kangxi guessed that Wei Xiaobao must have asked the gunmen to translate in advance, and then recited it in the Palace. Kangxi would never have guessed that it was originally praise to the cult leader of a heretical cult; Wei Xiaobao was simply using it like 'grafting flowers

onto a tree', or 'leading away a goat in passing'[58].

Immediately the Luocha Country Ambassador presented the gifts. Luocha Country was even colder than Liaodong, the black fox and mink furs it produced were even more gorgeous and richer than Liaodong products. Manchu high-ranking officials were people who can judge the quality of goods; as soon as they saw it, no body did not utter praise. Immediately Kangxi ordered Wei Xiaobao to receive the gifts properly and prepare Chinese gifts in return.

After the morning audience was over, Kangxi summoned Tang Ruowang and Nan Huairen, two people, he ordered them to see the Luocha Country Ambassador. Nan Huairen was a Belgian, whose language was similar to French. The Luocha Country Ambassador could speak French, hence the two of them were able to communicate. Nan Huairen praised Kangxi's brilliance and benevolence, which was seldom found among the monarchs since times immemorial. He told other things so that the Luocha Country Ambassador was convinced.

The next day, Kangxi ordered Tang Ruowang and Nan Huairen, two people to demonstrate the cannon on Nanyuan [lit. southern park], and then, along with Wei Xiaobao, he accompanied to Luocha Country Ambassador for an inspection. Seeing the sharpness and accuracy of the cannon, he was inwardly quite impressed. He asked Nan Huairen to convey to the Emperor that the Queen Regent of Luocha Country was determined to cultivate friendship with China, and to be nation brothers forever.

After the Luocha Country Ambassador took his leave and returned to his country, Kangxi recalled that Wei Xiaobao went to a military campaign this time, he managed to get rid of two strong allies of Wu Sangui in one stroke, his merit was indeed not small. Thereupon Kangxi issued an edict to grant Wei Xiaobao the title of First Class Loyal and Brave Count. Immediately the princes, dukes and cabinet ministers thronged to congratulate him.

Wei Xiaobao remembered Shi Lang, Regional Commander Huang, and the others, who, unexpectedly, not a single person returned. He presumed it was because their commander-in-chief went missing on the sea. He was the number one favorite of the Emperor, the person closest to him. If the Emperor was

furious, he might charge them with ‘fault in military operation, shrinking back on approaching the battlefield, crime for letting the commander-in-chief fallen into the deathtrap’, et cetera, all kinds of criminal charges added together, so that everybody was afraid to be beheaded, hence they wander destitute around the Tong Chi Island and did not dare to come back.

When the Manchurians sent the troops for the first time, their military law was extremely strict; when they went to war, if the captain of a unit died in battle, and the troops shrank back and ran away, frequently the entire unit would be executed. Even until the Manchus enters the peaceful years, this law still existed; for this reason, Manchurian troops were very refined and unrivalled. Thereupon Wei Xiaobao sent out two envoys toward Tong Chi Island and Shen Long Island, to summon Shi Lang and the others back to the Capital.

One day Kangxi summoned Wei Xiaobao to the Upper Study Room. Pointing to three memorials lying on the desk, he said, “Xiao Guizi, these three memorials came from three different places; can you guess whose memorials these are?”

Wei Xiaobao craned his neck to look at the three memorials; but he did not see anything that would give him any clue. “Your Majesty must give me a bit of clue, then your servant can guess well,” he said.

Kangxi smiled; he raised his right palm and made chopping gestures, as if he was beheading someone, three times. Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Ah, that’s right; it must be that big … big treacherous officials Wu Sangui, Shang Kexi and Geng Jingzhong, those three fellows’ memorial.”

Kangxi laughed. “You are very smart,” he said, “Guess again: what do these three memorials say?”

Wei Xiaobao scratched his head. “It’s very hard to guess,” he said, “Did those three memorials arrive at the same time?”

“Some arrived earlier than the other,” Kangxi replied, “But the difference is not much.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Those three treacherous officials are harboring malicious intentions, they must have the same ideas; your servant guesses that the content of the memorials are more or less the same.”

Kangxi lightly patted the memorials on the desk and said, “Precisely. The first memorial arrived was from that old fellow Shang Kexi. He said that he is old, and wanted to return to Liaodong. He asked to have his son, Shang Zhixin to replace him in guarding Guangdong. I wrote a comment on the memorial: if Shang Kexi wants to return to Liaodong, he does not need to leave his son in Guangdong. When Wu Sangui and Geng Jingzhong heard the news, one after another they also submitted memorial to the throne.”

Picking up a memorial, Kangxi said, “This one is the old fellow Wu Sangui’s. He said, ‘For twenty years the minister has received the Heaven’s kindness, with wasted contribution it is hard to repay; only wearily guarding the border for a period of time, how can I dare to ask rest from responsibility? Today I heard Ping Nan Wang [king who pacify the south] Shang Kexi has given a full account in a memorial to the Emperor, and has already received favor, to be allowed to withdraw completely from guarding the border. Relying on great compassion, I boldly ask the Heaven to listen, asking to be removed from this assignment.’ Humph, he is testing me, he wants to see whether I dare to remove him from guarding the border? He is not doing it alone, he must have communicated with Shang Kexi and Geng Jingzhong, the three of them together trying to scare me!”

Kangxi picked up another memorial and said, “This one is Geng Jingzhong’s. He said, ‘Minister has held two hereditary rank of nobility simultaneously, my heart longs for the Emperor’s imperial city watchtower, only because of the ocean atmosphere I dare not suddenly ask to cease leading the troops. Recently I saw Ping Nan Wang Shang Kexi submitted a memorial begging to return, and has received the imperial decree. Remembering that minister has led officers and men into punitive expedition to the south for more than twenty years, I am looking up in earnest on the Emperor’s kindness, asking to be removed from this assignment.’ One in Yunnan, the other in Fujian, separated by ten thousand *li*, how could the wording of these two letters be similar? In one hand they say they must not cease leading the troops, on the other hand they beg to withdraw. These fellows, do you think they still have me in their eyes?” While saying that, he angrily tossed the memorials unto the desk.

“That’s right,” Wei Xiaobao said, “These three memorials contain heresy and treason, it is actually rebellion’s war declaration. Your Majesty, we dispatch the

troops, seize the three rebel thieves and bring them to the Capital, the whole families … humph, the whole family, the males must be killed, the females must be given to meritorious ministers as slaves." He was about to say 'the whole family must be executed unto the third generation', but suddenly remembered Ah Ke and Chen Yuanyuan; thereupon midway he changed his statement.

Kangxi said, "If we dispatch the troops, we will give the common people of the world a reason to say that I slaughter meritorious ministers; to say that the birds are no more, the bow is put away; the rabbit is dead, the dog is boiled alive. It would be better to remove their posts as border defense, and see what those three men would react. If they obey the Emperor's decree and withdraw from the border, respectfully and submissively obey the Mandate of Heaven, so be it; otherwise, if they deploy the troops to battle, I will have enough reason to send the troops on a punitive expedition."

"Your Majesty prophecy with supernatural accuracy, your servant has only utmost admiration," Wei Xiaobao said, "It's just like in the opera: Your Majesty asked: 'Who's there kneeling down?' Wu Sangui replied, "Minister Wu Sangui is here to have an audience with the Emperor.' Your Majesty shouted, 'How dare you Wu Sangui, why don't you look up?' Wu Sangui said, 'Minister is guilty and does not dare to look up.' Your Majesty said in singing, 'What offense have you committed?' Wu Sangui replied, 'Your servant is unwilling to withdraw from the border, I want to revolt.' Your Majesty shouted, "Ay, what a brazen thing! Wei Xiaobao!' And then I strode into the stage and sank to my knees, saying, '*Xiao Jiang* [little general, referring to self] is here!' Your Majesty called out, 'Here is the arrow banner of command! I send you to lead a hundred thousand troops to suppress the rebel thief Wu Sangui!' Your servant received the arrow banner of command, and called out, 'I obey!' and my leg flew, kicking Wu Sangui on his buttocks; immediately Wu Sangui was kicked around that he piss in his pants in terror. All is lost!"

Kangxi roared in laughter. "You want to lead the troops to attack Wu Sangui?" he asked.

Wei Xiaobao could see the teasing in Kangxi's eyes, hence he knew the young Emperor was just joking. He said, "Your servant is so young, and has no ability at all, how can I lead the army? It would be best if Your Majesty personally

becomes the Grand Marshal, I will become your vanguard officer; coming across a mountain I will open up a path, encountering water I will build a bridge. Majestically we will rush to Yunnan to strike."

Listening to him, Kangxi's heart leaped in excitement, thinking that if the Emperor personally leads his troops into battle against Wu Sangui, it would be so much fun. He said, "Let me give it a careful thought."

Early morning the next day, Kangxi convened the princes, dukes and cabinet ministers at the Hall of Supreme Harmony to discuss military and national affairs. Although Wei Xiaobao had been promoted several ranks in succession, his official position in the imperial court was still low; actually, he was not qualified to participate in discussion of national affairs at the Hall of Supreme Harmony. Kangxi issued a special decree, saying that since Wei Xiaobao was sent as the imperial envoy to Yunnan, he was privy of Border Defense Wu's inside information, hence he was summoned to accompany the Emperor in this high-level meeting.

The young Emperor was seated on the dragon chair, *Qin Wang* [prince, royal blood], *Jun Wang* [prince, not of royal blood], *Bei Lei* [see chapter 13], *Bei Zi* [son of Beilei], Prime Minister, Cabinet Ministers, and other high-ranking officials were standing according to their rank, Wei Xiaobao stood at the very end of the line.

Kangxi handed over Shang Kexi, Wu Sangui, Geng Jingzhong's, three memorials to the Hall of Central Harmony's [Zhong He Dian] *Da Xue Shi* [lit. senior ministerial of great learning], who simultaneously acting as the Director of Board of Rites, Batai; he said, "Three border defenses submitted memorial, pleading to be removed from the border. How we should respond, everybody present me your own memorial."

After the various princes, dukes and ministers read and circulated the memorials, Prince Kang Giyesu said, "Reporting to Your Majesty: in your servant's humble opinion, the three border defenses pleading to be removed from the border, it was not due to their own conscience; it seems that they are merely feeling out the imperial court."

"How did you see it?" Kangxi asked, "Explain."

Giyesu said, “In these three memorials, they all said that the responsibility over local military affairs is heavy, they did not dare to depart without authority. Since they knew that the military affair is a heavy responsibility, why would they plead to withdraw from the border? Obviously it is self-contradictory.” Kangxi nodded.

The Hall of Preserving Harmony’s [Bao He Dian] *Da Xue Shi* Wei Zhouzuo was a very old man with white hair and white beard; he said, “In minister’s humble opinion, the imperial court should issue a warm imperial decree to comfort and exhort them, saying that the three border defenses’ meritorious service were outstanding, His Imperial Majesty rely heavily upon them, they must do their jobs diligently, acting as the screen to guard the border. The matter of withdrawing from the border need not be considered.”

Kangxi said, “So in your opinion, the three border defenses should not be removed from their posts?”

Wei Zhouzuo said, “The Holy Sage [referring to the Emperor] understands it very well: Lao-tze[59] said, ‘Fine soldier is inauspicious’; even if they are good soldiers, they are still inauspicious. Some critics said that the character ‘fine’ (佳) was an error, it should be ‘only’ (惟); thus it should say ‘only soldier is inauspicious’, then it will be even clearer. Laozi had another saying, ‘troops are inauspicious tool, the wrong tool of a nobleman, to be used against his will’.”

Wei Xiaobao was inwardly bewildered, “This old fellow is so brazen; in the Emperor’s presence he unexpectedly dared to say *Laozi* this and *Laozi* that. And the Emperor is not angry.” He did not know that this ‘laozi’ was a sage of antiquity, Li Er, not the ‘laozi’ [I, your father] used jocularly by the people of the marketplace to refer to themselves.

Kangxi nodded and said, “Troops are vicious, battles are dangerous; the ancient has clear examples. When there was military expedition, inevitably the living thing would turn into charcoal. So you say that if *Zhen* issue a warm imperial decree to comfort and exhort them, not allowing them to withdraw from the border, this matter will be settled?”

The *Da Xue Shi* of Hall of Literary Glory [Wen Hua Dian] Dui Kana said, “Please Your Majesty understand: since Wu Sangui guarding Yunnan, that region is

peaceful, the barbarians do not dare to disturb, the southern part of our Dynasty does not have any trouble. If he is relocated to Liaodong, perhaps Yunnan and Guizhou will suffer. If the imperial court does not allow him to withdraw from the border, Wu Sangui will be grateful and will strive to repay the kindness, Geng and Shang, two border defenses, as well as the Kong army of Guangxi, will definitely look up to respect the Heaven's kindness. Henceforth the Yellow River is clear and the sea is calm, the whole world is at peace."

Kangxi said, "You are very much afraid that after the border defense is removed, the southwest region will lack a strategic town, and perhaps there would be foreign invasion?"

"Yes," Dui Kana said, "Wu Sangui's troops and defense is highly perfected, it usually is prestigious, the barbarians are afraid and submit to him. Once this defense is removed, whether it will bring good fortune or calamity, it will be hard to predict. In minister's humble opinion, one more problem we have is not as good as one less problem."

Minister of Revenue Mi Sihan said, "Since the ancient time the Holy Sages ruling the country, they always esteem Huang Lao's technique [not sure]. When Western Han governed the world, they abide by the rules laid down by their predecessor, seeking peace and inaction [referring to Taoist doctrine of inaction] in politics. Your Majesty is an enlightened sage, your virtue is nearing the Three Sovereigns, who is rarely matched even by people in the most flourishing period of Han and Tang. In the years that Your Majesty rises in position, you grasp the political power, give the people rest, and harmonize the four barbarians; all the world is grateful for your kindness. In minister's shallow opinion, the matter of the three border defenses can only be handled according to the old rule, there is no need to restring our bow by having a reform and start all over again, since right now we have favorable weather for the crops, the country prospers, the people at peace. The Holy Son of Heaven rules by hanging down the bow, there is no need to entertain such thought."

Kangxi asked *Da Xue Shi* Du Lide, "What do you think?"

Du Lide said, "The three defenses were originally established as a reward and an opportunity to render merit. Right now the three defenses do not have any serious offense, if they are suddenly withdrawn, I am afraid there will be

ignorant people who will say that the imperial court fails to be lenient toward former minister who has given outstanding service, perhaps there will be someone who would hinder the Sage's court political aspiration."

After much discussion, the princes, dukes and cabinet ministers all stated their position that the border defenses must not be removed.

Listening to all these people's speech, where everybody dropped quotations to appear learned, although he did not understand what they were saying, Wei Xiaobao knew that everybody advised against removing the border defenses; in his heart he was anxious. Busily he tried to attract Songgotu's attention and signaled him with his eyes, while slightly shaking his head, hinting him to speak against everybody else's proposition.

Seeing him shaking his head, Songgotu misunderstood his meaning, he thought that Wei Xiaobao also advised him to oppose the removal of the defense. He thought that Wei Xiaobao understood clearly the Emperor's true regard, and he noticed how Kangxi showed neither approval nor disapproval to the discussion, he presumed the young Emperor must be afraid to fight with Wu Sangui. Songgotu said, "Wu, Shang, and Geng, three people are adept at using military force, if the imperial court removes the border defense, and in spite of everything the three defenses refuse to accept orders, Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangdong, Fujian, and Guangxi, five provinces deploy their troops at the same time, perhaps there will be other rebels responding by sending out their troops, it won't be easy to deal with. In your servant's opinion, Wu Sangui and Shang Kexi are already old, they won't live too much longer, there is no harm in waiting a few more years, let those two people die of old age. The three defenses' veterans of a hundred battles, a large number of the old troops and veteran generals will also die; if the border defense is removed at that time, our chance of victory will increase a lot."

Kangxi smiled and said, "That is the plan coming from your experience and knowledge."

Songgotu thought the Emperor was praising him; busily he kneeled down and kowtowed to express his gratitude. "In discussing the important matter of the country, your servant does not dare not to be completely loyal and exhaust all considerations to come up with a completely safe plan."

Kangxi asked *Da Xue Shi* Tu Hai, “You are skilled with both the pen and sword, have deep understanding of three military strategies and six plans, adept at maneuvering troops; what do you think of this matter?”

“Your servant’s talent and wisdom is mediocre, it was all due to Your Majesty’s grace that I am promoted to this position,” Tu Hai replied, “Your Majesty can see clearly for ten thousand *li*; imperial court’s military forces are in excellent condition, if the three defenses have rebellious intention, they won’t be a major problem. It’s just that if all tens of thousands people under the three defenses’ command depart for Liaodong at the same time, we have to carefully consider one thing.”

“What matter we have to consider carefully?” Kangxi asked.

Tu Hai said, “Liaodong is the place where our Great Qing originated, the place where our ancestors and predecessors were buried; if the three defenses indeed have disloyal intention, tens of thousands people making a ruckus and acting unreasonably in Liaodong, it would not be easy to guard against.”

Kangxi nodded. Tu Hai continued, “If the three border defenses’ troops withdraw from their original posts, the imperial court must deploy other military forces toward Yunnan, Guangdong and Fujian to be stationed there. Several tens of thousands large army moving north, several tens of thousands large army moving south, no matter how you look at it, it is a great waste of resources, undoubtedly there will be trouble in those places. The three border defenses’ troops have been quite harmonious with the local people for quite some time, and there is no news of any conflict. Guangdong and Fujian’s dialect is very strange and unusual, when the new army arrived, they have to adjust, everybody can’t understand each other, the custom is different, perhaps it will stir up mass uprising; and then Your Majesty’s sacred intention to love common people as your own children would be harmed.”

The more Wei Xiaobao listened, the more anxious he was; he knew the young Emperor had made up his mind to remove the border defense, yet each and everyone of the princes, dukes, and cabinet ministers was timid and was afraid of getting involved. His own official position was too low, in term of age, he was too young, he could not speak rubbish in the imperial court; hence he was in a very difficult position.

Kangxi asked the high official of the Ministry of War, Ming Zhu, “Ming Zhu, this is the Ministry of War’s business. What do you think?”

Ming Zhu replied, “The Holy Sage Son of Heaven is very bright, you stand tall and see far, your view of this matter is a hundred times better than the ministers. After giving this matter a careful consideration, your servant thinks that removing the border defense has some advantages, but not removing the border defense also has its own advantages; in my heart I find it difficult to make up my mind, for several days I lost sleep over this matter. Afterward I suddenly recalled something, and then I was relieved immediately, and last night I was able to fall asleep. Your servant thought that Your Majesty has given this matter meticulous consideration. All the thoughts that the ministers have, Your Majesty has already foreseen each and everyone accurately. The stratagems that all your servants could think of, even if it were more brilliant, it would not be more brilliant than Your Majesty’s direction. Your servant only has to listen to Your Majesty’s instruction on how to handle this matter. Whatever Your Majesty say, all your servants need to do is advance bravely with dead heart, without any plan for anything new. In the end we will definitely obtain great luck, great profit, and have everything our hearts desire.”

As soon as Wei Xiaobao heard this, he was admired him greatly; he mused, “All these civil and military ministers of the court, nobody surpasses this fellow’s skill in becoming a government official. This man’s skill in bootlicking has reached perfection; *laozi* should do obeisance to him and take him as my master. In the future this fellow’s career will enjoy meteoric rise; his scholarly achievement, fame and honor will be immeasurable.”

Kangxi smiled and said, “I asked you to think of an idea, not to sing praises.”

Ming Zhu kowtowed and said, “Holy Sage, please understand: your servant is not singing the praise, it was really the truth. Ever since the Ministry of War learned the news about the instability of the three border defenses, day and night your servant was anxious, thinking about how to deal with this matter. If by any chance we must use military force, how to move the troops and send the generals. If we want to assure victory, we must let the Master not to have the least bit of worry. However, after thinking back and forth, in all honesty the Master is simply too brilliant, while your servants are too worthless. We rack our

brains painstakingly, the end result will definitely be inferior to Your Majesty's casual thought. The Holy Sage Son of Heaven is the crape myrtle star descending to the world, naturally not someone ordinary people like your servant could even reach. For this reason, your servant thought that as long as Your Majesty issues your order, I am sure it will be the best. Even if your servants do not understand, as long as we do it with all our hearts, in the end we will see the light."

When the numerous ministers heard this, they all cursed him in their hearts as being shameless, flattering the Emperor in front of everyone else, being completely unscrupulous; yet they had no choice but to parrot him.

Kangxi said, "Wei Xiaobao, you have been to Yunnan, let me hear your thought: how should we deal with this matter?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "Your Majesty, please understand: your servant does not understand national affairs, it's just that Wu Sangui has spoken a few words to your servant. He said, 'Wei *Dutong*, if there is some unforeseen event in the future, you don't have to worry. Your *Dutong* [commander] position can only go up, not go down.' Your servant did not understand, hence I asked, 'What unforeseen event in the future?' Wu Sangui laughed and said, 'When the moment comes, you will naturally know.' Your Majesty, Wu Sangui is thinking of rebelling. This matter is absolutely true; right now I am afraid he has already prepared the dragon robe. He compared himself as a fierce tiger, and compared Your Majesty as a black-naped oriole."

Kangxi knitted his brows slightly, "What fierce tiger, black-naped oriole?" he asked.

Wei Xiaobao kowtowed several times and said, "That servant Wu Sangui has spoken a good deal of treason and heresy talks, your servant will not dare to repeat it no matter what."

"You'd better repeat it," Kangxi said, "It's not like you are speaking on your own account."

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao replied, "Wu Sangui has three treasured items. He said that although these three treasures are fine, he regrets the fact that there is a fly in the ointment. The first treasure is a red ruby as big as a pigeon egg, it's really as red as chicken blood; he has it embedded in his hat. He said, 'The gem is very

big, it's a pity the hat is too small.'"

"Humph," Kangxi snorted. The numerous ministers were looking at each other; they all thought that by saying 'the gem is very big, it's a pity the hat is too small', he was implying that he wanted to wear the crown on his head.

Wei Xiaobao continued, "His second treasure is white-based, black-striped white tiger skin. Your servant has been waiting upon Your Majesty in the Palace for a while, yet I have never seen this kind of white tiger skin. Wu Sangui said that this kind of white tiger is rarely seen even once in several hundred years. In the past the Song *Taizu* [founding emperor of Song] Zhao Kuangyin had one, Zhu Yuanzhang also found one, Cao Cao and Liu Bei each has also had one. He has the white tiger skin draped on his chair, saying, 'White tiger skin is hard to come by, it's a pity the chair is too ordinary.'"

Kangxi nodded again; he was secretly amused, he knew that Wei Xiaobao was speaking without thinking, framing Wu Sangui. He also knew that Wei Xiaobao was completely uneducated, thinking that Cao Cao was also an emperor.

Wei Xiaobao continued, "The third treasure is a piece of large marble screen, with painting of natural scenery. In the painting there was a little black-naped oriole perching on a tree, underneath the tree there was a big tiger. Wu Sangui said, 'This screen is very valuable; it's a pity that the tiger is underneath the tree, yet the little black-naped oriole is standing on high branch.'"

Kangxi said, "Those three things he said are no more than metaphors, it does not necessarily mean that he had a mind to rebel."

"Your Majesty is magnanimous, you are cherishing your servants," Wei Xiaobao said, "If Wu Sangui only has thirty-percent of conscience, and know how to be grateful and seek to repay the kindness, that would be great. However, it's a pity that he gives present to the princes, dukes and ministers of the court; this prince a thousand *taels* of yellow gold, that duke twenty-thousand *taels* of white silver. He is desperately serious in spending his money. Those three treasures of his, however, are not part of the tribute to Your Majesty."

Kangxi laughed. "I do not covet his belongings," he said.

"That's right," Wei Xiaobao said, "Wu Sangui always want to pay the imperial court's salary, to treat them with rewards; most of the money he obtained stay

in Beijing, given to civil and military officials. Your servant said to him, '*Wangye*, you sent all those gold and silver to the high-ranking officials of the court, you are indeed too generous, I can do the spending for you.' Wu Sangui laughed and said, '*Xiao Xiongdi*, all those gold and silver only stay in their homes temporarily, let each and every one of them help me speak good words on my behalf. In a few years, they will nicely add the interest, and then both principal and interest will return to me.' Your servant did not understand it, so I asked, '*Wangye*, once those belongings enter other people's home, how can they return it to you? You were willingly giving it to them, it's not that they borrow the money from you, how can you expect any interest?' Wu Sangui laughed aloud; he patted my shoulder, took a brocade bag and gave it to me, and said, '*Xiao Xiongdi*, this is a small token *Xiao Wang* is giving you, with the hope that in front of His Majesty, you would speak good words on my behalf a lot. If His Majesty wanted to remove the border defense, you must say that the border defense must never be removed. Ha ha … don't worry, these things, I will not ask you to return to me in the future.'"

While saying that, Wei Xiaobao took a brocade bag from his pocket and held it up high above his head. Everybody could see that the bag was embroidered with four red characters, 'Ping Xi Wang Fu' [King who pacify the west's mansion]. He bent down to squat, opened up the bag's mouth and poured out the contents. A series of 'ding ding dang dang' was heard, pearls, precious stones, emerald, gems, several dozens of valuable objects scattered on the Hall's floor. The pearls sparkled the gems shone, the light dazzled everybody's eyes. Some of these gems were indeed gifts from Wu Sangui, some were given by other people as gifts or bribes to Wei Xiaobao. But in that moment, who would know the difference?

Kangxi smiled and said, "You went to Yunnan this time, you have actually attained much."

Wei Xiaobao said, "These pearls and jewels, your servant does not dare to desire, would Your Majesty bestow it to others?"

Kangxi giggled and said, "They were gifts from Wu Sangui, how can I take them from you and gave to others?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "Wu Sangui gave them to your servant, because he wanted

me to tell lies in front of Your Majesty, to help him speaking good words on his behalf, to say that the border defense must never be removed. Your servant is loyal and devoted to Your Majesty, I must not covet a bit of gold, silver, money and valuables, and say that a rebel thief was a loyal minister. But on the other hands, having received Wu Sangui's thing, I feel a bit unfair to him. In any case, gold, silver, money and valuables throughout the world belong to Your Majesty. Whomever Your Majesty wishes to give it to, it is Your Majesty's benevolence, no need to make Wu Sangui a good person by letting him buy the people's heart."

Kangxi roared in laughter. "You are exceptionally loyal to *Zhen*," he said, "In that case, just consider I give these pearls and jewels as a reward to you." From his pocket he took out a western spring gold watch and said, "And I am giving you another treasure from the west."

Wei Xiaobao hastily kneeled down and kowtowed. He took several steps forward and received the gold watch with both hands.

These two, a ruler and his minister, were displaying such an artificial show, the numerous high-ranking ministers were watching with knowing expressions; who did not understand Kangxi's intention? These high-ranking ministers had received Wu Sangui's bribe, the most recent it was delivered by Wei Xiaobao himself. They thought that if they were not being tactful, and Wei Xiaobao shook the imperial court with 'venerating Yunnan' tactic again, the Emperor might be furious, and then all of them might be charged with 'acting as liaison of foreign vassal state, conspiring against the law'; if they were not beheaded, then they would be banished to an army post.

Wei Xiaobao's speech to frame Wu Sangui was indeed very childish and ridiculous; even if Wu Sangui really had the intention to rebel, he would never divulge his secret in front of an imperial envoy sent by the Emperor himself. Wei Xiaobao also spoke about Wu Sangui sending gold and silver to the high-ranking ministers of the imperial court, and that in the future he would want to get both the principal and the interest back, suggesting that when the rebellion succeeded in the future and he became the emperor, he would want the high-ranking ministers to pay him back the gold and silver. This was definitely a child's idea; Wu Sangui was a man of rigorous schemes and deep foresight, how could

he haggle over how much gold and silver he had given to each minister? Yet they knew perfectly well that Wei Xiaobao could not be contradicted, he had the Emperor's support; who would dare to bring trouble to himself by saying anything to refute him?

Ming Zhu's brain was the quickest; he immediately said, "Wei *Dutong* is young, yet he is brave and talented; he understands the matter of the world and has a red-bellied devotion toward His Majesty, he can see through Wu Sangui's tiger cave, and obtain the actual facts, indeed he is worthy of other people's admiration. If not for Your Majesty was able to illuminate the cave, seeing the plot first by sending Wei *Dutong* to personally investigate, how would we, who work in Beijing, know that Wu Sangui that old fellow has received the country's kindness, yet unexpectedly harboring the desire to rebel?"

With these words, he had flattered Kangxi and Wei Xiaobao, while gently exonerated himself and the entire court, and asserting the criminal charge against Wu Sangui. Everybody in the Hall of Supreme Harmony felt that his speech was really pleasant to their ears. The various high-ranking ministers were originally anxious and uneasy; this moment they could not help but heaving a sigh of relief.

Prince Kang and Songgotu were always in good terms with Wei Xiaobao, naturally at this time they threw their lot with him and threw their stones to one who fell down the well; they loudly said Wu Sangui was wrong. The numerous ministers also 'you said a sentence, I said a sentence', everybody said the border defense should be removed, some even chided themselves for being muddled, fortunately the Emperor had straightened them up, as if the clouds and mist were pushed aside that they saw the blue sky. Some even went farther by offering plans how to remove the border defense, how to seize Wu Sangui's capital, how to raid his house. Wu Sangui's riches matched those of the enemy's country, as soon as they talked about how to raid his house, everybody thought that it was a greatly profitable mission; but then they had a second thought, they felt it may not be easy to do, when Wu Sangui became hostile, before you could raid his house, he would chop your head first.

Kangxi waited until everybody finished talking before saying, "Although Wu Sangui has intention that is against the law, this rebellion accusation has not

been revealed. Our discussion in this place today, nobody can leak it out even for one sentence. We must give him an opportunity to reform and start afresh."

The numerous ministers chorused their praises of the Emperor's vast and mighty benevolence, for his broad and deep mercy.

From his pocket Kangxi extracted a piece of yellow paper; he said, "Here is the imperial edict, I want you to see if there is anything improper."

Batai bowed and received it. Holding it high with both hands, he read aloud, "Receiver of the Mandate of Heaven the Emperor's imperial order says: From time immemorial the Emperors and Kings pacify the world, always rely on ministers, master of military affair's strength. Reaching up to the peace and quiet of the ocean and the universe, rousing the spirit to travel and return in triumph, resting the soldiers, enabling the important minister of the border region to leisurely look after it, bestowing him with prolonged abundant life, pampering him with the rivers and the mountains, in an extremely grand ceremony!"

Reading to this point, he paused. The numerous ministers broke into murmur, clucking their tongues, praising the Emperor for producing such a magnificent writing. Batai let out a gentle cough, turned his head around twice, as if he was enjoying a Han Liu Ou Su's[60] exquisite literary work; and then with elongated intonation he continued reading, "The King has always been sincere, loyal and dependable, subduing, setting forth, planning and strategizing, with all his strength exerting himself on behalf of others, guarding the cliff of the border, releasing *Zhen* from concern over the South, rendering such a splendid meritorious deed!" Reading to this point, he paused, sighed softly and said, "What an excellent literary work!"

Songgotu said, "Your Majesty's kindness reaches the heavens, if Wu Sangui has a bit of humanity in him, when he kneeled to read this imperial edict, perhaps he would be ashamed to death."

Batai continued reading, "Remembering the King's years already high, master and followers are laid bare, for a long time stationed in an out-of-the-way places, yearning for good rest. Since the adjacent places are in order, it's only fair to grant the King's request to be removed from your position. Now, such-and-such

and such-and-such are especially sent to announce *Zhen*'s imperial intention. The King's, along with the officers and men under his command, interest in packing up and go north, has reassured *Zhen* to think fondly of you all; if only the cycle of dawn and dusk stops, the ruler and his ministers share the joy, guaranteed endless rest forever. When this matter is settled, a place will be meticulously prepared. The day the King arrives, there will be peaceful place so that you will not have any worry. By the Emperor himself."

Batai read with sonorous voice, the intonation with which he read the imperial edict was as if he was reading literary work. When he finished reading, none of the numerous ministers did not praise him. Ming Zhu said, "If only the cycle of dawn and dusk stops, the ruler and his ministers share the joy, these eight characters [dan xi gou zhi, jun chen xie le] truly make people feel unsurpassed gratitude. When your servants heard it, there was a burst of nice and warm feeling in the pit of our stomachs."

Tu Hai said, "Your Majesty has given this matter a very careful consideration, you have stated in advance that as soon as he arrives in Beijing, there will be a place for him to stay. Otherwise, he might use all sorts of excuses, saying that he must send people come to the Capital to set up a house. Stalling and delaying, he might tarry three or five more years."

Kangxi said, "It would be best if Wu Sangui can follow orders and respond to the imperial court, so that the common people will be exempt from the horrors of war. We must send two people who can talk really well to Yunnan to announce *Zhen*'s intention."

When the numerous ministers heard what the Emperor just said, they all turned their gaze toward Wei Xiaobao. Being at the receiving end of everybody's gaze, Wei Xiaobao was flustered; he thought, "My goodness, this is not a plaything. Last time I delivered the new daughter-in-law, I nearly delivered my own life as well. This time I go to remove the border defense, how could Wu Sangui not have the intention to kill the imperial envoy minister?" Thinking that if he went to Yunnan he might see Ah Ke, his heart warmed up involuntarily; but in the end his life is still more important.

Ming Zhu saw Wei Xiaobao's ashen countenance, he deduced correctly that Wei Xiaobao did not dare to go; thereupon he said, "Your Majesty, please

understand: with regard to the ability to talk really well, *Dutong* Wei Xiaobao is very competent. However, Wei *Dutong* hates the wicked as if they were his personal enemies; knowing that Wu Sangui disrespected the Emperor, he hates him to the bones. If he sees even half of his face, he would reprimand Wu Sangui immediately; I am afraid that he might spoil this important matter. In your servant's humble opinion, it would be better to send the Ministry of Rites' assistant minister Zhe'erken, and Imperial Hanlin Academy *Xueshi* [equivalent to bachelor's degree] Da'erli to go to Yunnan and announce the imperial edict. These two people are refined in manner and have fine reputation, they might be able to influence mischievous wicked man to a better life; we never know."

What he said suited Kangxi's intention, he approved on the spot for Zhe'erken and Da'erli two people to go and announce the imperial decree.

The numerous ministers realized that the Emperor had decided early on to remove the border defense that he even prepared the imperial edict in advance; they all regretted that they spoke good words on Wu Sangui's behalf earlier. By now they all changed direction, they said many fabricated indictments, that Wu Sangui was big traitor, major criminal, that his crime must not be pardoned.

Kangxi nodded and said, "Although Wu Sangui is bad, it's unlikely that he would go as far as that. All of us must seek the truth from facts, and handle this matter carefully." Standing up, he beckoned Wei Xiaobao to follow him into the rear hall.

Wei Xiaobao followed behind the Emperor toward the imperial garden. Kangxi laughed and said, "Xiao Guizi, you are really quite something! If you did not take that bag of pearls and jewels and poured them out on the floor, those damn old fellows would still speak good words about Wu Sangui."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Actually, Your Majesty only needs to say, 'Removing the border defense is better', then everyone would say, 'Indeed removing the border defense is better'. It's just that to have them say it with their own mouth is a bit more interesting."

Kang nodded and said, "Those old fellows are striving to secure their positions, everything they have in their mind cannot be spoken incorrectly. However, as the matter stands, if we let Wu Sangui act whenever he wants to act, everything will

be in his hand, and then it will be greatly disadvantageous to us. By removing his border defense first, we may greatly disturb his footsteps."

"That's right," Wei Xiaobao said, "Just like playing *Pai Jiu*, how can we always let Wu Sangui be the banker? Your Majesty must also throw several throws of dice."

"Your analogy is correct, we must not let him be the banker all the time," Kangxi said, "Xiao Guizi, we have thrown the dice, but that fellow Wu Sangui is really not easy to fight. The generals and soldiers under his command are all formidable veterans of a hundred battles. When he deploys his troops in rebellion, if the Han people throughout the world respond to him, that will be bad!"

For the last several years Wei Xiaobao went around all over the country, the number of time he heard Han people cursed the Tatars was indeed not a few. Han people were numerous, for every hundred of Han people, there might not necessarily be one Manchu person. If the Han people throughout the world rose in rebellion, no matter what Manchu people would not be able to resist. However, although the number of people who curses the Tatars was many, there were even more people who detested Wu Sangui. Thinking about this fact, he said, "Your Majesty, please don't worry. Not one of the Han people throughout the world likes that fellow Wu Sangui. If he wants to revolt, other than his own trusted aides, nobody would support his effort."

Kangxi nodded. "I have thought about that too," he said, "Previous Ming's King Gui ran away to Burma, it was Wu Sangui who captured him and killed him. Wu Sangui wants to rebel, he can only say Han people rebelling against the Manchu, he cannot say fighting the Qing to restore the Ming." Speaking to this point, he took a short pause, and then asked, "Previous Ming's Emperor Chongzhen, when did he die?"

Wei Xiaobao scratched his head. "This …" he stammered, "At that time your servant has not been born; actually I am not … not too clear."

Kangxi laughed aloud. "I was asking blindly," he said, "At that time I have not been born either. Right, on the anniversary of his death, I will send several Princes and Beilei to go to Chongzhen's tomb and offer sacrifice, so that the

common people throughout the world will be grateful to me and hate Wu Sangui even more."

"Your Majesty can calculate and scheme like deity," Wei Xiaobao said, "But if the anniversary of Chongzhen's death is still some time away, what if Wu Sangui rise in rebellion first?"

Kangxi paced back and forth, and then he smiled and said, "All these times you were on imperial orders to work for me, you have indeed suffered not a few hardships. Mount Wutai, Yunnan, Shen Long Island, Liaodong, and lastly you even went to Luocha Country. This time I am going to send you to a good place, to make up for it."

Wei Xiaobao said, "The best place in the world is by Your Majesty's side. As long as I can hear Your Majesty's voice, I can see Your Majesty's face, my entire body will be filled with vigor, my heart will be unspeakably comfortable. Your Majesty, this word is absolutely true, it's not bootlicking."

Kangxi nodded. "I know it's the truth," he said, "I and you, a ruler and his minister, are congenial, that is also predestined affinity. You and I have friendship that goes far to our fights when we were children, this friendship indeed stands out from the masses. When I see you, my heart is also very happy. Xiao Guizi, that half a year when I did not hear anything about you, I thought you drowned in the ocean; I was full of regret, I should have not sent you to take that kind of risk, I was really broken-hearted and grieved."

Wei Xiaobao was deeply touched. "If … if only I can take care of you for the rest of my life," he said, with a hint of sob in his voice.

"Alright, alright," Kangxi said, "I will become the Emperor for sixty years, you will become high-ranking officer for sixty years. We, a ruler and his minister, have kindness and brotherhood, we will carry things through to the end." It was extremely rare for an emperor to say such word toward his subject. One, Kangxi was young, he spoke frankly; two, he and Wei Xiaobao had been friends since their teenage years, they were mutually since.

Wei Xiaobao said, "You will become the Emperor for a hundred years, I will work for you for a hundred years; whether I become high-ranking official or not, I don't care."

Kangxi laughed and said, “Isn’t sixty years as the Emperor enough? One must not not knowing enough is enough.” He paused a moment, and then continued, “Xiao Guizi, this time I am sending you to Yangzhou, to come back to your hometown in silken robes.”

As he heard ‘go to Yangzhou’ three characters, Wei Xiaobao’s heart skipped a beat. “What is ‘come back to one’s hometown in silken robes’?” he asked.

“You have become a high-ranking minister in Beijing,” Kangxi said, “Returning to your hometown to see your relatives and friends, you must create quite a stir; let everybody envy you, won’t that be great? Have your subordinate help you write a memorial to the throne, to have your father, mother, and your household be granted titles, let them be well-regarded, well-off.”

“Yes, yes,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Many thanks for Your Majesty’s kindness.”

Kangxi noticed Wei Xiaobao’s somewhat awkward expression. “Uh, you don’t like it?” he asked.

Wei Xiaobao shook his head, “I like it very much,” he said, “It’s just that … it’s just that I don’t know who my father is.”

Kangxi was taken aback; recalling that his own father had left home to become a monk on Mount Wutai, he felt that the two of them were fellow sufferers who empathize with each other. He patted Wei Xiaobao’s shoulder and said warmly, “When you get to Yangzhou, there is no harm in investigating it slowly. Perhaps the Heaven will have pity on you and let you, father and son, have a reunion. Xiao Guizi, you go to Yangzhou, your mission this time may be very easy to accomplish, I am sending you to build a martyr shrine [忠烈祠 zhong lie ci].”

Wei Xiaobao scratched his head, “Grow chestnut [种栗子 zhong li zi]?” he asked, “Your Majesty, if you want to eat chestnut, I’ll go to the street and buy some for you; sugar-coated deep-fried Liangxiang [town in Beijing municipality] sweet-scented osmanthus chestnut is savory and glutinous; we don’t need to go to Yangzhou to grow some.”

Kangxi roared in laughter. “Damn it,” he said, “Xiao Guizi is unlearned. I said ‘Martyr Shrine’, but you muddle things together and changed it to ‘grow chestnut’. Martyr shrine is a memorial hall, to enshrine and worship loyal minister who was martyred.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed. “Your servant is indeed very stupid,” he said, “Turns out you want me to build something like Guan Di [I am not sure, but I think it refers to Guan Gong (Romance of the Three Kingdoms)] temple.”

“Now you are talking,” Kangxi said, “When the Qing troops entered the Pass, their massacre of Yangzhou and Jiading people was very tragic, to such an extent as to create those ‘Ten Days of Yangzhou’, ‘Three-slaughter of Jiading’, and so on. Thinking about these matters, my heart is always uneasy.”

“The massacre was indeed very tragic,” Wei Xiaobao said, “There were bodies everywhere within Yangzhou’s city wall. Even after ten years, it was not uncommon to find human bones in the wells and in the rivers. But that time I was not even born yet, you have not been born either; the blame cannot be placed on our heads.”

Kangxi said, “You said it right; however, it was my ancestor’s affair, hence it is my affair. At that time, there was this Shi Kefa; have you heard of him?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Shi Gebu, Shi *Daren* defended Yangzhou to the death, he was a greatly loyal minister. When the older people of our Yangzhou mentioned him, they all shed some tears. In our courtyards we have a memorial tablet that reads ‘Memorial Tablet of Nine-Tattooed-Dragon Shi Jin[61]’. On the first and the fifteenth of each month, everybody would kowtow to this memorial tablet. I heard people say that it was actually Shi Gebu, but was hidden from the government officials.”

Kangxi nodded, “Loyal minister martyred, leaving behind affection in the people’s hearts,” he said, “Turns out the common people enshrine and worship Nine-Tattooed-Dragon Shi Jin’s memorial tablet, burn incense and kowtow to it, is actually to commemorate Shi Kefa. Xiao Guizi, what kind of courtyard do you have at home?”

Wei Xiaobao’s entire face blushed. “Your Majesty,” he said, “This is actually not too pleasant to hear. In our home we open a brothel, called the Lovely Spring Hall; it is reckoned to be first or second best brothel in Yangzhou.”

Kangxi smiled; in his heart he said, “Your mouth is full of marketplace nonsense, I knew early on that you did not come from any scholar or aristocratic family. This boy is very loyal to me that he did not conceal even this kind of

shameful matter from me."

Actually, by saying that his family opened a brothel or whatever, Wei Xiaobao was merely tooting his horn; his mother was no more than a prostitute, not some brothel proprietress.

Kangxi said, "You present my imperial edict and announce it in Yangzhou. I am commending Shi Kefa's loyalty to the end in his dedication to the service of his country, loyal to his lord and loving the people, a greatly loyal minister, a great hero and warrior. We, the Great Qing, respect loyal ministers and patriots, while looking down upon rebels and traitors. I am building a nice memorial hall for Shi Kefa, for his bravery as the loyal minister who sacrificed himself in defending Yangzhou city in the past, everybody can enshrine and worship him in the memorial hall. Take another three hundred thousand *taels*, to comfort and aid bereaved families, to give relief to the needy in Yangzhou and Jiading, two cities. I will issue another edict, to excuse these two places from taxes for three years."

Wei Xiaobao let out a deep breath. "Your Majesty," he said, "Your grace this time is indeed too great. I must simply kneel down and kowtow to you several times in sincerity and wholeheartedly." While saying that, he went down on his knees, and 'dong, dong, dong' kowtowed three times.

Kangxi laughed and asked, "When you kowtowed to me in the past, you were not being sincere and wholehearted?"

Wei Xiaobao smiled and said, "Sometimes it was sincere and wholehearted, other times it was no more than half-heartedly."

Kangxi laughed aloud; he did not consider it a disobedience. He thought, "Those people who kowtow to me, out of a hundred, perhaps 99 are doing it half-heartedly, yet only Xiao Guizi dares to say it out loud."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Your Majesty, this stratagem of yours is indeed shooting two birds with one arrow."

Kangxi laughed and said, "What do you mean shooting two birds with one arrow? It is called 'one arrow, two golden eagles'. Tell me, which two birds are you talking about?"

"By building this Martyr Shrine," Wei Xiaobao said, "The Han people under the

heavens will know that Your Majesty treats the common people very well. Formerly, the Ta … formerly, the Qing troops massacred Han people in Yangzhou and Jiading randomly, Your Majesty is full of remorse in your heart, and thought of something to make amend. If Wu Sangui rebels, or perhaps Shang Kexi, Geng Jingzhong rise in rebellion, saying they want to restore the Ming Dynasty or whatever, common people will say, what's not good about the Manchurian Qing? The Emperor is very good."

Kangxi nodded. "You are right," he said, "But you are a bit 'gauging the abdomen of a gentleman with a lowly man's heart'. I think that 'Ten Days of Yangzhou' and 'Three Massacres of Jiading' of the past were definitely the sorrow of their hearts; sending out money to comfort and aid bereaved families and reducing taxes, it is not entirely for the sake of buying the hearts of the people. So what's the second bird?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "Your Majesty builds this memorial hall, everybody will know that being a loyal minister and a patriot is good, being a rebel and a traitor is not good. Wu Sangui wants to rebel, he is a rebellious thief, hence the common people will look down on him."

Kangxi reached out to slap Wei Xiaobao's shoulder heavily; he laughed and said, "Right! We must proclaim it without restraint, loyal subjects who repay their lord are good people. Of the common people in the world, which one is willing to become a bad person? If Wu Sangui does not deploy his troops, then that's the end of it; but if he does, nobody will follow him."

Wei Xiaobao said, "I heard the storytellers tell the tales, the most amazing loyal minister and patriot, one was Yue Fei, Yue *Yeye* [grandpa], the other was Guan Di, Guan *Wangye*. Your Majesty, this time we go to Yangzhou to build Martyr Shrine, it would be better to also repair Yue *Yeye*, Guan *Wangye*'s memorial halls."

Kangxi laughed and said, "Your mind is exceptionally quick; it's a pity that you don't read books, you don't have knowledge. Repairing Guan Di Temple is very good; Guan Yu repaid his lord with loyalty, he had strong *yi qi*, I can grant him an honorary title. But that Yue Fei fought Jin troops. Our Great Qing was originally called Later Jin (Dynasty). Jin is Qing, Jin troops are Qing troops. This Yue Wang [King Yue] Temple, you don't need to pay attention."

“Yes, yes, so that’s how it is,” Wei Xiaobao replied; in his heart he mused, “Turns out you, Tatars, are Jinwuzhu, Hamichi’s descendants. Your ancestors are very disappointing.”

Kangxi said, “Henan Province’s Wangwu Mountain, there seem to be a group of troops and horses who lean toward Wu Sangui, is that right?”

Wei Xiaobao was startled. “That’s right,” he replied, but in his heart he said, “If you did not mention it, I would have forgotten about this matter.”

Kangxi said, “That time you investigated Wu Sangui’s plan to rebel, and sent people to submit memorial to me, I rebuked you instead; do you know the reason?”

Wei Xiaobao replied, “Presumably because we are not prepared to deal with Wu Sangui’s military force yet, thus Your Majesty pretended not to believe, to avoid beating the grass to scare the snake.”

Kangxi laughed. “Correct!” he said, “Beat the grass to scare the snake, you have used this idiom correctly. In the imperial court, Wu Sangui must have a lot of confidants. This old thief knows our each and every move very clearly. The matter of Situ Bolei of Wangwu Mountain, if I followed up with the investigation at that time, Wu Sangui would definitely find out. If he was alerted, he might dispatch his troops immediately in rebellion. At that time he knew the real situation of the imperial court, but of his military strength, deployment and what have you, I did not have the slightest idea. If we went to war, we would definitely lose. We must know ourselves, and know our enemy, then we will emerge victorious in every battle.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “At that time Your Majesty sent people to scold me a bit, the entire brigade’s officers knew about it. If Wu Sangui had spies in my military camp, they were bound to report to the old fellow. Perhaps in his heart the old fellow snickered at Your Majesty’s muddle-headedness.”

Kangxi said, “This time you go to Yangzhou, take with you five thousand troops and horses, go to Henan’s Jiyuan, take them by surprise, destroy the bandit cave on Mount Wangwu completely. Wu Sangui has supporting troops hidden too close to the Capital, it is calamity within our bosom.”

“That’s much more wonderful,” Wei Xiaobao said happily, “Your Majesty, it

would be better for you to personally lead the troops into battle, kill Wu Sangui in an initial show of strength."

Kangxi smiled and said, "There are only a thousand or two bandits on Mount Wangwu, among those, more than half are the old, the weak, women and children. That man surnamed Yuan was boasting, he said more than thirty thousand men, it's entirely bogus. I have already sent people to go up the mountain to investigate clearly. Against a thousand or so bandits, you want me to personally lead the troops into battle, I will be the laughingstock of the people! Ha ha, ha ha …!"

Wei Xiaobao followed with some hollow laughs, he thought that the young Emperor was indeed very astute, false report of large number would not work on him.

Kangxi said, "On how to exterminate Mount Wangwu bandits, you think about it, come back here in one or two days to make your report."

Wei Xiaobao complied and withdrew. He pondered it over, "This matter of marching an army and go to war, *laozi* is not too adept at it. That day in the naval battle I relied on Shi Lang; in the land battle, whom should I rely on? Get it. I should have Guangdong *Tidu* [local commander] Wu Liuqi as my assistant, I simply must listen to his advice in everything. This man is an expert in fighting battles." But then he had a second thought, "His Majesty wanted me to think of a good strategy and report to him in one or two days. Going to Guangdong to invite Wu Liuqi and come back here, at least I need a month; there won't be enough time. In Beijing, who is the expert in fighting battles?"

After thinking for half a day, the number of well-known military leaders in Beijing was actually not a few, but they were mostly Manchu generals; if not they had received the title 'Gong' [duke] or 'Hou' [marquis], then they must be high-ranking military officer or local commander. Wei Xiaobao was a lowly *Dutong* [commander], he could not order them around.

His own nobility title was 'Bojue' [count/earl]. Within the Manchurian Qing system of government, 'Zijue' [viscount] was one-*pin* rank, 'Bojue' was above it; it was above the *pin* rank system, it was even higher compared to the *Da Xueshi* [great bachelor (master's degree?)] and *Shangshu*[62] *pin* rank. But of course it

was an empty title, although he was respected, in reality he did not have real power. He was really young, it was really not easy if he wanted a famous minister or brave general to obey his order.

He paced back and forth in his room, lost in thought. He saw the jade bowl presented by Shi Lang as a gift sitting on the table, and thought, “In Beijing Shi Lang was dissatisfied, hence he came to me for help. The number of dissatisfied military officers in Beijing should be a lot. But those who are dissatisfied and those who have skills may not necessarily be together. Those without skills but enjoy meteoric rise in career advancement, in Beijing there are not a few; I, Wei Xiaobao, am one. Ha ha …!”

Walking over to the table he held the jade bowl with both hands; he thought, “The choice of these four characters ‘jia guan jin jue’ [to confer a title of official position/to be promoted] is very effective; when he sent me this jade bowl, I was a ‘Zijue’, but now I am promoted to ‘Bojue’. What kind of skill do I rely on to be ‘jia guan jin jue’? My biggest skill is bootlicking, patting the young Emperor’s back so that he would feel comfortable. Other than that, *laozi*’s real skill is damn too ordinary. Looks like people with real skill do not like to flatter; those who like to flatter will be more or less the same as *laozi*.”

Looking up, he pondered deeply: among his acquaintances, which military officer was unwilling to flatter? Tian Di Hui warriors were heroes who definitely would not flatter casually; but other than his shifu Chen Jinnan and Wu Liuqi, everybody else only knew internal strength and external skill, they could not lead troops and fight a battle. Shifu’s subordinate Lin Xingzhu could fight a battle, too bad he had returned to Taiwan.

Suddenly he remembered something: that day when he and Shi Lang led the troops to Tianjin, and then detoured to Tanggu and went out to sea, the Naval *Zongbing* [regional commander] Huang Fu fawned on him attentively; yet there was a military officer in Tianjian, one with big beard, who received him with knitted brows and flat mouth, someone who acted as if he was looking down on him, who was not willing to utter even a sentence of bootlicking. Who was that fellow? If at that time he did not pay attention to this military officer’s name, by now naturally he could not remember even more. He mused, “Those who flatter have no skill; this big beard was unwilling to flatter, he must have skills.”

He got an idea; immediately he went to Ministry of War *Shangshu yamen* to find *Shangshu* Ming Zhu, asking him to send for a big-bearded officer of the Tianjin Guard Regiment and have him by carriage to Beijing as quickly as possible. This big beard's military rank was neither high nor low, if not a *Fujiang* [deputy general/regional vice-commander, equivalent to brigadier general], then he must be a *Canjiang* [administrator, equivalent to colonel].

Ming Zhu felt this matter was rather strange; this big beard had no name no surname, how to summon him? However, Wei Xiaobao was presently the Emperor's most favorite person, forget that he had to send for a military officer from Tianjin, even something ten times more difficult, he must find a way to accomplish it; with a smile on his face he complied at once. He personally wrote a '600-*li* urgent message' to the Tianjin Guard Regiment *Zongbing*, ordering him to send all military officers with big beard under his command to go to Beijing and have an audience at the Ministry of War.

Around noon the next day, Wei Xiaobao had just finished his lunch when his personal guard came in to report that Ministry of War *Shangshu* was asking for an audience. Wei Xiaobao went to the front door to welcome the visitor, he saw Ming Zhu and about twenty big bearded military officers behind him; some had black beard, some white beard, some grizzled beard. All of them were covered in sweat and dust. Ming Zhu said, "Wei *Jueye* [master noble], you instructed me to summon a man, *Xiongdi* found a group of men. Please make the selection yourself, I don't know which one you wanted."

Suddenly seeing these many big-bearded military officers, Wei Xiaobao was startled, and then he could not help but bursting in laughter. "*Shangshu Daren*," he said, "I only ask you to find a big-bearded man, you are handling this matter really thoroughly. Once you looked for people, you found twenty. Ha ha, ha ha …!"

Mingzhu said with a laugh, "I was afraid I might summon the wrong person, not the one Wei *Jueye* has in your mind."

Wei Xiaobao roared in laughter again; he said, "Turns out under Tianjin Guard Regiment *Zongbing* there are so many men with big beard …" He had not finished speaking, someone from among the crown suddenly bellowed in his thundering voice, "So what about the big beard? You created a lot of trouble

just for a joke?”

Wei Xiaobao and Ming Zhu were shocked; they turned their heads toward that man. They saw a tall and sturdy man; standing among the other military officers, he was still half a head taller. There was an angry look on his entire face, his thick big beard looked as if they were standing up from the roots. Wei Xiaobao was startled, but then he delightedly said, “That’s right, that’s right, it’s precisely *laoxiong* [ol’ big brother] that I wanted to see.”

The big beard angrily said, “Last time you came to Tianjin, I have offended you. I knew early on that you would retaliate to vent your anger. Humph, I have not committed any crime; if you want to lodge an accusation against me, I am afraid it won’t be easy.”

“What’s your name?” Ming Zhu rebuked him, “Why are you this rude in front of your superior?”

The big beard had just arrived at the Ministry of War’s *yamen* and paid his respect to Ming Zhu, hence he knew that Ming Zhu was his big boss; therefore, he did not dare to recklessly contradict him. Immediately he bowed down and said, “Reporting to *Daren*: lowly officer is Tianjin *Fujiang* Zhao Liangdong.”

Ming Zhu said, “This is Wei *Dutong*, whose nobility is revered; he is generous and is a good friend of our ministry. How did you offend him? Quickly step forward and admit your guilt.”

Zhao Liangdong struggled hard to suppress his anger; furiously he cast a sidelong glance toward Wei Xiaobao, thinking, “This playboy’s smell of mother’s milk has not yet dried, why would I want to admit my guilt to you?”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Zhao *Dage*, please don’t blame me. It was *Xiongdi* who offended you, *Xiongdi* is the one who should admit my guilt to you.” Turning around, he addressed the group of military officers, “*Xiongdi* has something important I need to discuss with Zhao *Fujiang*, but momentarily I could not remember his honored surname and great given name, thereupon the Ministry of War *Daren* invited all of you gentlemen to come to Beijing, tiring everybody in an all-night journey. In actuality I feel very bad.” While saying that he repeatedly cupped his fist and bowed.

The crowd of military officers hastily returned the propriety. Seeing his

modesty, which was entirely beyond his imagination, the anger in Zhao Liangdong's heart vanished immediately; he said to Wei Xiaobao, "*Xiaojiang* [lowly general] apologize," and bowed with cupped fist.

Wei Xiaobao returned his salute and said with a laugh, "No need to be polite." Turning toward Ming Zhu, he said, "*Daren*, would you honor me with your presence? Please come inside and sit, *Xiongdi* wants to propose a toast to express my gratitude. Friends of Tianjin Guard Regiment, please also come in." Ming Zhu had a mind to befriend Wei Xiaobao, hence he happily complied.

Wei Xiaobao prepared a grand banquet; he asked Ming Zhu to sit on the seat of honor [lit. 'head seat'], and invited Zhao Liangdong to sit on the second seat, while he himself accompanied on the host position. The rest of Tianjin military officers sat on three separate tables. The Count Mansion banquet was extremely sumptuous, the wine made three rounds, the performers put on a play in front of the banquet tables. Among the military officers from Tianjin who went to the Capital this time, some were no more than low-ranking officers; it was only due to their big beard that they unexpectedly were able to drink wine and watch a play together with Ministry of War *Shangshu* and *Bojue Daren* [Lord Count] in the Count Mansion. It was indeed a chance in a lifetime that even in their dreams they did not dare to expect.

Although Zhao Liangdong was temperamental and obstinate, he was a careful man; seeing Wei Xiaobao did not mention anything about what he wanted to discuss during the banquet, he did not ask. He only listened to Wei Xiaobao recounting strange manners and different customs of Luocha Country. He thought, "Little child is talking nonsense, how can there be any man and woman hugging and jumping around in public? How can there be such shameless matter in the world?"

After drinking several cups of wine and watching a round of play, Ming Zhu stood up to take his leave. Wei Xiaobao sent him off to the main gate, and then he returned to the main hall to accompany the military officers until the play was finished and they had drunk and ate to their hearts' content, before he invited Zhao Liangdong to the inside study room to speak in detail.

Noticing that the bookshelf was full of books, Zhao Liangdong could not help but feeling deep veneration toward Wei Xiaobao, "Although this child is young,

he is actually very well-learned; he must be a lot wiser than us, crude people."

Seeing his eyes were on the books, Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Zhao *Dage*, let me be honest with you: these books are here to keep up appearances only. The number of characters that *Xiongdi* knows, added together is less than ten. My own name 'Wei Xiaobao', three characters, if they are put together, I always recognize them; but put them apart, there's no guarantee I would know them. Apart from those characters, I have no choice but to watch these damn books helplessly."

Zhao Liangdong burst into loud laughter; he relaxed considerably, thinking that this young commander was actually very frank, he did not put on airs. "Wei *Daren*," he said, "Lowly officer has offended you previously, please don't take any offense."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "What offense? There is no harm in you and I become brothers. You are older, I call you Zhao *Dage*, you call me Wei *Xiongdi*."

Zhao Liangdong hastily stood up and bowed with cupped fist. "*Dutong Daren* must not speak such words," he said, "*Xiaoren* is too undeserving."

Wei Xiaobao laughed, "Please sit down, please sit down," he said, "I just have good luck, I happened to accomplish some matters which satisfied His Majesty and made him happy; you still think I really have some dog fart skill? I became this high-ranking official, honestly I am very ashamed. How could I be like Zhao *Dage*, who gain merit by hard work, one saber one spear at a time, completely depending on your real skill to achieve it."

Zhao Liangdong was very pleased to hear him. "Wei *Daren*," he said, "I am a coarse man, whatever it is that you want, do not hesitate to instruct me. As long as *Xiaojiang* can do it, I will definitely stake my life in doing it for you. Even if it is impossible for me to achieve it, I will still stake my life in doing it."

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted. "I don't have anything important," he said, "It's just that last time at the Tianjin Guard Regiment I saw Zhao *Dage*, I noticed your grand appearance, a model of a man of talent. I was the imperial envoy minister, everybody else was patting my behind, only Zhao *Dage* was unwilling to sell your integrity."

Zhao Liangdong looked rather awkward, he said, "*Xiaojiang* is an uncouth

military man, I am not good in flattering my superiors; it was not that I deliberately wanted to be rude to the imperial envoy minister."

"I did not mind at all," Wei Xiaobao said, "Otherwise, I would not ask you to come here. I have a logical explanation: those without any skills will have no choice but to rely of flattery to be promoted and gain wealth; those who are unwilling to flatter must be people with real skill."

Zhao Liangdong delightedly said, "Indeed Wei *Daren*'s word is extremely refreshing. *Xiaojiang* does not have any skill, but when I hear people tooting their horn and patting the horse's butt, I would become angry, and thus offended my superior and had a row with my colleague. The reason I cannot win a promotion, is precisely due to this stubbornness [orig. 'ox temperament']."

"You are not willing to flatter, you must have skills," Wei Xiaobao said.

Zhao Liangdong's jaw dropped; he did not know what to say, he only thought, 'my father and mother who gave birth to me did not know me as well as Wei *Daren*.'

Wei Xiaobao ordered another banquet in his study room; the two of them sat face-to-face, drinking and chatting. Zhao Liangdong told him about his lot in life; he was a native of Shaanxi, started his career as a leader of a squad of five soldiers, he advanced bravely in battles, amassing merit and gained promotion until he reached the rank of *Fujiang*. Hearing he was adept in fighting battles, Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted; he mused, "I really did not misread this man." Thereupon he asked him about how to attack the enemy on a mountaintop.

Zhao Liangdong did not read any military book, but he was battle trained, his experience was extremely vast; as soon as he heard Wei Xiaobao's question, he thought his skill was being tested. Like an unceasing torrent he immediately talked with great gusto; he took down the four books and five classics from the bookshelf, and spread it around on table, using the books to model mountain peak, valley, river, and pathways. He explained where to set up ambush, where to feign an attack, where to intercept the enemy, where to assault; one by one he explained in great detail.

What he explained was a battle strategy where presumably both sides have

equal strength. Wei Xiaobao asked, “If the enemy only has one thousand men, and we have five thousand troops and horses, how do we attack to guarantee victory?”

“There is no such thing as guaranteed victory,” Zhao Liangdong replied, “But our military strength is several times bigger than the enemy’s; if it were *Xiaojiang* who is leading the troops, if we lost, how could we consider ourselves human beings? We simply must capture the enemy alive, don’t let even one escape our net; only then will it be great.”

Wei Xiaobao ordered his servant to get several thousand-*wen* worth of copper coins, which he used as troops and horses. Zhao Liangdong thus spread it out to make battle formation. Wei Xiaobao memorized everything he said. That night he had Zhao Liangdong stayed in his Mansion for the night.

The next day he saw Kangxi, he imitated Zhao Liangdong by spreading the formation around the Upper Study Room. He did not dare to recklessly move the Emperor’s books, as long as he could roughly capture the scope, it would be good enough.

Kangxi pondered for half a day. “Who taught you this strategy?” he asked.

Wei Xiaobao did not conceal the truth, he told Kangxi about Zhao Liangdong. Hearing that Ming Zhu summoned twenty some big bearded military officers to travel overnight from Tianjin to Beijing just to let Wei Xiaobao select one, Kangxi could not help but burst out in loud laughter. “How did you know Zhao Liangdong has skill?” he asked.

Wei Xiaobao did not dare to say that it was because this big beard was unwilling to flatter. He himself was the ‘big king’ of bootlicking; naturally he could not let the Emperor know this trade secret. Thereupon he said, “Last time Your Majesty sent your servant to Tianjin, I noticed that this big beard performed the military drill very well. I thought that the day will come that we must deal with Wu Sangui’s troops movement, this big beard is a very good talent.”

Kangxi nodded and said, “You have ‘how to deal with Wu Sangui’ constantly in your mind; that is very good. Those old fellows in the imperial court, humph, they have ‘how to curry favor with Wu Sangui’ constantly in their minds, how to

get him to bribe them. That Zhao Liangdong is currently a *Fujiang*, isn't he? When you return, promise him that you will do your best to ensure that he will get good recommendation for promotion. I will especially issue an imperial edict to promote him to *Zongbing*, let him owe you, so that in the future he will help you in your mission with all his heart."

Wei Xiaobao was delighted, "Your Majesty is very considerate toward your subjects, you are very meticulous."

Returning to his Count Mansion, he told Zhao Liangdong about the promotion. Sure enough, a few days later the Ministry of War issued a statement, promoting Zhao Liangdong to be a *Zongbing*, assigned to serve under *Dutong* Wei Xiaobao. Zhao Liangdong was deeply grateful, thinking that following this young boss, even without flattery he could enjoy rapid promotion; indeed it was the number one great pleasure of one's life.

In recent days the high-ranking ministers of the imperial court were waiting for the news whether the three border defenses accepted the imperial order of the removing of the defenses, or they would rise in rebellion; in their hearts they were quite anxious.

One day Wei Xiaobao was chatting with Zhao Liangdong in his mansion when someone came to ask for an audience; the Prince Consort Wu Yingxiong invited him to his mansion for little drink and refreshments. The messenger was Wu Yingxiong's personal attendant; he said, "Prince Consort has not seen Wei *Daren* for a long time, he is very concerned; he is asking Wei *Daren* for the honor of your presence. Prince Consort said that the 'thank-the-matchmaker' wine has not been drunk by you, Senior."

Wei Xiaobao thought, "This *Fuma Ye* [emperor's son-in-law] has a name but no reality, you want to thank what matchmaker? However, speaking about this word 'thank you', you guys surnamed Wu cannot simply settle your matter with me over a cup of wine. There is no harm in going, here's a chance to get rich easily, why not?" Therefore, taking Zhao Liangdong along with his personal guards from the Valiant Cavalry Brigade, he went to the Prince Consort's mansion.

After Wu Yingxiong got married with Princess Jianning, he was given a

residence in Beijing, which was different from the temporary residence he used to stay when he visited Beijing in the past. Leading several military officers, Wu Yingxiong went out the main gate to greet him. “Wei *Daren*,” he said, “We are brothers, today we are going to chat, there is no other guest. I only have these several friends who have just arrived from Yunnan, I invited them over to accompany Zhao *Zongbing* drinking wine.”

The military officers introduced themselves. One man grew long beard, his appearance majestic; he was Yunnan’s *Tidu* [local commander] Zhang Yong. The other two were *Fujiang*; the one with valiant expression was Wang Jinbao, the one with mild and deferential appearance was Sun Sike. Wei Xiaobao pulled Wang Jinbao’s hand and said, “Wang *Dage*, you are a treasure [‘bao’], I am also a treasure, but you are a Dabao [big treasure], I am a Xiaobao [little treasure]. The two of us brothers are ‘a pair of treasures’, we can only make a kill without having to compensate.” [Translator’s note: the context is (you guess it) gambling.] The three generals from Yunnan roared in laughter. They were delighted to see Wei Xiaobao was so easy-going.

“Zhang *Dage*,” Wei Xiaobao asked Zhang Yong, “Last time *Xiongdi* went to Yunnan, how come I did not see the three of you?”

Zhang Yong replied, “At that time *Wangye* happened to send *Xiaojiang*, three people, to go out on border patrol, we could not be in Kunming to wait upon Wei *Daren*.”

“Ay, what *Daren*, *Xiaojiang*?” Wei Xiaobao said, “Let’s just be straightforward; I call you Zhang *Dage*, you call me Wei *Xiongdi*. We are brothers who are happy to meet by chance!”

Zhang Yong laughed and said, “If Wei *Daren* say it that way, how can we dare not to do it?”

They were chatting and laughing as they went into the reception hall. As soon as they were seated, the servants appeared to serve them tea. Another servant came to Wu Yingxiong and said, “Princess is asking the Prince Consort to accompany Wei *Daren* to come in for a visit.”

Wei Xiaobao’s heart was thumping madly, he thought, “Maybe I should not see this Princess.” He recalled the time she and he together during their journey

to Yunnan, along the way 'the wind and the light were charming and gentle', just like newly married couple; he could not stop his blood from boiling and bubbling up inside him, his face turned deep red.

Wu Yingxiong laughed and said, "Princess often says that our marriage, predestined by fate was brought together by Wei *Daren*; we simply must present the 'thank-the-matchmaker' cup of wine to you." Finished speaking he stood up and said to Zhang Yong and the others with a laugh, "Gentlemen, please sit and relax here." Accompanied by Wei Xiaobao, he went into the inner hall.

Passing through two halls, they arrived at the wing. Wu Yingxiong held his hand against the door, with serious expression on his face, he said, "Wei *Daren*, I have a big favor I must ask for your help."

Wei Xiaobao's face turned red again; he thought, "You were castrated by the Princess, you can't be a husband, do you want me to do you this big favor?" He stammered, "This … this … this is rather improper."

Wu Yingxiong was taken aback, "If not for Wei *Daren* lending your hand for the sake of loyalty, helping us in this dire distress, who else has this kind of ability?"

Wei Xiaobao looked even more embarrassed; he thought, "The Princess must have forced him to ask me; otherwise, why would she insist on me and not allow others to help?"

Looking at Wei Xiaobao's strange expression, Wu Yingxiong thought he was unwilling to lend his hand. "This matter," he said, "I understand it is very difficult to do. But if we succeed, *Fu Wang* [father king] and *Xiongdi* will never forget Wei *Daren*'s favor."

Wei Xiaobao thought, "Why would even Wu Sangui be grateful to me?" Ah, right, Wu Sangui does not have any grandson, he wants me to help him get one. But whether I can get him a grandson or not, I have no guarantee." He said, "*Fuma Ye*, I cannot guarantee anything. *Wangye* and you want to thank me in advance, if I fail, won't I let you down?"

"Not a big deal, not a big deal," Wu Yingxiong said, "As long as Wei *Daren* is doing everything in your power, we, father and son, will be grateful just the same. Even the Princess will also be deeply grateful."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “You want me to really put out my energy for you, that is for sure.” And then he continued in serious voice, “Regardless of success or failure, I will definitely guard my mouth like a closed bottle; *Wangye* and *Prince Consort* can set your hundred and twenty hearts at ease.”

“Naturally,” Wu Yingxiong replied, “Who would dare to leak the secret? I must ask for Wei *Daren*’s kind effort, the quicker the better.”

Wei Xiaobao smiled and said, “Can’t we just do it now?” Suddenly he remembered something, “Aiyo, it’s not right! I am helping him to get a son is not a big deal, but he, father and son, are going to rebel, inevitably they will be executed unto the third generation. Won’t that mean including my son’s head will be chopped down?” But then he had another thought, “The young Emperor can’t possibly kill Princess Jianning. To the Princess’ son he will naturally also open up two sides or three sides of the net.”

Seeing Wei Xiaobao’s expression alternated between gloomy and bright, Wu Yingxiong took a step forward and said in a low voice, “The news of border defense removal has not reached Yunnan yet, Zhang *Tidu* and the others do not know. If Wei *Daren* can hurry to see Your Majesty and speak to him to withdraw the order to remove the border defense, we can send a ‘600-*li* urgent message’ to Yunnan, the edict to remove the border defense can still be intercepted and withdrawn.”

Wei Xiaobao was startled. “You … you are talking about the border defense removal?” he asked.

“That’s right,” Wu Yingxiong replied, “What other matter at present is more important than the border defense removal? It can be said that toward Wei *Daren*, His Majesty would see, hear and obey; only if Wei *Daren* act will we be able to pull back the raging tide.”

Wei Xiaobao thought, “Turns out I misunderstood completely; it’s really funny.” He could not help but roaring in laughter.

Wu Yingxiong was bewildered. “Why does Wei *Daren* laugh? Did I say anything wrong?” he asked.

“No, no,” Wei Xiaobao hastily said, “I am sorry, I suddenly remember something funny.”

Wu Yingxiong's face showed a rather hurtful look; he secretly gnashed his teeth in anger, "Right now I have to bear your savageness, wait till *Fu Wang* raise up his righteous banner, we will sweep our way to Beijing. You, this boy will be captured; it will be a wonder if I don't hack you into pieces."

"*Fuma Ye*," Wei Xiaobao said, "Early in the morning tomorrow, I am going to kowtow to His Majesty, I will tell him that Prince Consort Wu is His Majesty's younger sister's husband, Ping Xi Wang is His Majesty's honorable relative; even if he will no longer confer a title or official position, he must not take away his honorable relative's title of nobility, since doing that will wrong the Princess."

"Yes, yes," Wu Yingxiong happily said, "Wei *Daren*'s brain moves so fast, in just a short while you are able to come up with great argument; please do as you suggested. Let us see the Princess now."

He led Wei Xiaobao to the Princess' door and asked for an audience. From the Princess' room a palace maid came out, inviting Wei Xiaobao to wait in the reception pavilion at the side of the room. Not too long afterwards the Princess came out to the pavilion. "Xiao Guizi," she sternly said, "You did not see me for such a long time; you want to die? Get lost!"

Wei Xiaobao laughed and paid his respect; he said with a laugh, "Princess, may you have ten thousand good fortune and peace like gold. Xiao Guizi is thinking about Princess daily, it's just that His Majesty sent me out on a mission all the way to Luocha Country; I just got back a few days ago."

Princess' eyes turned red. "You are thinking about me daily?" she said, "Looking at your craftiness, I … I …" speaking to here, her tears flowed down like rain.

Wei Xiaobao noticed the Princess' jade countenance was gloomy, her face looked thin and pallid, presumably after she got married to Wu Yingxiong she was depressed. He thought, "This fellow Wu Yingxiong is a eunuch; married to a eunuch, naturally she is not happy." Seeing the Princess' situation, and remembering the feeling of the former days, he could not help but feeling tenderness toward her. He said, "Princess misses His Majesty, His Majesty also misses the Princess; in a few days, he is going to invite Princess into the Palace to chat about the sentiment of the brother and sister." He made up a fake imperial

decree; Kangxi had never said anything about the Princess.

For the last several months Princess Jianning had lived in the Prince Consort Mansion, she was extremely bored. Hearing Wei Xiaobao, she was greatly delighted. “When?” she eagerly asked, “Tell *Huangdi Gege* [big brother Emperor], tomorrow I am going to see him.”

“That’s great!” Wei Xiaobao said, “Prince Consort has something he wanted me to present to His Majesty tomorrow, I’ll present another memorial to ask His Majesty to receive Princess into the Palace.”

Wu Yingxiong was also very happy, “With the Princess helping to talk, His Majesty can’t possibly refuse even more,” he said.

The Princess pouted and said, “Humph, I only talk about daily life of a family with *Huangdi Gege*, I won’t help you talk about any national affair.”

Wu Yingxiong laughed with her, “Very well,” he said, “Whatever you love to talk, just talk about that.”

The Princess rose up slowly, “Xiao Guizi,” she said, “I haven’t seen you for such a long time, you have grown tall and big. I heard in Luocha Country you have a very good demon miss friend; is that true?”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “How can there be such matter?” Suddenly ‘slap!’ his face was burning, as he took the Princess’ slap on his face. “Aiyo!” Wei Xiaobao cried out and jumped.

The Princess laughed and said, “You speak dishonest words endlessly, you dare to lie to me?” Raising her hand, she wanted to slap him again. Wei Xiaobao leaned sideways to evade, her palm did not strrike him. The Princess said to Wu Yingxiong, “I have something I’d like to question Xiao Guizi, I don’t want you to be here to hear it.”

Wu Yingxiong smiled and said, “Fine, I’ll accompany the military officers outside drinking wine.” He thought that if Wei Xiaobao was taking a beating and he could only look helplessly, it would not be good for his ‘face’; thereupon he withdrew from the reception pavilion.

The Princess reached out to twist Wei Xiaobao’s ear. “Dead little demon,” she shouted, “You have forgotten me.” While saying that, she twisted his ear really

hard.

Wei Xiaobao yelped in pain. “No, I have not!” he busily said, “Haven’t I come to see you?”

The Princess’ foot flew up and kicked his lower abdomen. “You have no conscience,” she cursed, “See if I don’t cut you to pieces. If I did not call you to come, even after three years you won’t possibly come to see me.”

Seeing there was no one else in the hall, Wei Xiaobao reached out to embrace her; he said in a low voice, “Don’t punch and kick, tomorrow you and I can chat in the Palace.”

The Princess blushed, “Chatting what?” she asked, “Chatting about you, this little demon!” She reached out toward his forehead and knocked him that he grew a bump the size of a chestnut.

Wei Xiaobao wrapped his arms around her tightly, he said, “I use the move ‘A pair of dragons fighting over a pearl’!” The Princess spat at him and struggled hard to free herself. Wei Xiaobao said, “If we are being intimate in here, I am afraid *Fuma Ye* will be suspicious. Tomorrow I’ll see you in the Palace.”

The Princess’ cheeks blushed, “What does he suspect?” she said. Her coquettish glances as smooth as silk as she looked at him with the corner of her eyes. With a smile that did not look like a smile she said, “Little demon, get out of here!”

Book Note: During the Jin Dynasty, the pacifying of barbarian region in the present day Qujing, Yunnan area, the classical quotation ‘Imperial Edict of Sichuan Document’ was referring to Han Wudi [Emperor Wu of Han Dynasty (141-87 BC)], when he wanted to communicate with the barbarian in southwest China, he sent Sima Xiangru to visit Bashu [i.e. Sichuan] first to announce the edict, telling the officers and people of southwest region to comply with the imperial decree.

Chapter 38

Criss-crossing the field a herd of horses flew across the road, domineering kite streaks across the sky

(Translated by Foxs)

They saw two horses fell dead on the roadside, the horses were indeed Yunnan horses. Zhang Yong happily said, "Dutong Daren, the path Wang Fujiang picked to pursue is indeed not bad." Yet Wang Jinbao was frowning and worried, he did not stop sighing, 'Ay, what a pity, what a pity!"

All smiles Wei Xiaobao returned to the main hall, he saw Wu Yingxiong was

chatting with the four generals. Zhao Liangdong and Wang Jinbao were involved in some heated argument on the side; both men were flushed with anger, they talked with raised voice. When they saw Wei Xiaobao, they both stopped. Wei Xiaobao laughed and asked, “What are the two of you arguing about? Can you tell it to me?”

Zhang Yong replied, “We are talking about horses. Wang *Fujiang* [deputy general] has an original insight in horses, the horses that he picked were always good colts. Just now everybody was talking about the beast of burden, Wang *Fujiang* praised Yunnan horses as very good. Zhao *Zongbing* [regional commander] did not believe him, he says that Sichuan horses, Yunnan horses have short legs, they can’t run fast. But Wang *Fujiang* says that Sichuan horses, Yunnan horses have enduring power, within ten *li*, they are not any better than other horses, but after running for twenty, thirty *li*, the more they run, the more they have vigor.”

“Is that so?” Wei Xiaobao said, “*Xiongdi* has several mounts, would Wang *Fujiang* please take a look?” He ordered his personal guard to go back to his mansion to fetch several good horses from the stable and bring them here.

Wu Yingxiong said, “Wei *Dutong*’s mount was given by Prince Kang, a famous Ferghana [orig. Dayuan, Central Asia] colt, called *Yu Hua Cong* [Jade Flower Buckskin Horse]; how can our Yunnan horses match this horse?”

Wang Jinbao said, “Wei *Daren*’s horse is naturally a very good horse. Dayuan produces good horses, lowly officer has heard about it. When lowly officer was in Gansu and Shaanxi, I have ridden many famous Ferghana colts. In short distance sprint, they can run very fast, no other horses can compare to them.”

“How about long distance race?” Zhao Liangdong asked, “Are you saying that Ferghana horse cannot beat Yunnan horse?

“Originally, Yunnan horse are not good at all,” Wang Jinbao replied, “But after surviving hardship and hard work, they have enduring strength. These past few years lowly officer has raised horses in northern Yunnan, I mated Sichuan horses with Yunnan horses, and contrary to expectation, the new species is not bad.”

“*Laoxiong*,” Zhao Liangdong said, “You are an amateur. Horses must be purebred; the more pure they are bred, the better the result. I have never heard

mixed stallions are better than the purebred."

Wang Jinbao's face was bulging red, "Zhao *Zongbing*," he said, "I am not saying that all mixed-bred horse are good. There are different uses of horse; some are use to break through enemy lines, some are use to pull heavy military load. Even battle horses are greatly different from each other, some are hundred—*li* horses, some are thousand—*li* horses, some are long distance horse, some short distance; they are completely different."

"Humph," Zhao Liangdong said, "Surprisingly some people think mixed breed are better."

Wang Jinbao was furious; he suddenly stood up and shouted, "Who are you calling mixed breed? What a foul-mouthed remark!"

Zhao Liangdong laughed coldly and said, "I was talking about horses, I am not talking about you. Whose breed is not pure, is a thief lacking in conscience; there is no need to get angry without any reason."

Wang Jinbao was even more furious. "This is the Prince Consort Mansion," he said, "Otherwise, humph, humph!"

"Humph, humph what?" Zhao Liangdong replied, "You want to fight with me?"

Zhang Yong intervened, "Gentlemen, you have just met each other for the first time; why would you fight over beast of burden? Come, come, come, let me toast both of you a cup, everybody must not fight." He was a *Tidu*, his official rank was higher than Zhao Liangdong and Wang Jinbao. The two of them did not dare not to give him some face, they did not have any choice but to drink the wine.

The two of them 'I stare at you, you stare at me'; if not for the fact that their superiors were present, these two men with fiery temper would definitely fight on the spot.

Shortly after, Wei Xiaobao's personal guards returned from his mansion, with the stable hand led the horses. Everybody went to the stable at the back of the mansion to look at the horses. Wang Jinbao indeed understood horses, with just a quick look he was able to tell good aspects and weak points of each horse; he was even able to guess each horse's nature and temperament with about

seventy, eighty percent accuracy. The Wei Mansion's stable hands were very impressed; they all praised Deputy General Wang's keen insight.

Finally they looked at Wei Xiaobao's mount, the Jade Flower Buckskin. This horse's legs were long and fat, it's appearance was like divine steed, its entire body was snow white with rouge spots everywhere, its coat was smooth and shiny, in short, it was a beautiful horse; everybody cheered incessantly. Wang Jinbao, however, showed neither approval nor disapproval. After looking for a long time, he said, "This horse's intrinsic quality is superb, it's a pity that it was raised incorrectly."

"How was it raised incorrectly?" Wei Xiaobao asked, "Please advise."

Wang Jinbao said, "Wei *Daren*'s horse can be counted as a very good colt that is seldom found in the world. This kind of good horse has to be sprinted a dozen *li* or so, and let it canter several dozen of *li* every day; the more it is tempered the better. However, Wei *Daren* treasured it too much, he was unwilling to ride it too much. This beast has passed too many of comfortable days, eaten too much of good refined grain, it is seldom ridden for more than two trips a year. Ay, what a pity, what a pity; just like the children of rich and noble families, it is too spoiled."

When Wu Yingxiong heard this, his countenance changed slightly; he uttered a soft 'humph'. Wei Xiaobao noticed that, and knew that Wang Jinbao's last few sentences had offended Wu Yingxiong. He thought, "There is no harm in my seizing this chance to sow dissension, let them, Yunnan's commanders, not get along well with each other." Thereupon he said, "I am afraid Wang *Fujiang* is only half right; children on rich and noble families can also have enormous skill. Take Prince Consort for example, he is your *Wangye*'s Heir Apparent, since childhood he holds golden bowl to eat rice, and jade bowl to drink his soup, yet he is not the least bit spoiled."

With a bulging red face Wang Jinbao busily said, "Yes, yes. *Wangye*'s Heir Apparent is naturally not the same. Lowly officer was not talking about Prince Consort."

With a cold laugh Zhao Liangdong said, "In your heart, I am afraid there is no difference."

“Zhao *Zongbing*,” Wang Jinbao angrily said, “Why do you always make life difficult for *Xiongdi*? *Xiongdi* did not offend you at all.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Alright, don’t harm the friendship over a small matter. As military officers, some people often look down on young high-ranking minister of the imperial court; I have seen it.”

Wang Jinbao said, “Reporting to *Dutong Daren*: lowly officer does not dare to look down on you.”

“But you look down on the Prince Consort,” Zhao Liangdong said.

“I did not!” Wang Jinbao almost shouted.

“Wang *Fujiang*,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Too bad that the good horses you raised are all in Yunnan, otherwise you might be able to let us increase our knowledge.”

Wang Jinbao said, “The horses that I raised … yes, yes, I do not dare.”

Wei Xiaobao felt a bit strange, “Why did he called out, ‘yes, yes, I do not dare’?” he mused.

Zhao Liangdong said, “In any case, since Wang *Fujiang*’s good horses are in Yunnan, the dead cannot testify. Wei *Dutong*, ourside the Pass, *Xiaojiang* has also raised several hundred good horses, each one is capable of running three thousand *li* during the day, running two thousand *li* at night. It’s a pity that they all far away, I can’t have *Dutong Daren* take a look at them.” Everybody burst into loud laughter; they knew he was intentionally ridiculing Wang Jinbao.

Wang Jinbao was so angry that his face turned pale; pointing to the stable on his left, he said in a loud voice, “The several dozen of horses over there are precisely the one I brought from Yunnan this time. Zhao *Zongbing*, you may select ten horses of yours, and randomly pick ten of mine; have the horses compete in leg strength. We’ll see who wins who loses.”

Zhao Liangdong saw the Yunnan horses are thin and small, their coat bald, their skin dry, altogether there were fifty, sixty horses; he thought, “What’s so amazing about your beggar horses?” He said, “Indeed you have a lot of horses, but they are a bit ‘five tuberculosis seven wounded’. I guarantee that if I randomly pull several horses from Wei *Dutong*’s Mansion, they will surpass Wang *Fujiang*’s darling treasures that you personally raised.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “We all are arguing in vain. Prince Consort, let us each pick ten horses, we’ll have a race. Both sides place a bet.”

Wu Yingxiong said, “How can our Yunnan’s little horse compete against Wei *Dutong*’s Ferghana horse? No need to compete, of course we will lose.”

Wei Xiaobao noticed Wang Jinbao was fuming; his expression shows that he clearly did not accept defeat. Wei Xiaobao said, “Prince Consort admits defeat, but Wang *Fujiang* does not concede. How about this: I’ll get ten thousand *taels* of silver, Prince Consort also get ten thousand *taels* of silver, in a moment we all go outside the city to have a horse race. Whoever wins six races, the rest do not have to race. What do you say?”

Wu Yingxiong was about to decline again, suddenly he had another thought, “This boy is young and eager to win, let me deliberately lose ten thousand *taels* to him and let him be happy.” Thereupon he laughed and said, “Very well, let’s do it. Wei *Daren*, if you lose, you must not be angry.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Winning must be in style, losing must be graceful; where’s the logic in getting angry when losing?” As he took a glance, he caught Wang Jinbao’s eyes flickered with delight; he thought, “Aiyo, looking at this Wang *Fujiang*’s expression, he seems to be very sure of victory; could it be that these sickly looking horses really have good endurance? Not good, not good, I must resort to trickery.” In all his life, he loved to cheat at gambling; seeing that in this horse race he might not necessarily win, he immediately cooked up some plan. He thought, “If we have the race today, there won’t be enough time to rig up a scam.” Thereupon he said, “Since we are going to make a bet, I must carefully select the ten horses; how about if we have the race tomorrow?”

Wu Yingxiong had made up his mind not to go all-out, in ten races, he decided to let Wei Xiaobao win eight or nine. Today or tomorrow did not make any difference to him; thereupon he nodded his approval immediately. Wei Xiaobao continued drinking wine and watching the opera in the Prince Consort Mansion, he no longer said anything about the race. He invited Wu Yingxiong, along with Zhang Yong, Wang Jinbao and Sun Sike, three people to come over to his own mansion to have some drink that evening. Wu Yingxiong happily accepted the invitation. They went to Wei Xiaobao’s Count Mansion together.

After they were seated and were offered some light refreshment and tea, Wei Xiaobao excused himself, “Please sit down and enjoy yourselves, *Xiongdi* needs to make some arrangement.”

Wu Yingxiong laughed and said, “We are family, no need to be polite.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Honored guests grace me with their presence, I can’t be too shabby and crude in my hospitality.”

Going to the inner hall, he instructed his manager to prepare a feast and theatrical troupe; and then he summoned his mansion’s head stable hand, gave him three hundred *taels* of silver and said, “My *Yu Hua Cong* and other horses are still at Prince Consort’s Mansion; go and fetch them back. While you are at it, invite the Prince Consort’s stable hands for a drink; have them drink the damn wine until they are drunk rotten.” The head stable hand complied.

Wei Xiaobao continued, “Give the horses something, make them weary and their legs soft that they won’t have any strength to run. Just don’t poison them dead.”

The head stable hand said, “Whatever it is that *Jueye* wants, *Xiaoren* will strive my hardest to do it.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “I guess it’s not a big deal to tell you: Prince Consort has a batch of horses just arrived from Yunnan. They boast that the horses’ endurance strength is superb. Tomorrow they are going to have a race with us. We cannot let them win over us, can we?”

The head stable hand understood immediately; he laughed and said, “*Jueye* wants *Xiaoren* to concoct something and have Prince Consort’s horses eat it, so that during the horse race tomorrow we will win?”

Wei Xiaobao laughed. “Correct,” he said, “You are very smart. In the horse race tomorrow, we have a bet. If we win, I’ll divide the gold and you will get your share. Do this quietly, you must never let Prince Consort Mansion’s stable hands know. Take this three hundred *taels* of silver, give a dinner party, take them to a drink, to gamble, to visit prostitute, damn it, just do whatever you need to do, make them fall into dark sky and black earth before you drug the horses.”

The head stable hand said, "*Jueye* set your heart at ease, I won't make mistake. *Xiaoren* will go buy several dozen catties of croton seed[63], mixed them inside the pea grain, and feed it to Wu Mansion's horses, let those horses defecate all night long. In the race tomorrow, even a turtle will outrun them."

Wei Xiaobao immediately went out to accompany Wu Yingxiong and the others drinking wine. He was afraid when Wu Yingxiong and the others came back, Wang Jinbao would go see the horses and would be able to see through their scheme; hence he attentively served them and constantly urging them to drink more wine. Zhao Liangdong's drinking capacity was extremely great, all along he had a drinking competition against Wang Jinbao. Very late that night, other than Wei Xiaobao and Wu Yingxiong, the four military commanders were dead drunk.

After the morning audience the next morning, Wei Xiaobao went to the Palace to wait upon the Emperor. Kangxi was smiling from ear to ear, he was in a very good mood. "Xiao Guizi," he said, "I have good news I want to share with you: Shang Kexi and Geng Jingzhong have accepted the imperial decree of border defense removal. In the coming days they are going to leave for the Capital."

"Congratulations Your Majesty," Wei Xiaobao said, "Shang and Geng, two border defenses accepted the imperial decree, that old fellow Wu Sangui's one palm cannot clap hand …"

Kangxi laughed, "It's hard to clap with only one hand," he corrected.

"Right," Wei Xiaobao said, "It's hard to clap with only one hand. We'll beat him that he will be in a sorry state."

Kangxi laughed and said, "What if he also accepted the imperial decree of border defense removal?"

Wei Xiaobao was taken aback, "That would be great," he said, "If he came to Beijing, Your Majesty wanted to roll him in your palm and make him round, he would not dare to be flat; Your Majesty wanted to knead him flat, no matter what he would not dare to be round."

Kangxi smiled and said, "You know this logic too?"

Wei Xiaobao said, “That time, he would be like ‘dragon[64] stranded on the sandy beach’, this old fellow would be like ‘tiger fell onto level ground …’” Speaking to this point, he stuck out his tongue and knocked his own forehead trying to remember the rest.

Kangxi roared in laughter; he said, “It is called ‘tiger fell onto flat land, you can take unfair advantage of it’. At that time, not only he would not dare to offend me, he would not even dare to offend you.”

“Yes, yes,” Wei Xiaobao said, “That will be extremely amusing.”

Kangxi said, “I have finished the imperial order to build Martyr Shrine in Yangzhou, I had a Hanlin Academy scholar wrote it. Bring it to Yangzhou, and have it engraved on a vertical stone tablet. Pick an auspicious day and make your journey.”

“Yes,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “If all three border defenses accepted the imperial order, do we still need to build the Martyr Shrine?”

“We don’t know whether Wu Sangui will accept or not,” Kangxi said, “Besides, commending martyrs is a good deed; even if Wu Sangui did not revolt, we still need to do it.”

Wei Xiaobao complied. When chatting, he mentioned Princess Jianning was asking to have an audience with the Emperor. Kangxi nodded, he ordered the court eunuch serving him to immediately announce to Princess Jianning that her request had been granted.

Kangxi’s mood was really good; he asked in details about Luocha Country’s natural condition and social customs, as well as about the people there. He also wanted to know how the gunmen revolted, how Princess Sophia suppressed the rebellion, how the Senior and Junior Tsars could co-exist. After talking for a while, the Princess arrived at the Upper Study Room.

As soon as they saw each other, the Princess threw herself to Kangxi’s feet, she hugs his legs and bawled. “*Huangdi Gege*,” she said, “From now on I want to accompany you in the Palace, I don’t want to go back again.”

Kangxi stroked her hair. “What is it?” he asked, “Prince Consort bullies you?”

The Princess cried; she said, “He won’t dare. He … he …” and broke into crying again.

Kangxi said in his heart, “You castrated him, you made him unable to be your husband. You did it yourself and you suffer the consequence.” He consoled her for a moment, and then said, “Alright, alright, don’t cry. You can accompany me for a meal.”

The Emperor ate his meals not on a fixed schedule; whenever he was in the mood, the meal must be served at any time. At once the eunuchs from the imperial kitchen served the meals, while Wei Xiaobao waited upon him on the side. Although the Emperor extremely doted on him, he simply cannot accompany the Emperor eating and drinking. Kangxi bestowed on him a dozen or more big bowls of dishes, which he ordered the eunuchs to deliver the dishes to his mansion, to be eaten later when he came back home.

After drinking several cups of wine, the Princess’ face blushed, her eyes watery as she cast glance after glance toward Wei Xiaobao. In the Emperor’s presence Wei Xiaobao did not dare to show the slightest bit of rude behavior, all along he did not meet the Princess’ eyes, while his heart was thumping wildly. “If after drinking the Princess reveal the secret and the Emperor finds out,” he mused, “This head of mine won’t be too secure.” He escorted the Princess on imperial order to Yunnan to complete her marriage, yet on the journey he embezzled the goods by having illicit relationship with the Princess; the criminal charge against him was indeed not small. In his heart he started to regret, he really should not have mentioned to the Emperor that the Princess was seeking for an audience.

The Princess suddenly said, “Xiao Guizi, get me some rice.” While saying that, she held the empty bowl in front of his face.

Kangxi laughed and said, “You have a good appetite.”

“To be able to see *Huangdi Gege*, I can eat my rice,” the Princess replied.

Wei Xiaobao filled the bowl with rice, and then holding it with both hands, he respectfully put the bowl on the table in front of the Princess. Princess’ left hand dropped down, she heavily twisted his thigh. It was painful, but Wei Xiaobao did not dare to make any noise, he did not even dare to reduce the smile on his face for half a part; only inevitably his smile became awkward, his overall expression

became rather strange. “Dead wh0re,” he cursed in his heart, “Why is it that each time you see me you always twist me?”

The cursing in his heart has not finished, his head was suddenly jerked backward; the Princess had reached to his back and forcefully pulled his braid.

This time Kangxi saw it; he smiled and said, “Princess is married now, yet you are still this naughty.”

The Princess pointed at Wei Xiaobao and said with a laugh, “It’s he, it’s he …” Wei Xiaobao was greatly anxious, he wondered what it was that the Princess was about to say. Luckily the Princess only broke into giggles. She said, “*Huangdi Gege*, your reputation is getting better and better. I did not know it when I was still in the Palace, but during the round trip to and back from Yunnan, I heard the common people all say that with you as the Emperor, the days of the common people throughout the world are really good. Even this boy,” speaking to here, she cast Wei Xiaobao a malicious look, and then continued, “His official position was rising higher and higher. Only your little sister is actually getting more and more bad luck.”

Kangxi’s mood was very good to begin with, and now Princess Jianning’s compliment was just perfect; he laughed and said, “You are married to a dependable and noble husband. If Wu Yingxiong, father and son, nicely obey the imperial order of border defense removal, the whole world will be at peace. I promise you I will raise his official position.”

The Princess’ small mouth pouted; she said, “You raise Wu Yingxiong, this fellow’s official position or not, it has nothing to do with me. I want you to raise my official position.”

Kangxi laughed and said, “And what official position do you want?”

The Princess said, “Xiao Guizi said that the Luocha Country Princess became some Queen Regent. You can make me a great marshal, send me to fight foreign country.”

Kangxi burst into loud laughter. “How can women be great marshals?” he said.

The Princess said, “In the past, Fan Lihua, Yu Taijun, Mu Guiying[65], which one did not seize the seal of authority and become the great marshal? Why can they

be one, but I can't? If you say my martial art skill is inadequate, let's try it." While saying that, she stood up with a giggle.

Kangxi laughed and said, "You did not want to study, just like Xiao Guizi, you both do not have the knowledge, you only know the stories from the opera. In the previous dynasties, there were indeed women who became marshals. Tang *Taizong* Li Shimin's *meizi* [younger sister] Princess Pingyang, helped Tang *Taizong* pacifying the world. She was a marshal, commanding a division of army called *Niangzi Jun* [women's corps]. The mountain pass where her troops were stationed was called *Niangzi Guan* [women's Pass], it was very formidable."

The Princess clapped her hands and said, "That's it then. *Huangdi Gege*, as an emperor, you surpass Li Shimin; let me be like Princess Pingyang. Xiao Guizi, what do you want to be? Gao Lishi? Or Wei Zhongxian?[66]„

Kangxi roared in laughter; he shook his head repeatedly and said, "You are speaking nonsense again. Xiao Guizi was a fake eunuch. Besides, Gao Lishi and Wei Zhongxian were both court eunuchs serving under muddleheaded rulers; by saying that, aren't you scolding me?"

The Princess laughed and said, "I am sorry *Huangdi Gege*, you should not be offended; I did not know."

Thinking about 'Xiao Guizi was a fake eunuch', she could not refrain herself from casting a glance toward Wei Xiaobao; the thoughts of love surged in her heart. She said, "I should go kowtow to the Empress Dowager."

Kangxi was startled; he thought, "The fake Empress Dowager has become the real Empress Dowager; your mother has run away from the Palace." He has always loved this younger sister dearly, he could not bear to see her be embarrassed. "These past few days Empress Dowager is not feeling very well," he said, "There is no need to tire her, the Senior. Just go to the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful and kowtow and pay your respect outside."

The Princess complied. "*Huangdi Gege*," she said, "I am going to the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful, and will be back to talk to you again. Xiao Guizi, you come with me."

Wei Xiaobao did not dare to comply. Kangxi signaled him with his eyes, telling

him to try to stop the Princess, not to let her see the Empress Dowager. Wei Xiaobao understood his intention; he nodded to signal that he received the Emperor's order, and at once went to accompany the Princess toward the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful.

Wei Xiaobao ordered a little eunuch to run ahead to report to the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful first. As expected, the Empress Dowager instructed them that she was unwell, hence they did not need to kowtow and pay their respect. The Princess had not seen her mother for quite a long time, she was quite worried. "Empress Dowager is not feeling very well, I simply must take a look," she said, while picking up speed, rushing toward the Empress Dowager's personal quarter; how could the numerous court eunuchs and palace maids dare to stop her?

"Your Highness, Your Highness," Wei Xiaobao anxiously called, "Empress Dowager, the Senior, catches cold; she must not be blown by the wind."

The Princess said, "I will enter slowly, there won't be the slightest wind." Pushing the bedroom door open, she raised the door curtain, but saw the gauze screen was hanging down, the Empress Dowager was sleeping in the bed, with four palace maids stood by the bed. The Princess said in a low voice, "Empress Dowager, your daughter is here to kowtow to you." While saying that, she went down on her knees and kowtowed several times.

She heard several groans from the Empress Dowager inside the gauze screen. The Princess walked toward the bedside; she was about to lift the mosquito net, a palace maid said, "Your Highness, Empress Dowager instructed us that nobody is to alarm Empress Dowager."

The Princess nodded. She opened the net a slit and looked inside. She saw the Empress Dowager was facing inside, she seemed to be in a very deep sleep. The Princess called in low voice, "Empress Dowager, Empress Dowager." The Empress Dowager did not respond at all. The Princess had no choice but to put the screen down and withdrew quietly. Her heart ached; she could not help but broke into crying.

Seeing she did not discover the truth, it was as if a large rock was removed from Wei Xiaobao's heart; he persuaded her, "Princess lives in the Capital, you

can enter the Palace at any time to pay your respect. Wait until Empress Dowager is well, you can come back to the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful."

The Princess thought his advice was reasonable; she wiped her tears immediately and said, "I wonder how my former dwelling place is, I want to take a look." Finished speaking she turned toward her former bedroom. Wei Xiaobao followed behind her.

The Princess's former personal quarter, Jianning Palace was located next to the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful; they arrived after only a short walk. After the Princess was married, Jianning Palace was dusted, swept, and looked after by eunuchs and palace maids, just like before.

The Princess stopped at the bedroom door, she saw Wei Xiaobao was standing outside, giggling; he did not follow her inside. The Princess blushed and said, "Dead eunuch, why aren't you coming in?"

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "I was a fake eunuch, I can't come into the Princess' bedroom."

The Princess reached out to twist his ear; she shouted, "You don't come in, I'll twist your dog ear off." She pulled hard, Wei Xiaobao had no choice but to come into the bedroom. The Princess closed the door and bolted it behind her.

Wei Xiaobao was so scared that his heart was thumping madly. "Princess," he said in a low voice, "We must not fool around in the Palace, I … I … I might lose my head!"

The Princess' eyes were watery, as if drops of water were about to fall down; in a seductive voice she said, "Wei *Jueye*, I am your servant, let me serve you." Reaching out with both arms, she hugged him tightly.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "No, we must not!"

The Princess said, "Alright, I'll go tell *Huangdi Gege*, you coerced me on the journey, you told me to castrate that fellow Wu Yingxiong, and now you are ignoring me." Reaching down to his thigh, she pinched and twisted him really hard.

It was quite a long time before the two of them emerged from the Princess'

bedroom. The Princess's face was beaming with joy; she said, "His Majesty ordered you to tell me about the Luocha Country Princess; how come you have not finished telling me yet you already want to leave?"

"Your servant is extremely tired," Wei Xiaobao replied, "I don't have the strength to tell you a story."

The Princess laughed and said, "Next time you have to come again to tell me about how you caught fox-spirit [i.e. enchantress] in Liaodong."

Wei Xiaobao squinted and cast her a sidelong glance; he said in a low voice, "If your servant talk much longer, I won't be able to move."

The Princess giggled; she reached out backhandedly and 'slap!' she made a mark on his face with her palm. The eunuchs and palace maids at the Jianning Palace were old timers, they knew that the Princess was pampered and was rough; seeing her slapping someone, they all thought, "Princess is married, but her old temperament has not changed a bit. Wei *Bojue* [Count] is the minister His Majesty most doted on, unexpectedly she still slaps him."

The two of them returned to the Upper Study Room, she wanted to take her leave. The sky was getting dark. They saw Kangxi was looking at a large map on the desk; he looked deep in thought. The Princess said, "*Huangdi Gege*, Empress Dowager is unwell, I could not see her. I will be back in a few days to kowtow and pay my respect."

Kangxi nodded and said, "Next time wait for her to summon you before you come here." With right hand finger pointing to the map, he asked Wei Xiaobao, "You entered Yunnan from Guizhou, but came out from Guangxi; which route is easier to take?" Turned out he was studying Yunnan's terrain.

Wei Xiaobao replied, "Yunnan's mountains are very high, it does not matter whether we enter from Guizhou or Guangxi, both are very difficult. The majority of the roads cannot be traveled by marching troops. The Princess had to take sedan chair, your servant rode a horse."

Kangxi nodded. Suddenly he remembered something; he ordered a eunuch, "Summon the officer in charge of the carriage of the Ministry of War." And then he turned toward the Princess and said, "Go back to your mansion, you have been out the whole day, the Prince Consort is waiting for you."

The Princess pouted and said, “He can’t possibly wait for me.” She was thinking of leaving the Palace together with Wei Xiaobao; it would be good if she could only talk to him some more along the way. But hearing the Emperor was summoning an official to discuss national affair, she said, “*Huangdi Gege*, it is already late, you still worry about national affairs. Even in the past *Fu Huang* [father emperor] did not work over government affairs as hard as you do.”

Kangxi’s heart ached, remembering his father emperor lived in seclusion on Mount Wutai as a monk; he said, “*Fu Huang* was bright, wise and farsighted; the matter that he managed to do in one *sichen* [i.e. two hours], I cannot finish it in three *sichen*.”

The Princess smiled and said, “I heard people say that *Huangdi Gege* has heavensent wisdom, which is rarely found since the dawn of time. Nobody dares to say that you surpass *Fu Huang*; however, they say that you are a good Emperor who is seldom seen in China for the last several thousand years.”

Kangxi smiled. “Good Emperors in China are actually a lot,” he said, “Forget about Yao Shun Yu Tang [See Chapter 14] who were adept in both pen and sword, the three generations after them, Han Wendi, Han Guangwu, Tang Taizong, they were all enlightened rulers who were greatly admired by the people.”

The Princess noticed that as Kangxi spoke, he was staring without blinking at the map on the table; she did not dare to talk too much, hence she cast a glance toward Wei Xiaobao, her arms were hanging down, but her finger pointed toward him, and then she turned her finger around to point to herself; her meaning was that Wei Xiaobao should see her often. Wei Xiaobao understood; he nodded slightly. The Princess paid her respect to Kangxi and withdrew.

A moment later, Kangxi looked up and said, “In that case, I am afraid the cannon we make are too heavy and too big, not easy to haul over those mountainous roads.”

Wei Xiaobao was startled; he understood immediately that Kangxi was thinking of transporting the cannon to Yunnan to attack Wu Sangui. “Yes, yes,” he said, “Your servant is muddleheaded, I had not thought of this. It would be best if we could make small cannon that can be pulled by two horses; entering Yunnan will

be a lot more convenient."

Kangxi said, "Decisive engagement between opposing army on the mountainous region cannot depend on magnificent army with thousands of men and horses rushing in at the same time; infantry will be even more important than cavalry."

Shortly afterwards, the Ministry of War's three Manchu officials and one Han official in charge of the horse and carriage arrived together and kowtowed in front of Kangxi. Kangxi asked, "How's the horse preparation?"

This particular department of the Ministry of War was in charge of relay station and moving vehicle logistics. Immediately the officers reported in details: how many horses they purchased from Western Region and Mongolia, how many horses they transported from outside the Pass, presently they had a total of more than 85,000 good horses, and they were still continuing to buy and raise more horses. Kangxi was very pleased; he uttered some words of praise. The four officials kowtowed to express their gratitude for the compliments.

Suddenly Wei Xiaobao said, "Your Majesty, I heard that Sichuan, Yunnan's horses are not the same as the outside the Pass and Western Region horses; although their body is smaller, they have good endurance and good at traveling on the mountainous road; I wonder if that's true."

Kangxi asked the four officials, "Is that true?"

The Han official replied, "Reporting to Your Majesty: Sichuan horses, Yunnan horses, are able to resist hardship and carry heavy load, their endurance is very good, and their ability to travel over mountainous roads is indeed very good. However, to charge and break through the enemy lines on flat land, they are far inferior to horses from outside the Pass and Western Region. For this reason, in the armed force we do not use Sichuan and Yunnan horses."

Kangxi cast a glance toward Wei Xiaobao, and then asked the official, "How many Sichuan horses, Yunnan horses do we have?"

The official replied, "Reporting to Your Majesty: in the defense forces stationed in Sichuan and Yunnan, Sichuan horses and Yunnan horses are not a few; however, in other places there are very few. In the defense force stationed in Hunan, we have more than 500 horses."

Kangxi nodded, “Dismiss,” he said. He did not want to reveal to these officials his intention to attack Yunnan. After the four officials withdrew, he said to Wei Xiaobao, “Luckily you reminded me. Tomorrow I must issue a decree, ordering Sichuan *Zongdu* [governor-general] to immediately buy Sichuan horses in large quantity. It would be best if we can keep this matter top secret.”

Wei Xiaobao suddenly giggled with a very complacent look on his face. “What is it?” Kangxi asked.

“Prince Consort Wu has just had one batch of Yunnan horses shipped here from Yunnan,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “He boasted that these horses have excellent endurance. Your servant did not believe him, so I made an appointment with him to have a race. Whether Yunnan horses really have good endurance, we will find out in a little bit.”

Kangxi smiled and said, “You should race him well then. How are you going to race?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “We agreed to race ten pairs, he who wins six will win the bet.”

Kangxi said, “Only race ten, you won’t necessarily find out if Yunnan horses indeed have the good quality. Do you know how many Yunnan horses did he ship in?”

Wei Xiaobao replied, “I looked at his stable, there are at least fifty, sixty horses. All are newly shipped.”

Kangxi said, “Then you’d better race with him fifty, sixty pairs. Take the long route, it will be best if you go to Xishan [western mountain], run along the mountain roads.” Seeing Wei Xiaobao’s expression was bit strange, he said, “Damn it, you have no prospect! If you lose, I’ll pay you back your gold.”

Wei Xiaobao felt it was inappropriate to tell the Emperor honestly that he had played some trick in Wu Yingxiong’s stable. In this race his chance of victory was 99%, but when the race finished, the Emperor would think that Yunnan horses were useless; and then when they march to fight the war in the future, perhaps Wei Xiaobao had brought harm to this important matter. He smiled and said, “It’s not about the gold …”

“Uh,” suddenly Kangxi exclaimed, “Yunnan horses have good endurance, that fellow Wu Yingxiong has a large quantity of Yunnan horses shipped to Beijing; what for?”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “It must be that he wanted to create quite a stir, boasting that his Yunnan horses are good.”

Kangxi frowned. “Not right!” he said, “This … this boy wants to escape.”

Wei Xiaobao still has not understood. “Escape?” he asked in surprise.

“That’s right!” Kangxi said, “Guards!” he called out. When several eunuchs appeared, he ordered them, “Issue a decree at once, close the Nine Gate, nobody is allowed to get out of the city, summon Prince Consort Wu Yingxiong to the Palace to see *Zhen*.”

The eunuchs complied and went out to issue the decree. Wei Xiaobao’s countenance changed slightly, “Your Majesty,” he said, “Are you saying that that fellow Wu Yingxiong is that audacious that unexpectedly he is going to escape?”

Kangxi shook his head, “I wish that my premonition is incorrect,” he said, “Otherwise, we will have to resort to arms immediately against Wu Sangui. At this time our preparation is insufficient.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “If we are not prepared, Wu Sangui is not necessarily prepared either.”

There was a concerned look on Kangxi’s face as he said, “You’re wrong. Before he even reached Yunnan, Wu Sangui has already recruited soldiers and bought horses, he already has the intention to revolt. He has been prepared for a dozen or so years, while I only started large scale deployment in the last year or two.”

Wei Xiaobao could only speak some comforting words, “But Your Majesty is brilliant and wise; your one year deployment is equal to Wu Sangui’s twenty years.”

Kangxi raised his foot and pretended to kick Wei Xiaobao as he said with a laugh, “I kick you once, it’s equal to Wu Sangui kicking you twenty times. Damn it, Xiao Guizi, you must not take Wu Sangui too lightly. This old fellow is very good at deploying troops and fighting a battle. Li Zicheng was that formidable, yet he was defeated by him. Within the imperial court, not one general is his

match.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “We rely on numbers to gain victory. Your Majesty sends ten generals; ten beat damn one.”

“Even so,” Kangxi said, “Only if we send out capable great marshals will we succeed. If under my command I have Xu Da, Chang Yuchun, or perhaps Mu Ying, then I won’t have to worry.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Your Majesty personally lead your troops into battle, you surpass Xu Da, Chang Yuchun, Mu Ying. In the past Ming Taizu defeated Chen Youliang, he also personally led his troops into battle.”

“It’s easy for you to bootlick,” Kangxi said, “You can say raw bird fish soup [niao sheng yu tang, see Chapter 14], brilliant and wise, et cetera. But to be brilliant, first you must know yourself. Marching troops into battle is no small matter. I have never been to battle; how can I be Wu Sangui’s match? Several hundred thousand soldiers and horses, if the command is improper, inevitable everything will fail and wiped over the floor. In the previous Ming’s Crisis of Tumu Fortress[67], the Emperor believed eunuch Wang Zhen, he personally led the army into battle, several hundred thousand troops suffered total defeat under this eunuch’s muddleheaded advice that even the Emperor was captured by the enemy.”

Wei Xiaobao was scared; he busily said, “Your Majesty, your servant is a fake eunuch.”

Kangxi roared in laughter; he said, “You don’t have to be afraid. Even if you were a real eunuch, I am not a muddleheaded ruler like that previous Ming’s Yingzong; how can I let you mess up with me?”

“Right! Right!” Wei Xiaobao said, “Your Majesty’s divine strategy is indeed not a small matter. There is a saying in the opera, it’s called … it’s called inside something something, something is ten thousand *li* away.”

Kangxi laughed and said, “That saying is too difficult; I am not going to teach you.”

While they were still talking, a eunuch came to report that Nine Gates’ *Tidu* already received the imperial order to shut the city walls. Kangxi was just feeling

slightly relieved when another eunuch came to report, “The Prince Consort went hunting and has not returned, the city gate is already shut, we cannot go out of town to summon him.”

Kangxi slapped the table; he stood up and called out, “He has really left.” He asked, “What about Princess Jianning?”

The eunuch said, “Reporting to Your Majesty: Her Highness the Princess is still in the Palace.”

“That fellow,” Kangxi hatefully said, “Unexpectedly he does not have the slightest bit feeling between husband and wife.”

“Your Majesty,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Let your servant pursue this fellow and get him back; he has an agreement with your servant for a horse race today, unexpectedly he went hunting out of town; indeed it’s not right for him to do so.”

Kangxi asked the eunuch, “When did the Prince Consort go out of town?”

The eunuch replied, “Reporting to Your Majesty: when your servant went to the Prince Consort’s Mansion to announce the imperial decree, the Prince Consort’s Mansion *zongguan* [manager] said that Prince Consort left early this morning to go hunting.”

“Humph,” Kangxi said, “This fellow must have received the news this morning that Shang Kexi and Geng Jingzhong accepted the imperial orders of border defense removal. I am guessing that he knew that his old man is going to revolt immediately, hence he sneaked out at once.” Turning toward Wei Xiaobao he said, “He has gone for six, seven *sichen* [i.e. 12 or 14 hours]; you won’t be able to catch up with him. He had several dozen of Yunnan horses shipped here from Yunnan, it is precisely so that he could exchange horses all the way to Kunming.”

Wei Xiaobao thought, “The Emperor indeed can prophecy with supernatural accuracy; as soon as he heard that Wu Yingxiong had a large quantity of Yunnan horses shipped here, he could guess that he was planning to run away.” Seeing Kangxi’s countenance was not good, he did not dare to flatter randomly; but suddenly he remembered something. “Your Majesty,” he said, “Please don’t worry, perhaps your servant has a way to catch this fellow and bring him back.”

“How are you going to do that?” Kangxi said, “Rubbish! If Yunnan horses really have good endurance, and he has left Beijing far away, if he changed his appearance in disguise, you won’t be able to overtake him at all.”

Wei Xiaobao was not sure if his head stable hand managed to feed crotons to Wu Yingxiong’s Yunnan horses, hence he did not dare to boast extravagantly in front of the Emperor. He said, “Eating the ruler’s good fortune, loyal to the ruler’s matter. Let your servant try to pursue him; if I really cannot overtake him, there is nothing we can do anyway.”

Kangxi nodded. “Very well!” he said. Taking a brush-pen in hand, he quickly wrote an imperial edict, and stamped it with the imperial jade seal, ordering the Nine Gates’ *Tidu* to open the city gate to let Wei Xiaobao out; he said, “Take more Valiant Cavalry Brigade’s sergeants with you; if Wu Yingxiong resists arrest, overcome him with force.” Kangxi also handed over the golden seal to give him the authority to mobilize the troops.

“I obey the order!” Wei Xiaobao replied; he received the imperial edict and dashed out the Palace.

The Princess was waiting at the Imperial Palace gate. Seeing Wei Xiaobao hurrying out in quick steps, she called out, “Xiao Guizi, what are you doing?”

“It’s desperately serious,” Wei Xiaobao called back, “Your husband ran away.” Unexpectedly he did not stop, but ran even faster instead.

“Dead eunuch,” the Princess cursed, “You have no manners; quickly halt for me.”

Wei Xiaobao called out, “I am going to catch the Princess’ husband, I will go through water and tread on fire, I will not decline under any circumstances, I will travel through night and day, my horse will not stop to rest …” While babbling nonsense, he had already gone far.

Outside the Palace, Wei Xiaobao mounted his horse and galloped back to his mansion. He saw Zhao Liangdong was accompanying Zhang Yong and the others, three men, drinking in the reception pavilion. Immediately he turned around, summoned several dozen of his personal guards, and shouted his order to arrest Zhang Yong and the others, three generals. The personal guards immediately tied the tree generals up.

With an imposing voice Zhang Yong said, “May I ask *Dutong Daren*, what crime did *Xiaojiang* and the others commit?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “I have the imperial edict here, I don’t have time to talk to you.” While saying that, he waved the imperial edict in his hand, and fired up several orders in succession, “Get one thousand Valiant Cavalry Brigade Sergeants and fifty Imperial Bodyguards here to this Mansion immediately to receive order. Prepare horses.” His personal guards complied and left.

Wei Xiaobao told Zhao Liangdong, “Zhao *Zongbing*, that fellow Wu Yingxiong ran away. Wu Sangui is about to revolt. We must go out of the city to pursue.”

“That fellow is too brazen,” Zhao Liangdong called out, “Lowly officer receives the order and ready to go.”

Zhang Yong, Wang Jinbao and Sun Sike, three people were greatly shocked; they looked at each other in dismay. Wei Xiaobao ordered his personal guards, “Guard these three men well. Zhao *Zongbing*, let’s go.”

“Wei *Dutong*,” Zhang Yong called out, “We are Western Liang men, and we are Great Qing’s officers, we have never been Ping Xi Wang’s direct subordinates. Formerly the three of us were serving as military officers in Gansu, afterwards we were transferred to Yunnan on a mission, all along Wu Sangui has always pushed us out. He transferred us elsewhere, he wanted us, three people to leave Yunnan, because he knew perfectly well that the three of us are unwilling to associate ourselves with traitors; he was afraid we might spoil his plan.”

“How do I know that you are telling the truth and not lying to me?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

Sun Sike replied, “Last year Wu Sangui was about to kill me, it was only because Zhang *Tidu*’s protection that lowly officer was able to preserve my head. In my heart I hate that old b@stard to the bones.”

Zhang Yong said, “If lowly officers, three people are Wu Yingxiong’s accomplices, why didn’t we run away with him?”

Wei Xiaobao thought that he was right; he hesitantly said, “Alright, whether you are in cahoots with Wu Sangui or not, I will examine when I come back. Zhao *Zongbing*, pursuing people is more important, let’s go.”

"*Dutong Daren*," Zhang Yong said, "Wang *Fujiang* is very good at tracking horses' footprints, he can tell Yunnan horses' hoof print as soon as he sees it."

Wei Xiaobao nodded, "That skill is definitely very useful," he said, "But if I bring you along, and on the way you pound the egg, *laozi* may fall into your great trap."

In a loud and clear voice Sun Sike said, "*Dutong Daren*, you can tie *Xiaojiang* in here, take Zhang *Tidu* and Wang *Fujiang* along in pursuit. If the two of them have a change of heart, when you come back, you may kill *Xiaojiang* with a chop."

"Good," Wei Xiaobao said, "You actually have *yi qi*. I am still rather undecided in this matter. Come, come, come, Zhang *Tidu*, let you and I throw the dice three times. If you win, I will listen to you, if I win, I have no choice but to borrow the three gentlemen's heads." Without waiting for Zhang Yong to respond, he called loudly, "Guards, get some dice!"

Wang Jinbao said, "*Xiaojiang* has dice with me, loosen my bondage, let *Xiaojiang* gamble with you."

Wei Xiaobao was greatly surprised; he ordered his personal guard to loosen the rope binding him. Wang Jinbao groped into his pocket and sure enough, he had three dice. 'Clink, clink, clink' he threw the dice onto the table, his technique was very good. "Why do you carry dice in your pocket?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Wang Jinbao replied, "In my whole life *Xiaojiang* loves gambling the most, hence I always carry dice in my pocket. If I have nobody to gamble with, my left hand will gamble against my right hand."

Wei Xiaobao was even more interested. "Your own left hand gamble against your right hand?" he asked, "How do you decide win or lose?"

Wang Jinbao replied, "If my left hand loses, my right hand will punch my left arm; if my right hand loses, my left hand will punch my right arm."

Wei Xiaobao roared in laughter. "Interesting, interesting," he repeatedly said. "*Laoxiong*," he added, "You and I are like-minded, you must be a good man. Come, I'll release these two generals as well. Wang *Fujiang* and I will throw three times, no matter who win or lose, the three of you will come with me to pursue

Wu Yingxiong. If I win, just consider my offense to the three of you just now is settled. If you win, I will kowtow to the three of you to apologize."

Zhang Yong and the others, three men roared in laughter; they all said, "We do not dare."

Wei Xiaobao took the dice. He was about to throw when his personal guard came in to report that the Valiant Cavalry Brigade Sergeants and Imperial Bodyguards have assembled outside the Mansion awaiting orders. Wei Xiaobao collected the dice and said, "There's no time to lose, pursuing people is more important. Four generals, let's go!" Taking Zhang Yong, Zhao Liangdong, and the others, four people, and leading the Valiant Cavalry Brigade Sergeants and Imperial Bodyguards, he went out of the city heading south to pursue.

Wang Jinbao led the way in front. After pursuing for several *li*, he dismounted to look at the hoof print on the road. "*Dutong Daren*," he said, "This is really strange; when the party reached this place, they turned eastwards."

"It is indeed strange," Wei Xiaobao replied, "He is running away to Yunnan, he should be going south. Alright, everybody, let's go east."

Suspicion arose in Zhao Liangdong's heart, "Running away to the east? It does not make sense. Could it be that this fellow Wang Jinbao is deliberately leading us on the wrong road, so that Wu Yingxiong can escape?" He said, "*Dutong Daren*, is it possible for *Xiaojiang* to lead a team of men and horses to continue pursuing southwards?"

Wei Xiaobao cast a glance toward Wang Jinbao. Noticing the angry look on his face, he said, "No need, we will all follow Wang *Fujiang*'s lead. Yunnan horses were raised by him, he will not recognize it incorrectly." He ordered his personal guards to bring some weapons and let Zhang Yong and the others, three people to choose.

Zhang Yong selected a broadsword on staff; he said, "*Dutong Daren* is young, yet you are amazingly broad-minded and open. We are military officers from Yunnan, Wu Sangui is about to rebel, unexpectedly *Dutong Daren* gives us your bare heart and let us keep it without the slightest doubt."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "You don't need to praise me. I am gambling here, I put all my valuables, all my money on the table. If I win, I will win big:

capturing Wu Yingxiong and gain three good friends. If I lose, I will also lose big: I will have my head chopped by you, *laoxiong*."

Zhang Yong was greatly delighted; he said, "We are real men of Western Liang, we love to make friends with heroes and warriors the most. I am indebted that Wei *Dutong* holds me in such a high esteem, the one surnamed Zhang will throw my life for you forever." While saying that, he tossed his broadsword to the ground and did obeisance toward Wei Xiaobao.

Wang Jinbao and Sun Sike also fell on their knees. Wei Xiaobao jumped down from his horse and kneeled down on the road to return the salute. The four of them kowtowed to each other, then they stood up and laughed heartily. Wei Xiaobao said, "Zhao *Zongbing*, please also come, let's salute each other. From now on we will be like brothers, blessing we will enjoy together, difficulty we will face together."

Zhao Liangdong said, "I only don't trust this Wang *Fujiang*. I want to wait until he catches Wu Yingxiong, and then I will become sworn brothers with him."

Wang Jinbao angrily said, "Although my official rank is low, I am a real man; why would I covet becoming sworn brothers with you?" While saying that, he jumped onto his horse and galloped ahead, following the trail.

Speeding along eastwards for ten or so *li*, Wang Jinbao jumped down the horse to look at the hoof print on the road and some manure. He knitted his brows and said, "Odd, odd."

"What is it?" Zhang Yong hurriedly asked.

Wang Jinbao said, "The horse dung is pulpy, I don't know the reason. This does not look like our Yunnan horses' manure."

As soon as Wei Xiaobao heard this, he was greatly delighted; he laughed aloud and said, "That's it, this is genuine goods at fair prices, treating both the young and the old honestly. This is indeed Wu Yingxiong's caravan."

Wang Jinbao muttered to himself, "The hoof print is correct, but the manure is too strange."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Not strange, not strange! Yunnan horses got to Beijing, they are not accustomed to the climate, their excrement will definitely become

mushy; must wait seven or eight days before they get better. As long as the horse dung is pulpy, this is definitely Yunnan horse."

Wang Jinbao looked at him; seeing Wei Xiaobao's strange expression, like a smile yet not a smile, he could not help but half believing and half doubting.

They continued following the trail. After galloping for a while, they saw the hoof print turned southeast. Zhang Yong said, "*Dutong Daren*, Wu Yingxiong is running toward Tianjin, he wants to go out to sea from Tanggu. He must have prepared a boat on the shore, going to Guangxi by boat, and then continued on to Yunnan, in order to avoid government army cutting him off along the way."

Wei Xiaobao nodded. "True!" he said, "From Beijing to Kunming, a great distance of a hundred and eight thousand *li*, he could be stopped by government army any time. Going on sea route is much safer."

"We must pursue him even faster," Zhang Yong said.

"Why?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Zhang Yong replied, "From the Capital to the seaside is only several hundred *li*. He does not need to empathize with the horses, he will definitely run desperately fast."

"Yes, yes," Wei Xiaobao said, "Zhang *Dage* can prophecy with supernatural accuracy; indeed you have the talent of a great general." Hearing Wei Xiaobao calling him 'big brother', Zhang Yong was even more delighted.

Wei Xiaobao turned around and ordered a team of Valiant Cavalry Brigade to urgently run toward Tanggu harbor to transmit order to the naval commander there, to seal off the seaport and not allowing any ship to go out to sea. A *zuoling* [company commander] received the order and led his troops galloping away.

Before long, they saw two horses fell dead on the roadside, the horses were indeed Yunnan horses. Zhang Yong happily said, "*Dutong Daren*, the path Wang *Fujiang* picked to pursue is indeed not bad." Yet Wang Jinbao was frowning and worried, his countenance looked very distressed.

"Wang *San'ge* [third brother]," Wei Xiaobao said, "Why aren't you happy?"

Wang Jinbao thought, “I am not number three, why do you call me ‘San Ge’?” He said, “*Xiaojiang* raised these Yunnan horses, each one is a good colt, one in a thousand, how could they produce pulpy excrement and fall dead on the road? Even if Wu Yingxiong urged them desperately, those horses cannot be this useless! Ay, what a pity, what a pity!”

Wei Xiaobao knew he loved horses, hence he did not dare to mention about they sneakily feed the horses with crotons; he said, “That fellow Wu Yingxiong is solely engrossed in escaping, hence he worked these horse to their deaths, he wasted Wang *San’ge*’s heart and blood. Damn it, this fellow was not raised by humans.”

Wang Jinbao said, “How can *Dutong Daren* call *Xiaojiang* ‘Wang *San’ge*’? I really do not dare to accept.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Zhang *Dage*, Zhao *Er’ge*, Wang *San’ge*, Sun *Sige* [first, second, third, and fourth brother, respectively]; I only looked at which one has more grizzled beard, I considered him a bit older.”

“So that’s how it is,” Wang Jinbao said, “Wu Sangui’s entire family does not have even one good person. If those who serve in the army do not love horses, they won’t have a good fate.” While saying that, he heaved a deep sigh.

Not even several *li* later, they saw three more horses fell dead on the roadside. The farther they went, the more they saw dead horses. Zhang Yong suddenly said, “*Dutong Daren*, Wu Yingxiong’s horses get sick because they ate bad food, they cannot be forced to run. But we must guard against him dismounting and running into the countryside to hide.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Zhang *Dage* can indeed foresee everything, *Xiongdi* is full of admiration.” At once he transmitted his order to the Valiant Cavalry Brigade to spread out and outflank the area ahead of them.

Sure enough, several *li* later a team of Valiant Cavalry Brigade on the north side cried out joyfully, “We get Wu Yingxiong!”

Wei Xiaobao and the others were greatly delighted; following their voice, they rushed ahead and saw in the distant several hundred Valiant Cavalry Brigade sergeants forming a circle in the wheat field by the main road. This area had just had rain the previous day, the wheat field was muddy. Wei Xiaobao and the

others urged their horses to run toward them. The sergeants were surrounding several men who were covered all over in mud and looked very dirty. The one in front was indeed Wu Yingxiong, only he was wearing marketplace small merchant attire, the graceful and luxurious 'golden horse jade hall' appearance was completely gone.

Wei Xiaobao jumped down from his horse, paid his respect and said, "Prince Consort, are you dressing up to play the opera? His Majesty suddenly carried away by a whim to watch an opera, he instructed *Xiaode* [little/lowly one, referring to self] to summon you. If you perform in front of His Majesty, I think it is very fitting. Ha ha … You dress as a beggar, isn't it Mo Ji from the story 'Precious [orig. gold and jade] Slave Stick Beating Unkind Boyfriend'?"

Wu Yingxiong was already scared that his entire body trembling; hearing Wei Xiaobao's ridicule, he did not respond a single word. Wei Xiaobao was very happy and excited; with Wu Yingxiong in his custody he returned to the Capital. By the time they arrived at the Palace, it was already around noon the next day. Kangxi had already received the report brought by the Imperial Bodyguards riding fast horses. He immediately summoned Wei Xiaobao for an audience.

Wei Xiaobao deliberately did not wipe the mud and dust from his face. When Kangxi saw him, naturally he thought that this man handled this matter loyally, that he had worked hard and rendered extremely great merit. Kangxi reached out and patted Wei Xiaobao's shoulder, as he laughed and said, "Damn it, Xiao Guizi, what kind of skill do you have? Unexpectedly you succeeded in catching Wu Yingxiong."

Wei Xiaobao no longer concealed anything, he told Kangxi about his scheme of poisoning the horses. He laughed and said, "Actually, your servant was only hoping to win his ten thousand *taels* of silver, teaching him a lesson that he won't boast, while at the same time your servant will have extra money to be spent, so that after working for Your Majesty, I won't have to embezzle any money. Who would have thought that Your Majesty's flood of good fortune fills the heavens; your servant fooled around a little bit, unexpectedly I obstructed Wu Sangui's sinister plot from prevailing. It is obvious that that old fellow's rebellion is doomed to failure."

Kangxi laughed aloud. He also felt that in the heart of this matter there

seemed to be a divine intervention, that his own good fortune was indeed not small. He laughed and said, “I am a blessed Son of Heaven, you are a lucky general. You may go and take a rest.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “That fellow Wu Yingxiong has been handed over to the Imperial Bodyguards; we are waiting for the Holy Sage’s decision on how to discipline him.”

Kangxi hesitated. “For the time being, we must not say a word or make any movement,” he said, “Put him back in the Prince Consort Mansion. See if Wu Sangui is making any movement. It would be best if he knew that his son has been captured back and I did not kill him, perhaps he would be grateful for this and no longer want to revolt.”

“Yes, yes,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Your Majesty is magnanimous, raw bird fish soup.”

Kangxi said, “Send a team of Valiant Cavalry Brigade to guard all the doors of the Prince Consort Mansion. Interrogate in details everybody going in and out of the Mansion. Take all horses and mules in his mansion out, don’t let even one animal remains.” For each order he spoke, Wei Xiaobao said ‘yes’ once.

Kangxi said, “All personnel who render merit this time, make a list and submit it to me, give them reward and promotion as appropriate. Even the head stable hand who fed crotons to the horses, promote him to be a petty official. Ha ha …”

Wei Xiaobao kneeled down to express his gratitude; he mentioned Zhang Yong, Zhao Liangdong, Wang Jinbao and Sun Sike, four people’s names, and also said, “Zhang Yong and the others, three generals, were Yunnan’s high-ranking military officers, but it is clear that they vow loyalty and devotion to Your Majesty, they exerted themselves in the capture of Wu Yingxiong. It can clearly be seen that if Wu Sangui wants to revolt, the generals under his command are bound to surrender one after another.”

Kangxi said, “Zhang Yong and those two *Fujiang* do not wish to be associated with traitors, that is very good. Zhang Yong was originally Gansu’s *Tidu*, most likely the other two *Fujiang* are not Wu Sangui’s former subordinates.”

“Your Majesty is an enlightened sage,” Wei Xiaobao said.

Leaving the Palace, Wei Xiaobao personally escorted Wu Yingxiong back to the Prince Consort Mansion. "*Fuma Ye* [emperor's son-in-law], only after I spoke not a few words of praise on your behalf in front of His Majesty that you can preserve your head. Next time you run away again, I cannot guarantee even my own head."

Wu Yingxiong repeatedly expressed his thanks, but in his heart he did not stop cursing. On how dozens of good horses fell dead one after another on the road, to such an extent as he failed within sight of success, he could never figure it out.

Several days later, an imperial decree was issued, commending Wei Xiaobao, Zhang Yong, and the others for their effort, and promoting all of them one level up. Kangxi did not wish to make this matter widely known, to avoid inciting Wu Sangui to rise in rebellion. For this reason, the citation in the imperial edict was obscure, it only said that these people had worked efficiently.

Because of Wu Yingxiong's attempted escape, Kangxi deduced that Wu Sangui's rebellion was imminent. But because Wu Yingxiong was captured back, he hoped it would instill fear in Wu Sangui's heart, perhaps it would slow down the rebellion plan somewhat. These days Kangxi was 'moving the army and sending the general', he manufactured cannon and purchased horses; he was very busy. It's just that the treasury coffer was rather limited. Supposing the three border defense rose up in rebellion together, plus Taiwan, Mongolia and Tibet, three places, so that he had to deal with six armies at the same time, the military expenditure would be spent like running water. Managing the money was indeed not easy; if he could delay for one day, he would have one more day to raise soldier's pay and prepare the provisions.

Kangxi thought that luckily Wei Xiaobao managed to break the Divine Dragon Island, and win the Luocha Country over. Divine Dragon Island was inconsequential, but Luocha Country was a real threat. This person was without learning or skills, yet he had tremendous luck; thereupon Kangxi issued an imperial edict, sending him to Yangzhou to build the Martyr Shrine, with a secret mission to detour south to Henan, to destroy the Mount Wangwu's Situ Bolei's gang of bandits, hence eliminating any 'calamity within their bosom'. Wei Xiaobao presented a memorial, requesting Zhang Yong and the others, four generals to be allocated under his command. Kangxi promptly granted his

request.

One day Wei Xiaobao, accompanied by Zhang Yong and the others, four generals, was ready to leave. Suddenly Shi Lang, Huang Fu, as well as Tian Di Hui's Xu Tianchuan, Feng Jizhong, and the others arrived. As they see each other, they all were very happy. Turned out when Wei Xiaobao fell into Cult Leader Hong's 'beautiful woman trap' and was captured, it was not that Shi Lang and the others did not dare to come back, rather, every day they sailed the battleships to look for him in every island, with the hope that they were able to save him. Xu Tianchuan and the others even separated themselves to look for him in Liaodong, Zhili, and Shandong, three provinces' coastal area. It was not until they received Wei Xiaobao's news, which he sent from the Capital that they finally returned to the Capital to see him.

Naturally Wei Xiaobao did not want to talk about the shameful way he was captured; he simply babbling nonsense a little bit to conceal his fault. Shi Lang and the others did not believe him, but nobody dared to ask too much question. Wei Xiaobao went back to present another memorial to the Emperor, reporting Shi Lang and the others' merit; hence everybody was duly rewarded. Xu Tianchuan and the other Tian Di Hui brothers did not receive Qing Court's officer's salary, hence Wei Xiaobao did not even mention their names. They all had a big feast in Beijing for a day, the next day they all left together.

One day they arrived at the foot of Mount Wangwu. Wei Xiaobao quietly informed the Tian Di Hui brothers about his mission to exterminate Situ Bolei. Everybody was shocked. Li Lishi said, "Wei *Xiangzhu*, we must not do that. Situ Bolei's aspiration is to restore the Ming, he is one great hero and a warrior. If we destroy Mount Wangwu, that means we are working for the Tatars."

"So that's how it is," Wei Xiaobao said, "When I saw Ol' Situ's disciples, I noticed that they have the lofty quality of a hero. But I receive the imperial decree to destroy Mount Wangwu; this is a difficult thing to do."

Priest Xuanzhen said, "Wei *Xiangzhu*'s official position in the imperial court is getting higher and higher, I am afraid it is a bit inappropriate. In my opinion, we join hands with Situ Bolei, and rise in rebellion."

Qi Qingbiao shook his head and said, "Our first step is to borrow the Tatars'

hand to deal with that big traitor Wu Sangui. If Wei *Xiangzhu* rebel at this time, there is a possibility the Tatar Emperor would ally himself with Wu Sanhui instead, and then we will ruin the enterprise for the sake of one basketful."

Wei Xiaobao did not want to rebel against Kangxi to begin with, as soon as he heard this, he hastily said, "Right, right! We must get rid of Wu Sangui first before we do anything else; this is the number one important matter. Situ Bolei only has several hundred people on Mount Wangwu, this is a trivial matter, we must not save a little only to lose a lot."

"The matter at hand," Xu Tianchuan said, "Is how to dodge the Tatar Emperor's order and explain to him. Besides, the Tatar Emperor has a heart to build Martyr Shrine for Shi Gebu in Yangzhou; in this matter, we must not spoil his plan."

Shi Kefa's utter devotion, his death for the country, none of the heroes and warriors of the world did not respect greatly. Hearing Xu Tianchuan, the Tian Di Hui warriors nodded their agreement. As for how to explain to the Emperor, nobody had better skill than Wei Xiaobao, thereupon everybody turned their eyes to him, waiting for him to come up with an idea.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Since we must not strike Wangwu Mountain, we can send a letter to Situ *Laoxiong*, asking the old brother to keep away."

They all deliberated for half a day, yet in the end they all thought that this stratagem was the most feasible. Wei Xiaobao recalled when he threw the dice betting on their lives that day, Wangwu Pai had a melon seed faced little Miss Zeng Rou, with big round eyes, and was very graceful and lovely. He thought, "I do not have any friendship with the Ol' Situ; if I want to do a favor, I might as well do it for Miss Zeng."

Right this moment, Zhang Yong and Zhao Liangdong separately sent their people to report: they had Wangwu Mountain surrounded, all access to and from the mountain had been blocked. Turned out as soon as Wei Xiaobao entered Henan province's border, he quietly informed Zhang Yong, Zhao Liangdong, and the others, four generals, about the imperial edict to encircle and annihilate Mount Wangwu. Without a word or movement, the four generals separately let their troops to guard all access and strategic locations at the foot

of Mount Wangwu; they were only waiting for the order to attack the mountain.

After the four generals followed Wei Xiaobao, only by capturing Wu Yingxiong, such an easy assignment, they all enjoyed promotion; hence they were very grateful, they hoped that this time they could strive to render meritorious service. They dug pits around the access roads everywhere, and covered the pits with horse-tripping ropes. Archers, hooks, scythes and spears guarded four sides and eight directions. The plan was to capture everybody from the mountain alive, not to let even one person escape. All four generals thought, “More than five thousand officers and soldiers attacking about a thousand bandits on the mountain, if we win, what’s so special about it? Only if we manage not to let even one person escape from the net will we be considered as rendering a tiny merit.”

Wei Xiaobao thought, “Capturing Situ Bolei and those bunch of old heads cannot be considered great merit; Tian Di Hui *Xiongdi* also greatly disapprove. The heroes of *Jianghu* attach most importance to *yi qi*, I simply must not offend my friends.”

While he was busy thinking about how to send letter to Zeng Rou and set Wangwu Pai master and disciples free, suddenly he heard sound of drums from the east side, and numerous sergeants shouting and yelling, followed by a sentry came in to report that some people were rushing and killing down the mountain. Wei Xiaobao thought, “In all three armed forces, I must not issue the order to let anybody go; we can only capture them alive and talk later, then I can slowly think of a way to set them free.” He ordered, “Capture all of them alive, not a single one can be killed or injured.” His personal guards went out to transmit the order. Wei Xiaobao added, “Especially the women, they must not be harmed even more.” With a glance he saw Xu Tianchuan, Qian Laoben and the others’ expression, and could not help but blushing a little. He said in his heart, “Don’t worry, this time it won’t be like Shen Long Island, where I fell into ‘beautiful woman trap’ and was captured.”

Leading the Tian Di Hui warriors, he went toward the mountain road on the eastern end to observe the battle, he saw halfway up the mountain a hundred or so men rushing down. The officers and men had received their commander-in-chief’s order, they did not dare to release any arrow, they only rushed upward to

stop. They heard the shouts repeated continuously as the people rushing down fell into the trap one by one, and were captured by the soldiers wielding hooks, scythes and spears. Wei Xiaobao wanted to see if Zeng Rou had been captured, but the distant was too far, he could not see clearly.

Suddenly they saw someone leaping as if he was flying from one tree to the other, going down the mountain. The officers and men rushed forward to block, the man was extremely vigorous and nimble, unexpectedly nobody could stop him. Priest Xuanzhen sighed in admiration, “Good skill!”

The man gradually came near, in just several dozen more *zhang* he would have reached the foot of the mountain. Qian Laoben said, “This man’s martial art skill is this superb, could he be Situ Bolei?”

Xu Tianchuan said, “Other than Old Hero Situ, I am afraid other people would not have this kind of …” Before he could finish, Sun Sike suddenly called out, “That man looks like Wu Sangui’s guard.” While they were speaking, the man had dashed several *zhang* nearer. “Capture him first, talk later!” Wei Xiaobao shouted.

The Tian Di Hui warriors rushed to encircle the man. The man brandished a steel saber; with each wave of his saber, he hacked down a sergeant. Sun Sike stuck out his long spear to meet him; after he saw clearly the man’s face, he called out, “Ba Langxing, what are you doing in here?”

This man was precisely Wu Sangui’s trusted aide, Ba Langxing. He replied in loud voice, “I am under Ping Xi Wang’s order to remove evil from the imperial court, to kill this rebel thief Situ Bolei. Why are you hindering me?”

When Xu Tianchuan and the others heard this, they were greatly shocked; they saw hanging on his waist was a bloody, badly mutilated head, but they were not sure if it belonged to Situ Bolei or not. They swarmed around to surround him. Sun Sike said, “Wei *Dutong* is here, lay down your weapon and go up to pay your respect, let’s hear what *Dutong Daren* has to say in dealing with the offender.”

“Alright!” Ba Langxing said. Putting the saber back into the scabbard, he strode toward Wei Xiaobao and said in a loud voice, “I pay my respect to *Dutong Daren*.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “You are here …” Ba Langxing suddenly leaped with two

outstretched claws toward Wei Xiaobao's face and pit of his stomach.

"Aiyo! Mother!" Wei Xiaobao cried out, turned around and ran away.

Ba Langxing's martial art skill was highly perfected and strong; he sneered and reached out to grab the clothes on Wei Xiaobao's back with his left hand, while with right hand he grabbed the top of Wei Xiaobao's head. Suddenly he felt a kick aimed at his right flank, a powerful and extremely fast kick. Ba Langxing leaned sideways to evade, the attacker followed up by a head-on palm strike; it was Feng Jizhong.

Ba Langxing raised his palm to parry, his body swayed, suddenly he felt his lower back tightened, Xu Tianchuan grasped him. Qian Laoben stretched out his finger to jab the pit of his stomach, Ba Langxing grunted. Feng Jizhong's left leg swept across, Ba Langxing could not stand his ground, he fell down to the ground. Qian Laoben pressed him firmly down, Wei Xiaobao's personal guards came over to tie him up and pushed him in front of Wei Xiaobao.

Ba Langxing loudly said, "Ping Xi Wang's great army will arrive any day, at that time all of you will die without burial site, quickly surrender now."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Ping Xi Wang has dispatched his troops into battle? I did not know that. Is he, Senior, well?"

Seeing his genial manner, momentarily Ba Langxing was unclear of Wei Xiaobao's intention. "Imperial Envoy Minister," he said, "You have been to Kunming, Ping Xi Wang also have a very high regard of you. You are an intelligent person, why do you want to be Tatars' servant? It would be better for you to pledge allegiance to Ping Xi Wang as soon as you can."

Xu Tianchuan kicked his buttocks and shouted, "That big traitor Wu Sangui is mean and shameless, and you become his servant, you are even more shameless." Ba Langxing was very angry, he turned his head around and spat toward Xu Tianchuan. Xu Tianchuan sidestepped, the spittle hit a personal guard's face.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Ba *Laoxiong*, you want to say something, say it nicely, no need to get angry. You want me to pledge my allegiance to Ping Xi Wang, that is not a bad advice. You came to Mount Wangwu, for what purpose?"

Ba Langxing said, “It’s not a big deal to let you know; in any case I have already killed Situ Bolei.” While saying that, he cast a glance toward the severed head hanging on his waist.

“Why did Ping Xi Wang want to kill him?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

Ba Langxing replied, “You can go see Ping Xi Wang with me, the Senior will definitely tell you.”

Xu Tianchuan and the others were greatly angry; they raised their fists to beat him. Wei Xiaobao signaled them with his eyes to stop, he ordered his personal guards to drag Ba Langxing into his tent to be interrogated. Who would have thought that this man was extremely obstinate, and was very loyal to Wu Sangui; he merely urged Wei Xiaobao to surrender, but unwilling to reveal anything else even for half a word. When he was searched, they found a document stamped with vermillion seal. Wei Xiaobao ordered his men to read it for him. Turned out it was a fake imperial order written by Wu Sangui, bestowing Situ Bolei the title ‘Kai Guo Jiang Jun’ [general who found a state]. When asked about the origin of this document, Ba Langxing only glowered at him without saying anything.

Realizing he would not find anything from Ba Langxing, Wei Xiaobao ordered his men to detain him. He had the other people who were captured flogged and interrogated. Some could not endure the torture and spilled everything. Turned out these days Wu Sangui was about to deploy his troops in rebellion, he sent his trusted aide Ba Langxing, leading a small team of soldiers, to go see his former subordinate Situ Bolei, wanting him to respond to the uprising. Wu Sangui told Ba Langxing that if Situ Bolei accepted the order, nothing can’t be better, but if he did not, he was to be killed to guard against him leaking the conspiracy.

When Situ Bolei heard about the uprising to ‘fight the Qing’, he was greatly delighted, and immediately promised to join the righteous uprising; however, when he asked about the particulars, he learned that Wu Sangui did not have ‘restoring the Ming’ in mind; rather, he wanted to be the Emperor. Hence the title ‘Kai Guo Jiang Jun’ could not be clearer. Situ Bolei was unwilling to accept the fake imperial order, he told Ba Langxing to return and inform Wu Sangui that if he pledge his allegiance to Ming Emperor’s later generations, Situ Bolei would definitely march at the front and would not balk at ten thousand deaths. But Wu Sangui murdered King Gui in the past, and now he wanted to be the Emperor,

the world's loyal-to-theMing-Dynasty patriots would never submit to him.

Ba Langxing persuaded him several times, Situ Bolei slapped the table and rained curses on him, telling him that Wu Sangui forfeited Han people's rivers and mountains, he committed ten thousand evils and was beyond any pardon. If he was willing to reform and start afresh, he might still be able to atone his crimes by meritorious acts, otherwise Situ Bolei was ready to feed on his flesh and sleep in his skin.

Ba Langxing did not say anything else, that evening he caught Situ Bolei off-guard and killed him, cut his head, and led his troops escape down the mountain. Because Wangwu Pai disciples were unaware, it was too late for them to pursue. As luck had it, the officers and men happened to surround the mountain right that moment, hence Wu Sangui's troops fell into the trap and were captured. Ba Langxing's sudden attack to Wei Xiaobao was with the intention of capturing the commander and used him as a hostage so that they could escape.

After finding all the details, Wei Xiaobao convened Tian Di Hui warriors in private discussion. Li Lishi said, "Wei *Xiangzhu*, Old Hero Situ was a person of loyalty and righteousness [orig. 'loyal liver righteous guts'], it was unfortunate that he lost his life in a crafty scoundrel's hand. It's only right for us to give him a proper burial."

Wei Xiaobao said, "I have an idea." And then he explained what he had in mind. Everybody clapped and praised his idea was good. Thereupon they went their separate way to make preparation.

That day not all of the officers and men attacked the mountain. As for Wangwu Pai people, because their leader was killed, they were thrown into confusion, they only guarded the mouth to their mountain strictly.

Early in the morning the next day, Wei Xiaobao led the Tian Di Hui warriors plus a team of Valiant Cavalry Brigade officers and men, bringing everything they had prepared, halfway up the mountain, where he ordered the officers and men to stay and guard, waiting for his order. He himself and Xu Tianchuan and the others, along with several of his personal guards, continued up the mountain. After walking for several *li*, they saw a dozen or so Wangwu Pai disciples with weapons in their hands blocking their way.

Xu Tianchuan stepped forward, alone, holding a white visiting card with both hands. The visiting cards had these words written on it: ‘Junior [orig. later generation] Wei Xiaobao, accompanied by Li Lishi, Qi Qingbiao, Priest Xuanzhen, Feng Jizhong, Fan Gang, Qian Laoben, Gao Yanchao and the others, solemnly come to deliver Old Hero Situ’s coffin and offer sacrifice.’

The Wangwu Pai disciples saw that the incoming people did not seem to carry any animosity, behind them there were some people carrying a coffin, and they also brought incense stick and candles, ritual paper money and other things; the disciples were greatly baffled. “Gentlemen, please wait, *Zaixia* will go up to report,” they said. Immediately one of them dashed up the mountain; while the rest of them still guarded the mountain road strictly. Wei Xiaobao and the others withdrew several dozen steps and sat on mountain rocks to rest.

Not too long afterwards, from up the mountain several dozen people walked down; the leader was Situ He, whom they had met in the past. He was Situ Bolei’s son; as the leader of the mountain passed away, he was to be in charge of Wangwu Pai’s affairs. Wei Xiaobao’s eyes, however, were looking at the people behind him; he saw a young, slender woman, wearing white flower on her head, which was precisely Zheng Rou. He could not help but was delighted.

In a loud and clear voice Situ He said, “Gentlemen have come to our humble place, I wonder for what purpose?” While saying that, he had his hand pressed on the hilt of the sword hanging on his waist.

Qian Laoben stepped forward with cupped fist and said, “Our superior Lord Wei learned that Old Hero Situ was unfortunate and was harmed by crafty scoundrel; he is deeply grieved, hence he leads *Zaixia* and the others to deliver the Old Hero’s coffin and offer sacrifice.”

Situ He looked at Wei Xiaobao from the distance and said, “He is a Tatar Imperial Court official, he leads imperial officers and men to surround the mountain, he is definitely harboring malicious intentions. You are planning evil schemes, we are not going to fall into your trick.”

Qian Laoben said, “May I ask, who is the assassin murdering Old Hero Situ?”

Gnashing his teeth, Situ He said, “He is Wu Sangui’s warrior, Ba Langxing, plus his subordinates, a bunch of evil thieves.”

Qian Laoben nodded and said, “Situ *Shaoxia* [young hero] does not believe our superior’s good intention, this is not surprising at all. Let us present the sacrificial offering first.” Turning his head around, he called out, “Bring it up!”

Two personal guards dragged a man slowly up the mountain. This man’s hands and feet were shackled, his head was covered in black cloth. Wangwu Pai disciples were greatly baffled; they wondered what kind of trick the other side was playing. When the man reached Qian Laoben, the personal guard held back the iron chain to stop him from walking further.

Qian Laoben said, “Situ *Shaoxia*, please look!” Reaching out, he pulled the black cloth covering the man’s head; they saw the man had furrowed brows and blazing eyes, he was none other than Ba Langxing.

As soon as Wangwu Pai disciples saw him, they shouted angrily, “That’s the treacherous bandit! Quickly kill him!” A series of ringing sound was heard as every one drew their weapons out, ready to chop Ba Langxing into pieces.

Situ He raised his hands to block in front of everybody. “Wait a moment!” he said. Cupping his fist toward Qian Laoben he asked, “Sire has caught the crafty scoundrel, I wonder how you are going to handle him.”

Qian Laoben said, “My superior highly esteemed Old Hero Situ; that day he also had predestined affinity to meet Situ *Shaoxia*. Today we apprehended this crafty scoundrel who committed the violent crime, along with the numerous evil thieves that he brought, we want to have everything hacked to pieces in front of Old Hero Situ’s coffin, to console the Old Hero’s spirit in Heaven.”

Situ He was surprised, thinking that how could there be such good deed in the world? He turned to look at Ba Langxing, in his heart he was half believing, half doubting, thinking, “Tatars are crafty; there must be an evil scheme behind this.”

Ba Langxing suddenly opened his mouth in curses, “F*ck your granny, you look at *laozi*’s bird, that old fellow of yours was killed by *laozi* …”

Qian Laoben’s right palm slapped on his back, his left foot flew and kicked his buttocks. Ba Langxing’s hands and feet were shackled, he could not dodge, his body tumbled forward, he was thrown toward Situ He, and was unable to crawl back up.

Qian Laoben said, “This is my superior’s small gift; Sire may handle this crafty scoundrel any way you wish.” Turning his head around, he called out, “Bring them all up.”

A team of personal guards dragged a hundred or more prisoners who had their hands and feet shackled, and their heads covered in black cloth. When the black cloths were removed, their faces were exposed; they were precisely Ba Langxing’s men. Qian Laoben said, “Situ *Shaoxia* may take them all away.”

Things had come this far, Situ He’s suspicion vanished. Turning toward Wei Xiaobao, he bowed from a distant and said, “Honored Sir’s great kindness, my humble Sect’s gratitude is inexplicable.” In his heart he mused, “He extended this kind of great friendship to us, I wonder what he wants from us. Could it be that he wants us to surrender to the Tatars? That is absolutely impossible.”

Wei Xiaobao quickly stepped forward to return the propriety; he said, “That day I threw the dice with Situ *Xiong*, Miss Zeng; I have always remembered that. I only hoped that some day we could play again.” Pointing to the coffin behind him, he said, “Old Hero Situ’s remains is in that coffin, please take it up the mountain, put it together with his body and give him a proper burial.”

Situ Bolei was decapitated, his severed head was brought down the mountain by Ba Langxing, none of Wangwu Pai numerous disciples was not extremely grieved. Situ He was still afraid they were being tricked; he walked over to the coffin, and saw the coffin lid had not been nailed down. When he uncovered it, he indeed saw his father’s severed head inside; he could not help but was overcome with grief, he kneeled down on the ground and cried loudly. When the rest of the disciples saw him like that, they also kneeled down and wept in sorrow.

Situ He stood up, he ordered four of his martial brothers to take the coffin up the mountain. He said to Wei Xiaobao, “Would Honored Sir visit my deceased father’s spirit tablet to burn an incense stick?”

Wei Xiaobao replied, “We ought to kowtow in front of the Old Hero’s spirit tablet.” He ordered his personal guards to wait at the mouth of the mountain, and only brought Shuang’er and Tian Di Hui brothers to follow Situ He going up the mountain.

Wei Xiaobao walked over to Zeng Rou and said in a low voice, “Miss Zeng, how are you?”

The tears on Zeng Rou’s face had not dried yet, she cried so much that her eyes were red; she looked even more adorable and pitiful. She lifted up her head and with sobs and sniffles she said, “You … you are General … Huacha … Huacha?”

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted. “You remember my name?” he said.

“Um,” Zeng Rou mumbled while lowering her head; her face blushed slightly.

Seeing her blushing, Wei Xiaobao’s heart was shaken, “Why is she blushing when she saw me? When a man is all smiles, it’s not a good thing; when a woman’s face is blushing, she is thinking about a husband. Could it be that she is thinking of me as her husband? I wonder if the dice I gave her is still here.” In a low voice he asked, “Miss Zeng, last time I gave you something, do you still have it?”

Zeng Rou blushed again and looked the other way. “What thing?” she asked, “I forget.”

Wei Xiaobao was quite disappointed; he sighed. Zeng Rou turned her head back and smiled gently; she said in a low voice, “Departing Ten!” [See Chapter 22]

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted; he could not stop the itch in his heart, which was difficult to scratch. He said in a low voice, “Mine was a Departing Ten, yours was a Supreme!”

Zeng Rou no longer paid him any attention; she quickened her steps and walked by Situ He’s side.

All four sides of Wangwu Mountain appeared like they were cut, the shape was like the top of a royal carriage; hence it got the name ‘Wang Wu’ [king’s room]. The peak was called ‘Temple of Heaven’; on the east there was ‘vibrant sun peak’, on the west there was ‘lunar corona peak’. The party followed Situ He to the Wang Mu Dong [queen mother cave] on the north side of Temple of Heaven. Along the way the pines were dark blue, the cypress bluish-green, the mountain scenery was beautiful and secluded.

Mount Wangwu was mentioned in literature as ‘Clear and Void Little Paradise[68]’. Among the thirty-six paradises under the heavens, it ranked number one. According to legend, it was the place the Yellow Emperor prepared as the dwelling place of Queen Mother. Wangwu Pai people lived in Wang Mu Cave and other caves nearby, where it was warm in the winter and cool in the summer, better than regular buildings. Situ Bolei’s memorial tablet was located inside the Wang Mu Cave. The disciples stitched the severed head together with the body and put him inside the coffin.

Wei Xiaobao led the Tian Di Hui brothers lighting the incense sticks and offered sacrifice in front of the spirit tablet. He kneeled down and kowtowed, thinking, “If I want to flatter Miss Zeng, I must act grieved, the more sorrowful the better.”

Pretending to cry was actually the trick he was an expert at. He recalled to mind the tragic suffering several times the old wh0re beat him up in the Palace, and then the dangerous situation when the Cult Leader Hong caught him, the repeated bad luck he had to suffer from Fang Yi cheated on him time and again, the helplessness he felt because Ah Ke loved Zheng Keshuang; he was overwhelmed with grieve, and burst into tears.

At first his crying was somewhat strained, yet as soon as he started to cry, it is only logical that the more he cried, the sadder he was. “Old Hero Situ,” he cried loudly, “For a long time Junior has heard that you are a loyal minister, a patriot, a great hero and warrior. In those days I saw your honorable son’s swordsmanship, I was even more convinced that your martial art was superb. I was hoping that I could do obeisance to you and be your disciple or grand-disciple; learning several moves of your martial art would be enough to feel proud and elated in the *Jianghu*. Who would have thought that you, Senior, was actually harmed by crafty scoundrel. Boo hoo … boo hoo … It really makes people exceedingly broken-hearted.”

Situ He, Zheng Rou and the others were already inconsolably heart-broken; listening to his crying, the cries of grief inside the Wang Mu Cave shook the heavens, the anguished wailing moved the earth. Xu Tianchuan, Qian Laoben, and the others originally did not want to cry, yet they were touched by the people’s mournful cry, and could not help but shedding some tears.

Wei Xiaobao beat his breast and stamped his feet, while continuously crying loudly; it was not until the Wangwu Pai disciples repeatedly consoled him instead that he finally held back his tears. He asked for Ba Langxing to be brought out; fetching a steel saber he handed it over to Situ He and said, “Situ *Shaoxia*, kill this treacherous bandit, avenge your esteemed father.”

With one chop of the saber Situ He severed Ba Langxing’s head and put it on the sacrificial table. Wangwu Pai disciples bowed down together to Wei Xiaobao to thank his great kindness. Actually, Wei Xiaobao was young, he would not think about the strategy of ‘buying people’s hearts’; he learned it from the opera ‘Wolong [i.e. Zhuge Liang] Condolence Visit’. After Zhou Yu was angered to his death by Zhuge Liang, Zhuge Liang himself came to Chaisangkou[69] to offer sacrifice, and cried with utmost grief on his knees, causing the various generals of Eastern Wu to have deep feeling toward him. Fortunately the Zhuge Liang in the opera recited a rather long memorial, his poetic oration was too elegant, so that Wei Xiaobao did not understand a single sentence; otherwise he would have copied the opera by reciting muddled memorial on Mount Wangwu, and thus would immediately expose the fox’s tail.

As such, naturally Wangwu Pai people were deeply grateful to him, to say nothing of when the other day after Wei Xiaobao captured Situ He and the others, he set them free and presented them silver as a gift, hence he had sold great friendship toward these people. However, he was a noble official of the Qing court, hence all along the people were quite baffled with his actions.

Qian Laoben then pulled Situ He aside, and explained that he and his companions were actually brothers of the Green Wood Hall of Tian Di Hui. Only he did not reveal Wei Xiaobao’s real status as he acted as an official of the imperial court, for fear that as soon as it leaked, their great endeavor might be spoiled. Qian Laoben only gave vague explanation that Wei Xiaobao had strong *yi qi*, that he ‘lived in Cao camp, but his heart was in Han camp’, that all the brethren regarded him as a good friend.

When Situ He heard this, he was enlightened at once; he repeatedly expressed his gratitude. This time he spoke most sincerely; completely different compared to a while ago, when misgivings in his heart had not yet explained.

They also discussed Wangwu Pai's future. Situ He said that since their Sect had just suffered great mourning, plus there were officers and men surrounding the mountain, they had not really thought about this matter. Qian Laoben tried to attract their interest a little bit, by saying that in Jianghu, Tian Di Hui's prestige was extremely resounding, that they were the present day leader of the fighting the Qing restoring the Ming movement, which Wangwu Pai had always respected and admired, plus they had a common goal.

When Situ He heard this, he was greatly delighted; straight away he discussed with the elders and all brothers of the Sect, and they all approved. Immediately he spoke to Qian Laoben, requesting to join the alliance. It was then that Qian Laoben explained clearly that Wei Xiaobao was actually the *Xiangzhu* of their Green Wood Hall.

In the afternoon of that very same day, Tian Di Hui's Green Wood Hall held a general assembly in Wang Mu Cave to admit Wangwu Pai brothers into their Society. They all bowed in respect to their *Xiangzhu*, and became Wei Xiaobao's subordinates. Wei Xiaobao was very happy; after drinking the 'forming of an alliance' wine, he wanted to have a gambling session with the old and new brothers. Li Lishi, Qian Laoben and the others promptly advised him against gambling, saying that if they were gambling in high spirits, unavoidably it would be too disrespectful to Situ Bolei who had just passed away.

Wei Xiaobao was somewhat disappointed; he then asked how would they deal with the aftermath of this Wangwu Pai affair. Li Lishi said, "Wangwu Mountain is located on the common boundary of Shanxi and Henan, two provinces; they are outside our Green Wood Hall's jurisdiction. According to our Society's rule, there is no harm in accepting brothers into our Society across the border, but each Hall's brothers cannot overstep the boundary in handling our matters. It would be best if Situ *Xiongdi* and the others move away to Zhili province and establish your residence there."

Qian Laoben said, "Tatar Emperor sends Wei *Xiangzhu* to attack Wangwu Mountain, Situ *Xiongdi* and the others cannot stay on Wangwu Mountain anymore, Wei *Xiangzhu* most likely has to report to his superior."

"Exactly," Situ He said, "*Xiaodi* [little brother, referring to self] will respectfully follow all *Dage*'s instruction."

Wei Xiaobao said, “Situ *Dage*, right now we are heading to Yangzhou to build a Martyr Shrine for Shi Gebu. After this memorial hall is completed, everybody will go to fight Wu Sangui.”

Situ He stood up and said loudly, “Wei *Xiangzhu* is going to attack Wu Sangui, subordinate wishes to be in the vanguard, leading my martial brothers and sisters to fight that wicked thief Wu Sangui to the death, to take revenge and wipe out a grudge for my deceased father.”

Wei Xiaobao delightedly said, “Nothing can be better than that. In that case gentlemen may come with me to Yangzhou. It’s just that you must disguise yourselves as Tatar officers and men; I am afraid you will feel slightly wronged.”

Situ He said, “In order to fight Wu Sangui, we are willing to endure greater grievance. Wei *Xiangzhu* becomes Tatar officer, we will also become Tatar soldiers. Besides, don’t Li *Dage*, Xu *Dage*, and the others also disguise yourselves as Tatar soldiers?”

That evening they buried Situ Bolei, and then packed their belongings to go down the mountain. The men with martial art skills would come with Wei Xiaobao to Yangzhou. The old, the weak, women and children would go to Baoding [prefecture, Hebei] and picked a place where they would settle down. In that area there were small branches of Tian Di Hui’s Green Wood Hall, hence they would be well taken care of.

Wei Xiaobao talked to Zhang Yong and the others, he explained that when the Wangwu Mountain bandits saw that they were surrounded by large army, they knew that they could not escape. After a bit of enlightenment, everybody agreed to surrender. He had already offered amnesty and enlisted the rebels as soldiers, incorporating them into their troops.

Zhang Yong and the others immediately congratulated him; they said that without any blood on the men’s blade *Dutong* [commander] had pacified Wangwu Mountain fierce bandits, hence he had set up great merit. Wei Xiaobao said, “This is the Four Generals’ merit; if you did not encircle the mountain so that the bandits were unable to escape even in they grew wings, they would not have agreed to surrender. Later *Xiongdi* will report to the Imperial Court, there will be reward and promotion for everybody.”

The four generals were greatly delighted; they knew that Ming Zhu, the Ministry of War's *Shangshu*, would do everything he could to fawn on him. As long as it was Commander Wei who reported the merit, the Ministry of War would definitely give it preferential treatment.

At first Wei Xiaobao was worried that Zeng Rou would follow Wangwu Pai's women and children to go to Baoding to settle there. He was thinking of assigning her to come with him to Yangzhou, but felt it was rather inappropriate. When he saw her putting on men's clothing, ready to march with Situ He and her martial brothers, the delight in his heart was unspeakable.

All through the journey, he was always looking for an opportunity to have an intimate time with her, but Zeng Rou was always following her martial brothers closely. Each time she saw him, she only smiled shyly without saying anything. Wei Xiaobao wanted to say something intimate to her, but all along he did not have the opportunity to do so; inevitably his heart was unbearably itching. If as the Qing army's commander-in-chief he wanted to use his official authority for private interests, he could simply transfer her into his personal guards brigade; however, in the capacity of a Tian Di Hui *Xiangzhu*, he knew that taking liberties with a woman, especially the woman of their Society, was a strict prohibition. Plus it would be unsightly in the eyes of the numerous brothers. Therefore, all he could do was swallowing his own saliva while waiting for a good opportunity.

Chapter 39

Men seeking pleasure selectively, young men leaving floating footprints like duckweed.

(Translated by Foxs)

Suddenly WeiXiaobao's braid tightened, followed by a sharp pain on his throat; someone pulled his braid and lifted it up, the person's left hand fingers were wrapped around his neck. With a 'smile, yet not a smile' look on her face; she sternly said in low voice, "Little demon, you have the nerve to amuse yourself even with me!"

Along the journey, government officials welcomed them and delivered bribe in abundant. Naturally Wei Xiaobao refused nobody; the farther they travelled south, his luggage became heavier and heavier. To his Tian Di Hui brothers he explained that they were corrupting Tatars' government; the more bribes they received, the more the common people would grumble, hence the reputation of the government officials everywhere would be damaged. When the time came to rise in rebellion, it would be easier to succeed. Xu Tianchuan and the others believed he was right.

One day they arrived in Yangzhou. The *Zongdu* [governor-general] of the Two Rivers[70] Ma Leiji, the *Xunfu* [inspector-general/provincial governor] of Jiangning Ma You and his subordinates: provincial administrative commissioner, surveillance commissioner, provincial educational officer, Huai River road construction, supply line, river control work managers, Yangzhou prefectural magistrate, Jiangdu County head magistrate, as well as military officers of all levels, had already received the news; they all were waiting several *li* outside the city.

The imperial envoy field office was setup at the Huai River Taotai [lit. raised circuit, or ancient official title; circuit intendant?] *Yamen*. Wei Xiaobao thought that the place was too constraining; he only stayed for one night, and the next day he requested to be moved to different place. He felt that the best place for the imperial envoy field office would be his old home, the Lovely Spring Courtyard, since he was bestowed honor by the Emperor himself, it would be fitting to come back to his former residence in silken robes. But he could not find any justification to have the imperial envoy field office in a brothel. Thinking about his past in Yangzhou, his most cherished desire, other than opening several big brothels, was to pull all the Chinese peony flowers in the Chinese Peony Garden in front of the Chanzhi [Dhyana/Zen wisdom] Temple from their roots.

Yangzhou's Chinese Peonies were claimed to be the most famous in the world, the Chinese Peony Garden in front of the Chanzhi Temple was especially grand; the different variety in the garden numbered in hundreds or thousands, the flowers were as big as rice bowls. When Wei Xiaobao was around ten years old, he, along with a group of street urchins, went out to play there. Seeing the

beautiful blooming peonies, he picked two flowers to play. The monk of the Temple saw him, snatched the flower back, and slapped him twice on his ears. Wei Xiaobao kicked and bit; he created quite a ruckus with the monk, and was able to push the big and fat monk to the ground, and kicked him several times. The rest of the urchins roared and swarmed into the garden, randomly pulling the Chinese peonies.

The monk cried out for help, a bunch of monks and kitchen helpers rushed out from the Temple with clubs in their hands, to chase the urchins away. Because Wei Xiaobao was the chief offender, he suffered quite a bit of beating with the clubs, his head grew a big lump. When he returned to the Lovely Spring Courtyard, his mother punished him by not giving him any supper that night. Although eventually he managed to go to the kitchen and stole some food until he was full, but the 'Chanzhi Temple Picking Flower Disgrace' was deeply etched in his heart. The next day he returned to the Temple to rain curses from a distant; he cursed the monks, from 'Tathagata Buddha's mama' all the way to cursing the monks' daughters. He swore, "There will come a day when *laozi* will pull out all the Chinese peonies in front of this Temple clean, will tread on your stinky temple to level it to the ground, will dig hole in it as latrine pit." He cursed until the monks of the Temple chased him away, and then he ran away as fast as he could.

Many years later, he had already forgotten about this matter. It was not until that day he returned to Yangzhou and was looking for a place to setup his field office did he remember Chanzhi Temple; immediately he told the Huai River Taotai about his intention. The Taotai thought, "Chanzhi Temple is a well-known Buddhist place, a thousand-year old ancient temple. If the imperial envoy stays there, I am afraid he would disturb the peace and stir up confusion." Thereupon he said, "Reporting to *Daren*: the scenery in the Chanzhi Temple is indeed magnificent, *Daren* has a superb idea, lowly officer admires it exceedingly. However, I am afraid it won't be too convenient to have non-vegetarian food and wine in the Temple."

"What's not convenient?" Wei Xiaobao asked, "Just move the Bodhisattva inside the Temple out; problem solved."

Hearing that he wanted the Bodhisattva to be moved, the Taotai was even

more scared; he thought that it would invite misfortune. If the common people inside Yangzhou's city wall were angered, they would be very difficult to handle. Therefore, with a force laugh he bowed with cupped fist and said in a low voice, "Reporting to *Daren*: Yangzhou's prostitutes are famous throughout the world. Along the way *Daren* has toiled to render great merits, now that you have arrived at my humble place, lowly officer ought to serve you with all my heart; I have already selected not a few good-looking girls who are adept at strumming the lute and singing songs, ready to be inspected by *Daren*. The monks' temple has hard bed and stiff backless stool, I am afraid it will spoil the fun very much."

Wei Xiaobao thought what he said actually made a lot of sense; he laughed and said, "In your opinion, where should we set the field office?"

The Taotai said, "Among the salt merchants of Yangzhou, there is one surnamed He, his home is called the He Garden, it is considered the most famous garden in Yangzhou. He has a mind to curry favor with Imperial Envoy Minister, and has already prepared proper invitation card, with the hope that *Daren* would honor him with your presence. It's just that his scholarly honor (in imperial exams) is too low, he did not dare to speak out. If *Daren* does not look down on him, there is no harm in you taking the trouble to visit and take a look."

This salt merchant surnamed He was very rich and powerful; when he was a kid, Wei Xiaobao often walked by the high wall outside his house. He heard the sound of string and wind instruments from the inside, and was very envious; however, he had never had any opportunity to look inside. Thereupon he said, "Very well, I'll stay there for several days; if it is not enjoyable, we'll move again. There are a lot of salt merchants in Yangzhou; we can stay from one house to the next. Even if we eat there, we won't make them poor."

The He Garden's rooms were connected like clouds, there were serene rocky small streams winding around the garden, the pavilions were elegant, the construction was exquisite; with just a glance one could tell that each foot of land had cost not a few gold and silver. Wei Xiaobao was very satisfied; he ordered his personal guards to also stay in the garden. Zhang Yong and the others, four generals, as well as the troops under their command were spread around neighboring government officials' private residences.

By this time Yangzhou was flourishing, it was considered one of the most

bustling cities in the world. During the Tang Dynasty, there was a saying about Yangzhou: 'ten *li* of pearl curtain, twenty-four romantic bridges'. At the beginning of Qing Dynasty, it had become the collection and distribution center Huai River salt, thus it became even more prosperous. According to historical records, at the end of the Ming Dynasty, there were a total of more than 375,000 'ding' (men sixteen years old and older). During the Ming-Qing transition, Yangzhou suffered Qing troops' massacre, by Shunzhi's third year, there were only 9,320 'ding' remained, but by Kangxi's sixth year, the number increased again to more than 397,900 'ding'. Not only the vitality was completely restored, it even surpassed its former glory.

Early morning the next day, all government officials, big and small, within Yangzhou's city wall appeared at the Imperial Envoy Field Headquarters to pay their respect. Wei Xiaobao received them, and then he read aloud the Imperial Edict. He did not know any character in Kangxi's imperial edict, hence earlier he asked the secretary to read it and he memorized it. This time he recited character by character; his memory was quite good, he did not make any mistake. In his haste he only held the imperial edict carelessly, but nobody detected anything.

When the numerous officials heard that the Emperor issued an edict to exempt Yangzhou's residents in every county three years of land tax, plus compensation to the orphans and widows of the victims of disaster during the founding of the country, and construction of Martyr Shrine for the loyal minister Shi Kefa, none did not shout 'long live', and kowtowed to thank the vast and mighty imperial kindness.

Finished announcing the imperial decree, Wei Xiaobao said, "Gentlemen, *Daren*, when *Xiongdi* left the Capital, His Majesty instructed me that Jiangsu province's output is prosperous, but for the past few years, the government is somewhat relaxed, troops preparation is also not in order; *Xiongdi* was ordered to investigate and reorganize properly. His Majesty cherished Yangzhou's common people so much, as government officials, we ought to spare no effort to repay the Holy Sage's grace."

All the civil and military officials voiced their agreement, but they could not help being secretly anxious. Actually, these words were taught by Songgotu. Wei

Xiaobao knew that to receive a lot of bribes, first, have the opposite party asking for a favor; second, have the opposite party somewhat afraid. For this reason, he threatened Jiangsu's civil and military officials a bit; he must flaunt his authority, but the threat must be neither too light nor too heavy, it must be just right, yet must be discreet and completely delivered in government official lingo. He would not be able to do this if Songgotu did not coach him.

With the bureaucratic protocol completed, he had the local official selecting the location for the Martyr Shrine, and also drawing up a plan to get the victims' names registered. He sent people to the four townships to announce the edict about Emperor's benevolence in exempting the people from land tax. All these businesses were not something that could be done in one morning one evening; while waiting, he lived comfortably in a golden nest in Yangzhou. For the next several days, the governor-general and inspector-general prepared banquet for him, the administrative commissioner and chief of police prepared banquet for him, various departments' officials prepared banquet for him. In every banquet room, delicacies were spread out, it was extremely extravagant, no expense was spared.

Every day Wei Xiaobao was thinking of going to the Lovely Spring Courtyard to visit his mother, but the exchange of toasts never stopped, from the beginning it was never convenient for him to do so. Imperial Envoy high-ranking official's mother worked as a prostitute in Yangzhou, this matter must never be exposed. The disgrace and loss of face was a minor matter, but the loss of imperial court's dignity was a major issue. Much less Wei Xiaobao had been a high-ranking official for quite a long time, all along he did not fetch his mother to live a happy and prosperous life with him in the Capital, instead he allowed her to be reduced to prostitution; it was a greatly unfilial thing. If this matter was ever found out by the imperial censor, even the Emperor would find it difficult to protect him.

He was thinking that as soon as things had settled down, he would quietly put on a disguise and go to the Lovely Spring Courtyard to take a look, and then he would have his personal guard escorted his mother to settle down in Beijing. He thought that it would be best if the gods did not know and the ghosts did not detect.

At first he had always had a plan to escape [orig. 'anoint oil at the bottom of

his feet’], as soon as he saw something amiss, he would immediately ‘spur the horse to full speed’, and escape without a trace. Unexpectedly his official position was getting higher and higher, the longer he was in office, the happier he was. By the time he actually had a thought to fetch his mother back to the Capital, he had already been in office for too long.

Several days later, it was Yangzhou’s prefectural magistrate Wu Zhirong’s turn to invite him to a banquet and wash the dust from the Imperial Envoy’s feet. Wu Zhirong had heard from the Taotai that the Imperial Envoy has had a thought to make Chanzhi Temple his field office. He thought that the Chanzhi Temple’s best feature was merely the Chinese peony garden in front of the Temple, the Imperial Envoy set his heart on the Temple, it must be because he appreciate the flowers’ beauty. He was very good at flattery, hence several days ahead of the banquet, he had a flower canopy built at the bank of the Chinese peony garden. He had artisans built it, the pine frame still had its bark intact, the branches and leaves remained on the trunk, inside the canopy the table and chairs were made of natural trees and rocks, the floor inside the canopy was covered with shrubs and grass, they used bamboo pieces to channel water to create streams around the canopy, complete with its gurgling noise, the details were extremely well-thought, it was as if the banquet was held on the mountain and fields, compared to rich people home’s engraved beams and jade-brick hall, it had different feeling and local flavor.

Who would have thought that Wei Xiaobao was an unbearably uncouth person, who did not have even half an elegant bone in his entire body; when he arrived at the flower canopy, the first question he asked was, “How can there be an arbor here? Ah right, it must be the Temple monks built it for their Buddhist ceremony; they are going to set it on fire, and put some food in here to feed the hungry ghosts.”

Wu Zhirong’s meticulous effort was totally in vain; he could not help but looking very awkward. He still thought that the Imperial Envoy was intentionally ridiculing him; with no other choice he let out a forced laugh and said, “Lowly officer’s knowledge and experience is shallow and crude, I failed to make arrangement that satisfies *Daren*’s taste; indeed I deserve to die.”

Seeing that the other guests had already stood respectfully to wait for his

arrival, Wei Xiaobao greeted them and then took a seat. After socializing with Wei Xiaobao for several days, the governor-general of the Two Rivers had already returned to Jiangning to do his duty. The inspector-general of Jiangsu province and administrative commissioner had their administrative offices in Suzhou, but they all stayed in Yangzhou to accompany the Imperial Envoy. As for the rest of the guests, if not famous scholar, then they must be salt merchants with scholarly honor in imperial exam, or have some official position in Yangzhou.

Yangzhou's banquet was very elegant and very rich in variety. Just the pre-banquet tea, fruits and delicacy were already more than a dozen varieties. Although Wei Xiaobao was born and raised locally, he could not know everything. After drinking a round of tea, the sun was gradually tilting to the west, the sun illuminated the several thousand Chinese peony outside the canopy, like glorious and magnificent luster of gems, just like brocade clothes. But the more Wei Xiaobao looked at it, the angrier he got, thinking about the grudge of the past, when he was beaten and humiliated by the monks of the Temple. Right then and there he was thinking of having all the Chinese peony pulled and burned, but he must have a legitimate pretext to do that.

While he was mulling over this, the Inspector-General Ma You said with a laugh, "Wei *Daren*, listening to *Daren*'s accent, it seems that you have lived in Huai Yang region before. Huai Yang's water and soil is rich, thus it produces talented persons, as well as good flowers."

The rest of the officials only knew that the Imperial Envoy was a Yellow Banner Manchu, the last several days the Inspector-General heard him speaking, he could detect Yangzhou accent in his speech, thereupon he seized this opportunity to flatter him a little bit.

Wei Xiaobao was thinking about the hateful monks of Chanzhi Temple. "Yangzhou's monks are no good," he blurted out.

The Inspector-General was startled, he was not sure what Wei Xiaobao was referring to. The administrative commissioner Mu Tianyan was a very perceptive, as well as highly educated; he interrupted, "Wei *Daren*'s observation is very true. Yangzhou monks selfishly concerned with gaining advantages for themselves, they fawn on local authorities, humiliate the poor; they were just like that since ancient times."

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted; he laughed and said, “That’s right. Mu *Daren* is a scholar, you knew that it was written in the books.”

Mu Tianyan said, “Isn’t the story of ‘Jade Green Muslin Covering’ by Wang Bo of the Tang Dynasty set in Yangzhou?”

Wei Xiaobao just loved to hear stories; he hastily asked, “What is the story of ‘yellow cloth [huang bu] versus sandy dragon’ [bi sha long, same pronunciation, different characters from ‘Jade Green Muslin Covering’]?”

“The story happened in Yangzhou’s Shita [stone pagoda] Temple,” Mu Tianyan said, “During the early Qian years of the Tang Dynasty, the Shita Temple was called Mulan [lily magnolia] Courtyard. When the poet Wang Bo was young, his family was poor …”

Wei Xiaobao thought, “Turns out this person was called Wang Bo, not a piece of yellow cloth.” He heard Mu Tianyan continued, “… he lived away from home in Mulan Courtyard. The monks in the temple rang a bell to signal meal times, when Wang Bo heard the bell, he went to the dining hall to eat. The monks disliked him, there was one time when everybody ate first, and rang the bell after they all finished eating. Wang Bo heard the bell, he went to the dining hall, but saw that the monks had already dispersed, the food had already been eaten clean …”

Wei Xiaobao slapped the table and angrily said, “Damn monks are so repulsive.”

“That’s right,” Mu Tianyan said, “Just a meal, how much does it cost? At that time Wang Bo was very ashamed, he inscribed a poem on the wall, ‘Attending a lesson from west to east, ashamed returning to black after-meal bell.’”

“What kind of fellow was this ‘Hui Li’ [return black]?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

The numerous officials had been in contact with him these past few days, they knew that the Imperial Envoy was not a scholar; in fact, a lot of famous, rich and honorable banner men did not come from academic field, hence nobody thought it strange. Mu Tianyan said, “Hui Li means monk.”

Wei Xiaobao nodded. “So they are the bald thieves,” he said, “And then what happened?”

Mu Tianyan said, “And then Wang Bo became a high-ranking official, the

imperial court sent him to guard Yangzhou, and he returned to Mulan Courtyard. Naturally those monks were fawning on him. He went to see if the poem he inscribed on the wall was still there or not, but he saw a piece of expensive jade green muslin pasted on the wall, covering the two lines of poem he wrote, in order to avoid it being damaged. Wang Bo was deeply moved, he added two more lines after the original poem, 'Thirty years ago dust covered the surface, only now it is covered with jade green muslin.'"

"Surely he arrested those bald thieves and had them flogged?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Mu Tianyan said, "Wang Bo was an elegant scholar, he thought that the two lines of poem already ridiculed them, hence he let it pass."

Wei Xiaobao thought, "If it were me, how could I give up that easily? But if I had to write a poem, I don't have that kind of skill. *Laozi* can only defecate, cannot write a poem."

After the story, the tea was removed and the wine was poured. Wei Xiaobao looked around. He caught Wang Jinbao on separate table was pouring a cup of wine into his mouth; the way he drink was very straightforward. Wei Xiaobao had an idea, "General Wang," he said, "You told me once that the war-horses that eat Chinese peony are especially full of power and grandeur, didn't you?" While he spoke, he winked at him.

Wang Jinbao did not understand his intention, "This …" he stammered.

Wei Xiaobao said, "His Majesty selects and uses famous species of good horses: Mongolian horses, Western Region horses, Sichuan horses, Yunnan horses, what have you. His Majesty instructed us to raise those horses carefully, didn't he?"

Wang Jinbao knew about Kangxi accumulated war horses with diligent care. "*Daren* is right," he said.

"You are well acquainted with horses' character," Wei Xiaobao continued, "When we were in Beijing, you said that if war-horses are fed Chinese peony, their running speed will double. His Majesty loves horses like this, we as his servants should uphold the Holy Sage's intention. If we dig the Chinese peony in this place and send it to the Capital, so that the Ministry of War's carriage

manager can feed the horse. When His Majesty finds out, his dragon countenance will surely be very pleased."

When the people heard this, their countenance looked extremely strange; Chinese peony flowers can strengthen the horse? It was the first time that they heard about it. Looking at Wang Jinbao, they noticed his expression was ambiguous, apparently he disagreed, but did not dare to object blatantly. Yet Wei Xiaobao kept saying His Majesty this and His Majesty that, he was 'lifting high the Emperor's hat'; who would dare to show the slightest objection? They all could see that these several thousand famous varieties of Chinese peony would be destroyed in his hands. Henceforth Yangzhou would lose one scenic spot. But why did this Wei *Daren* hate these Chinese peonies so much? Everybody looked at each other in dismay, nobody could say anything.

Prefectural magistrate Wu Zhirong said, "Wei *Daren*'s scholarly knowledge is profound, indeed worthy of other people's admiration. This Chinese peony's root is called Scarlet Peony. The Compendium of Medical Herbs[71] mentions that its function is to reduce internal blood clot and improve blood circulation. The name Chinese peony [shaoyao] itself has the character 'yao' [medicine] in it; apparently the people of old recognized its good medicinal character. When the horse eats Chinese peony, its blood vessels unimpeded, naturally it can run like flying. When *Daren* returns to the Capital, lowly officer will have all the Chinese peony flowers here dug out and have *Daren* carry it back to the Capital."

When the other officials heard this, in their hearts they all scolded Wu Zhirong as despicable and shameless, in order to curry favor with a superior officer, he was willing to go as far as destroying Yangzhou's beautiful scenery. Wei Xiaobao clapped his hands and said, "Wu *Daren* is capable and experienced. Very good, very good."

Wu Zhirong felt much honored; he hastily stood up to bow and said, "Thank you for *Daren*'s compliment."

The administrative commissioner Mu Tianyan walked out of the canopy toward a cluster of Chinese peonies. He picked a big Chinese peony, as big as a rice bowl, and returned to the table; with both hands he presented the flower to Wei Xiaobao and said with a laugh, "Would *Daren* please stick this flower on your

hat? Lowly officer has a story for *Daren* to hear."

Hearing that he was about to listen to another story, Wei Xiaobao received the flower; he saw that the Chinese peony's petals were dark red, with a yellow line running right in the middle of each petal, it was indeed a tender and beautiful flower, hence he inserted it onto his hat.

Mu Tianyan said, "Congratulations *Daren*, this Chinese peony has a name; it is called the 'Gold Band All Around'. It is a very rare variety, there is a writing in the ancient books that whoever can see this 'Gold Band All Around', in the future he could be the Prime Minister."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "How can there be such thing?"

Mu Tianyan said, "The story originated during the Northern Song Dynasty. In those days Han *Weigong* [Duke of Wei], Han Qi, was guarding Yangzhou. In the Chinese peony garden, right here, in front of the Chanzhi Temple, suddenly four big flowers bloomed on one Chinese peony tree, the petals were dark red, with gold thread right in the middle; it was precisely this 'Gold Band All Around'. This kind of Chinese peony had never been seen before, it was extremely rare. His subordinates promptly reported this, Han Weigong graced the garden with his presence to enjoy the scenery; he was very happy. Seeing there were four flowers, he thought about inviting three guests to enjoy the flowers together."

Wei Xiaobao took down his hat to look at the flower again; indeed the red and yellow produced stark contrast, it was exceptionally marvelous. The lines of golden stripes may not be found in a hundred flowers.

Mu Tianyan said, "At that time there were two well-known persons in Yangzhou, one was Wang Gui, the other Wang Anshi[72]; both were people of talent and learning, of knowledge and experience. Han Weigong thought, there were four flowers, but only three people; unavoidably 'everything is fine except for one small defect'. If he were to invite other person, their prestige may not fit the other three. While he was hesitating, suddenly someone came to pay respect to him; it was Chen Shengzhi. He was also a famous scholar. Han Weigong was greatly delighted; the next day he held a big feast in front of the Chinese peony garden. He had the four 'Gold Band All Around' flowers picked and inserted into each man's hat. This story is called 'The Feast of Four Prime Ministers with

flowers on their hats'. These four men later on became Prime Ministers."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Interesting. These four honorable friends were all famous intellectual, people who could write poem and write essays. *Xiongdi* cannot be compared to them."

"That is not necessarily so," Mu Tianyan replied, "During the Northern Song Dynasty, only intellectuals can become Prime Ministers. Our Great Qing conquered the world on horseback. The ones esteemed the most by His Majesty are brave and cunning heroes and warriors." Hearing the comment 'brave and cunning heroes and warriors', nine characters [you yong you mou de ying xiong hao han], Wei Xiaobao could not help but was very happy. He nodded his head repeatedly.

Mu Tianyan continued, "Han Weigong was conferred the title Duke of Wei Country, it goes without saying. Wang Anshi was bestowed the title Duke of Jing Country, Wang Gui was made Duke of Qi Country, and Chen Shengzhi became Duke of Xiu Country. Not only these four famous feudal officials became Prime Ministers, they were all bestowed the title 'Country Duke'; not only each one had riches and honor, they also had long life. Wei *Daren* attained much in your youth, right now you are bestowed the title *Bojue* [Earl/Count], if you are promoted one more level, you will be *Houjue* [Marquis]; one more level and you will become *Gongjue* [Duke]. Even *Wang* [King] or *Qinwang* [Prince (royalty)] is just a matter of time."

Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud and said, "If only it will be according to Mu *Daren*'s golden mouth, then everybody here will also be promoted and gain wealth."

All the officials rose and held the wine cups with both hands; they said, "Congratulations to Wei *Daren* for your upcoming promotions, *Gong* and *Hou* for ten thousand generations."

Wei Xiaobao also stood up and drank the toast together with the numerous officials; he thought, "This official is both scholarly and eloquent, he can tell stories and attract people's attention. If I call him to Beijing to work for me, I can frequently listen to his stories, won't it be better than listening to the storytellers? By nature this man is a big king of flattery, he was given the name Mu Tianyan [lit. admiring heaven's countenance]; clearly he always wanted to

have an audience with the Emperor."

Mu Tianyan continued, "Afterwards Han Weigong led the troops to guard the western border. Seeing him, Western Xia people were scared to death, they did not dare to send any troops to disturb the border. At that time the Western Xia people feared two Song Dynasty ministers, one was Han Weigong, Han Qi; the other was Fan Wenzhenggong[73], Fan Zhongyan. At that time there was a saying, 'With a Han in the army, western thieves hear it and their hearts tremble; with a Fan in the army, western thieves hear it and were frightened that their guts busted'. In the future Wei *Daren* will lead the troops to guard the western border, there will be a saying, 'With a Wei in the army, western thieves see it and hastily kneel down'!"[74]

Wei Xiaobao loved it very much; he said, "These two characters 'western thieves' are very clever. Ping Xi Wang that western …" Suddenly he remembered, "Wu Sangui has not yet risen in rebellion; I cannot call him 'western thief'." Hastily he corrected himself, "Ping Xi Wang is guarding the western border, we have peace and security without any problem; he has rendered very great merit."

Wu Zhirong said, "Ping Xi Wang is brave and resourceful, he performs high service through hard work, he was bestowed the title *Qinwang*, the heir apparent has become the Prince Consort. In the future Wei *Daren* will have great riches and great honor, will live as long as Mount Nan, definitely you will be no different than Ping Xi Wang."

In his heart Wei Xiaobao cursed, "Hot piece mama, you want me to be no different than Wu Sangui that big traitor. This old turtle will have his head removed any day, you want me to be the same as him?"

Mu Tianyan usually paid closed attention to what's happening in the imperial court, just a few days ago he saw the imperial bulletin that the Emperor has issued the imperial decree of border defense removal. He immediately foresaw that Wu Sangui would be in deep trouble. Right now, seeing Wei Xiaobao's countenance slightly changed, his suspicion was confirmed and he understood it clearly. He said, "Wei *Daren* is promoted by the Emperor himself, he is the trusted aide that the Holy Sage depends on, the pillar of the imperial court, the

ridgepole and beams of the nation. Ping Xi Wang, on the other hand, while his official ranking right now is high, in the end he cannot be compared to Wei *Daren*. Wu *Fuzun* [prefectural magistrate] comparison is not too correct. Wei *Daren*'s ancestor was Tang Dynasty's Zhongwu Wang [lit. loyal martial/military king] Wei Nie; who once destroyed four hundred and eighty thousand foreign troops, whose prestige shook the western frontier. When Zhu Ci rebelled that time, he sent people to invite Wei Zhongwu Wang to send troops into battle together. Zhongwu Wang was loyal to the Emperor and was not double-minded, how could he be willing to do such treason and heresy? Immediately he had the rebel thief's envoy beheaded, and then he sent his troops to help the imperial court defeat and pacify the rebel thieves, hence he set up great merit. Wei *Daren* appearance is stately, his good fortune great, incomparable; in all likelihood, he inherits Wei Zhongwu Wang's good fortune."

Wei Xiaobao smiled and nodded. Actually, he did not even know his own surname; it was only because his mother's name was Wei Chunfang that he went by his mother's surname. It had never occurred to him that surname Wei had this kind of high-profile persona, this administrative commissioner even said with conviction that he was his own ancestor. It seemed that the administrative commissioner was determined to 'paste gold onto Wei Xiaobao's face'. From the tone of his voice, it seemed that he already figured out that Wu Sangui was about to revolt. This man's ability and wisdom was really amazing.

Being refuted by him, Wu Zhirong was dissatisfied, but he did not dare to openly contradict his senior; he said, "I heard that Wei *Daren* is a Plain Yellow Banner man." His implication was clear: he was a Manchu, how could he have anything to do with Wei Nie of the Tang Dynasty?

Mu Tianyan laughed and said, "Wu *Fuzun* only knows one does not know two. The present Holy Sage reigns the world; toward the millions of people all over the world, he treats everyone equally favorably. Manchu and Han are one family, why make any distinction between the two?" This argument was actually rather forcing the logic, but Wu Zhirong did not dare to argue. He thought that if he spoke several more sentences, he might very well offend the Imperial Envoy; hence he repeatedly stated his agreement.

Mu Tianyan said, "Ping Xi Wang is our Yangzhou's Gaoyou [county] man, do

Wu *Fuzun* and Ping Xi Wang belong to the same family?”

Wu Zhirong was really not from Gaoyou, hence he did not have any relationship with Wu Sangui, but at that time Wu Sangui’s power and influence was overpowering, hence he hurriedly borrowed the influence and claimed some honor due to his surname Wu. He said, “According to genealogy, lowly officer is one generation younger than Ping Xi Wang; I should call *Wangye* my uncle.”

Mu Tianyan nodded, no longer paid him any attention. He said to Wei Xiaobao, “Wei *Daren*, although this ‘Gold Band All Around’ Chinese peony is not as rare as it was during the Song Dynasty, yet it is in full bloom like this, it is also exceptionally rare. Today Wei *Daren* arrived and enjoy the flower when it is in full bloom, this is not a coincidence; it must be the Heaven’s will. Lowly officer has a tiny bit of idea, would *Daren* listen to me?”

“*Laoxiong*, please give your advice,” Wei Xiaobao said.

“Giving Advice, these two characters, how can I dare?” Mu Tianyan said, “The root of the Chinese peony indeed has some medical benefit. *Daren* wants to use it to feed the horse, if it is further refined by drug store, the effect will be even more powerful. Lowly officer will order my men to procure a large quantity of it, and will have medicine expert in Beijing process it. As for the Chinese peony in this place, to think that they have merit in announcing the good news to *Daren*, is it possible to leave them behind? When the day come in which Wei *Daren* takes command to destroy the thieves, and you are bestowed the title *Wang* [king], just like Han Weigong, Wei Zhongwu Wang, you can come back here to enjoy the flower. At that time I am sure the ‘Gold Band All Around’ will be in full bloom again to welcome the noble; won’t that be a beautiful thing indeed? In lowly officer’s opinion, in the future there will be an opera developed based on this story.”

Wei Xiaobao was happy and excited, “Are you saying that there will be an actor playing me in the opera?”

“That’s right,” Mu Tianyan said, “Naturally there will be an elegant, attractive young actor playing the role of Wei *Daren*. But there will also be actors with white beard, black beard, ‘big flower face’ [referring to lots of makeup], and ‘white nose [cunning/sly person] little clown’ playing us, the officials.” The

government officials roared into laughter.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and asked, “What will this story called?”

Mu Tianyan turned to the inspector-general Ma You and said, “For that, please *Futai* [inspector-general (old)] *Daren* pick a good name.” He noticed that the inspector-general has been very quiet, he thought that they must not give him a cold shoulder.

Ma You laughed and said, “Wei *Daren* will be bestowed the title *Wang* in the future, how about this opera is called ‘Wei Wang inserts the flower on his hat’?” The numerous officials voiced their approval together.

In his heart Wei Xiaobao was delighted, he no longer desired to haggle over the old grievance of the past. He thought, “*Laozi* will never be a prime minister, or destroying western thieves. Being a *wangye* just for fun, perhaps I can, but if I pulled these Chinese peonies, I am afraid I will bring bad omen.” Looking at the flower garden, he saw that there were at least several dozen more of ‘Gold Band All Around’; he thought, “How can there be this many prime ministers? Could it be that all of you will become prime ministers? *Futai* or *Fantai* [vassal state governor (old)], there is still hope. This Wu Zhirong has a thief head and dog brain, no matter what he won’t be a prime minister. In the future, the ‘white nose little clown’ must be playing his role.”

He was fully aware that this administrative commissioner spoke in a roundabout way, spending a lot of effort planning his speech, his main intention was to save these several thousand Chinese peonies in front of the Chanzhi Temple. This was government official trick that was passed through in front of everybody; it was called ‘flowered sedan chair people lift the people’, since you have lifted me up, I cannot be obstinately clinging to my own way. He could not make these Yangzhou officials lose face. Thereupon he no longer mentioned anything about the Chinese peony. He laughed and said, “In the future, if there is indeed an opera like that, we can’t watch it anyway. Right now, why don’t we listen to songs first?” The numerous officials voiced their approval at once.

Wu Zhirong had already prepared everything, he issued the order, from outside the canopy they could hear the tinkling noise of girdle ornament, followed by a whiff of perfume. Wei Xiaobao’s spirit was aroused; he thought,

“There’s a beauty I can look at.”

Sure enough, a woman gracefully walked into the flowered canopy, paid her respect to Wei Xiaobao and with a delicate voice she said, “May Imperial Envoy *Daren* and all *Daren* have ten thousand good fortune and peace like gold. *Xiao Nuzi* [little/lowly woman] will serve by singing a song.” The woman was approximately thirty years old, her attire was gorgeous, but her facial features were only average.

The flute player started to blow the bamboo flute, and she sang. The song she sang was Du Mu’s [(803-852) Tang Dynasty poet] two-stanza Yangzhou poems: “There are faint green mountains and far green waters, And grasses in this river region not yet faded by autumn; And clear in the moon on the Twenty-Four Bridges, Girls white as jade are teaching flute-music[75].” “With my wine-bottle, watching by river and lake, For a lady so tiny as to dance on my palm; I awake, after dreaming ten years in Yangzhou, Known as fickle, even in the Street of Blue Houses.[76]„

The flute was melodious, the singing voice winding amidst the music; it was very pleasant to listen to. But looking at this courtesan, Wei Xiaobao felt rather impatient.

When the woman finished singing, another courtesan walked in. This woman was around thirty-four or thirty-five years old, her bearing was elegant, her voice was even more trained, she was able to sing the most complicated melody. Her voice remained even while the pitch and rhythm were dynamically rising and falling. The song she was singing was Qin Guan’s poem, ‘Watching The Waves’[77]; “The stars divide the Niu [ox] and Dou [big-dipper] constellations, the horizon borders Huai River and the ocean, Yangzhou’s ten thousand wells raised to prominence. Flowers along the streets emitted its fragrance, at the hawk’s cry the people arise, ten *li* of Vermillion curtain brought the spring breeze. Hero’s aura like a rainbow, dragging the spring’s gold and purple out, flying pass each other over the canopy. The lane enters hanging down poplar, painting of a bridge running north and south behind the bluish-green smoke.”

The poem was definitely sung very beautifully, but listening to it, Wei Xiaobao

was extremely bored; he could not help but yawning loudly. The ‘Watching The Waves’ was only sung halfway, Wu Zhirong was very perceptive, seeing the Imperial Envoy was not interested, he waved his hands, the courtesan immediately stopped singing, saluted, and withdrew. With a forced laugh Wu Zhirong said, “Wei *Daren*, these two courtesans are the most well-known in Yangzhou, they were singing about the liveliness of Yangzhou. I wonder what does *Daren* think?”

It never occurred to him that for Wei Xiaobao to listen to songs, first, the singer must be young and good-looking, second, the song must be romantic and simple, third, the way she sang it must be flirtatious. That day when Chen Yuanyuan sang about the downfall of the country, she had the gorgeous appearance, plus she added explanation to the verses all the way through before he could finish listening to the ‘Yuanyuan Song’. Right now these two courtesans’ appearance was mediocre, their expression stiff, and he did not have any idea what they were singing about. He was only yawning; it could be considered that he was being extremely polite.

Hearing Wu Zhirong’s question, he said, “Not bad, not bad, it’s just that they are a bit too old. This kind of aging goods and old stock, *Xiongdi* does not have much appetite.”

“Yes, yes,” Wu Zhirong said, “Du Mu was a Tang Dynasty man, Qin Shaoyou was a Song man, indeed they are too old-fashioned. There is one new poem, written by a new poet, called Zha Shenxing; he made his name not too long ago. He was writing about the charm of Yangzhou’s farmer family girl; it’s really fresh, really fresh.” Signaling with his hand, he ordered his attendant to summon another courtesan.

When Wei Xiaobao talked about ‘aging goods and old stock’, he was referring to the courtesans, but Wu Zhirong thought that the songs and poems were too old-fashioned. Wei Xiaobao did not have the slightest idea about the Du Mu or Qin Shaoyou that he was talking about, he did understand, however, about ‘the charm of Yangzhou’s farmer family girl; it’s really fresh, really fresh’. He thought, “Since it’s about a very fresh Yangzhou’s farmer family girl, there is no harm in taking a look.”

When the courtesan entered the flowered canopy, it would be alright if Wei

Xiaobao did not look at her, but as soon as he looked, he could not stop anger from rising in his breast, malicious intent arose to the edge of his guts, ready to flare up. Turned out this courtesan, perhaps she was not quite fifty yet, but for sure she was way over forty; there were graying hair on her temples, lots of wrinkles on her forehead. Her eyes should be big and round, but they were thin instead, her mouth should be small, but it was huge instead. Seeing this courtesan was holding a *pipa*, Wei Xiaobao's anger ablaze; he thought, "Someone like you wants to copy Chen Yuanyuan!"

Soon the strings were plucked, like the sound of jade or leaping pearls, singing oriole or twittering swallow; it was very pleasant to hear. And then she sang, "Reflection of distant mountain on Huai River so bluish-green, overflowing water on Huai River so clear. Inverted image enters the tower, the entire fence is draped with flower. Who would have guessed that outside the marketplace fence and gate the reed hut is still there? When the woman with light makeup appears, her dark green skirt drags a long tail."

Her singing voice was simple yet elegant, each line was accompanied by beautiful segment of *pipa* melody; sometimes it sounded like gurgling water, other time it sounded like the ringing of silver bells. On the final line 'her dark green skirt drags a long tail', the *pipa* was diminishing into soft ritardando. None of the government officials did not feel 'their heart untroubled, their spirit pleased'. Some closed their eyes in concentration, some shook and swayed their heads in keeping with the music. When last note of the *pipa* vanished, the government officials cheered together.

Mu Tianyan said, "Good poem, good song, good *pipa*. It is indeed chaste tree branch hairpin and plain cloth skirt does not cover 'divine fragrance, national grace' [i.e. outstanding beauty]. It doesn't matter if it is a poem or a song, natural beauty can be seen from simplicity and elegance. This is a first class skill."

"Humph," Wei Xiaobao snorted; he asked the courtesan, "Do you know the song 'Eighteen Touches'? Sing it for me."

As soon as the government officials heard the request, their countenance turned pale. The courtesan's countenance changed even more. Suddenly tears streamed down her face; she turned around and ran out. 'Crash', the *pipa* in her hands fell to the ground, the courtesan did not even pick it up, she continued

running out.

Wei Xiaobao laughed heartily and said, “You can’t sing the song, I won’t punish you; why are you so scared?”

The ‘Eighteen Touches’ was actually an extremely obscene folk song, it was about touching eighteen parts of a woman’s body, each touch was accompanied by a metaphor to describe it. Although all the government officials had heard this song, but in this grand feast of distinguished assembly, who dared to mention it openly? Wouldn’t that be a major disgrace to their reputation as government officials? The courtesan’s *pipa* playing skill and her singing voice had a long standing reputation in Yangzhou. Not only she was good at singing poems, she was also good at composing poems, her fame spread among the high-ranking court officials. Even Yangzhou’s rich merchants and powerful families could not casually see her. Wei Xiaobao’s request was a major humiliation to her.

Mu Tianyan said in a low voice, “If Wei *Daren* loves to hear folk songs, we’ll find someone who can sing, so you can enjoy it.”

“Even the ‘Eighteen Touches’ she couldn’t sing, this old wh0re is really disappointing,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Next time I’ll take you to Lovely Spring Courtyard at Ming Yu Alley, the prostitutes over there know a lot of folksongs.” As soon as those words came out of his mouth, he immediately felt it was improper; he thought, “No matter what I cannot invite him to Lovely Spring Courtyard. Luckily there are a lot of brothels in Yangzhou; for nine brothels with big names, there are nine brothels with small names. Any courtyard will provide the amusement.” Lifting up the wine cup, he laughed and said, “Let’s drink, let’s drink.”

When the civil government officers heard his vulgar talks, they all felt embarrassed, they all raised their cups and drank, pretending not to hear anything. The military government officials, however, were delighted; they thought that the Imperial Envoy Minister was somewhat like-minded with them.

Right this moment, he saw a *yamen* bailiff walked out of the flowered canopy with lowered head. Wei Xiaobao only saw his back, but his heart was moved, “This man’s back looks very familiar; who is he?” But the bailiff never returned.

After a while, Wei Xiaobao forgot all about him.

After drinking several more cups of wine, Wei Xiaobao felt that socializing with these civil government officials was dull and boring; since there was no opera and no gambling, he was extremely bored. To amuse himself, he sang the 'Eighteen Touches' in his heart, "One touch, two touches, touching the end of *Jiejie*'s [older sister, used in more intimate way] hair." Unable to endure the boredom anymore, he stood up and said, "*Xiongdi* has enough wine, I'll take my leave now." He bowed with cupped fist toward the inspector-general, the administrative commissioner, the chief police officer, and other high-ranking officials before walking out. All the government officials also arose and send him off, out of the flowered canopy, and waited until he sat on a large sedan chair.

Wei Xiaobao returned to his field headquarters and told his personal guards that he wanted to rest; any guest, no matter who, must not be allowed to see him. Entering his bedroom, he changed into a set of tattered clothing. Several days ago he ordered Shuang'er to go to the marketplace to buy a set of old clothing. He tore the clothing in several place, trampled it on the ground, and poured some lantern oil on it, so that the clothes were unbearably filthy and greasy. His hat, shoes and socks, even the string tying his braid were all exchanged with shabby, low-quality goods. From the wood burning stove he grabbed a handful of ashes, diluted it with water, and smeared it all over his face, his arms and hands. When he looked in the mirror, his appearance had indeed returned to that of the little servant at the Lovely Spring Courtyard many years ago.

Shuang'er helped him changed; she laughed and said, "Xianggong, in the opera there is the Imperial Envoy Minister Bao Longtu[78] took a disguise to make private investigation; I wonder if he'd look like you?"

"More or less," Wei Xiaobao replied, "But Bao Longtu was born with dark skin, he did not need to rub ashes on his face."

"Is it all right if I go with you?" Shuang'er asked, "You are going alone, if something bad happens, no one is going to help you."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "The place that I am going to, a good looking young lady like you must not go." Finished speaking, he hummed the song, "One

touch, two touches, touching the side of my good Shuang'er's cheek …" Reaching out to her, he stroked her face. Shuang'er blushed and giggled, she stepped away to evade.

Wei Xiaobao took a big wad of banknotes and stuffed it into his pocket, he also took a bundle of loose money, grabbed Shuang'er, and lightly kissed her face, before he slipped out from the back door.

The personal guard on guard duty at the back door shouted, "What are you doing?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "I am the He Family's wet-nurse's son's older [male] cousin's younger sister's husband. Do you understand the family relationship?" The personal guard was startled; before he was able to figure out the family relationship, Wei Xiaobao had already slipped out of the door.

None of Yangzhou's main streets and small alleys he did not know thoroughly, so much so that he would not get lost even if he was blindfolded. Not too long afterwards he had already reached the Ming Yu Alley by the bank of Shouxi Lake; faintly he heard from behind the doors everywhere the sound of pan pipes, drum, string and woodwind instruments, intersperse with the sound of finger-guessing game, of singing, and people shouting 'Six!' When these sounds entered his ears, he felt it was ten times better than listening to great immortals' heavenly music; there was an unspeakable comfort and joy in his heart.

When he arrived at the Lovely Spring Courtyard, he saw that the gate and the front courtyard were just as before, there was no difference from when he left many years ago. He quietly walked around to the side, pushed open the side door, and slipped in. He tiptoed toward his mother's room. Peeking inside, he did not see anybody, hence he knew that his mother was accompanying a guest. He mused, "Hot piece mama, I wonder which pest is visiting my Mama this time to be my foster father tonight."

Entering the room, he saw the bedclothes was the same as he remembered it, it's just that it looked a lot more worn-out. He mused, "Mama's business is not too good, my foster fathers are not too many." Turning sideways, he saw his own little bed was still standing against the wall. In front of the bed there was his own pair of old shoes. The bedding on the bed had been washed and starched

clean. He walked over and sat down on the bed. Seeing his old bamboo-green long gown was folded neatly on the corner of the bed, there was a tinge of regret in his heart, “Ma is waiting for me to come back. Damn it, *Laozi* is living merrily in Beijing, I did not send anybody to deliver money to Ma. I really don’t have a good heart.” He reclined on the bed, waiting for his mother to come back.

The rule in the brothel was that if the patron wanted to stay overnight, another fine, clean and big room would be prepared for them. The prostitutes’ own rooms were smaller, and rather simple and crude. Young and beautiful, popular prostitutes would have comparatively better accommodation. Women like Wei Xiaobao’s mother, Wei Chunfang, for example, their age was not young anymore, business was scarce; naturally the brothel proprietress treated them very carelessly, their rooms were made of thin boards.

Wei Xiaobao lay down for a while. Suddenly he heard someone in the adjacent room was shouting in stern voice, it was the brothel proprietress’ voice, “*Laoniang* [old lady, referring to self] bought you with white shining silver, you use all kinds of excuses, always refuse to receive patrons. Humph, do you think I bought you to put you in the courtyard to be Bodhisattva Guanyin that we offer sacrifice to, so that we will look good? Beat her; beat her well for me!” Right away there was the sound of whip lashing on flesh, the cry of pain, the weeping, and the cursing noises mixed into one.

Wei Xiaobao was accustomed to hear this kind of noise since he was little; he knew that the brothel proprietress had just bought a young girl, forced her to receive a patron, and whipped her for a while. It was quite common. If the young woman still refused, pricking her fingernail with needle, branding her skin and flesh, all kinds torture could be used on her one by one. This kind of sound never failed to be absent in the brothels. It’s just that he had left for a long time that this time he heard the noise again, he felt he was reliving past experience. Toward the young girl, however, he did not feel any pity.

The young girl cried and said, “Just beat me to death; I won’t receive any patron even if I am dead, I’d rather bash my head against the wall and let you see!”

The brothel proprietress instructed the ‘turtle slave’ to beat her fiercely. After twenty, thirty lashes, the young girl was still crying and shouting that she would

not give in. The turtle slave said, “We can’t beat her anymore today, let’s talk it over again tomorrow.”

The brothel proprietress said, “Drag this little s1ut out.”

The turtle slave helped the young girl out. A moment later he came back. The brothel proprietress said, “This s1ut is impossibly stubborn, we must use soft technique, give her Mi Chun [lit. confused/lost spring] wine.”

The turtle slave said, “She won’t drink wine.”

“Idiot!” the brothel proprietress said, “Put the Mi Chun wine inside the meat. That will do the trick.”

“Yes, yes,” the turtle slave said, “*Qi Jie* [seventh (older) sister], you are just amazing!”

Wei Xiaobao peeped through a crack on the wooden partition, and saw the brothel proprietress was standing in front of the cupboard; she took out a bottle of wine, and poured a cup, which she then gave to the turtle slave. He heard her saying, “Have Chunfang accompany those two *gongzi* [young master] drink. The money they bring is indeed not a few. They said they want to stay overnight in the courtyard, waiting for a friend. This kind of young, inexperienced people would not fancy Chunfang, later I will talk to them, to see if they want to ‘comb the covering’ of this s1ut. If we are lucky, I won’t be surprised if we’ll swindle three, four hundred *taels* from them.”

The turtle slave laughed and said, “Congratulations *Qi Jie* on ushering in wealth and prosperity; I will also hold on to your good fortune, that way I will strike my gambling debt in one stroke.”

The brothel proprietress cursed, “Lowly road kill [orig. lowly embryo, a corpse who died along the road], painstakingly we earn several *taels*, and you lost it all in thirty-two domino tiles. This is not good, watch out or I’ll cut your turtle tail.”

Wei Xiaobao knew that Mi Chun wine was a type of drug wine, those who drink it will lose their conscience. All brothels used this kind of drug toward young prostitutes who were unwilling to receive guests. When he was little, he thought this was very mysterious, but now he realized that it was no more than knockout drug mixed into the wine; to him this matter became very ordinary. He thought,

“Today my foster fathers are two young *gongzi*? What kind of fellow are they? I must take a look.”

He quietly slipped away toward the Sweet Nectar Hall, where they usually received rich merchant or grand guests. He stood on the round stone block outside the hall where he used to stand and peeked inside. In the past, whenever there was a grand guest coming to visit the brothel, he would always stand on this round stone block to peep inside, right here the crack on the window was especially big, when he looked inside, he could get a very clear view. The guests usually sat with their side to the window, hence they never saw any shadow outside the window. He had peeped several hundred times before, and had never bumped into a nail.

He saw the red candle inside the room was burning hot, his mother’s face was covered in makeups, she wore a pink satin gown, and a red flower on her head; she was pouring wine for the guests with a smile on her face. Wei Xiaobao took a good look at his mother; he thought, “Turns out Ma is already old; she won’t be in this business for long, only blind pest like these two rookies can possibly call her to accompany them drinking. Ma’s folksong is also not too pleasant to hear; if it were me who visited the courtyard, if she were not my Ma, even if I lose twelve-hundred *taels* I would not have called her.”

He heard his mother said with a laugh, “When two *gongzi* drink this cup, I will sing ‘Lovesickness Before Dawn’ tune to accompany you downing your wine.”

Wei Xiaobao sighed inwardly; he mused, “Ma’s folksongs are very limited; if not ‘Lovesickness Before Dawn’ [orig. thinking of each other at the fifth hour (between 3-5am)], then it must be ‘One Straight Black Bamboo Sprout’, or ‘One Folding Fan Seven *Cun* Long’, or ‘One Person Fanning Two Persons Cool Down’. She never wanted to learn some more. As a prostitute, she is not diligent.” Suddenly he had a brainwave and almost burst out laughing, “In learning martial art I am not diligent either; turns out my lazy character I inherited from Ma.”

Suddenly he heard a tender and delicate voice saying, “No need!” As soon as he heard these three words [bu yong le], Wei Xiaobao’s entire body shook, he almost slipped down from the stone block. Slowly he squinted and saw a slender jade-white hand holding a wine cup; his eyes traced the delicate hand through the sleeve and up to the face. He saw the side of a pretty face; who else but Ah

Ke? Wei Xiaobao's heart leaped in joy, the surprise and delight in his heart was hard to suppress. "How could Ah Ke be in Yangzhou?" he mused, "How could she come to the Lovely Spring Courtyard and called my Ma to accompany her drinking? She's a woman dressed as a man and did not call anybody else but only my Ma, she must be eager to see me. Turns out in the end she still has conscience, she remembered that I am her husband who has bowed to the heaven and the earth with her. Aha! Wonderful, wonderful! You and I, husband and wife are having reunion, today we can have wedding festivities [orig. bridal room and ornamented candles], I will wrap my arms around you …"

Suddenly he heard a male voice, "Right now Wu *Xiandi* [worthy brother surnamed Wu] is not drinking anything, but when those Mongolian friends arrived …" Wei Xiaobao's ears were buzzing; immediately he knew things were far from good. Before his eyes the sky spun and the earth went around, for a moment his eyes were blurry; he closed his eyes and calmed himself. When he opened his eyes and looked at the young master who was sitting by Ah Ke, he saw who else but Taiwan's *Er Gongzi* [second young master] Zheng Keshuang?

Wei Xiaobao's mother Wei Chunfang said with a laugh, "Since *Xiao Xianggong* [little/younger 'young master'] does not drink, *Da Xianggong* [big/older 'young master'] must drink one more cup." While pouring a cup of wine for Zheng Keshuang, her butts sat on Zheng Keshuang's lap.

"Hey," Ah Ke said, "Show some respect."

Wei Chunfang laughed and said, "Aiyo, *Xiao Xianggong*'s face is too tender, you cannot bear to see this kind of teasing. After this you should come here every day to have fun, I am afraid you will not like it if people do not flirt with you enough. *Xiao Xianggong*, let me get a young miss to accompany you, what do you say?"

"No, no, don't!" Ah Ke busily said, "You sit nicely on the side!"

Wei Chunfang laughed and said, "Ah, you are jealous! You blame me for accompanying *Da Xianggong* and not you." She stood up, and sat on Ah Ke's lap.

When Wei Xiaobao saw that, he was irritated, but amused at the same time. He thought, "Unexpectedly there is such thing in the world, my wife came to patronize ['visit a prostitute'] my Mama."

He saw Ah Ke stretched out her hand to push. Wei Chunfang could not stand, she spun and fell on her buttocks. Wei Xiaobao was enraged; he thought, “Little wh0re, you pushed your mother-in-law; so lacking in manners!”

But Wei Chunfang was not angry, with a giggle she stood up and said, “*Xiao Xianggong* is afraid of disgrace; how about you come and sit on my lap?”

Ah Ke angrily said, “Not good!” [A bit of explanation: when asking ‘is it alright?’, Chinese use the phrase ‘hao bu hao?’ (good or not good)] She turned to Zheng Keshuang and said, “I want to leave! We can meet people any place, but why did you insist on this place?”

Zheng Keshuang said, “We have agreed to meet here; we won’t leave until we meet. I did not know that this is actually a dirty place. Hey, I want you to sit properly.” The last sentence was directed toward Wei Chunfang.

The more Wei Xiaobao thought, the angrier he got; he mused, “That day in Guangxi by the River Liujiang, you pleaded *laozi* to spare your dog life, you swore a heavy oath that you would not speak to my wife even for one word. Today, in spite of everything, you came together to patronize my Mama. Patronizing my Mama is still alright, but you have spoken I don’t know how many thousand words, tens of thousand words. That day I did not cut your tongue, it was really *laozi*’s biggest blunder.”

Wei Chunfang was in high spirit, she reached out to wrap her arm around Zheng Keshuang’s neck. Zheng Keshuang pushed her arm away and said, “Wait for us outside. The two of us brothers have something we need to discuss, don’t come in before I call you.”

Wei Chunfang had no choice but to leave the room. Zheng Keshuang lowered his voice, “Ke *Mei* [younger sister, term of endearment], small disturbance must not harm big scheme, if we want to accomplish big thing, we have to endure small inconvenience.”

Ah Ke said, “That Prince Galdan is not a good person, why would he want us to meet him here?”

Hearing the words ‘Prince Galdan’, Wei Xiaobao mused, “That Mongolian scoundrel is also coming; marvelous, marvelous. Most likely they are going to discuss rebellion plan. *Laozi* can move an army and send a general to catch them

in one net."

He heard Zheng Keshuang said, "These days Yangzhou's security is so tight. If the guests to the inns and hotels are not frequent visitors, the *yamen* and local military troops would ask endless questions. If we reveal the least bit of our background, it would not be good at all. This brothel does not have any officers coming to harass us, it is much safer for us to stay here. You and I are still alright, but Prince Galdan and his party, a group of Mongolians' appearance will be too conspicuous. Besides, with your appearance like an immortal, if we stayed in an inn, all Yangzhou's men would want to come to see you. Sooner or later something bad will happen."

Ah Ke let out some soft giggles, "You don't need to be oily-mouthed and smooth talker to fawn on me."

Zheng Keshuang stretched out his arm around her shoulder, and landed a light kiss on the corner of her mouth. He said with a laugh, "When was I ever be oily-mouthed and smooth talker? If there was any immortal as beautiful as you, those Lu Chunyang, Iron Crutch Li, and the others would not want to descend to the world, all deities would stay in Heaven, unable to take their eyes off my little treasure."

"Pfft," Ah Ke stifled her laughter, and lowered her head. Wei Xiaobao's rage shot to the heavens, he could not endure it anymore; his hand reached his dagger, he was ready to charge inside. Immediately he had a second thought, "This fellow's martial art skill is stronger than mine. Ah Ke will definitely help him. If I rush in, this adulterous couple will surely murder her own husband. In the world, people can be anything, except big wanderer without martial art skill." Thereupon he struggled to suppress his anger, and had no choice but to close his eyes so that he would not see the intimacy of those two people.

He heard Ah Ke said, "*Gege* [big brother, term of endearment], actually …" As soon as she said this word, '*Gege*', Wei Xiaobao's heart was filled with bitterness and anger. "Damn it," he mused, "No sense of shame at all; you even call him '*Gege*'."

He did not hear the rest of Ah Ke's words, but he heard Zheng Keshuang said, "He is in the open, while we are in the dark. Galdan's warriors are really

formidable; leave it to me, this time we will definitely stab several open holes on his body."

"That fellow really bullies intolerably," Ah Ke said, "If this hatred is not avenged, all my life I won't be happy. Did you know that I originally did not want to acknowledge my father? It was simply because he promised that he would send eight martial art experts to accompany me dealing with this matter that I finally agreed to acknowledge him."

Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, "Who offended you? If you want revenge, you can simply tell your husband. Nothing is impossible, you did not need to acknowledge Wu Sangui, that big traitor as your father."

Zheng Keshuang said, "It's really not difficult to stab him dead, it's just that the Tatars officers and men are taking strict precautions. After assassinating him, to withdraw and escape alive is not too easy. We have to think an entirely different strategy before we make our move."

Ah Ke said, "Father promised to send people to kill him was not entirely for my sake. He wants to deploy his troops to attack the Tatars, and this man is a major roadblock. He instructed me that I should never let Ma know, I suspect he has his own selfish reason."

"Have you told your Ma?" Zheng Keshuang asked.

Ah Ke shook her head, "I have not," she said, "In this kind of matter, the more secretive the better. You never know, Ma might say something to stop me. If I did not obey her, that won't be good. I might as well not say anything to her."

Wei Xiaobao wondered, "Who is it that she wants to assassinate? Why is this person a roadblock to Wu Sangui's plan of deploying his troops?"

He heard Zheng Keshuang said, "These days I am watching his coming and going, the security is indeed very tight, it is very difficult to come near him. I gave it a lot of thought, this fellow is a lecher, someone disguised as a courtesan might be able to get very close to him."

"A lecher?" Wei Xiaobao wondered in his heart, "Is he talking about *Futai* [inspector-general]? Or *Fantai* [vassal state governor]?"

"Only if Shijie and I disguise ourselves," Ah Ke said, "But I don't want to

disguise myself as that kind of lowly woman."

"Or we attempt to bribe the cook," Zheng Keshuang said, "Put some poison in his wine."

Ah Ke hatefully said, "Killing him by poison, my anger cannot be vented. I want to chop his hands, to cut his tongue that always talks nonsense to me! That little demon, I … I hate him!"

As soon as the three words 'that little demon' entered his ears, Wei Xiaobao's head spun. Instantly he understood; he said repeatedly in his heart, "Turns out you want to kill your own husband." Although he knew that Ah Ke wholeheartedly leaned toward Zheng Keshuang, he had never imagined that she hated him that much. "When did I ever offend you?" he wondered in his heart.

This doubt was instantly answered, as he heard Zheng Keshuang said, "Ke *Mei*, this fellow is infatuated with you, he has never dared to offend you the least bit. I know the reason you wanted to kill him is because you want to vent my anger. You have this kind of affection to me, I … I really don't know how to repay you."

Ah Ke said in a gentle voice, "I hate him more for humiliating you one part compared to him humiliating me ten parts. If he beats me, curses me, I look at Shifu's face, and swallow my hatred, but toward you he … he repeatedly treated you that rude. When I remember it, I really wish I could make mincemeat of him."

"Ke *Mei*," Zheng Keshuang said, "How about if I repay you right now?" His right arm also reached out to embrace her body. Ah Ke's face looked so lovely and bashful, she buried her head in his bosom.

Wei Xiaobao's heart was aching, angry, and bitter at the same time. Suddenly his head was jerked back, somebody grabbed his braid. He was greatly shocked; immediately afterwards somebody twisted his ear. He was about to scream when a voice that he was very familiar with spoke near his ear in a low voice, "Little b@stard, come with me!" [the word here is 'wang ba dan' – turtle (derogatory way) egg]

In all his life, he could not remember how many hundreds or thousands times he has heard this scolding 'little b@astard'; without thinking he obeyed immediately. The grabbing of his braid and the twisting of his ear was executed

very skillfully; it was also something that he could not remember how many hundreds or thousands times he has had his braid pulled and his ear twisted like that. He knew it was his mother Wei Chunfang.

The two of them arrived at her room. Wei Chunfang kicked backward to slam the door closed. As soon as she released his braid and ear, Wei Xiaobao called out, “Ma! I am back!”

Wei Chunfang stared at him for quite a long time. Suddenly she threw herself onto him and hugged him tightly, while crying and sobbing uncontrollably. Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Haven’t I come back to see you? Why are you crying?”

Still sobbing and sniffling, Wei Chunfang said, “Did you die? Where did you go? I looked for you everywhere inside and outside Yangzhou, I beseeched the deity and worshipped Buddha, I don’t know how many times I raised my prayers, how many times I knocked my head. Dear Xiaobao, finally you return to Mother’s [‘niang’] side.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “I am not a child anymore, I went out to roam outside, you don’t have to worry.”

With tears still in her eyes, Wei Chunfang’s eyes were blurry. She saw her son had grown tall, his build was thick and solid, she was very happy. She broke into crying again and scolded him, “You little b@stard, without saying anything to your *Niang*, you went away that long. This time if I don’t ferociously feed you sautéed bamboo shoots in meat, little b@stard won’t know his *laoniang*’s fierceness.”

The so-called ‘sautéed bamboo shoots in meat’ was spanking of his bottoms by feather duster with bamboo stick handle. Wei Xiaobao has not had that in a very long time. Upon hearing his mother, he could not help but laughing in amusement.

Wei Chunfang also laughed. She took out her handkerchief to rub the mud and filth from his face. After wiping for a while, she looked down and saw the front lapel of her new satin gown was stained with tears and snoot, plus a lot of charcoal ashes from her son’s face; she could not help but feeling upset. ‘Slap!’ she heavily struck his face and scolded him, “This is my new clothes, I just sewed

it to celebrate the New Year three years ago, I haven't worn it quite several times yet. Little b@stard, you came back is not a good thing, you made your *laoniang*'s new clothes dirty. How am I going to accompany the guests?"

Seeing how his mother treasuring the new clothes, making noises with flushed face and looked very angry, Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Ma, don't worry about your new clothes. Tomorrow I am going to have a hundred new clothes sewn for you, they will be ten times better than this one."

Wei Chunfang angrily said, "Little b@stard can only talk big; what kind of skill do you have? Looking at your revolting behavior, can you get rich outside and come back here?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "Riches, I haven't gotten any, but my gambling luck has been good, I won some money."

Wei Chunfang had a 30% confidence in her son's ability to cheat in gambling; she held out her palm and said, "Give it to me! When you have a bit of money in you, not too long afterwards you would spend it all."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "This time I won really big, too big that no matter what I cannot spend it all."

Wei Chunfang raised her palm and slapped him again. Wei Xiaobao ducked, the palm missed. He thought, "As soon as she sees me she wants to beat me. I have the Princess in the north, and my *laoniang* in the south."

He was just putting his hand into his pocket to get some money out when the turtle slave outside called, "Chunfang, the guests want you. Come quickly!"

"I am coming!" Wei Chunfang said. She walked over to the table and picked the mirror box, hurriedly put up some cosmetics in front of the mirror inside the lid of the box. "Just lie down here," she said, "When *Laoniang* is back, I want to examine you carefully. You … you must not go away!"

Wei Xiaobao saw his mother's eyes were brimming with concern, she was afraid that he would be gone missing again, thereupon he laughed and said, "I am not leaving, don't worry!"

"Little b@stard," Wei Chunfang cursed again, but her face looked happy. Brushing off her clothes, she left the room.

Wei Xiaobao lay down on the bed, he pulled the quilt to cover himself. He only lay down for a moment, Wei Chunfang was back in the room, carrying a wine pot. Seeing her son was lying on the bed, she was relieved. She turned around to go out. Wei Xiaobao knew that Zheng Keshuang ordered her to get more wine. Suddenly he had an idea. “Ma,” he said, “Are you getting some wine for the customer?”

“Right,” Wei Chunfang replied, “Just lie down nicely for me, when Ma returns, I will swindle something good for you to eat.”

“Get some more wine,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Let me drink some.”

“Gluttonous ghost,” Wei Chunfang scolded him, “Little child is not supposed to drink wine.” She took the wine pot away.

Hastily Wei Xiaobao peeked through the wooden partition. Seeing nobody in the adjacent room, like an arrow he dashed out of the room and entered the adjacent room, opened the cupboard and took the brothel proprietress’ bottle of Mi Chun wine, returned to his own room and hid the bottle underneath the quilt. Pulling the cork out, he said in his heart, “Zheng Keshuang you little b@stard [the word here is ‘za zhong’ – mixed breed], you want to put poison in my wine, today *laozi* will strike first and gain the upper hand!”

Before long, Wei Chunfang returned, carrying a pot brimming with wine. Upon entering the room, she said, “Quickly drink two mouthfuls.”

Still lying down on the bed, Wei Xiaobao received the wine pot. He sat up and drank a mouthful. Wei Chunfang looked at her son stealing brothel patron’s drink, she was not able to refrain her face from revealing overflowing tenderness.

“Ma,” Wei Xiaobao said, “There is a big soot on your face.”

Wei Chunfang hastily went to the mirror to look. Wei Xiaobao brought the wine pot into the quilt, and poured more than half a bottle of the Mi Chun wine.

Seeing her face was clean, without any soot in sight, Wei Chunfang realized that her son had been playing trick with her, to get her attention away from him, so that he could steal a big mouthful of wine. She turned around at once, snatched the wine pot and cursed, “Little b@stard came out of *laoniang*’s belly;

how could I not know your trick? Humph, formerly you could not drink wine, after loitering around outside these days, you learned all kinds of bad deeds."

"Ma," Wei Xiaobao said, "That *Xiao Xianggong*'s temperament is not good. No matter what you must give him several more cups to drink. After he is drunk and does not make any sound, it will be easier to swindle that *Da Xianggong*'s money."

Wei Chunfang said, "*Laoniang* has been in this business all my life, do I still need you to teach me this child's play?" But in her heart she secretly agreed that her son's idea was good. She also thought, "Little b@stard is home, this is indeed a tremendously happy occasion. Tonight I'd better not have any pest asking me to spend the night with him, *laoniang* wants to be with my son." Taking the wine pot, she hurriedly left.

Wei Xiaobao lay back down on the bed, anger and complacency alternated in his mind, he thought, "*Laozi* is really lucky. That stinky thief surnamed Zheng did not visit other prostitute, he came here to give me advantage, he wanted to be *laozi*'s foster father. Let's see if I don't stab him with a sword and scatter some corpse transforming powder." He thought about how after sprinkling some corpse transforming powder on his wound, Zheng Keshuang would soon turn into a puddle of yellow liquid; when Ah Ke's drunkenness was over, her '*Gege*' would have been disappeared without a trace, his whereabouts unknown, even if she broke her head she would never figure out what happened. "Damn it," he mused, "If you want to call your '*Gege*', quickly call him several more time. Very soon you won't be able to call at all."

He was very happy. Crawling out of his bed, he went back to the Sweet Nectar Hall to peek inside. He saw Zheng Keshuang had just downed a cup of wine. Ah Ke had a cup on her lips, which she daintily sipped. Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted, he saw his mother poured another cup for Zheng Keshuang. Zheng Keshuang waved his hand and said, "Out, out, we don't need you to serve."

Wei Chunfang complied. When she put down the wine pot, her sleeve covered a dish of sliced ham. Wei Xiaobao smiled and said in his heart, "I am going to eat some ham tonight." He hastily returned to the room.

Not too long afterwards, Wei Chunfang came back with a plate of sliced ham.

She laughed and said, “Little b@stard, when you were dead outside, did you have this kind of good food to eat?” Grinning from ear to ear she sat on the bed, watching her son eating with gusto; she felt better than if she was eating it herself.

“Ma,” Wei Xiaobao asked, “Did you drink the wine?”

“I did, several cups,” Wei Chunfang replied, “If I drank some more I am afraid I will be drunk, and then you’ll slip away.”

Wei Xiaobao thought, “If I did not drug Mama, I could not achieve big thing.” He said, “I won’t leave. Ma, I haven’t accompanied you sleeping for a long time. Tonight don’t go to keep those two pests company, you stay here with me.”

Wei Chunfang was greatly delighted; her son hated to leave her like this, the last time it happened he was about seven, eight years old. She could not believe that after suffering outside, he finally remembered to love his mother. She could not help but beaming with joy as she said, “Alright, tonight *Niang* will accompany obedient Xiaobao to sleep.”

“Ma,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Although I was outside, I remembered you every day. Come, let me take your clothes off.”

His bootlicking skill had been used on the Emperor, the Cult Leader, the Princess and his masters; it was honed to perfection. Presently he was using it on his own mother, unexpectedly he received an unusual reaction. Wei Chunfang was used to social interaction with the patrons of the brothel, men’s hand groping her body, she just hardened her heart. But when her own son’s hand was extended to unbutton her clothes, she could not stop her body from turning weak; she let out a giggle. After Wei Xiaobao took off his mother’s outer clothes, he proceeded by loosening her trousers’ belt. “Pei,” Wei Chunfang spat, and gently slapped his hand; she said with a laugh, “I can do it myself.” Suddenly she felt shy, she went inside the quilt and took off her trousers, and from underneath the quilt she put it on top the quilt.

Wei Xiaobao fished two ingots of silver, altogether worth more than thirty *taels*, and stuffed it into his mother’s hand; he said, “Ma, I am giving this to you.”

Wei Chunfang was very happy; suddenly she burst into tears. “I … I’ll keep it for

you," she said, "In … in a few years I'll give it back to you to get yourself a wife."

Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, "I already have." He blew the oil lantern off and said, "Ma, quickly sleep. I will wait for you to fall asleep, before I go to sleep myself."

Wei Chunfang laughed and said, "Little b@stard, you really have a lot of tricks," and then she closed her eyes.

She was tired after working all day, plus she drank several cups of wine; seeing her son returned, she was unbearably happy. As soon as she closed her eyes, it did not take long before she dozed off.

As soon as Wei Xiaobao heard her snore, he tiptoed toward the door. An idea struck him, hence he returned and took his mother's trousers and tossed it on top of the mosquito net; he thought, "When she wakes up, without trousers she won't be able to catch me."

He went outside Sweet Nectar Hall, and saw Zheng Keshuang splayed on his chair face up, and Ah Ke slumped face down on the table; they were both motionless. Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted; he waited for a moment, seeing that the two of them were still unmoving, he entered the hall. He was about to close the door behind him when he suddenly had a second thought, "There is no hurry to close the door. If this fellow only pretend to be drunk, I can't escape if the door is closed."

Pulling his dagger, he walked over to him, and pushed Zheng Keshuang with his right hand. He was completely motionless; it was obvious that he had lost his consciousness. Wei Xiaobao also pushed Ah Ke; she mumbled something, but did not sit up. He thought, "The wine she drank was too little; I am afraid she will wake up soon, and that will be dangerous."

Inserting the dagger back into his boot, he propped her up until she was sitting up. Ah Ke's eyes were closed, "*Gege*," she mumbled incoherently, "I … I can't drink anymore."

Wei Xiaobao said in a low voice, "Good *Meizi*, drink one more cup." He poured a cup full of wine and pushed it into her little mouth with his left hand that the wine trickled down. Still in a daze Ah Ke swallowed the Mi Chun drugged wine.

Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, “You and *laozi* have bowed to the Heaven and the Earth in an official wedding, you were unwilling to celebrate the wedding festivities with your husband, but came to Lovely Spring Courtyard to be a little wh0re, you want your husband to be the pest who ‘comb your covering’. You are indeed a lowly pervert.”

Ah Ke’s beauty was originally matchless. Now that she was drunk, under the red candle’s light, she looked even more ‘thousand-adorable hundred-charm’. Wei Xiaobao’s sexual desire was greatly aroused. No longer cared whether Zheng Keshuang was dead or alive, drunk or awake, he carried Ah Ke in his arms toward the large bedroom next to the Sweet Nectar Hall.

The large bedroom was prepared for grand patrons who wanted to spend the night. The big bed was at least six *chi* [foot] wide. The mattress and quilt were embroidered, the furnishing was magnificent. Wei Xiaobao gently put Ah Ke down on the bed. He went back outside to pick the candlestick, which he put on the table next to the head of the bed. Looking at Ah Ke’s rosy complexion, he could not stop his heart from thumping madly. Leaning over her, he took her long robe, exposing her thin, close-fitting light green undergarment.

He reached out to loosen the knots on her thin underpants, suddenly he heard footsteps behind his back; someone was rushing in. He was about to turn around when his braid tightened, his ear was twisted; once again he was grabbed by Wei Chunfang. “Ma,” Wei Xiaobao said in a low voice, “Let go, quickly!”

“Little b@stard,” Wei Chunfang cursed, “Although we are poor, we must not violate the courtyard’s rule. Among the nine famous courtyards of Yangzhou, which one ever had the guest’s money stolen? Quickly return it!”

“I did not steal anybody’s money,” Wei Xiaobao anxiously said.

Wei Chunfang pulled his braid as hard as she could, and forcefully dragged him back to their own room. She scolded, “If you did not steal money, why did you take people’s clothes off? These several tens of *taels*, you must have become little thief and stole it. I raised you up with great trouble, it had never occurred to me that you would become a thief.” In her bitter anger, she burst into tears. She took the two ingots of silver at the head of the bed and threw it to the floor.

Wei Xiaobao found it hard to explain; if he said that the guest was a woman

dressing up as a man, and that she was his own wife, one, it was complicated and was not easy to express succinctly, two, no matter what his mother would not believe him. He could only say, “Why would I want to steal anybody’s money? Look, I have a lot of money.” From his pocket he took out the big wad of banknotes. “Ma,” he said, “I wanted to give all this money to you, but I was afraid I might scare you off, hence I am going to give it to you slowly.”

Wei Chunfang saw several dozen sheets of banknotes worth several hundred *taels* each, she was so scared that her eyes grew big. “This … this … little thief,” she stammered, “You … you … didn’t you take this from those two *xianggong*? Even if you re-enter the womb and reincarnate as little b@stard ten lifetimes, you won’t make this much money. Quickly return other people’s money, we do business in the courtyard, if we have the ability, we may swindle other people’s money a hundred or eighty thousand *taels*, but the pest has to be most willing to do it, he has to present it with both hands. If you ever steal one thing from other people, Er Lang Shen [deity with three eyes] would never spare you, you will still do the same thing to earn a living in your next life. Xiaobao, *Niang* is doing this for your own good!” When she spoke the fast few sentences, her tone turned gentle. She also said, “When those people wake up tomorrow and do not see this much money, won’t they raise a ruckus? And then officials from *yamen* will come to investigate, they will arrest you, won’t they beat you until your skin breaks and your flesh rotten? Obedient Xiaobao, we cannot covet this much money belonging to other people.”

After talking back and forth, the bottom line was that she wanted her son to return the money. Wei Xiaobao thought, “Ma making a lot of fuss, this matter cannot be explained succinctly. If the noise reaches the brothel proprietress, the turtle would find out, everybody will make a fuss, then this matter will turn for the worst.” His heart was moved, he had an idea, “Alright, alright,” he said, “Ma, I will listen to you.”

Pulling his mother’s hand along, he went back to the Sweet Nectar Hall, and stuffed his wad of banknotes into Zheng Keshuang’s pocket. He pulled his own two pockets inside out and brushed his body, saying, “I don’t even have one *tael* left on me; you feel better?”

Wei Chunfang sighed and said, “Good, you are doing the right thing.”

Returning to their own room, Wei Xiaobao noticed that his mother was wearing a pair of old trousers, he could not help but scoffing. Wei Chunfang bent her finger and knocked his forehead with her knuckle; she scolded, “I woke up to use the toilet, and could not find my trousers, hence I knew you were not doing a good thing.” Finished speaking, she could not refrain from laughing.

“Aiyo, not good,” Wei Xiaobao said, “I need to sh1t.” Hugging his belly, he rushed out.

Wei Chunfang was afraid he might return to Sweet Nectar Hall; seeing he was running toward the latrine [orig. thatched hut] at the back garden, she was relieved. “You want to go to the reception hall again, you won’t escape *laoniang*’s eyes,” she mused.

Wei Xiaobao exited from the side door and dashed back to the He Garden. The personal guard on duty raised his arms to block, “What do you want?” he shouted.

“I am the Imperial Envoy Minister,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Don’t you know me?”

The personal guard was startled; he looked closer, indeed it was the imperial envoy minister. “Yes, it’s *Daren* …” he hastily said.

Without waiting for him to finish, Wei Xiaobao quickly returned to his room and said, “Good Shuang’er, quick, quick, help me change back into Imperial Envoy Minister.” While talking, he pulled off the long robe he was wearing.

Shuang’er served him washing his face and changing his clothes; she said with a laugh, “Imperial Envoy Minister going out to make personal investigation, have you found the actual facts?”

“I have,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “We are going to make arrest right now. Quickly wear your personal guard uniform, go get eight personal guards and follow me.”

“Do you want me to get Xu *Laoyezi* [old master] and the others?” Shuang’er asked.

Wei Xiaobao thought, “Zheng Keshuang and Ah Ke are already unconscious, just stretch a hand and grab it, it’s going to be as easy as blowing off dust. If Xu Tianchuan and the others come with me, they won’t let me kill that stinky fellow surnamed Zheng. Taking personal guards with me, I can put on airs and scare my

Niang, scare the brothel proprietress, the turtle." Thereupon he said, "No need."

Shuang'er put on her personal guard uniform, "How about taking Miss Zeng along?" she asked.

Within the personal guard squad, only she and Zeng Rou were women dressed as men. These days these two girls were in contact with each other, and were already very close to each other. Wei Xiaobao thought, "If I want to carry Ah Ke back here, Shuang'er alone cannot do it, I must have two persons carrying her. Imperial Envoy *Daren* cannot do the job himself in front of other people, and I can't let any personal guard's stinky hands touch my wife's fragrant body, can I?" He said, "Very well, you may take her along. Just don't call those Wangwu Pai people."

Zeng Rou quickly put on the personal guard uniform and was ready in a short time. Leading the two women and eight personal guards, Wei Xiaobao returned to the Lovely Spring Courtyard. Two personal guards went up to knock on the door, "*Canjiang* [administrator/colonel] *Daren* is here," they shouted, "Quickly open the door and greet him." The personal guards were instructed to say that Wei Xiaobao was a *Canjiang*; to scare the brothel proprietress and the turtle, a *Canjiang* is more than enough.

After beating the door for half a day, the main gate was finally creaking open, a turtle slave came out to meet them. "Visitors!" he shouted. The word was called out in such a bored way.

Wei Xiaobao was afraid he might be recognized, he did not dare to look at the man. A personal guard shouted, "*Canjiang Laoye* [old master] personally arrived, tell *laobao* [brothel keeper] to serve him well."

Wei Xiaobao went to the main hall, the brothel proprietress came out to greet him; she did not even look at Wei Xiaobao as she said, "*Laoye* please come to the reception pavilion for some tea."

Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, "It's best that you did not look at me, so that you won't recognize me; I also don't need to see my Ma. I ought to simply tell them to bring Ah Ke and Zheng Keshuang out and leave this place." However, usually this brothel proprietress was very attentive in receiving the guests, she was even more deferential and polite toward government officials, yet today she

was that cold, the way she spoke was very odd, unconsciously he was rather astonished.

When he entered the Sweet Nectar Hall, he saw that the feast had not been cleaned up, Zheng Keshuang was still splaying face up on the chair. He was about to give order when suddenly a man with magnificent attire walked in. “Wei *Daren*, how are you?” the man said.

Wei Xiaobao was startled. “How did you know me?” he mused, and looked at him. His shock was not a small matter. Immediately he stooped down to pull the dagger from his boot, suddenly his hand tightened; somebody behind him grabbed his wrist, and coldly said, “Sit down nicely, don’t make unnecessary move!” With his left hand the man grabbed the back of Wei Xiaobao’s neck and lifted him up and dropped him into a chair.

Wei Xiaobao groaned secretly. He heard Shuang’er’s tender voice shouting and yelling as she fought the man. Zeng Rou also stepped forward to join the fray. A young master in brocade clothes sent a palm to hack at her, the two of them immediately fought. Wei Xiaobao focused his attention to look, turned out this young master in brocade clothes was a woman dressed as a man, she was none other than Ah Ke’s martial older sister Ah Qi. The man fighting Shuang’er was tall and thin, he was actually Tibetan Lama Sangjie; only right now he was wearing casual clothes, complete with a hat on his head and a fake braid. The first man with magnificent attire was Mongolian Prince Galdan.

“I am too muddleheaded,” Wei Xiaobao mused, “I plainly heard Zheng Keshuang said that they have an appointment with Galdan in here; why didn’t I guard against this? As soon as I saw Ah Ke, I was in a daze that I don’t even remember *laozi*’s own surname. Damn it, *laozi*’s surname, I actually do not know; no wonder …”

He heard Shuang’er cried out, “Aiyo,” as the acupoint on her waist was sealed by Sangjie, and she fell to the ground. In the meantime, Zeng Rou was still engaged in fierce battle with Ah Qi. Although Ah Qi’s style was exquisite, her attacks were lacking strength; several times she hit Zeng Rou, but failed to injure her. Sangjie came over, and in just two moves he was able to seal Zeng Rou’s acupoint too. The eight personal guards either had their acupoint sealed by Sangjie, or were killed by Galdan; their bodies were scattered around the

courtyard outside the hall.

Sangjie let out a 'hey, hey' laugh and sat down. "Wei *Daren*," he said, "Where is your Shifu?" While saying that, he stretched out both his hands with the fingers right in front of Wei Xiaobao's face.

Wei Xiaobao saw that all ten of his fingers were short by one section; human fingers originally have three sections, right now his fingers only have two sections left. It looked extremely strange and scary. Wei Xiaobao groaned inwardly, "That day he flipped through the Sutra, the tips of his fingers were moistened by my poison. This man is unexpectedly very ruthless; he has the heart to cut his own ten fingers. Today *laozi* has fallen into his hands, if he wants to take revenge, he would chopped all my ten fingers, which is not a big deal; but what if he also want to cut a section of my head?"

Seeing that Wei Xiaobao was so scared that he was merely staring blankly; Sangjie was very proud of himself. "Wei *Daren*," he said, "That day I saw you were just a small kid, I did not know that you are a person of high rank within the imperial court; I have offended you much."

"I don't dare to accept the honor," Wei Xiaobao replied, "That day I only thought you were an ordinary Lama, I did not know that you are a really great hero; I have offended you much."

"Humph," Sangjie snorted; he asked, "How do you know I am a hero?"

Wei Xiaobao replied, "Someone put violent poison on the Sutra, with the intention of harming my Shifu. Shifu was able to see through the scheme, she did not dare to reach out and touch it. You insisted on looking at the Sutra, my Shifu had no other choice but to give it to you. Great Lama, after your fingers were poisoned, you made prompt decision to chop your fingers at once, it is really amazing! People swipe their own neck to suicide is easy, people chop their own ten fingers, since ancient times there has never been one great hero who had done it. Back then Guan Yunchang scraped his bone to remove poison, without knitting a single brow, but it was someone else who scrape his bone for him; for him to chop his own fingers, I don't think he can do that. You are more formidable than Guan Yunchang; doesn't it mean that you are a great hero, the first under heaven since ancient times?"

Sangjie was fully aware that Wei Xiaobao was flattering him big time, thinking that he would show leniency toward him, which was no difference than asking Sangjie to spare his life. However, when those words entered his ears, admittedly he enjoyed a comfortable feeling. That day he had to ruthlessly cut his own fingers before he was able to save his own life. Although his pair of hands was mutilated, his martial art skill was greatly reduced, but thinking that in that juncture of life and death he unexpectedly had this kind of courage, he was actually very proud of himself. He took twelve of his martial younger brothers to the Central Plains to seize the 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra'. The outcome was that all twelve people perished while his pair of hands was mutilated; it was indeed a bad luck. Naturally he never mentioned about this matter to anybody, while there has never been anybody who dared to ask either as why he chopped his own ten fingers. Consequently, it was the very first time that he heard something like what Wei Xiaobao had just said.

Unconsciously, a hint of smile appeared on the Great Lama's grim face. "Wei *Daren*," he said, "We found out that you have graced Yangzhou with your presence; hence we all agreed to meet you here. You especially caused trouble for Ping Xi Wang, spoiling not a few of his, the Senior's important matters. When the Prince Consort wanted to return to Yunnan to visit his family, he was also blocked by you; is that right?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "Gentlemen's information is actually very quick, it is indeed incredible! This time I left the Capital, I wonder if Gentlemen knew what His Majesty instructed me to do."

"Please advise," Sangjie said.

"With pleasure, with pleasure," Wei Xiaobao replied, "His Majesty said, 'Wei Xiaobao, you are going to Yangzhou on a mission, I am afraid Wu Sangui would send people to assassinate you, *Zhen* is somewhat uneasy. Luckily his son is in *Zhen*'s hands; if you ever meet unexpected misfortune, *Zhen* will treat this fellow Wu Yingxiong the same as whatever they are doing to you. Wu Sangui sends people to cut the tip of your little finger, inevitable this fellow Wu Yingxiong will also lack the tip of his little finger. That old fellow Wu Sangui sends people to kill you, it's is equal to killing his own son.' I said, 'Your Majesty, I can be anybody's son, but I definitely don't want to be Wu Sangui's son.' His Majesty roared in

laughter. As such, I am coming to Yangzhou."

Sangjie and Galdan looked at each other, their countenances changed slightly. Sangjie said, "His Highness the Prince and I this time go to Yangzhou to find you, at first we thought that the Imperial Envoy His Majesty sent must be an extraordinary character, who would have thought that when the two of us looked from afar, turned out it was an old acquaintance. Even this Miss Ah Qi also knew you."

Wei Xiaobao said with a laugh, "We are indeed old friends."

Ah Qi picked up a chopstick from the table and jabbed it on Wei Xiaobao's forehead. She spat and said, "Who wants to be old friend with you?"

Sangjie said, "We made appointment to meet Taiwan's Zheng *Er Gongzi* in here, originally it was to discuss how to deal with you. Who would have thought that you personally came to pay a visit, hence you saved us a lot of trouble."

"Precisely," Wei Xiaobao said, "His Majesty interrogated that big beard, the Prince's subordinate Hantiemo for three days; we know everything."

When Sangje and Galdan heard the name Hantiemo, they were greatly shocked; they both rose up and asked, "What?"

"It's nothing really," Wei Xiaobao said, "His Majesty and Hantiemo talked in Mongolian, jabbering words that I did not understand even one. Afterwards His Majesty bestowed him quite a lot of money, and sent him to the Ministry of War to work for *Shangshu* Ming Zhu *Daren*. Less than three days later, he sent me to rush him to draw some maps. This is military stuff; I don't know anything. I said to His Majesty, 'Your Majesty, Mongolia and Tibet are too cold, if you want to send troops to fight a war, your servant is considering to have a vacation with you, I want to go to beautiful world of Yangzhou to have a stroll.'"

Galdan's face showed concern; he asked, "Did you say the young Emperor is going to dispatch troops to attack Mongolia and Tibet?"

Wei Xiaobao shook his head and said, "This kind of matter, I am not really clear. His Majesty said: it would be best if we deal with the old fellow, one person. If Mongolia and Tibet want to help us, then we'll consider them as friends; if they help the old fellow, there is no other way, we have to gain the

initiative by striking first.’”

Sangjie and Galdan looked at each other; they felt relieved, and sat down. Galdan asked about Hantiemo, Wei Xiaobao described his appearance and mannerism vividly and realistically, Galdan and Sangjie could not not believe him. Noticing that these two men were frowning slightly, Wei Xiaobao guessed that as the two of them find out that Hantiemo had surrendered to the Qing, they expected that the collusion between Mongolia, Tibet and Wu Sangui could not be concealed from the young Emperor, hence they were afraid Kangxi would gain the initiative by striking first.

Wei Xiaobao saw Shuang’er and Zeng Rou had their acupoints sealed and were lying on the floor, while most of the eight personal guards had perished. This time he quietly went to the Lovely Spring Courtyard; because he was afraid other people might know his life’s secret, Xu Tianchuan, Zhang Yong, Zhao Qixian, and the others did not know at all. It seems that even if he was chopped into mincemeat, made to be the famous Yangzhou’s lion’s head [i.e. pork meatball], perhaps simmer-fried or steamed in broth, or cooked with crab meat, nobody would come to rescue him. Since he had no way out anyway, he might as well babble anything, it was better than sitting and waiting for death quietly.

“His Majesty heard that Prince Galdan’s martial art skill is superior, that he is an unparalleled hero,” he continued, “He is very full of admiration.”

Galdan smiled and asked, “Did the Emperor also train martial art? How did he know about my martial art?”

“Naturally His Majesty knows martial art,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “And his skill is not bad at all. That day Your Highness fully displaying your capabilities at the Shaolin Temple, you beat Shaolin Temple’s Abbot that he concede defeat. The heads of Damo Hall, Luohan Hall, Bo’re Hall, three great halls, flee at the mere distant sight. *Xiongdi* told His Majesty everything.” That day Galdan left Shaolin with his tail between his legs, yet right now hearing Wei Xiaobao tooting the horn on his behalf, giving him a lot of face in front of Sangjie, he could not refrain from showing a satisfied look on his face.

Wei Xiaobao continued, “Shaolin Temple *Fangzhang* [abbot] Hui Cong *Dashi*’s martial art skill can be considered first or second best in *Wulin*, but Your Highness the Prince merely flicked your sleeve and Hui Cong *Fangzhang* could not hold his stand and fell sitting down. Fortunately when he fell, his buttocks happened to land on a *putuan* [round meditation mat used by Buddhists], hence he was saved from breaking a few of his old bones …” Actually, it was Galdan who was brushed by Hui Cong’s sleeve that day, so that he landed on a chair and was unable to stand up; Wei Xiaobao turned the story around. He said in his heart, “Hui Cong *Shixiong* treatment to me was not bad, but today as his *Shidi* I am facing a calamity, in a moment I will die in a sitting posture [referring to Buddhism death] and leave for the Western Paradise. I have no choice but to treat emptiness as appearance, and appearance as emptiness; *Shixiong*’s victory as defeat, and other people’s defeat as victory.”

While his mouth was babbling nonsense, in his heart he let his imagination run wild, his eyes looked to the east and gazed to the west. In a glance he saw Ah Qi’s expression; she seemed to be smiling yet she was not exactly smiling, her pair of beautiful eyes was fixed at Galdan’s face, her gaze was brimming with affection.

Wei Xiaobao had a sudden inspiration, “This wicked girl wants to be Mongolian Princess.” Thereupon he said, “His Majesty said, ‘Prince Galdan’s martial art skill is high, his appearance is handsome; if he wants to take a Princess, he ought to marry young, good looking, as well as with high level of martial art skill Miss …” Stealing a glance toward Ah Qi, sure enough, he noticed that her face was

blushing; it was obvious from her expression that she was paying full attention; hence he continued, “Although that Chen Yuanyuan is known as the first beauty under the heavens, but right now she is older; I wonder why Galdan is determined to marry her?”

Ah Qi could not bear not to talk, “Who said he wanted to marry Chen Yuanyuan? You are talking nonsense!”

Galdan shook his head, “How can there be such thing?” he said.

“That’s right,” Wei Xiaobao said, “I said, ‘Reporting to Your Majesty: His Highness Prince Galdan has a very good lady friend, called Miss Ah Qi …’”

Ah Qi spat, but her face looked very happy; Galdan cast her a glance with a smile on his face. Wei Xiaobao continued, “… This Miss Ah Qi’s martial art skill is number three in the world, she is only below Great Lama Sangjie and His Highness Prince Galdan. Compared to Your Majesty, hee hee … she is still a bit stronger. Your servant is telling the truth, Your Majesty must not take offense …’”

At first Sangjie was somewhat bored listening to his babbling, but when he heard that unexpectedly Wei Xiaobao told the Emperor that Sangjie’s martial art skill was the first under the heavens, he knew perfectly well that out of ten words that this little demon said, he ought not believe even half a word; yet he could not help feeling happy and content. His nose made a snort though, hinting that he did not believe him.

Wei Xiaobao continued, “His Majesty said, ‘I don’t believe you. Even if this young lady’s martial art was stronger, can it be that she is superior to her Shifu?’ I said, ‘Your Majesty did not know this, but this young lady’s Shifu is a Buddhist nun wearing white clothes, her martial art skill was actually very strong, she could be considered number three in the world. However, once upon a time, during a duel against Great Lama Sangjie, she was struck by Great Lama Sangjie’s palm. The Shitai could not resist, the entire internal energy in her body disappeared without any trace. Therefore, the title of number three martial artist in the world was snatched by her disciple.’”

When Ah Qi heard him exposing her school background, she was surprised and baffled, “How did he know my Shifu?” she mused.

Although Sangjie had not personally fought with Jiu Nan, his twelve martial brothers all died a violent death under her, master and disciples' hands; it was really an extraordinary shame and disappointment of his life. This moment as he heard Wei Xiaobao asserted that Jiu Nan was struck by his palm that her internal energy dissipated, he knew that Wei Xiaobao was pasting a lot of gold on his face. Previously he and Galdan were most worried that Wei Xiaobao would unmask their disgrace, and thus both of them were thinking to kill this man as quickly as possible to close his mouth; but when they heard that he had reversed their great defeat into great victory, they thought that there was no harm in letting him live a bit longer.

Sangjie turned his gaze toward Ah Qi for a moment; he thought, "This is the first time that I knew that you are the little nun in white's disciple. There is something odd here."

Ah Qi asked, "You mentioned Chen Yuanyuan; what about her?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "That Chen Yuanyuan, I have seen her with my own eyes in Kunming. To tell Miss the truth, she is quite much older than I am; however, the title 'number one beauty under the heavens' [tian xia di yi mei ren] six characters is indeed not in vain. When I saw her, immediately my soul flew out, my hands and feet ice-cold, I shook all over, my heart said, 'How can there be such a beauty in the world?' Miss Ah Qi, your Shimei Ah Ke can be considered very beautiful, but compared to this Chen Yuanyuan, her appearance and her physique, she is far too inferior."

Naturally Ah Qi knew that Ah Ke was stunningly beautiful, she was far above her; she also knew that Wei Xiaobao was 'spirit and soul upside-down' toward Ah Ke. If even he could say those words, very likely it was the truth. But in her mouth she still said she was unconvinced, "You, little kid, is a little lecher, looking at people's thirty-percent good looks, you said she was a hundred percent beauty. Chen Yuanyuan is at least forty years old this year, even if she was previously good-looking, nowadays she can't be that beautiful."

Wei Xiaobao repeatedly shook his head. "Not right, not right," he said, "Just look at you, Miss Ah Qi. This year you are no more than eighteen, nineteen years old; it's only natural that you are exceedingly beautiful. In thirty more years, definitely you will still be extremely beautiful. If you don't believe me, you and I

can make a bet. If after thirty years your appearance is not beautiful, I will cut my head for you."

Ah Qi giggled. Any woman who hears other people call her beautiful will be delighted, especially if she was praised in front of her boyfriend, she would burst with joy even more. Much less she had quite a confidence in her own beauty to begin with, she believed that after thirty years, she could not possibly be a lot more uglier.

Wei Xiaobao was hoping that she would accept the bet, so that Galdan would perhaps look at his beloved's face and let Wei Xiaobao live thirty more years; when that time comes, it would not be too late to decide victory or defeat. Unexpectedly Sangjie snorted and said with a cold laugh, "Too bad you won't live pass tonight. Miss Ah Qi's beautiful appearance thirty years later, you won't have the good fortune of seeing."

Wei Xiaobao giggled and said, "That's not a big deal. I only hope that Great Lama and Your Highness the Prince will remember what I said tonight, thirty years from today, you will know that Wei Xiaobao already had the foreknowledge." Sangjie, Galdan and Ah Qi, three people, could not bear not to burst into laughter.

Wei Xiaobao said, "I went to Kunming; that was a matter of several months ago; I escorted Princess Jianning to marry Wu Sangui's son, the three of you already knew. It was originally a very happy occasion, but as soon as I entered the city of Kunming, I saw people crying and wailing loudly on the streets. Not several houses later, I saw a coffin; there were many women and children in mourning clothes, they cried until the sky darkened and the earth black."

"Why is that?" Galdan and Ah Qi asked together.

"I also felt it was very strange," Wei Xiaobao replied, "I asked Yunnan's officer, everybody hummed and hawed but nobody gave me any answer. Afterwards I sent my personal guard to make discreet inquiry, and only then did I find out. Turns out early that morning Chen Yuanyuan learned about the arrival of the Princess, she wanted to personally welcome her. When she came out of the sedan chair, more than a hundred thousand Kunming men went wild; everybody rushed forward to see her, they all said that a celestial fairy has descended to the

world of the immortals. You pushed, I throng forward, several thousand men were trampled to death. At first the military officers and soldiers under Ping Xi Wang's command desperately tried to suppress the disturbance, but later on they saw Chen Yuanyuan, everybody's sword and spear all fell to the ground; their jaw dropped, their mouth watered as they have their eyes fixed at Chen Yuanyuan."

Sangjie, Galdan and Ah Qi, three people, were 'you look at me, I look at you', while thinking, "This child definitely added oil and soya paste in his speech, but perhaps Chen Yuanyuan's beauty is indeed out of the ordinary. It would be good if I can see it myself."

Seeing that the three of them were gradually convinced, Wei Xiaobao said, "Your Highness the Prince, Ping Xi Wang has a *zongbing* under his command by the name of Ma Bao; have you heard this name before?"

Galdan and Ah Qi nodded. The two of them went together with Ma Bao to the Shaolin Temple, how could they not know? Galdan said, "That day at Shaolin Temple, you have also met him."

"Was it he?" Wei Xiaobao said, "I don't remember. That day I was only paying attention to Your Highness the Prince's obviously marvelous skill, beating Shaolin Temple's eminent monks, I did not have time to look at other people. Even if I did have a bit of free time, I would rather steal several glances toward Miss Ah Qi's countenance of a flower, face like the moon." Ah Qi spat, but in her heart she was very happy.

"What about Ma *Zongbing*?" Galdan asked.

Wei Xiaobao sighed. He said, "Ma *Zongbing* was part of the problem that day. He received Ping Xi Wang's order to protect Chen Yuanyuan, who would have thought that as he looked at Chen Yuanyuan several times, unexpectedly he was also in a daze, and went as far as stroking her white and tender little hand. Afterwards Ping Xi Wang found out about it, and had him flogged forty times with army club. Ma *Zongbing* quietly told other people: 'I stroked Chen Yuanyuan's left hand, actually I expected *Wangye* to cut my hand. If I had known that I only got forty army-club floggings, I would have stroke her right hand too. Eighty floggings will not necessarily kill me.' Under his command, Ping Xi Wang

altogether has ten big *zongbing*, the other nine *zongbing* were really envious. These words of him were passed on to Ping Xi Wang, in turn, he passed on a military order: henceforth whoever stroke Chen Yuanyuan's hand will have both his hands chopped. Ping Xi Wang's son-in-law Xia Guoxiang was one of the ten big *zongbing*, right away he had a master artisan to create a pair of fake hands. He said that every now and then he might see this fairy-like mother-in-law, just in case he could not bear not to touch her hand, he might as well make false hands first, in case when that happens he did not have time to have the hands made to order. This is called 'anticipating trouble'."

Galdan was listening with his mouth open and his eyes staring blankly as if he was entranced. Sangjie repeatedly shook his head and said, "Absurd, absurd!" But it was unclear whether he meant the ten big regional commanders were absurd, or that Wei Xiaobao's story was absurd.

"You have seen Chen Yuanyuan," Ah Qi said, "How come you did not stroke her hand?"

"There is a reason behind it," Wei Xiaobao replied, "Before I went to see Chen Yuanyuan, Wu Yingxiong came to see me first, he said that I have travelled thousands of *li* to deliver the Princess to be his wife, he was very grateful. From his bosom he took out something, it was shiny yellow, fully inlaid with emerald, beautiful jade, ruby and kitten eyes; turned out it was a golden manacles."

"How can manacles be that precious?" Ah Qi asked.

"That's right," Wei Xiaobao replied, "At that time I asked him what kind of toy was that; I thought he was going to give it to me as a present. Who would have thought that 'clack', he shackled my hands. I was gobsmacked. 'Prince Consort', I cried out, 'Why are you arresting me? What crime did I commit?' Wu Yingxiong said, 'Imperial Envoy *Daren*, you must not misunderstand, *Xiongdi* only has good intention toward you. You are going to see my Chen *Yiniang* [father's concubine], you simply must wear this manacles, in case you cannot restraint yourself and reach out to touch her. If you only touch her hand, *Fu Wang* [father king] may look at your face as the Imperial Envoy *Daren*, and may not do anything. But I am afraid you will touch her once, touch her twice, touch her three times or more. *Fu Wang* will inevitably commit major offense by killing Imperial Envoy *Daren*. While admittedly it was *Daren* who was being improper,

our Wu family will be ruined.' I was so scared that I wore the manacles to see Chen Yuanyuan."

The more Ah Qi listened, the more she thought it was ridiculous. "I don't believe you," she said.

"Next time you go to Beijing," Wei Xiaobao said, "Ask Wu Yingxiong to show you these golden manacles, then you cannot not believe. He always has it with him, so that as soon as he sees Chen Yuanyuan he can immediately take it out and put it on. If he was one step slower, it would be desperately serious."

"Humph," Sangjie said, "Chen Yuanyuan is his *shu mu* [concubine mother], could it be that he has the audacity to be impolite to her?"

"Naturally he doesn't," Wei Xiaobao replied, "And that's exactly why he is carrying the golden manacles."

Ah Qi said, "He is in Beijing now, why would he want to carry it?"

Wei Xiaobao was startled; he mused, "Bad! The horn I tooted is broken." But his brain could move very fast; he said at once, "Wu Yingxiong was thinking of returning to Kunming immediately, he did not expect to stay in Beijing for long. He stayed in Beijing against his will."

Sangjie glowered at him and said, "In that case, you repaid kindness with evil. Others lent you manacles, showing you a lot of friendship, but you stopped him, you did not let him return to Yunnan."

Wei Xiaobao shook his head, "What kindness did Wu Yingxiong show to me? He and I have an enmity that we cannot live under the same sky."

Sangjie was surprised, "What did he do to offend you?" he asked.

"Why hasn't he offended me?" Wei Xiaobao said, "He loaned the manacles to me, it was more malicious than having my *laozi* [in this case, old man, father] killed. At that time, if I did not wear that manacles, I would have touched even Chen Yuanyuan's face. Ay, Great Lama, Your Highness the Prince, at that time, if only I could touch Chen Yuanyuan's face, which is ten thousand times more beautiful than the petal of a flower, what do I care even if Wu Sangui chopped both of my hands? Even if he chopped both of my legs to be made Yunnan's Xuanwei Ham, I consider it nothing."

Three people's thoughts flew to the southern sky, imagining Chen Yuanyuan's peerless glowing countenance; listening to Wei Xiaobao, unexpectedly they did not laugh.

Wei Xiaobao lowered his voice and with a mysterious expression he said, "I have a very top secret, the three of you must not divulge it. Actually I should not say it, but the opportunity to chat amiably with you is very rare; there is no harm in telling our own people."

"What secret?" Galdan hastily asked.

Wei Xiaobao lowered his voice even more, "His Majesty is about to move an army and send a general to attack Wu Sangui."

Sangjie and the others, three people, looked at each other and laugh; they all thought, "What kind of secret is that? If the Emperor does not attack Wu Sangui, Wu Sangui will deploy his troops to attack the Emperor."

"Do you know why the Emperor is deploying his troops to Yunnan?" Wei Xiaobao asked, "This is rather difficult to guess."

"Could it be also because of Chen Yuanyuan?" Ah Qi asked.

Wei Xiaobao slapped the table, he appeared extremely amazed. "Uh! How did you know?" he asked.

"Casual guess," Ah Qi replied.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Miss is indeed a female Zhuge, you can prophecy with supernatural accuracy. As the Emperor, His Majesty has everything; the only thing that is lacking is this 'number one beauty under the heavens'. Why do you think last time His Majesty sent me, a little child to Yunnan, and not some people of virtue and prestige, a cabinet minister who has rendered great merit through hard work? It was precisely because he wanted me to take a look, whether this woman was really extremely beautiful. He also wanted me to sound out Wu Sangui, whether he would be willing to present Chen Yuanyuan to the Palace. If he sent a white-bearded high-ranking minister to handle this matter, it would be rather embarrassing, wouldn't it? Who would have thought that as soon as I raised this subject, Wu Sangui furiously slapped the table and said, 'You deliver one Princess here, and want to have my living Guanyin in exchange? Humph,

humph, even if you give me a hundred princesses, I won't give you any.'"

Sangjie and Galdan looked at each other, they both had a nagging feeling that they had fallen into Wu Sangui's ruse; turned out this matter involved this kind of beauty entanglement. When Wu Sangui 'flushed the crown in anger due to beautiful woman' in the past, it was precisely because of Chen Yuanyuan that he forfeited the Ming Dynasty's three hundred years' rivers and mountains; everybody in the world knew about it. The young Emperor was young and romantic, hence this matter actually made sense.

Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, "Xiao Xuanzi, you are raw bird fish soup [see Chapter 14]; definitely you won't covet the old turtle's wife. I, Xiao Guizi, am facing a great catastrophe, I have no choice but to make some malicious remark about you, it is indeed not a good thing." Seeing Sangjie and Galdan's grim expression, he continued, "When I saw that Wu Sangui was angry, I did not dare to talk anymore. At that time, although I brought several thousand troops and horses to Yunnan, how could I match the magnificent army with thousands of men and horses under Wu Sangui's command? What choice did I have but to shut my mouth and quietly amassed great fortune?" Galdan nodded.

"One evening," Wei Xiaobao continued, "That big beard Hantiemo came to see me. He said he was sent by His Highness the Prince to Kunming to establish contact with Wu Sangui. But in Kunming he discovered that something was not right. He said that Mongolians are descendants of Geng something Khan, that each one is a hero and a warrior; why would they go to war and deliver their lives for the sake of Wu Sangui's beautiful woman? He asked me to smuggle him back to Beijing to see the Emperor, he wanted to personally tell the Emperor that Chen Yuanyuan has nothing to do with Mongolian Prince and Tibetan Lama, that Mongolian Prince Galdan has already had Miss Ah Qi, he can't possibly want to have Chen Yuanyuan. Tibetan Great Lama also has … has a lot of good-looking Tibetan girls …"

"Nonsense!" Sangjie shouted, "We, Yellow Hat[79] Lama strictly maintain purity, rule and monastic discipline, we can't possibly have a voracious desire for beauty and lust."

Wei Xiaobao hastily said, "It was Hantiemo who said that, it has nothing to do

with me. Great Lama, to win favor from the Emperor, I am afraid Hantiemo told him not to worry, he can be rest assured that you will not fight over Chen Yuanyuan."

"Humph," Sangjie said, "Next time I see Hantiemo, I will ask him clearly, whether he was telling lies, or it was you who told lies, and thus ruin my clean reputation."

Wei Xiaobao was secretly delighted, "He wants to ask Hantiemo, apparently he won't kill me right away." He busily said, "Yes, yes, next time you can tell me to confront Hantiemo. You are helping Wu Sangui to revolt, honestly you won't get any benefit. Even if the rebellion was successful, if the two of you don't have any manacles handy, you will always be fearful and apprehensive …" Suddenly seeing angry expression appeared on Sangjie's face, he said hastily, "Great Lama, you treat emptiness as appearance, and appearance as emptiness; when you see Chen Yuanyuan, naturally your heart will not be tempted, it's just that, it's just that … ay!"

"It's just that what?" Sangjie asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Last time I went to Kunming, Chen Yuanyuan came out to welcome the Princess, were not several thousands of people being crushed to death? These dead people's families wanted to conduct burial ceremony, but suddenly they could not invite any Buddhist monk or Taoist priest."

"Why?" Ah Qi asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Many of those monks who saw Chen Yuanyuan had their worldly desire aroused; in one day, several thousand monks in Kunming returned to secular life, they did not want to leave home anymore. Just think, suddenly the number of monks decreased by several thousands, naturally there was not enough monks to perform the ceremony."

Galdan and the others, three people, were half believing and half-doubting; they all thought that his story was rather too unbelievable, but toward Chen Yuanyuan's beauty, they had no doubt at all. Ah Qi cast a glance toward Galdan, she said softly, "Kunming is a strange place, I don't want to go there. If you want to help Wu Sangui, you can go alone."

"Who said that I want to go to Kunming?" Galdan hastily said, "I do not wish

to see Chen Yuanyuan. In my opinion, our Miss Ah Qi is not necessarily inferior to Chen Yuanyuan."

Ah Qi's countenance sank, she said, "You said that I am not necessarily inferior to Chen Yuanyuan, obviously you are saying that I am inferior to her. You definitely want to see her." While saying that, she stood up and said, "I am leaving!"

Galdan was greatly embarrassed; he hastily said, "No, no! I swear to the Heaven, in my whole life, I will not cast a single glance to Chen Yuanyuan." Ah Qi turned from anger to happiness; she sat back down.

Wei Xiaobao said, "You will not cast a single glance to Chen Yuanyuan, you are speaking correctly. No matter who, as soon as he sees her, will one glance be enough? A hundred glances, a thousand glances will not be enough."

"You little devil," Galdan cursed, "You only know how to talk nonsense. I swear not to see Chen Yuanyuan forever, and that's that. If I see her, let my eyes be blind immediately." Ah Qi was greatly delighted; she gazed at him full of tender feelings.

Wei Xiaobao said, "I listened to the young Emperor speaking, he really did not understand why the two of you want to help Wu Sangui. If it is because of Chen Yuanyuan, then nothing we can do; there is only one Chen Yuanyuan under the heavens, even the young Emperor does not have it. Other than because of this beautiful woman, whatever Wu Sangui has, the young Emperor has ten times as much. If the two of you are willing to help the Emperor, gold, silver, money and valuables, you will get whatever amount you want."

Sangjie coldly said, "Although Tibet and Mongolia are poor, we do not covet gold, silver, money and valuables."

Wei Xiaobao thought, "These two do not want gold, silver, money and valuables, they do not want beautiful women, what do they want the most?" He had a second thought, "That's right," he mused, "Lowly men cannot survive a day without money, great men cannot survive a day without power. I, Wei Xiaobao, am a little man, these two are great men." Thereupon he said, "The young Emperor said, Galdan is only a prince, his power is not high enough, if he helps me fighting Wu Sangui, I will make him the Mongolian King."

Galdan's eyes shone with delight; he said excitedly, "The Em … Emperor really said that?"

"Of course!" Wei Xiaobao replied, "Why would I lie to you?"

"There is no such thing as 'Mongolian King' in the world," Sangjie said, "If the Emperor can really help His Highness to be the Dzungar Khan [orig. 'zhun ka'er han'], His Highness will be perfectly contented."

"Possible, possible!" Wei Xiaobao said, "This title 'zheng ge'er hao' [complete/total good], the Emperor will definitely agree to grant." While in his heart he mused, "What in the world is damned 'total good'? Could it be there is another title 'half good'?"

Looking at his expression, Sangjie knew that Wei Xiaobao did not understand; he said, "Mongolia is divided into several divisions, among those, the Dzungars[80] are the biggest. Mongolian rulers are not called 'Kings', they are called 'Khans'. His Highness the Prince is not a Khan yet."

"So that's how it is," Wei Xiaobao said, "As long as Your Highness the Prince helps His Majesty, won't become one or two Zhengge'er [complete/total] Khan be easy? The Emperor can issue an edict, send several tens of thousands troops and horses, will the other Mongolian people dare to resist?"

Hearing this, Galdan was very happy; he said, "If the Emperor is willing to do that, naturally it will be easy."

Wei Xiaobao struck his chest and said, "You don't have to worry, leave it to me, I'll accomplish it for you. His Majesty hates only Wu Sangui, one person. Although Miss Ah Qi is beautiful, as long as you keep the Emperor from laying his eyes on her, I guarantee that he won't snatch her from you. As for Great Lama Sangjie, if you help the Emperor, His Majesty can make you the grand ruler of the entire Tibet." He did not know what they called the grand ruler of Tibet, hence he did not dare to speak irresponsibly.

Sangjie said, "The entire Tibet is under the Living Buddha Dalai Lama's rule, the office cannot be casually bestowed by the Emperor."

"Others can be the Living Buddha," Wei Xiaobao said, "Why can't you? In Tibet, how many Living Buddhas are there?"

Sangjie said, “There is also Panchen Lama Living Buddha, altogether there are two.”

“That’s right,” Wei Xiaobao said, “One sky cannot have three suns, but everything else must have three to make sense. We can ask His Majesty to grant the title Living Buddha Sangjie. Grand Living Buddha Sangjie will be in charge of Da something, Pan something, two little Living Buddhas.”

Sangjie’s heart was moved; he mused, “This kid talks nonsense, but he actually made some sense.” Thinking about this, a smile appeared on his thin face.

This moment Wei Xiaobao was only trying to survive and escape with his life, whatever the opposite party asked, he would readily agree. Much less granting these people the titles of Dzungar Khan or Tibetan Grand Living Buddha did not cost him one *tael* of silver. He said, “I am not tooting my horn, whatever plan *Xiongdi* suggested to the Empeor, 99% he will see, hear and obey. Besides, the two of you agree to fight Wu Sangui, not only the Emperor will bestow the title to you, *Xiongdi* will render great merit as well, I will definitely enjoy promotion and gain wealth. As the saying goes: ‘the imperial court needs good people to be the officials’. In the imperial court, *Xiongdi* is a high-ranking official, the two gentleman separately become high-ranking officials in Mongolia and Tibet; I’ll say it would be better if the three of us do obeisance and become sworn brothers. From now on the three of us will enjoy blessing together and will face difficulty together; we are not fated to be born on the same year same month same day, but willing to die on the same year same month same day. In this world, other than the young Emperor, the three of us are the greatest; won’t that be wonderful?” He thought, “To die on the same year same month same day, these words are important. As soon as the two of them nodded their heads in approval, they cannot kill me. If they do, it will be the same as committing suicide.”

Before Sangjie and Galdan went to Yangzhou, they had already investigated carefully, and knew that this young Imperial Envoy was the number one favorite among the people who served in front of the Emperor, his career has enjoyed meteoric rise, his promotion was speedy; it’s just that they had never imagined that he was the same youngster they had met in the past. Galdan did not have any enmity with him to begin with. Sangjie had his twelve younger martial

brothers killed by his master and he, and had his ten fingers chopped because of him; originally he hated Wei Xiaobao to the bones, but after listening to his talk, he thought that his martial brothers were dead, they could not be brought back to live, his fingers were chopped and would not grow anymore. Even if he could strike this man dead with his palm, he was merely venting his anger; nothing more. If he helped Wu Sangui accomplishing his goal, he would simply exert his strength in vain, without any benefit to himself. But if he became sworn brother with him, he would absolutely reap tangible benefit, the advantage to him was really great. The two of them 'you look at me, I look at you', they both slowly nodded their heads.

Wei Xiaobao was overjoyed at the unexpected turn of events; he would have never imagined that his speech would move these two evil people's hearts. Afraid that they might change their mind, he hastily said, "*Da Ge*, *Er Ge*, *Er Sao* [big brother, second brother, second sister-in-law, respectively], let us swear brotherhood right now. It does not matter if *Er Sao* wants to join us or not, as soon as you bow to the Heaven and the Earth with *Er Ge*, we become one family." Blushing, Ah Qi spat, but in her heart she felt that this little kid really know how to make people happy.

Sangjie suddenly stretched out his hand and 'slap!' he broke a corner of the table. Wei Xiaobao was shocked. "What is he doing?" he mused.

He heard Sangjie said in stern voice, "Wei *Daren*, whatever you told me, today I believe you. But if in the future you repeatedly changing, you don't live up to your promises, let the corner of this table become your example."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Whatever *Da Ge* says, the three of us brothers will do it together, everybody will reap the benefit. If *Xiongdi* deceive the two of you, you can dispatch army from Mongolia and Tibet to give the Emperor some trouble; if the Emperor is angry, he would definitely have my head chopped. Two *Gege* please think, will *Xiongdi* dare to do you wrong?"

Sangjie nodded and said, "Well said, you are right."

Immediately the three of them arranged the red candle in the hall, kneeled down and bowed toward the outside to become sworn brothers. Sangjie was the oldest, Galdan next, Wei Xiaobao became the third brother. He bowed to the

first brother and the second brother, and then also kowtowed to Ah Qi, while calling her ‘Second Sister-in-law’ in a very intimate way. He thought, “Now that you have become my *Er Sao*, next time I am fooling around with my own wife Ah Ke, I wonder if you’d feel embarrassed to do so.”

Ah Qi picked up the wine pot and poured four cups; she laughed and said, “Today the three of you boys swore brotherhood, I wish from now on you will carry things through, that you will accomplish this great undertaking. *Xiaomei* [little sister, referring to self] toast the three of you a cup.”

Sangjie also laughed; he said, “Naturally I must drink this toast.” Finished speaking, he picked up the wine cup.

“*Dage*, wait!” Wei Xiaobao hastily said, “This wine is spoiled, it’s not too clean, we must have it replaced. Waiter!” he called out loudly, “Quickly get some wine.” He felt something was not right, “What happened in Lovely Spring Courtyard? It’s been quite a while and I haven’t seen anybody serving us.” But then he remembered, “Ah right, seeing a fight, plus some government officers get killed, the brothel proprietress, the turtle slave must have run far away.”

Right this moment, he saw a turtle slave came in with head hung low. “What is it?” the man mumbled.

Wei Xiaobao mused, “The turtle slaves of Lovely Spring Courtyard, which one I did not know? This fellow must be new, how can he be this without-propriety toward the guest? He must be so scared that he turned silly.” He shouted, “Quickly get two pots of wine.”

“Right away!” the turtle slave replied, turned around and left.

Looking at the turtle slave’s back, Wei Xiaobao’s heart was moved. “Uh! Who is this man? I have seen him during the day at the Chinese peony garden outside the Chanzhi Temple; how can he be a turtle slave in here? Something’s strange here.” He pondered deeply, and soon his back was wet with cold sweats. “Ah!” he exclaimed, and sprang up.

“What is it?” Sangjie, Galdan and Ah Qi, three people asked in chorus.

Wei Xiaobao spoke in a low voice, “This man is Wu Sangui’s martial art expert warrior in disguise. He must have heard everything we said just now.”

Sangjie and Galdan were shocked; they both said, “In that case we can’t let him live.”

“Two *Gege*,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Please … please don’t act too soon. Let’s pretend we did not know, we’ll see how many are they, and … and what trick they are playing.” While saying that, his voice was actually trembling.

If that turtle slave was really Wu Sangui’s warrior in disguise, he would not be this panic-stricken; actually, that man was Divine Dragon Cult’s Lu Gaoxuan. This man was coming with him from the Divine Dragon Island to Beijing, and had been in contact with Wei Xiaobao for quite a long time. This time his disguise was extremely ingenious, his real face was completely unrecognizable; but looking at his back, Wei Xiaobao had a feeling that it looked familiar. Outside the Chanzhi Temple that day, he had not recognized him; but now at the Lovely Spring Courtyard he saw the same back once again, he felt something was not right, hence he gave it a careful thought, and only then did he realize who the man was.

If it was only Lu Gaoxuan, one person, Wei Xiaobao had nothing to fear. It seemed that outside the Chanzhi Temple Lu Gaoxuan had overheard Wei Xiaobao accidentally said that he wanted to go to Lovely Spring Courtyard to listen to songs, hence Lu Gaoxuan also came and disguise himself as a turtle slave. But since he was here, most likely Fat and Thin Toutuo were also here. Perhaps even Cult Leader Hong has also personally come. If Wei Xiaobao wanted to repeat his ruse by having Hong *Jiaozhu* to swear brotherhood with him, to pledge that they were going to die on the same year same month same day, it would be extremely difficult. The more he thought about it, the more he was scared. Beads of sweats appeared on his forehead.

He saw Lu Gaoxuan came in, carrying a wooden tray with two pots of wine. With his head hung low, he put the wine pots on the table. Wei Xiaobao mused, “He hangs his head low, must be because he is afraid I might see through his disguise. Humph, I wonder who else is coming?” He said, “How come there’s only you in the Courtyard? Quickly call some more people to serve us.”

Lu Gaoxuan let out an ‘Um’, and quickly turned around and left. Wei Xiaobao said in a low voice, “*Da Ge*, *Er Ge*, *Er Sao*, wait for my signal. If I roll my eyes and throw my head back, you must act immediately, kill whoever comes in. This man

has superior martial art skill, it is no small matter."

Sangjie and the others nodded their compliance; but in their hearts they thought, "What's so amazing about Wu Sangui's warrior even if his martial art skill were higher? There is no need to make such a big fuss over nothing."

A moment later, Lu Gaoxuan came back with four prostitutes, who then separately sat by the four people's side. When Wei Xiaobao saw them, he did not recognize all four prostitutes, they were not the original Misses of the Lovely Spring Courtyard. All four of them were extremely ugly, some had drooping eyes, some had twisted mouth, or sickly yellowish skin or dark skin, or perhaps bumpy face like they had edema, or face full of scars. Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Lovely Spring Courtyard's girls are very pretty."

He saw the one sitting by Sangjie, a young woman with face full of scars, winked at him, and signaled him with her eyes. Wei Xiaobao saw her eyes were alive, her glance was very beautiful; he thought, "These four are from Shen Long Jiao, deliberately disguising themselves like this, but she is repeatedly signaling me with her eyes, I wonder what's her intention?" He picked the original Mi Chun wine and poured one cup each for the four prostitutes. "Everybody must drink one cup!" he said.

In the brothels, there was no such thing as the guest pours the wine for the prostitutes. As soon as the guest reaches out toward the wine pot, the prostitute would immediately pour the wine; but these four prostitutes only sat down with their heads hung low. Wei Xiaobao pour the wine for them, unexpectedly the four of them did not say a single word. Wei Xiaobao mused, "These four women masquerade as prostitutes, their skill is extremely lacking." He said, "You are here to serve the guests, how come you did not understand the custom? You must drink one cup first." While saying that, he poured another cup and said to Lu Gaoxuan, "Are you new? You can't even be a turtle. All of you are disrespecting the guest' wine; if the guest is angry, would he spend his money?"

Lu Gaoxuan and the four prostitutes thought that it was really a brothel's custom, they all replied, "Yes!" and picked up the wine and drank it.

Wei Xiaobao said with a laugh, "Now that's good. Are there more turtles and

prostitutes in the courtyard? Call everybody here for me. Such a big Lovely Spring Courtyard, how come there are only the five of you? I am afraid this is rather strange."

The prostitute with swelling yellowish face signaled Lu Gaoxuan with her eyes. Lu Gaoxuan turned around and left. When he returned, he brought two turtle slaves along. With a hoarse voice he said, "No more prostitutes, but we have two more turtles."

Wei Xiaobao was secretly amused; he thought, "Prostitutes, turtles, are the terms people say behind your back; you are a turtle slave yourself, how can you say 'prostitute' and 'turtle'? Even if you are a patron of the brothel, you can't be this rude. In the courtyard, you would say 'Miss' and 'waiter'. I just tested you, and immediately you 'reveal the horse's foot'. Humph, humph, Hong *Jiaozhu* can prophecy with supernatural accuracy, but even in his dream he would never imagine that I, Wei Xiaobao, grew up in this Lovely Spring Courtyard."

He saw that both the two turtle slaves were big, fat and tall. One was Fat Toutuo in disguise; he could tell with just one look. The other one vaguely reminded him of Thin Toutuo, but how come he was this tall? After a quick thinking, he knew that his feet must have stepped on some elevated platform; if Wei Xiaobao had not known in advance, he could never have guessed. Wei Xiaobao poured two more cups of wine and said, "The guest tell you turtles to drink, you two turtles must drink!"

Fat Toutuo quietly picked up the cup and drank; Thin Toutuo was hot-tempered, he could not show restraint. "You, little b@stard, are a turtle!" he cursed.

Lu Gaoxuan hastily pulled his sleeve and shouted, "Quickly drink the wine! How could you dare to offend the guest?"

This time Thin Toutuo became a turtle slave, he had received the Cult Leader's strict warning. He was startled and quickly drank his wine.

"Is everybody here?" Wei Xiaobao asked, "Is there anybody else?"

"Nobody else," Lu Gaoxuan replied.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Is Hong *Jiaozhu* also masquerade as a turtle?" When he

said those words, he rolled his eyes and threw his head backwards.

As soon as Lu Gaoxuan and the others, seven people, heard this, they were shocked; the four prostitutes rose up at once. Sangjie had been preparing himself by circulating his *chi*, his hands moved simultaneously and hit Thin Toutuo and Lu Gaoxuan's waists. As soon as these two fingers moved, Lu Gaoxuan fell down immediately; but Thin Toutuo only grunted before he swiped his palm in a hacking move toward Sangjie's head. Sangjie was surprised; he thought that his 'two Zen-fingers' skill could be considered unparalleled in the world. After his fingers were poisoned and shortened by one section, his movement was not as agile as before; but precisely because the fingers were one section shorter, when it hit the enemy's body, the power was thirty percent stronger than before. This moment he was very sure that he had hit the acupoint on this big and fat man's waist, why did the man act as if nothing had happened to him? Could it be just like Wei Xiaobao, he had also trained 'Jin Gang Hu Ti Shen Gong' [Vajra's (Budha's warrior attendant) (or diamond) divine skill to protect the body] to perfection?

Actually, these two did not have any 'Jin Gang Hu Ti Shen Gong' at all. Wei Xiaobao was impervious of saber and spear, because he was wearing the treasured vest to protect his body, while Thin Toutuo was standing on stilts so that he was one *chi* taller. Sangjie thought that he was really a tall and sturdy person, so that when he aimed his jab, his middle finger actually hit the outside of Thin Toutuo's thigh. Thin Toutuo felt a sharp pain, but his acupoint was not sealed.

By this time Fat Toutuo already fought Galdan. The prostitute with face full of scars fought with Ah Qi. Another prostitute pounced on Wei Xiaobao. Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Are you crazy? [the original word implies 'sexual craziness', sex maniac] Why are you dressed in ugly appearance ugly shape like this?"

He saw like a pair of claws, the prostitute's ten fingers came swiftly and viciously toward him. He was shocked; immediately he ducked down and crawled underneath the table. Stretching out his hand, he pushed the prostitute's legs. The prostitute had drunk the Mi Chun wine, by this time the drug was starting to take effect; her mind blurred, as soon as Wei Xiaobao pushed, she was unable to

stand, she swayed several times before her buttocks landed on the floor, and then she was unable to stand anymore. The other three fake prostitutes also fainted one after another.

Thin Toutuo and Sangjie exchanged several moves. Thin Toutuo did not like the stilts as they impeded his movements; sending his strength to his legs, 'crack, crack', he broke the stilts. Sangjie cursed, "Turns out you are a dwarf."

Thin Toutuo angrily said, "Formerly *Laozi* was a lot taller than you are; I like to be a dwarf, what does it have to do with you?"

Sangjie laughed aloud. While their mouth exchanged words, their hands and feet did not stop moving least bit. Both of them were martial art experts; after exchanging several moves, they both admired each other. Sangjie thought, "Unexpectedly there is such fat and short warrior under Wu Sangui's command with this kind of superb martial art skill." While Thin Toutuo thought, "Although your martial art skill is high, you have been made a hunting dog [i.e. lackey] by this little demon Wei Xiaobao; not a really good role [referring to Chinese opera]."

On the other front, after several moves Galdan proved to be no match for Fat Toutuo. It's just that Fat Toutuo had drunk Mi Chun wine, his hands and feet were not too agile, hence the reason Galdan had not been knocked down yet. Ah Qi saw that the prostitute who fought with her had very exquisite style, but after no more than several moves, the prostitute fainted; Ah Qi was baffled. Turning her head, she saw Galdan withdrew repeatedly; hastily she rushed to help him.

Fat Toutuo's vision blackened, his body swayed several times, he felt the enemy struck the pit of his stomach with a palm, but the power behind the palm was not formidable. He closed his eyes and stretched out his hands in different directions to parry the opponents' arms. The index fingers of both hands hit the enemies' armpits. Ah Qi immediately felt her body weakened and slowly slumped to the ground; she collapsed on top of Lu Gaoxuan's back. While panicked, she saw Fat Toutuo suddenly lurched forward and fell.

"Ah Qi, Ah Qi," Galdan called out, "Are you alright?" Suddenly Fat Toutuo leaped up and sent a punch toward Galdan's chest, sending him back several *zhang* that he heavily crashed onto the wall.

Fat and Thin Toutuo's internal energy was really deep; although they had drunk the Mi Chun wine, it was no more than ordinary knock-out drug used by the brothels, not something that was difficult to deal with. Although the two of them were dizzy, their internal strength was enough to overcome the drug's effect. By this time Thin Toutuo felt as if his eyes were covered by a veil of mist, Sangjie's shadow blurrily swayed back and forth in front of him. Each strike he sent was easily parried by Sangjie, while his left shoulder and right cheek successively ate two fists.

Sangjie's fist power was very heavy, even though Thin Toutuo's skin was rough his flesh thick, he could not endure it. He could not help but repeatedly howling before turning around and running out of the door.

Lu Gaoxuan shakily tried to stand up; the acupoint on the upper part of his body had not been unsealed, with a blurry vision he also rushed out of the door.

Galdan was hit by Fat Toutuo that he crashed onto the wall, he felt as if his back was about to break apart. In his heart he was actually scared, but he saw the enemy was supporting himself against the table with his left hand, while his eyes were closed, and his right palm constantly moving in front of the pit of his stomach, as if he was afraid the enemy would attack. Galdan seized this opportunity by leaping forward and sending a violent kick toward Fat Toutuo's buttocks. Fat Toutuo roared, his left hand reached backward to grab the pit of Galdan's stomach and raised him up. Sangjie rushed forward to help. Fat Toutuo suddenly opened his eyes; still grabbing Galdan, he rushed out of the Sweet Nectar Hall, and flew over the wall.

"Put him down!" Sangjie shouted, as he ran after him and leaped over the wall in hot pursuit. The sound of the two men shouting gradually vanished in the distance.

Wei Xiaobao crawled out from underneath the table. He saw a bunch of people sprawling all over the floor; Shuang'er and Zeng Rou lay down on the corner of the hall, four fake prostitutes fainted on the floor, Zheng Keshuang was originally slumped over the table, during the fight the chairs were pushed over that he rolled down under the table. The lower part of Ah Qi's body was draped over an overturned chair, the upper part of her body was lying on the floor. All these people were motionless; some had their acupoints sealed, some were

unconscious because of the Mi Chun wine, it was as if they were all dead.

The one Wei Xiaobao most concerned of was Shuang'er; hastily he held her up. Seeing her eyes were turning and she was breathing as usual, he was relieved; it's just that he could not unseal her acupoint, hence he had no choice but to lift Shuang'er, Zeng Rou and Ah Qi, three women, up and sat them on the chairs.

Concerned over his mother's safety, he rushed toward her bedroom. He saw Wei Chunfang was lying on the floor by the bed and was greatly shocked; hastily he helped her up. He saw her body limp, yet her breathing and heartbeat were normal, he guessed her acupoint must have been sealed by Divine Dragon Cult people. In the Lovely Spring Courtyard, all the prostitutes and turtles must have had their acupoints sealed too, they should be able to wake in several *sichen* [two hours], hence he did not have to worry.

Returning to the Sweet Nectar Hall, he cocked his ears to listen attentively, and did not hear the least bit sign that Fat and Thin, two Toutuo or Sangjie and Galdan had returned; he mused, "The fake prostitute with face full of scar was signaling me with her eyes, apparently she was telling me to be careful. This person's conscience is good, I wonder who she is." He walked over and stooped down to wipe the woman's face several times. A layer of plaster flaked off, exposing a tender and lovely, white and soft cheek. Wei Xiaobao cheered; turned out this woman was Xiao Junzhu Mu Jianping.

Lowering his head, he kissed her face gently and said, "When all is said and done, you still have conscience toward me; you must have been forced by them to deceive me." Suddenly his heart jumped, "Who are those three fake prostitutes? Is Miss Fang among them? That little wh0re is a specialist in harming me, if this time she is not here, I will be greatly surprised." Thinking about Fang Yi, his heart was both sweet and bitter. He saw that the woman with swollen yellow face had a slim and graceful body, most likely she was Fang Yi. Thereupon he reached out to wipe the makeup from her face. The putty powder fell, exposing an attractive, beautiful and charming face; she was around five, six years older than Fang Yi, but her countenance was more beautiful than Fang Yi. Turned out she was Madame Hong *Jiaozhu*.

After she was drunk, her cheeks looked like peach blossom, her skin looked as if it exuded water. In the past, although Wei Xiaobao felt that Madame Hong

was beautiful and alluring, he had never dared to look at her with the least bit of frivolous intention. This time she was as drunk as mud, the opportunity had presented itself. Extending his right hand, he pinched her cheek, and saw her eyes tightly closed; she did not feel the pinch at all. His heart was thumping wildly, he pinched her other cheek.

Turning around, he walked over to the other two women. These two women's bodies were obese, they did not look like Fang Yi at all. One of these women had fiercely pounced on him. Wei Xiaobao picked up the wine pot and drenched her face with the wine, and then pulling her lapel, he used it to wipe her face, exposing her real face; surprisingly she was the fake empress dowager. Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted; he thought, "I am rendering a really great service. His Majesty and Empress Dowager wanted me to arrest this old wh0re for revenge. With thousand ways, a hundred plans I failed to arrest her, who would have thought she unexpectedly came to the Lovely Spring Courtyard on her own to be an old wh0re. It can clearly be seen that by calling her the old wh0re, all along it was a divine strategy, early on I have a foresight."

Wiping the fourth fake prostitute's makeup, he found out that behind the makeup was Fang Yi's face. Wei Xiaobao was greatly shocked, "How did her waist become so thick? Could it be that she had an illicit intercourse with a man and conceive a child? By the heaven and the earth, the old wh0re really became an old wh0re, could it be that Little Turtle Wei has indeed become a little turtle?" Reaching out, he ran his hand over her undergarment, his hand did not touch skin and flesh; when he pulled it, turned out it was a pillow. Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud; he said with a laugh, "Your conscience is a lot worse than Xiao Junzhu's. For fear that I might fall into your evil scheme, she repeatedly signaled me with her eyes. But for fear that I might recognize you, you even dare to disguise yourself as a big-bellied woman. Ha ha … you, little wh0re, become a big-bellied woman in Lovely Spring Courtyard, I will have an abortion for you. Early morning abortion or late night abortion, I will have the pillow taken out of you."

Walking out of the hall, he saw several personal guards lying dead on the ground. The courtyard was without lantern, without any flame; there was not even a whisper to be heard. He thought, "Fat and Thin Toutuo have drunk the

drugged wine, in the end they won't be able to defeat those two sworn brothers of mine, but if Hong *Jiaozhu* and the others waiting to rescue them on the outside, the outcome will be very difficult to say. Two *Gege*, if today you return to heaven, please forgive *Xiaodi* [little brother] for not accompanying you dying on the same year the same month and the same day!"

Returning to the hall, he saw Madame Hong, Fang Yi, Mu Jianping, Shuang'er, Zeng Rou, and Ah Qi, six beautiful women were either unconscious or unable to move. Each one had her own beauty, each one had her own charm; his heart was greatly moved, he mused, "There is another good-looking young Miss inside on the bed, she is a lot more beautiful than these six persons, the one I already bowed to the Heaven and the Earth with, but have not consummate the marriage in bridal room with ornamented candles. Tonight you anxiously looked for me, if your husband did not pay you any attention, won't I be too cold and ruthless [orig. 'without any sense of justice']? Won't I wrong you too much?"

He was about to step inside when he noticed Zeng Rou's pair of pretty eyes was fixed on him, her cheeks were blushing, her expression was tender and bashful; he thought, "From Wangwu Mountain to Yangzhou, along the way you, this little girl, were always avoiding me, I can't even talk to you one more sentence. Tonight I must not be too polite to you." He carried her in his bosom into the room and put her by Ah Ke's side.

He saw Ah Ke was still fast asleep; her long eyelashes hung down, the corner of her lips slightly curled into a smiling expression. Most likely in her stupor she was having a very sweet dream, she was being intimate with Zheng Keshuang.

Wei Xiaobao thought, "Either give up, or go through to the end. I might as well have this bunch of old wh0re, fake prostitutes, good Miss, bad women, everybody moved in. This is Lovely Spring Courtyard, women came to a brothel, what good could they possibly do? It was you who came here, when you are awake, you can't blame me."

Since childhood, his lofty ambition was to open a big brothel in Yangzhou, to come to Lovely Spring Courtyard and have dinner party with singsong girls, to have the prostitutes of the entire courtyard to accompany him. This moment, although the situation was not the same as the plan he drew in the former days, actually it was quite a magnificent feat, not a small matter indeed.

Immediately he carried Shuang'er, Ah Qi, Madame Hong, Fang Yi and Mu Jianping, one by one into the room. Finally even the fake empress dowager was also brought in. Eight women lay side by side on the bed. Suddenly he recalled, "Must not take unfair advantage of a friend's wife. *Er Sao*, you are my older brother's wife; we are heroes and warriors, must uphold *yi qi*." Hence he carried Ah Qi back into the hall and sat her properly on the chair. He saw there was a considerable praise in her gaze. Seeing her lovely and pretty countenance, her labored breathing, her chest moved up and down endlessly, Wei Xiaobao suddenly felt regret, "I become sworn brothers with Great Lama and Mongolian Prince, it was not because we have affinity with each other, but simply because of a scheme, so that they won't come to kill me; those *Da Ge, Er Ge* are nonsense. This Miss Ah Qi is so pretty, it's a pity to call her *Er Sao*, I might as well make her my wife. The storyteller has told the story of 'Three Laughing Marriage Affinities, Nine-Beauty Scheme', Tang Bohu[81] had nine wives. If I include Ah Qi, I only have eight beauties, still short one beauty. Pei, pei, pei!" he spat, "The old wh0re is old and vicious, how can I consider her as a beauty?"

Compared to Tang Bohu, he was short one beauty; it was still acceptable. But now he had to lose two beauties, he was actually quite disappointed. Thereupon he brought Ah Qi back into the room. But only a few steps later, he suddenly recalled, "Guan Yunchang escorted *Huang Sao* [older brother the emperor's wife] for a thousand *li*; he did not turn Liu *Da Sao* into Guan *Er Sao* [referring to Liu Bei and Guan Yu, Romance of the Three Kingdoms]. Wei Xiaobao escorted *Er Sao* for seven steps, I can't ignore *yi qi* too much. If I have to have two less beauties, then let me short two beauties; why afraid that I can't get it back in the future?" Thereupon he immediately turned around and put Ah Qi back on the chair.

Ah Qi did not know the raging battle inside his mind; being brought back and forth like that, she wondered what kind of trick he was playing, and was a bit surprised.

Wei Xiaobao entered the room and said, "Miss Fang, Xiao Junzhu, Madame Hong, the three of you entered the Lovely Spring Courtyard to be prostitutes on your own. Shuang'er, Miss Zeng, the two of you voluntarily came with me to Lovely Spring Courtyard. What kind of place this is, although when you came you

did not know, but since little girls have come to this kind of place, it won't be right if you don't accompany me. Ah Ke, you are my wife, you came here to patronage my Mama, that is, you patronage your own mother-in-law. Your husband is going to patronage you." Stretching out his hand he pushed the fake empress dowager far away to the corner of the bed. He shook and spread the quilt to cover the remaining six women. Kicking his shoes off, with a loud shout he crawled into the quilt.

Heaven and Earth in confusion. After an unknown period of time had passed, the candle on the table went out, the room became completely dark. Also a long time had passed, Wei Xiaobao hummed the 'eighteen touches' in a low voice: "A hundred and seven touches, touching *Jiejie Meimei*'s [older and younger sisters] seven hands … a hundred and eight touches, touching *Jiejie Meimei*'s eight feet …"

During this 'seven-hand, eight-feet', suddenly he heard tender and gentle voice softly said, "No … don't … Zheng … Zheng *Gongzi* … is that you?" It was precisely Ah Ke's voice. She drank the Mi Chun wine the earliest, after sleeping for a long time, the drug effect gradually diminished, and she slowly regained her consciousness.

Wei Xiaobao was furious; he thought, "Even in your dream you are thinking of Zheng *Gongzi*, thinking that he is climbing onto your bed; is it good?" Lowering his voice he said, "It's me."

"No, no!" Ah Ke said, "You must not …" She struggled a little bit.

Suddenly they heard Zheng Keshuang's voice calling out from the hall, "Ah Ke, Ah Ke, where are you?" Crash! Bang! There was a lot of noise as the chair, as well as the cups and plates on the table fell down to the floor.

Since his voice was coming from the hall, naturally the one embracing her was not him; in her shock Ah Ke's mind sobered a little bit. With a trembling voice she said, "You … who are you? Why … I … I …"

Wei Xiaobao said with a laugh, "It's your own husband; don't you recognize me?"

To say that Ah Ke was mildly surprise was a gross understatement. She struggled desperately to break away from his embrace, but her body was limp

and without any strength. “Zheng *Gongzi*, Zheng *Gongzi*!” she cried out in fear.

Zheng Keshuang staggered into the room, but there was not the least bit of light inside, ‘Bang!’ his forehead bumped onto the doorframe. “Ah Ke, where are you?” he called out.

“I am here!” Ah Ke replied, “Let me go! Little demon, what did … what did you do?”

“What?” Zheng Keshuang was baffled; he did not know that the last two sentences were addressed to Wei Xiaobao.

Wei Xiaobao was very excited and in high spirit, how could he be willing to let her go? “Good Shidi,” Ah Ke pleaded, “Please, let me go.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “I said I won’t let go, then I won’t let go! A real man gave his words, dead horses cannot pull it back.”

Zheng Keshuang was startled and angry at the same time, “Wei Xiaobao,” he said, “Where are you?”

With an air of complacency Wei Xiaobao replied, “I am on the bed, embracing my wife. I am in the bridal room with ornamented candles; what are you doing here? You want to disturb the bridal chamber?”

Zheng Keshuang was furious. “Disturb your Ma’s bridal chamber!” he cursed.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “You want to disturb my Ma’s bridal chamber? Not today, because today she does not accept any visitor, unless you yourself want to be the groom.”

“Rubbish!” Zheng Keshuang yelled angrily. Following the direction of the voices, he pounced toward the bed. He wanted to uncover Wei Xiaobao, but in the dark he grabbed an arm. “Ah Ke,” he asked, “Is this your arm?”

“It’s not,” Ah Ke replied.

Since it was not Ah Ke’s arm, Zheng Keshuang thought it must be Wei Xiaobao’s. Thereupon he fiercely pulled with all his strength. Unexpectedly he pulled the fake empress dowager, Mao Dongzhu’s arm.

After drinking the Mi Chun wine, her brain was murky, but feeling that someone was pulling her arm, instinctively her left hand went up and slapped

backhandedly. It happened to strike the top of Zheng Keshuang's head. Her strength had gone about 80, 90%, this palm strike did not have any real power behind it. But Zheng Keshuang was greatly surprised; he quickly turned around to withdraw. His head happened to hit the pillar of the bed and he fainted right away.

"Zheng *Gongzi*, what happened to you?" Ah Ke cried out in alarm, but she heard no response.

Wei Xiaobao said, "He went to disturb the bridal chamber; he has crawled under the bed."

Crying, Ah Ke said, "He did not. Quickly let me go!"

"Don't move, don't move!" Wei Xiaobao said.

Ah Ke struck with her elbow and happened to hit his throat. Feeling severe pain, Wei Xiaobao threw his head backward. Ah Ke struggled free and hastily wanted to get off the bed. As soon as she rolled around, her body pressed the pit of Mao Dongzhu's stomach. Mao Dongzhu screamed from the pain and reached out to wrap her arms tightly around Ah Ke's body. In the darkness, Ah Ke did not have any idea who was holding her; in her abject terror, she lost all the strength in her body. Suddenly she felt that someone got hold of her right foot. She was so scared that her body was drenched in cold sweats, "There are so many men on the bed!" she thought.

Wei Xiaobao could not find Ah Ke in the darkness. "Ah Ke," he called, "Quickly make some noise, where are you?"

Ah Ke said in her heart, "Even if you chop my head, I won't make any noise."

"Alright," Wei Xiaobao said, "You won't make any noise, I will touch one, I will touch two, I will touch everywhere, in the end I will touch you." He suddenly sang the folksong, "One touch, two touches, touching the beautiful woman. The beauty's face is like melon seed, could it be that you are the old wh0re?" [The original rhymes: melon seed – guazi, wh0re – biaozi.] While his mouth was singing the folk song, his hands were busy groping.

Suddenly they heard the clamor of voices outside the courtyard, some people shouted orders, a large number of troops had several brothels surrounded; and

then there were footsteps, some people were entering the Lovely Spring Courtyard. Wei Xiaobao knew that these people must be either his own troops or Yangzhou's local officials; he was very happy. He was about to crawl out from underneath the quilt, but unexpectedly the incoming people were very fast; he saw torches and very soon those people had already entered the Sweet Nectar Hall. He heard Priest Xuanzhen's voice calling out, "Wei *Daren*, are you in here?" His voice was filled with anxiety.

Before he could even think, Wei Xiaobao blurted out, "I am here!"

As soon as Tian Di Hui warriors found out that Wei Xiaobao had disappeared, for fear that he might be in danger, they came out to look for him. They knew that he took several personal guards toward the Ming Yu Lane area, hence they investigated that area and found out that there was a fight in the Lovely Spring Courtyard. Upon entering the courtyard, they saw several dead personal guards lying on the ground and were greatly shocked. It was not until they heard his voice replying that they felt relieved.

Wei Xiaobao heard people shouting and calling, and then everybody seemed to swarm this way. He hastily stood up to let the mosquito net down, in the process his feet were stepping on several bodies, but he could not care less on whose bodies.

The mosquito net had just come down, Priest Xuanzhen and the others already entered the room. Each person had a torch in his hand; in one glance they all saw Zheng Keshuang fainted in front of the bed, and were very surprised. Someone called out, "Wei *Daren*, Wei *Daren*!"

Wei Xiaobao called back, "I am in here. Don't open the mosquito net."

Hearing his voice, they all cheered. Everybody 'you look at me, I look at you', with smiling expression on their faces; they all thought, "Everybody was worried, you are actually here to have fun."

Under the torch light Wei Xiaobao put on his clothes, found his hat and wore it, and then crawled out of the bed. While putting on his shoes he said, "I used some trick to capture quite a few offenders, they are all on the bed. This time everybody's merit is not small."

They all felt very strange, but they knew for some time that the way he worked

was like ‘gods appear and devils vanish’; for the time being it was inconvenient to ask too much.

Wei Xiaobao ordered the men to have Zheng Keshuang bound, and have Ah Qi carried to the field headquarters on a sedan chair. He also had the edges of the mosquito net squeezed firmly underneath the bedding, and then asked for ten personal guards and ordered them to take the big bed back to the Imperial Envoy Field Headquarters. The captain of the personal guards said, “Reporting to *Daren*: the door is too small, we cannot lift the bed out.”

“Idiot,” Wei Xiaobao cursed, “Can’t you tear the wall open?”

The captain understood immediately, he repeatedly said ‘yes’, and shouted his order. The personal guards set to work immediately, tearing the three walls of Lovely Spring Courtyard open. About a dozen personal guards fetched six or seven sedan chair poles and set the poles at the bottom of the bed, and then they lifted up the big bed, level and steady, and brought it out of the room.

By this time it was already daylight, the big bed was paraded through the main streets and marketplace of Yangzhou. The personal guards carried the ‘do not panic’ and ‘step back’ signs, with a gong and herald to clear the way, while the rest of the party marched behind the bed. When the common people of Yangzhou saw it, none of them did not click their tongue in amazement.

The big bed arrived at the He Garden, the gate was still too small. Learning from experience, this time the captain of the personal guards did not wait of the Imperial Envoy *Daren*’s instruction, he immediately ordered his men to tear the wall open and brought the big bed into the reception pavilion, and set it down in the middle of the hall. Wei Xiaobao passed on his order: the captured offenders on the bed were not a small matter, he ordered several dozen higher-rank military officers to lead the troops with bows strung, with sabers unsheathed, to form a tight perimeter around the garden. He also had Xu Tianchuan and the others guarding outside the room, to prevent Thin Toutuo and the others from coming in and seizing the prisoners by force.

Although there were multitude men guarding all around the reception pavilion, in the hall itself Wei Xiaobao was left alone with the big bed. He thought, “In the Lovely Spring Courtyard a moment ago, it was such a good opportunity, but out

of seven beauties, apparently I only embraced less than half. Besides, in the darkness I did not know which one I already embraced, and which one I have not embraced. I'd better start anew, from the first line of 'one touch'." Thereupon he hummed softly, "One touch, two touches, touching *Meimei* …" pulling the mosquito net open, he threw himself onto the bed.

Suddenly his braid tightened, followed by a sharp pain on his throat; someone pulled his braid and lifted it up, the person's left hand fingers were wrapped around his neck. It was none other than Madame Hong. After all these time, the effect of Mi Chun wine had disappeared. Madame Hong, Mao Dongzhu, Fang Yi, and Mu Jianping, four women, had already awakened; while the acupoints on Shuang'er and Zeng Rou's body had gradually unsealed. It's just that the bed was carried along Yangzhou's streets, the bed was surrounded by numerous officers and soldiers, so that the seven women on the bed did not dare to move, they did not dare to make noise. This moment Wei Xiaobao wanted to enjoy tender, amorous good fortune, as soon as he climbed onto the bed he was grabbed by Madame Hong.

Madame Hong had a 'smile, yet not a smile' look on her face; she sternly said in low voice, "Little demon, you have the nerve to amuse yourself even with me!"

Wei Xiaobao was so scared that his soul flew to the outer space; with a forced laugh he said, "Madame, I … I did not amuse myself; this … this …"

"What song did you sing?" Madame Hong asked.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "That was something that I heard randomly in the brothel, you must not take it seriously."

Madame Hong said in a low voice, "Do you want to live, or do you want to die?"

Wei Xiaobao said with a laugh, "Subordinate White Dragon Envoy respectfully wishes Madame and *Jiaozhu* to enjoy immortal good fortune forever, your long life the same as the heaven's. Madame's order, subordinate will receive and obey without delay."

Madame Hong noticed that he was speaking those words frivolously, without any respect or sincerity. She spat and said, "You must remove the officers and soldiers around the hall first."

“Very well,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Won’t that be easy? Let me go, I will issue the order.”

Madame Hong said, “Issue the order from here.”

Wei Xiaobao had no choice, he loudly called out, “Everybody outside, *Zongdu* [governor general], *Xunfu* [inspector general], Ministry of War *Shangshu* [department head], Minister of Revenue *Shangshu*, listen up: all officers and soldiers must withdraw, no one is allowed to remain here.”

Madame Hong pulled his braid and shouted, “What Ministry of War *Shangshu*, Minister of Revenue *Shangshu*? Rubbish!” While saying that, she pulled his braid again, hard.

“Aiyo!” Wei Xiaobao screamed, “I am dying!”

When the officers and soldiers outside heard him calling *Zongdu*, *Shangshu*, and so on, they were already suspicious, as soon as they heard him crying in pain, several dozen men with sabers and spears in their hands immediately rushed into the hall. “Imperial Envoy *Daren*,” they asked, “What is it?”

Wei Xiaobao called out, “No … nothing! Aiyo, Mama!”

The officers looked at each other in dismay, they were at a loss of what to do.

Madame Hong was furious; she raised her hand, ‘slap!’ she heavily struck Wei Xiaobao’s face. Wei Xiaobao cried out again, “Mama! Don’t hit your son!”

Although Madame Hong did not know that when Wei Xiaobao called someone his mother, he was actually cursing her as a prostitute, yet seeing his mischief, she raised her palm again to strike. Suddenly the ‘tian zong’ [heaven reservoir] and ‘shen tang’ [divine hall] two acupoints behind her shoulder went numb, her right arm went limp and dropped down. Madame Hong was startled; she quickly turned her head around to see who had sealed her acupoints. But the person closest to her back was Fang Yi.

“Miss Fang,” she said with a cold laugh, “Your martial art skill is not bad at all!” Her left hand swiftly moved toward Fang Yi’s eyes.

“It wasn’t me!” Fang Yi cried out, while leaning her head sideways to evade.

Madame Hong was about to attack again, suddenly two hands behind her back

reached out and grabbed her left arm; it was Mu Jianping. “Madame,” she called out, “It was not my Shijie who sealed your acupoints!” She saw that it was Shuang’er who sealed Madame Hong’s acupoints.

Mao Dongzhu raised her hand to strike Mu Jianping, fortunately she lost her internal energy that Mu Jianping did not suffer any injury. Mao Dongzhu’s second palm strike came, Fang Yi stretched out her hand to block.

Seeing the four women were fighting each other, Ah Ke turned around, she wanted to get down of the bed. Her right foot had just stepped out of the quilt, “Ah!” she cried, and immediately pulled her foot back. Wei Xiaobao was pulling her left foot. “Don’t go!” he said.

Ah Ke struggled hard and cried out, “Let me go!”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “You guess: will I or will I not let you go?”

Ah Ke panicked; she turned around and sent out a punch. Wei Xiaobao ducked, ‘Bang!’ her fist landed on Zeng Rou’s left cheek. “What did you hit me for?” Zeng Rou shouted.

“I … I’m sorry … Aiyo!” Ah Ke said, but she was hit by Fang Yi’s palm.

In an instant the bed was in great confusion, seven women beating and twisting randomly. Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted; he mused, “This is called ‘the whole country in rebellion, the heroes …’ no, ‘the heroines[82] fight each other in muddled battle!’”

While he was thinking to fish in troubled water, suddenly ‘crack, crash!’, the big bed collapsed. Eight people ‘you press on my hand, I push down your leg’. Seven women screamed together. Witnessing this scene, the officers and soldiers were dumbstruck. Wei Xiaobao roared in laughter while crawling out from among the crowd. But someone grabbed his left leg and twisted it. “Everybody, let go!” he shouted, “Officers, arrest all my wives, young and old!”

The officers stood in circle, but nobody dared to make any move. Wei Xiaobao pointed to Mao Dongzhu and said, “This old wh0re is a criminal, you must never let her escape.”

The officers felt strange, “You said these women are all your wives, young and

old, how come one of them is a criminal, and two of them dressed as personal guards?" Immediately some of them pointed their sabers and spears to Mao Dongzhu, while some others dragged her out. 'Click, click!' they put manacles on her hands.

Wei Xiaobao pointed to Madame Hong and said, "This Madame is my superior, but we'd better put her in shackles as well."

The officers were even more surprised, but they put manacles on Madame Hong's hands anyway. Madame Hong's martial art skill was high, but her acupoints were sealed by Shuang'er, half of her body was numb and aching, it would be difficult for her to resist.

By this time Shuang'er and Zeng Rou managed to extricate themselves from the crowd. Recalling last night's experience, they were blushing, but also found it very amusing.

Wei Xiaobao pointed to Fang Yi and said, "She is my first concubine!" Pointing to Mu Jianping he said, "And she is my second concubine. First concubine needs to be put in shackles, second concubine does not need."

The officers put manacles on Fang Yi's hands. The Imperial Envoy Minister's strange words and weird speech came out one after another, but by this time the officers had heard a lot, hence nobody thought it strange.

By this time, only Ah Ke was left sitting on the floor. They saw her hair was in a mess, her clothes was in disorder, she was wearing men's clothes, nevertheless her countenance was bright and outstandingly beautiful; her hands were holding down the hem of her long gown tightly to cover her naked legs. Her head was hung low, her cheeks were blushing. The officers and soldiers all thought, "Of all Imperial Envoy *Daren*'s wives, young and old, this wife is the most beautiful."

They heard Wei Xiaobao said, "She is my officially wedded wife, let me help her up." He took two steps forward and said, "*Niangzi* [wife (formal)], please rise!" while extending his hand to help her up.

Suddenly there was a 'Slap!' sharp and clear, the Imperial Envoy *Daren*'s face was heavily slapped. With head hung low, Ah Ke cried and said, "All you can do is bully me. Just kill me. I … even if I die I don't want to marry you."

The officers looked at each other in dismay; they were all shocked. The Imperial Envoy Minister was beaten in public. As the officers, it was their official duty to protect him with all their might. But the person beating and disgracing him was the Imperial Envoy Minister's own lawful wife; they could not step forward to stop her with force, but shouting to berate her also did not seem to be the proper thing to do. For a moment they were at a loss.

Caressing half of his face which was hit, Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "How can I be willing to part with you by killing you? *Niangzi* needs not be angry, otherwise I'll have my men kill Zheng *Gongzi*." He raised his voice to ask, "Where is the man arrested at the Lovely Spring Courtyard?"

A *Zuoling* [Company Commander] replied, "Reporting to *Dutong* [Commander]: this fellow has his hands and feet shackled and is being guarded well."

"Very good," Wei Xiaobao said, "If he wants to run away, chop his left leg first, and then cut his right leg …"

Ah Ke was scared. "Don't … don't … cut his legs," she called out anxiously, "He … he won't run away."

Wei Xiaobao said, "If you want to run away, I will chop Zheng *Gongzi*'s hands." Sweeping his gaze on Fang Yi, Mu Jianping, and the others, he said, "If these first concubine, second concubine of mine ran away, cut Zheng *Gongzi*'s ears and nose."

Ah Ke anxiously said, "You … you … what do these women have to do with Zheng *Gongzi*? Why do you put the blame on him?"

"Naturally they have something to do with him," Wei Xiaobao replied, "My women all have countenance of a flower, face like the moon, while Zheng *Gongzi* is a sex maniac. If he saw them, he would definitely harbor evil designs."

Ah Ke thought, "It's still not his responsibility." But she knew that this person spoke without reason; it was useless to argue with him. In her anxiety, she broke into crying again.

Wei Xiaobao said, "The women with manacles, take them away and guard them well, put fetters on their legs. Tell the kitchen to set up a banquet, the

good Miss without manacles are to accompany me drinking wine in here." The personal guards complied with loud voice.

Still crying, Ah Ke said, "I … I don't want to accompany you to drink. Just put shackles on my hands."

Without saying anything Zeng Rou walked out with her head hung low. "Hey," Wei Xiaobao called, "Where are you going?"

Zeng Rou turned her head around and said, "You … you are really shameless! I don't want to see you again!"

Wei Xiaobao was startled. "Why?" he asked.

"You … you still ask me why?" Zeng Rou said, "Others are not willing to marry you, you compel them to. You are a high-ranking official, do you think you can bully common people like this? Previously I thought you were a … a hero, who would have thought …"

"Who would have thought what?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Suddenly Zeng Rou broke into crying; covering her face, she said, "I don't know! You … you are an evil man, not a good person." While saying that she ran toward the door.

Two military officers raised their saber to block; they shouted, "You insulted Imperial Envoy, you must not leave. Wait for Imperial Envoy *Daren*'s decision on how to punish you."

Reprimanded by Zeng Rou like that, the happiness in Wei Xiaobao's heart immediately vanished into the thin air; he thought that what she said actually made a lot of sense. Being a Tatar high-ranking officer, he was relying on force to bully others, thus he was no different from the treacherous court officials and evil tyrants that the storytellers were talking about. He thought, "I can't be a hero; that's fine. But I must not be a treacherous court official."

Heaving a deep sigh he said, "Miss Zeng, please come back, I want to say something."

Zeng Rou turned her head and boldly said, "I offended you, you might as well chop my head."

Shuang'er had a good relationship with her; she hastily urged, "Zeng *Jiejie*, don't be angry, *Xianggong* can't possibly kill you."

Wei Xiaobao low-spiritedly said, "You are right, if I force them to marry me, I am like the painted face treacherous court official (in the opera) seizing common people's daughter, just like the Tiger Wang kidnapping the bride in the 'Three Laughing Marriage Affinities'."

Pointing to Ah Ke, he said to the *Zuoling*, the captain of his personal guards, "Take this Miss out, also release that man surnamed Zheng, let them go and be husband and wife." When speaking those words, he was extremely grieving. He also pointed to Fang Yi and said, "Take her manacles off, release her as well, let her go find her beloved Liu *Shige*. Ay, my lawful wife loves her lover, my first concubine also loves her lover. Damn it, what kind of Imperial Envoy *Daren*, *Dutong Daren* am I? I am a double cuckold *Daren*."

Seeing Wei Xiaobao was throwing a fit, the *Zuoling* was so scared that he stood with head hung low; he did not dare to make any noise. Wei Xiaobao said, "Quickly take these two women out." The *Zuoling* complied, he escorted Ah Ke and Fang Yi out.

Wei Xiaobao looked at the two women's back; in his heart he was really reluctant to let them go. As they walked out, Fang Yi and Ah Ke did not even turn their heads; there was not a word of thanks, there was not a single grateful glance.

Zeng Rou took two steps forward and said in a low voice, "You are a good person! You … please punish me." There was a deep regret on her tender face.

Wei Xiaobao's spirit was immediately aroused; he was beaming with joy as he laughed and said, "Right, right! I must punish you. Shuang'er, Xiao Junzhu, Miss Zeng, the three of you are good women. Come, let us go in and talk."

He was about to take the three women into the inner hall and had some intimate time with them when a military officer walked in and said, "Reporting to *Dutong Daren*: there is someone outside, saying that he was sent by Hong *Jiaozhu*, asking to have an audience with *Daren*."

Wei Xiaobao was scared out of his wits; he hastily said, "What Red Jiaozhu, Green Jiaozhu [the word 'Hong' sounds like 'Red', different characters]? I don't

want to see, I don't want to see! Quickly kick him out."

The officer bowed and said, "Yes!" He took a step backward, and then said, "That man also said that they have two men in their hands, they want to trade them with two women in *Dutong Daren*'s hands."

"Trade with two women?" Wei Xiaobao said. His gaze swept on Madame Hong and Mao Dongzhu's faces; he shook his head and said, "He must be joking! Such good merchandise, why do I want to trade?"

"Yes," the military officer said, "Let lowly officer drive him away."

Wei Xiaobao asked, "What kind of men he wanted to trade with? Damn it, what's so good about men? Trading men for women, I will suffer too much loss."

The officer said, "That man is talking nonsense, he said one was a Lama, the other was a Prince; they both are *Dutong Daren*'s sworn brothers."

"Ah!" Wei Xiaobao exclaimed; he thought, "Turns out Sangjie Lama and Prince Galdan are caught by Hong *Jiaozhu*." He said, "A Lama and a Prince, what am I supposed to do with them? Go tell that fellow, these two women, even if he offered two million men, I don't want to trade." The officer repeatedly said yes, then he withdrew.

Wei Xiaobao cast a glance to Zeng Rou; he thought, "Previously she said that I am an evil man, not a good person. I have to let my own wives go, to let them marry their lovers before she considered me a good person. Humph! To be a good man, the capital is indeed not small. Sangjie and Galdan, two men, have already sworn brotherhood with me, if I don't trade them back, Hong *Jiaozhu* will definitely have them killed. Even if I keep Madame Hong, what do I do with her? Although she is extremely beautiful, she won't agree to enjoy immortal good fortune together with me, to have live as long as the heaven's with me. Damn it, paying more attention to a lover than friends is not a hero!" "Hold on!" he shouted.

"Yes!" the officer replied. He bowed to await the order.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Go tell him: have Hong *Jiaozhu* release those two men, I will return Madame Hong to him. This Madame has countenance of a flower, face like the moon; she is better than Xi Shi and Yang Guifei[83], she is the world's

priceless treasure. Originally even if he killed me I would not want to release her; to have me trade his two men with her, actually it is greatly advantageous to him. As for the other woman, although she is disappointing, I can't let her go." The officer complied and withdrew.

All along Madame Hong maintained a wooden expression; only this moment she showed a smiling expression as she said, "Imperial Envoy *Daren* really knows how to compliment others."

"Madame," Wei Xiaobao said, "You are seriously beautiful, why be modest? We must be good people to the end, if I have to eat into my capital, then so be it. Deliver the goods first, receive the payment later. Guards! Quickly open my boss' manacles." Receiving the key, he personally unlocked Madame Hong's manacles and walked her out.

When they reached the main hall, they saw the officer was talking to Lu Gaoxuan. Wei Xiaobao said, "Mr. Lu, you must serve Madame well on her way back. Madame, your subordinate respectfully sends you, Senior, off in a triumphal return, wishes you and *Jiaozhu* will enjoy immortal good fortune forever, your long lives will be the same as the Heaven's."

Madame Hong giggled tenderly; she said, "And I wish Imperial Envoy *Daren* promotion and wealth, a life as long as Mount Nan, lovely wife and beautiful concubines, and to be rewarded nobility titles as Duke and Marquis for ten thousand generations."

Wei Xiaobao sighed; he shook his head and said, "To be promoted and gain wealth is easy, to have lovely wife and beautiful concubines, that will be difficult." Raising his voice he ordered, "Play the music, send the guest off, prepare a sedan chair."

Amidst the sound of music, he personally walked her off to the main gate, and watched as Madame Hong climbed onto the sedan chair.

Chapter 40

The wait for rabbit suspecting the tree trunk can be guard against, the search for fish regretting the tree is difficult to foretell.

(Translated by Foxs)

Kneeling on the ground, Wu Zhirong presented a letter with both hands, saying, "This letter carries great responsibility. Daren, please take a look." Wei Xiaobao did not take the letter, he asked, "What does it say? What kind of essay?"

The sedan chair carrying Madame Hong had just left, Wei Xiaobao was just

about to turn around to go inside, a large sedan chair arrived at the main gate; Yangzhou Prefectural Magistrate had come to pay his respect. Seeing that the beauties he had in his hand left one by one, Wei Xiaobao was in a particularly bad mood, he had no interest to chitchat. “What do you want?” he asked.

Prefectural Magistrate Wu Zhirong paid his respect and saluted before saying, “Lowly officer has some classified military intelligence to report to *Daren*.”

Only after hearing the words ‘classified military intelligence’ did Wei Xiaobao let him come in. He said in his heart, “If it is not important classified matter, I will beat your butts.”

When they got to the inner study room, Wei Xiaobao sat down, but did not offer any seat to Wu Zhirong. “What classified military intelligence?” he asked.

Wu Zhirong said, “Would *Daren* please dismiss these people?” Wei Xiaobao waved his hand to order the personal guards to go out.

Wu Zhirong walked over and said in a low voice, “Imperial Envoy *Daren*, this is a very important matter, if *Daren* submits a memorial to the Emperor, your merit will be extraordinarily big. Lowly officer will also receive the benefit of the light behind the shade of *Daren*’s good fortune. Therefore, lowly officer was thinking of not reporting this to *Futai* [inspector-general (old)] and *Fantai* [vassal state governor (old)], the two *Daren* just yet.”

Wei Xiaobao frowned, “What important matter?” he asked, “Why is it so urgent?”

Wu Zhirong said, “Reporting to *Daren*: only because His Majesty’s good fortune is great, *Daren*’s good fortune is great that lowly officer managed to obtain this information.”

“Humph,” Wei Xiaobao said, “You, Wu *Daren*’s good fortune is also great.”

“I don’t dare, I don’t dare,” Wu Zhirong replied, “Lowly officer has received His Majesty’s grace and Imperial Envoy *Daren*’s promotion that day and night I always think about how to repay the great kindness. After accompanying *Daren* enjoying the Chinese peony outside the Chanzhi Temple yesterday, I thought about *Daren* talking about elegant styles, the admiration in my heart is exceedingly great, I only wish that I can work for *Daren* every day, to receive

Daren's advice at all times."

"That's great," Wei Xiaobao said, "Then you don't need to be a prefectural magistrate. I can see that you are clever and quick-witted, it would be better to … be better to …"

Wu Zhirong was greatly delighted; busily he bowed with cupped fist, "Thank you for *Daren*'s benefaction."

Wei Xiaobao smiled and said, "It would be better for you to be my door keeper, or else my sedan chair carrier. Every day when I go out, you will be able to see me. Ha ha, ha ha …!"

Wu Zhirong was furious; his countenance changed slightly, but immediately he said with a forced laugh, "That will be wonderful. Being *Daren*'s door keeper is definitely better than being a prefectural magistrate in Yangzhou. Lowly officer usually sends quite a lot of idle people to make discreet inquiry and find information everywhere, if there is someone who harbor the desire to rebel or slander His Majesty, or disparage cabinet minister, lowly officer will find out immediately. This kind of heresy confuses the people and incites those who hear it; it is a major crime, lowly officer always take more rigorous precautions to administer justice."

"Oh," Wei Xiaobao said, thinking that this man was capable of skirting the issue of being door keeper or sedan chair carrier in just one sentence; he really knew how to be a government official, he was indeed amazing.

Wu Zhirong said, "If it were peddlers and carriers, lowly people of marketplace babbling some nonsense, it would not create much harm; the ones we must be most vigilant are the intelectuals. This kind of people compose poems and write essays, oftentimes they take events from the past to mock the imperial court politics, when ordinary people read it, oftentimes they do not know that these scholars are having malicious intention by using the past to disparage the present."

Wei Xiaobao said, "If others read it and don't understand, then there's no harm done."

"Yes, yes," Wu Zhirong said, "Although that is true, in the end this malicious intention must be punished. These poisonous poetry and literature of treason

and heresy must never be allowed to spread throughout the world." From his sleeve he took out a piece of letter and presented it with both hands. "*Daren* please take a look," he said, "This is a poetry antology lowly officer obtained yesterday."

If he fetched a stack of banknotes from his sleeve, Wei Xiaobao's countenance would immediately show favorable expression toward him, but seeing that it was a document, he was quite disappointed, when he heard that it was a poetry anthology, immediately he yawned big. Without receiving the document, he looked up and did not pay him any attention.

Wu Zhirong felt rather awkward; he slowly withdrew his hands that were holding the poetry anthology. "During the banquet yesterday," he said, "There was a woman singing a new poetry depicting peasant women of Yangzhou, *Daren* was not too happy listening to it, hence lowly officer went out to investigate the poetry anthology from which the song came. I found quite a number of offensive and heretical sentences."

"Is that so?" Wei Xiaobao lazily said.

Wu Zhirong opened up the book and pointed to a poem, "*Daren*, please look at this," he said, "The title of this poem is 'Hongwu's Copper Cannon Song' written by Zha Shenxing; it was about the previous dynasty's Zhu Yuanzhang using copper cannon."

When he heard this, Wei Xiaobao's interest was mildly piqued. "Did Zhu Yuanzhang also use cannon?" he asked.

"Yes, yes," Wu Zhirong replied, "Presently our Great Qing's Holy Sage Son of Heaven is on the throne, yet this man surnamed Zha wrote a song to praise Zhu Yuanzhang's copper cannon; won't that incite everybody to cherish the memory of the previous dynasty? This poem exaggerates Zhu Yuanzhang's power and prestige, this is not right. The last four sentences say, 'I have come to see you in thistles and thorns, not at all like the rivers and mountain in my memory. Golden low-ranking public official gently wipe the everflowing tears, passionately strive for and endure the ever-rising ascend to gaze afar.' The content of this man's heart cannot be more clear than this. Our Great Qing received the Mandate of Heaven to drive out the Zhu's Ming, all common people are overjoyed to no end,

but why did this man look at Zhu Yuanzhang's cannon and want to visit the rivers and mountains of his memory? Why must he shed tears?"

(Book note: Zha Shenxing's earlier poem had considerable reminiscent of the previous Ming; later on Kangxi's literature chamberlain minister changed the style of the poem.) "Where is this copper cannon?" Wei Xiaobao asked, "I want to see it. Can you locate it? His Majesty loves cannon very much."

Wu Zhirong replied, "According to the poem, these copper cannon are in Jingzhou."

With a wooden expression Wei Xiaobao said, "Since they are not in Yangzhou, why do you bother? You are the Prefectural Magistrate of Yangzhou, not the Prefectural Magistrate of Jingzhou. Wait till you become the county head magistrate of Jingzhou before you investigate these copper cannon."

Wu Zhirong was greatly shocked; being the county head magistrate of Jingzhou would mean that he was being demoted. He must not raise this subject anymore; hence he put the poetry anthology back into his sleeve and took out two other books. "Imperial Envoy *Daren*," he said, "That Zha Shenxing's book has slight improper tone; by *Daren*'s grace we won't make further investigation. But these two books absolutely must not be ignored."

Wei Xiaobao frowned, "Which fellow wrote them?" he asked.

Wu Zhirong replied, "One was written by Zha Yihuang, called 'The Diary of a Country', the content is a full commendation of the anti-Qing movement. The other is Gu Yanwu's poetry anthology; it is even more extremely disregarding the ruler and superior, disregarding the law and natural morality."

Wei Xiaobao was secretly shocked. "Mr. Gu Yanwu and my Shifu are the military strategists of the Turtle Slaying Assembly," he mused, "How did his book fall into this government official's hands? I wonder if our Tian Di Hui is mentioned there?" He asked, "What is written in the book? Tell me in detail."

Seeing that Wei Xiaobao was suddenly interested, Wu Zhirong's spirit was aroused. He opened up the book 'Diary of a Country' and said, "Reporting to *Daren*: this book is calling all the anti-Qing rebels as loyal subjects and patriots. In this chapter, 'The Narrative on the Investigation of Master of the Ministry of War On Bestowing Supervisory Authority To The Imperial Censor', he is talking

about his [paternal male] cousin Zha Meiji fighting our Great Qing, about how he conspired with the insurgents, how he placed himself in opposition to our elite troops."

With his right hand index finger he pointed to the book and read, "'On the seventeenth of the fourth month, the Qing troops attacked Yuan Huaji, they retreated via Tong Yuan. Meiji supervised Ling, Yang, Zhou and Wang, various patriots, leading five hundred ships, more than five thousand men, all with white cloth wrapped around their heads, by the seventh earthly branch [between 11am – 1pm, noon] the battle was over, they pursued the enemy to the end, beheading the first hundred or more low-rank troops, achieving great victory, striking fear to the enemy, that they went ashore and ran away.' You see *Daren*, they called the rebels 'patriots', but called our Great Qing's elite troops 'the enemy'. Don't you think he really deserve to die?"

Wei Xiaobao asked, "What did Gu Yanwu write in his book?"

Wu Zhirong put down the 'Diary of a Country' and picked up Gu Yanwu's poetry anthology. Shaking his head he said, "The poems that this man wrote, not a single one does not speak of rebellion and conspiracy against the state. This poem's title is 'Qiang Hu'[84]; this is clearly a slander against our Great Qing."

His finger pointed to a verse and read, "Our country's golden bowl was originally whole, it was thrown into confusion like a newborn from a barbarian concubine. Recruiting the troops to establish provinces, accumulating soldier's pay to establish provinces. There's concern over tribal chieftains rebelling against the Western Sichuan, a worry about bewitched people singing over Shandong, so much so that among Shenzhou's [old name for China] half-banished thieves, whoever raise his voice and make a vow can be barbarian tribal chief. Four adjoining outskirts and boundaries opressing Shandong culture, destroying villages and massacre uncountable people. Cut open abdomen, broken intestines, snapped necks and fractured jaws, pile of corpse like a pond. Those fortunate enough were taken prisoners and join the barbarians. Barbarians speak 'ya, ya', like chisling tooth to mend the denture. Establishing worm banners[85], mounting thick weeds carriages. Looking at shedding blood in thousand cities, gathering beautiful women like flowers. Alas, the barbarians

destroyed it like this, but speaking as if that it was the Heaven's will for the country …"

Wei Xiaobao waved his hands and said, "Enough, stop reading. Yi yi[86] ya ya, I don't know what you are talking about."

"Reporting to Daren," Wu Zhirong said, "The poem says that we, the people of Manchuria, are barbarians, it says that it was in order to fight the war against Manchu people to keep the provinces that the Ming Dynasty recruited troops and raised the soldiers' pay, inciting the whole country to rise in rebellion. It also says that we, Manchu people, massacred people, cut open their belly, broke their intestines, and seized beautiful women."

"So that's how it is," Wei Xiaobao said, "Seizing beautiful women, that's very good. When the Qing troops broke into Yangzhou, didn't they kill a lot of common people? If not because of this matter, how could His Majesty exempt Yangzhou of three years' land tax? Hm, this Gu Yanwu's poem is so honest."

Wu Zhirong was greatly shocked; he thought, "You are too young and do not know what's important. Luckily it was you who said it; if it were from someone else's mouth, I report it up, do you think the gauze hat [i.e. job as an official] you are wearing would stay steady on your head?" But he knew that Wei Xiaobao was the Emperor's most favorite person; how could he dare to set himself against the Imperial Envoy Minister? Repeatedly he said several 'yes', and with a forced laugh said, "Indeed *Daren* has wise opinion; lowly officer was in murky darkness and suddenly it opens. Would *Daren* please give direction on this poem, 'Song of the history of the heart inside the well'? This poem has a rather lengthy preface; it is indeed wildly rebellious."

Holding the book up, his head swayed in time with his reading: "In the winter of Chongzhen's eleventh year, the drought of the well in the Chengtian [lit. bearing (the load) of heaven] Temple in Suzhou's capital had already deepened; obtaining a case, on the outside was written 'The Great Song (Dynasty) Iron Case Sutra', and it was very heavy …"

("*Daren*, it tells about finding an iron box inside the well."

"Iron box?" Wei Xiaobao asked, "Was there any gold, silver or treasure inside?") "Inside there was a scroll of book, the title was 'Xin Shi' [history of the

heart], it said ‘the solitary minister of the Great Song Zheng Sixiao’s hundred songs of worship’. The nickname ‘Sixiao’ actually means ‘south’, the Song lost its people, its reputation was recorded in ancient history book. The days of the book collection enjoyed divine protection were nine years. After the demise of Song, just as day and night expecting Prime Minister Chen, Zhang *Shaobao* [junior guardian] gathered the troops overseas, trying to restore the Great Song’s three hundred years of soil.”

(“*Daren*, the essay was talking about the Song Dynasty, but actually he was referring to the Great Qing. Gu Yanwu is hoping that Taiwan’s rebel Zheng would gather the troops overseas to restore the soil of the Great Ming.”) “Not yet repelling the barbarian Yuan back to the northern desert, could only weep in bitter tears, and pray to the Heaven and the Earth, submitting oneself to the Great God, speech failed, attention diverted, certainly there would be a day the barbarians will turn into summer.”

(“*Daren*, he cursed us, Manchurian Qing as Tatars, he wanted to repel us out.”

“Are you a Manchu?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

“This … this … lowly officer is a servant of His Majesty of the Great Qing, a subordinate of Manchu *Daren*, indeed I am concentrating my thoughts and my efforts in dedication to Manchu people.”) “Thereupon when the people of the country saw this, none did not bow their head in amazement. The *Xunfu* [inspector general] Duke Du Yuanzhang preserved the writing for later time, as well as set up a memorial hall in the south, and hid the box in the memorial hall. Before long, the country met with difficulties, just like the final years of the divine protection. Alas, what a sorrow!”

(“*Daren*, the Great Qing’s army entered the Pass, it was to console the people and punish the tyrant, yet this Gu Yanwu said that the country met with difficulties, he also said ‘alas, what a sorrow’; can we bear not to question this man’s intention?”) “The number of books trasmitted to the north was less, and after the misfortune, many have become taboo, hence these books were not seen in the last thirty years or so; nowadays it resurfaces at the Zhu Clan of Fuping [county, Weinan, Shanxi]. When this book first appeared in the past, the Taicang [county, Suzhou, Jiangsu] Guard Regiment’s Qian Jun respectfully composed two chapters of poetry, Kunshan’s [county, Suzhou, Jiangsu] Gui

Sheng solemnly added eight chapters. When Zhejiang East fallen, Duke Zhang returned to Dongyang [county, Jinhua, Zhejiang]; he went to the moat and died there. Qian Jun escaped overseas, and died on Lang Qi Mountain. Gui Sheng changed his name to Zuo Ming, and continued to be particularly fervent and intense, until in the end he died of exhaustion and hunger."

("*Daren*, these three rebels did not acknowledge allegiance to our Great Qing, fortunately they died early, otherwise, they would definitely be executed along with their families unto the third generation.") "Only the untalented me, drifting along in this life, heading toward the grieving years, enduring the net that is getting tighter and tighter."

("*Daren*, he said that the imperial court supresses essays with rebellious intent, it's getting harder and harder; yet this fellow is clearly has the audacity [orig. 'hair grows on his guts'] and is unafraid.") "See whatever is worthy, think to imitate; standing alone without fear, expressing this matter, showing the ministers how to change in conducting themselves, pretending to write this song."

As he was listening to this, Wei Xiaobao repeatedly yawn; he only wanted to know what was written in Gu Yanwu's book, hence he endured patiently until Wu Zhirong finished reading the lengthy preface. "Are you done?" he asked.

"Next comes the poem," Wu Zhirong said.

"If there is nothing important, you don't need to read," Wei Xiaobao said.

"Very important, very important," Wu Zhirong replied. He read, "Minister Zheng Sixiao of the late Song, cried bitterly over barbarian Yuan [i.e. Mongol] moving nine ancestral shrines, all by himself holding on to Han cauldron with difficulty, alone devotedly desiring and wishing with lamentation on the weary Hunan. Writing a book, roll by roll to become 'Xin Shi', the content of ten thousand ancient hearts. A thousand searches hidden away inside the iron case in the well, a hundred worship songs that have yet to die today. In barbarian captivity not even a hundred years, perhaps by chance the divine ancestor would re-open the Heaven …"

("*Daren*, by saying this sentence 'In barbarian captivity not even a hundred years', he is really really deserve to die. He is cursing our Great Qing to reign not

even a hundred years, saying that Han people may have some ‘divine ancestor’, which will come to open the Heaven. What opening the Heaven? He is thinking of overthrowing our Great Qing!”) “I heard His Majesty said,” Wei Xiaobao spoke up, “Only if the Great Qing treats the common people well will our rivers and mountain be steady. Otherwise any empty talk of thousand years, ten thousand years, everything will be in vain. There is a foreigner by the name Tang Ruowang, he is the Director of Imperial Observatory; do you know him?”

“Yes,” Wu Zhirong replied, “Lowly officer has heard about him.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “This man wrote an almanac, his projection is for 200 years. Some people accused him, saying that the Great Qing’s dominion will last for tens of thousands of years; why did he project only 200 years? At that time Oboi was in charge of the nation, he was completely muddleheaded, unexpectedly he was going to chop his head. Fortunately His Majesty is an enlightened sage, he reprimanded Oboi severely, and had the person who lodged the complain executed, along with his entire family unto the third generation. His Majesty dislikes the most people who wrongly accused good people, by saying nonsense about the Great Qing dominion lasts for a hundred years, or two hundred years to harm others. His Majesty said that really good ministers will cherish common people, and work diligently for the imperial court. As for people who love to lodge false accusation against others, always pick mistakes inside a poem or an essay, which is called ‘seeking for bone inside the egg’, definitely those people are the painted face treacherous officials [in the opera], he ordered me that if I see this kind of fellow, to immediately tie him up and chop his damn head.”

Wei Xiaobao was determined to protect Gu Yanwu at all cost, he was afraid that Wu Zhirong reported to him but failed, he might go to different government official and raise some noise. Thereupon Wei Xiaobao spoke more and more harshly, trying to scare Wu Zhirong that henceforth he would not dare to raise this matter anymore.

He did not know that Wu Zhirong obtained his prefectural magistrate position entirely because he reported the ‘Ming Shi’ [history of the Ming Dynasty], the writing of Zhuang Tinglong of Huzhou, Zhejiang, which talked about the beginning of the Ming Dynasty, which had words and sentences that were disrespectful toward the Qing Dynasty. Provoking literrary inquisition to seek

fame and fortune was this man's expertise.

This time Wu Zhirong found some flaws in the literary work of Gu Yanwu, Zha Yihuang and the others, he was unable to contain his joy. He believed that he found heavensent wealth and promotion, he might even gain three classes of promotion at once; who would have thought that the Imperial Envoy Minister would talk to him like that? In that instant, cold sweat started to drench his back; he thought, "In the 'Ming Shi' case, Oboi *Daren* personally handled this matter. Now Oboi *Daren* has been deposed by His Majesty, it seems that His Majesty's temper is totally different from Oboi *Daren*; this time I am indeed in a very bad situation."

On how Kangxi captured Oboi, since it was not too honorable, it was not openly discussed. The high-ranking ministers racked their brains with ideas, but among the government officials, very few talked about it. Wu Zhirong's official rank was rather low, plus he was stationed in a prefecture far away from Beijing, thereupon he did not know that the only connection he had in the high place, Oboi *Daren* was dead precisely in the hand on this Wei *Daren* in front of his eyes. Otherwise, he would be even more terrified.

Seeing his earthly gray countenance and his trembling body, Wei Xiaobao was secretly delighted; he asked, "Have you finished reading?"

Wu Zhirong replied, "This poem, there is still … still … half."

"So, what does it say?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Trembling with fear, Wu Zhirong continued reading, "The Yellow River did not wait for clear person [Qing], the deep water retain its splendor. Suddenly appeared strange book out of the world, alarming the barbarian riders filling the rivers and mountains. The Heaven knows the way of the world will be repeated, hence this book revealed the goal of the government ministers. To meet again more than thirty years later, with one heart one mind restored at the same time. Duke Lu died at the cliff's door, those who trust the country sacrifice their lives at swallow market. In olden days reciting poetry lamenting people of old, in secluded bamboo groove and restful woods worrying about mountain ghosts. Alas, cattail yellow's [蒲黃 - 'pu huang', cattail pollen or pollen typhae] lifetime is so long! How would the South see it?" He read it without taking a breath, and he

did not dare to add explanation either; with great difficulty he finally finished reading, his sweats dripped on the pages of the book.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “There is nothing out of ordinary in the poem. It talks about some mountain ghosts, some faded old woman [黃脸婆 – ‘huang lian po’ (yellow-faced old woman)]; it’s really amusing.”

Wu Zhirong said, “Reporting to *Daren*: the ‘pu huang’ in the poem was referring to Song Dynasty’s high-ranking ministers Pu Shougeng and Huang Wanshi who surrendered to the Yuan Dynasty; it is a ridicule to the Han people who become government officials of the Great Qing.”

Wei Xiaobao’s countenance sank. “I said it was ‘huang lian po’, then it is faded old woman,” he said sternly, “Is your wife’s [lao po, same ‘po’ character] face very yellow? Why did anybody write a poem to make fun of faded old woman and you cannot stand it?”

Wu Zhirong took a step back, his hands trembling, ‘pat!’ the book in his hands fell. “Yes, yes,” he said, “Lowly officer deserves to die.”

Wei Xiaobao seized the opportunity to flare-up; he shouted, “What a nerve! I courteously recited His Majesty’s imperial edict to enlighten you. You are a very minor government official, yet you dare to throw things at me, to lose your temper at me! You look down upon His Majesty’s imperial edict; aren’t you rebelling?”

‘Bonk!’ Wu Zhirong dropped on his knees and repeatedly kowtowed. “*Da* … *Daren* please spare my life, forgive … forgive *Xiaoren*’s muddleheadedness.”

With a cold laugh Wei Xiaobao said, “You threw things at me, you lost your temper, that’s fine, at most you will be charged with humiliating the Imperial Envoy. Heavy punishment would be beheading, light punishment would be banishment; it’s a trivial matter …”

Hearing the charge was getting heavier, from banishment to beheading, Wu Zhirong kowtowed even more fervently, his head was like pounding on garlic. “*Daren*, please be magnanimous, *Xiao* … *Xiaode* [lowly one] knew my guilt.”

“You look down on His Majesty’s imperial edict,” Wei Xiaobao barked, “Can I let it pass just like that? Your family, wife, sister-in-law, son, daughter, mother-

in-law, paternal aunt, servant girl, mistress, a bunch of heads must be chopped down."

Wu Zhirong was shaking all over, his teeth chattered, making a clicking noise, he no longer dare to say anything.

Seeing that he had scared him enough, Wei Xiaobao asked sternly, "Where is that Gu Yanwu now?"

Wu Zhirong replied in trembling voice, "Report … reporting to *Daren* … he … he … he is at …" his teeth bit his own tongue that his speech was not clear. After quite a while, he managed to continue, trembling with fear, "Lowly officer was too brazen, I had Gu Yanwu and that surnamed Zha, also … also one surnamed Lu, detained … detained at the *yamen*."

"Have you torture and question them?" Wei Xiaobao asked, "What did they say?"

Wu Zhirong said, "Lowly officer only casually asked a few questions, the three of them were unwilling to confess."

"Are they really unwilling to say anything?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Wu Zhirong said, "They … they are not. But … but we found a letter in that surnamed Zha's pocket; as a matter of fact, it carries great responsibility. *Daren*, please take a look." From his side he took a cloth bundle, opened it to produce a letter, and presented it with both hands.

Wei Xiaobao did not take the letter, he asked, "What does it say? What kind of essay?"

"No, it's not that," Wu Zhirong said, "It was written by Guangdong *Tidu* [local commander] Wu … Wu Liuqi."

When Wei Xiaobao heard 'Guangdong *Tidu* Wu Liuqi', seven characters, he was shocked. "Wu Liuqi?" he busily asked, "He also write poetry?"

"It's not that," Wu Zhirong replied, "Wu Liuqi is plotting rebellion, this letter is irrefutable evidence, he won't be able to deny at all. When a while ago lowly officer mentioned military intelligence and that we will render great merit, I was talking about this matter."

“Oh,” Wei Xiaobao said, while in his heart he groaned, “It’s bad!”

“Reporting to *Daren*,” Wu Zhirong continued, “Scholars compose poem or write articles with somewhat rebellious content, *Daren* bravely made decision that it was not a big deal; lowly officer is full of admiration. There’s a common saying: *Xiucai* [a person who has passed county level imperial exam] rebelling, in three years he won’t have any result. Presumably it’s not something we should be worried about. But this Wu Liuqi is in command of the entire province’s troops. If he wanted to rise in rebellion, and the imperial court did not gain the initiative by striking first, then … then it would desperately serious.” Talking about Wu Liuqi rising in rebellion, immediately his eloquence came back.

All along he had been kneeling on the floor; now that he saw Wei Xiaobao’s expression alternated between grim and clear, obviously he was very interested in this matter, Wu Zhirong slowly stood up. “Humph,” Wei Xiaobao snorted, and glowered at him. Wu Zhirong was startled; he immediately dropped down on his knees again.

“What does the letter say?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

“Reporting to *Daren*,” Wu Zhirong replied, “The writing in the letter is very obscure; he said something about the important event in the southwest, that the undertaking of the real men is in full swing. He invited the one surnamed Zha to visit Guangdong to give directions and principles of action. The letter says, ‘Passionately planning the matter of Zhong Shan [lit. central mountain], the great feat of Kaiping [county, Jiangmen, Guangdong], will not be accomplished without Mr. Qing Tian’s [lit. clear (rice) field; see next section] planning the operation.’ That was definitely a reference to rebellion.”

“You are talking rubbish again,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Do you know what important matter they are talking about? You are a minor official, how would you know His Majesty and the imperial court’s classified strategic decision?”

“Yes, yes,” Wu Zhirong replied, “But in his letter he clearly mentioned the plan to rebel; we really must not easily neglect it.”

Wei Xiaobao took the envelope and extracted the letter; he saw the paper was full of walnut-size characters. He could tell that the ink was very dense, the strokes were very coarse, but he did not recognize a single character. He said,

“The letter did not mention anything about rebellion.”

“Reporting to *Daren*,” Wu Zhirong said, “About the rebellion, naturally he cannot write it openly. This Wu Liuqi wanted to be Zhong Shan King, Kaiping King, and he wanted that surnamed Zha to be Mr. Qing Tian; that is rebellion.”

Wei Xiaobao shook his head and said, “Rubbish! People who take official post, which one does not wish to become ‘King’ or ‘Duke’? Are you saying you don’t want to? This Wu Junmen [lit. army gate, no idea what it is] has rendered great merit, he wanted to set up another great service for the imperial court, hoping that His Majesty would grant him the title King, it is a sign of great loyalty.”

Wu Zhirong had a very awkward expression on his face; he thought, “Talking with an ignorant and incompetent disciple like you, I can’t make anything clear. Today I have offended you; if I do not set up a merit through this matter, my career will most likely not have any future.” Thereupon suppressing his temper, he forced a laughter and said, “Reporting to *Daren*: the Ming Dynasty had two great generals. One was called Xu Da, the other Chang Yuchun.”

Ever since he was little, Wei Xiaobao had heard mister storytellers talked about ‘The Great Ming’s Legend of Heroic Deeds'; he knew the stories surrounding the founding of the Ming Dynasty by heart [orig. ‘ripe as a melon that rolls from its vine’]. As soon as he heard Wu Zhirong mentioning Xu and Chang, two great generals, immediately his spirit was aroused, totally unlike when he was drowsily listening to him reciting poetry and literature. He laughed and said, “Those two great generals’ prestige is known in eight directions, they are indeed very formidable. Do you know what weapon Xu Da used? What weapon Chang Yuchun used?”

This time he stumped Wu Zhirong. Because of the ‘Ming Shi’ Wu Zhirong enjoyed meteoric rise in his political career, hence he was very familiar with the history of the Ming Dynasty; however, nothing was said about the kind of weapon Xu Da and Chang Yuchun used. With a forced laugh he said, “Lowly officer is of humble talent and shallow learning; I do not know. Would *Daren* please advise?”

Wei Xiaobao was very proud of himself. He said with a smile, “You guys only read the book rotten, but don’t know about this kind of matters. Let me tell you:

Great General Xu was the reincarnation of the Song Dynasty's Yue Fei, Yue *Yeye* [grandpa]; he used a steel spear with cast iron point, on his waist he carried eighteen wolf tooth arrows, he shot with great precision, his arrows never missed. General Chang was the reincarnation of Yan man Zhang Yide from the Three Kingdom era; he used an eight-snake spear one *zhang* [about 10ft/3m] long, ten thousand men could not withstand his bravery." And then he rambled on and on about how these two generals Xu and Chang broke the Yuan army. These stories came from the storytellers, naturally it was a lot more fantastic, but not much of the actual fact.

Wu Zhirong was listening to the stories while he was kneeling on the floor. His knees were growing more and more painful. However, in order to make Wei Xiaobao happy, he had no choice but to pretend that he was listening with keen interest; he repeatedly gasped in admiration, and with great difficulty forcing himself to listen to the end before saying, "*Daren* has wide learning and retentive memory, lowly officer is full of admiration. Those two, Xu Da and Chang Yuchun's merit was indeed very great; after their deaths, Zhu Yuanzhang bestowed the title of 'King' to the two of them, one was Zhong Shan *Wang* [king], the other was Kaiping *Wang*. Zhu Yuanzhang also had a military strategist …"

"That's right," Wei Xiaobao cut him off, "That military strategist was Liu Bowen; looking up he knew astronomy, looking down he knew geography, looking ahead he knew three thousand years, looking back he knew a thousand years." And then like an unceasing torrent he narrated about how Liu Bowen gained his capability of knowing everything under the heavens, that even the gods and demons could not understand his scheme, how he planned this and that strategy in fighting this war or that, how to predict things that happened a thousand *li* away.

Wu Zhirong's legs went numb, he could not endure anymore; he slid back and sat on the floor, and said with a forced laugh, "*Daren*'s story is so pleasant to hear, lowly officer's spirit is aroused. By *Daren*'s grace, lowly officer is thinking of listening while standing up, I wonder if it is possible?"

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Alright, stand up."

Propping himself against a chair, Wu Zhirong slowly stood up. "Reporting to

Daren," he said, "The 'Mr. Qing Tian' Wu Liuqi mentioned in his letter was precisely Liu Ji, Liu Bowen. That Liu Bowen was a Qingtian [county, Lishui] man from Zhejiang. Wu Liuqi himself wanted to be Xu Da or Chang Yuchun, and wanted that man surnamed Zha to be the Liu Bowen."

Wei Xiaobao said, "He wants to be Xu Da or Chang Yuchun, that's great. That man surnamed Zha wants to be the Liu Bowen, humph, he may not necessarily have that kind of skill. Do you think it's easy to be Liu Bowen? Liu Bowen's 'Shaobing Song' [lit. baked sesame seed-coated cake] said, 'Hand grasping a steel knife ninety-nine, killing the barbarians to the end before putting it down.' Hey, formidable, formidable!"

Wu Zhirong said, "*Daren* is really smart, you are absolutely correct. That Xu Da, Chang Yuchun and Liu Bowen, three men, were all fighting the Yuan army, they help Zhu Yuanzhang driving out the barbarians. The things that Wu Liuqi said in his letter clearly mean that he wanted to rise in rebellion, he wanted to kill Manchu people."

Wei Xiaobao was shocked; he thought, "Wu *Dage*'s intention, how can I not know? Do I need you to tell me? This letter indeed has enormous repercussion; it is by Heaven's providence that it fell into my hands." Thereupon he repeatedly nodded and reached out to pat Wu Zhirong's shoulder. "Good!" he said, "Our luck is very good! If you did not come and tell me about this, it would be terrible. His Majesty said that I am a general who depends on good luck; indeed the Holy Sage's golden mouth is proven to be right again."

Having his shoulder patted several times, Wu Zhirong felt the bones in his entire body went soft; he felt that ever since he came out of his mother's womb, he had never had such glory. He could not help but was deeply touched; with a choking voice he said, "*Daren* showed such affection, this kindness and grace, even if lowly officer has my body torn and my bones crushed, it is still hard to repay. *Daren* is good-luck general, lowly officer will follow you, being a good-luck soldier or good-luck servant, or even good-luck dog or good-luck horse; that will still bring honor to my ancestors."

Wei Xiaobao roared in laughter; he raised his hand to stroke Wu Zhirong's head. "Very good! Very good!" he said.

Wu Zhirong was tall. Realizing that it was not too convenient for Wei Xiaobao to reach out and stroke his head, he busily lowered his head to let him stroking the top of his head. Previously Wei Xiaobao was very angry; Wu Zhirong kneeled down, kowtowed and took off his hat, Wei Xiaobao pressed his palm on the smooth scalp where the hair was shaved, and slowly stroked toward his back, just like stroking a dog who begged to be petted while wagging its tail. When his palm reached the back of Wu Zhirong's head, Wei Xiaobao thought, "I don't want your torn body and crushed bones either, I just need to chop a damn blade right here." He asked, "Other than you, is there anybody else who knew about this matter?"

"No one, no one," Wu Zhirong replied, "Lowly officer realized the stake is very high, I did not dare to leak the least bit of rumor. If that rebel thief Wu Liuqi finds out that his rebellious conspiracy has been exposed, he might immediately rise in rebellion, and then *Daren* and lowly officer will not have the least bit of merit."

"True," Wei Xiaobao said, "You are very thoughtful. We must be very careful, we must not let *Futai* and *Fantai* know about it, they might rush to submit a report to the imperial court, hence snatching away your great contribution."

Wu Zhirong was over the moon; he bowed with cupped fist repeatedly. "Yes, yes," he said, "I completely rely on *Daren*'s support."

Wei Xiaobao put Gu Yanwu's letter into his pocket and said, "Just leave all these poetry anthology here, you quietly get Gu Yanwu, those several people here, after I interrogate them clearly, I will select troops and horses to escort you to Beijing. I will personally submit a report to His Majesty. In this great contribution, you are the first, I receive the benefit of your splendor and be the second."

Wu Zhirong was unable to contain his joy. "No, no," he busily said, "*Daren* is the first, lowly officer is second."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "After you go to see His Majesty, whatever you want to say to him, I will carefully teach you. As long as His Majesty is pleased, you want to be *Xunfu* or *Fantai*, just leave it to me."

Wu Zhirong was so happy that he almost fainted; with both hands he put the poetry anthology books on the table, and 'dong, dong, dong' knocking his head

on the floor before taking his leave. Wei Xiaobao was afraid he might change his mind midway, hence he appointed a team of Valiant Cavalry sergeants under the leadership of a *Zuoling* to accompany Wu Zhirong in escorting prisoners.

Upon returning to the inner hall, he sent someone to summon Li Lishi and the others for a discussion. Suddenly he saw Shuang'er came into his presence, kneeled down, and crying, "*Xianggong*," she said with a sob, "I want to ask you something."

Wei Xiaobao was greatly baffled; hastily he reached out to hold her hands and pull her up. Without letting her hands off he said tenderly, "Good Shuang'er, you are my lifeblood. Whatever it is, I will definitely do it for you." Seeing the tears kept streaming down her cheeks, he raised his left hand and wiped the tears with his sleeve.

"*Xianggong*," Shuang'er said, "This is a very difficult matter, but I … I simply must ask you."

Wei Xiaobao wrapped his left arm around her waistand said, "The more difficult thing to do, if I can get it done for you, the more it will prove that I dote on my good Shuang'er. What is it? Quickly tell me."

A hint of blush appeared on Shuang'er's pale face. "*Xianggong*," she said in a low voice, "I … I want to kill that government official who has just left. But you must not be angry with me."

Wei Xiaobao thought, "In this matter you and I are like-minded; now you came to ask me, this is extremely wonderful." He asked, "How did this government official offend you?"

Sobbing and sniffling, Shuang'er replied, "He did not offend me. This Wu Zhirong is my family's archenemy. The Zhuang Family's *Laoye*, *Shaoye* [old and young master, respectively] were all killed because of him."

Wei Xiaobao immediately understood; that night at the Zhuang Family's house, he saw everybody there was a widow, and there were a lof of memorial tablet arranged in one of the rooms, turned out the criminal ringleader, the main offender, was this man. "Are you sure you did not misidentify the person?" he asked.

Shuang'er's tears poured down her cheeks again as she said with a sob, "No … I can't possibly mistook him for someone else. That day he … he brought officers from *yamen* to the Zhuang Family to arrest people. I was still little, but his ferocious appearance, I cannot forget it no matter what."

Wei Xiaobao thought, "I must appear to be in a very difficult situation, then she would greatly see the favor I am giving her." Knitting his brows, he pretended to ponder deeply for half a day before hesitantly said, "He is a government official appointed by the imperial court, the Prefectural Magistrate of Yangzhou prefecture, the Emperor happened to send me to Yangzhou on a mission, if you killed him, I am afraid my official position will be in jeopardy. Just now he came to me with a very important matter; if you kill him, I am afraid … I am afraid …"

Shuang'er was deeply anxious, she said in tears, "I … I actually knew that I am going to give *Xianggong* a lot of trouble, but … Zhuang Family's *Laotaitai* [old Madame], *San Shaonainai* [third young mistress], they … they kowtowed in front of the memorial tablets every day, vowing to kill this evil government official surnamed Wu to take revenge and wipe out the grudge."

Wei Xiaobao slapped his thigh and said, "Alright! It's my good Shuang'er who asked me, even if you asked me to kill the Emperor, you asked me to kill myself, I will comply to your request, much less just one tiny *Zhifu*? But you have to give me a kiss on the mouth."

Shuang'er's entire face turned beet-red, she was happy and bashful at the same time; turning her head away, she said in a low voice, "*Xianggong* treats me this well, I … I have been yours long time ago. You … you …" Speaking to this point, she lowered her head.

Seeing her graceful, beautiful, and submissive demeanor, Wei Xiaobao's heart turned soft. He could not bear to be frivolous toward her anymore. "Very well," he said with a laugh, "When we achieve great success, I am going to kiss you on the mouth, you must not flee."

Shuang'er blushed even deeper; she nodded her head slowly.

"If you killed him right now," Wei Xiaobao said, "The revenge will not be sweet enough. I will let you bring him to the Zhuang Family, have him kneel down

before all Zhuang Family *Laoye*, *Shaoye*'s memorial tablets, let *San Shaonainai* and the others kill this dog's head with their own hands. What do you say?"

Shuang'er thought that it was a really great idea, but may not be necessarily real. With her round eyes opened wide, she looked at Wei Xiaobao, not daring to believe. "*Xianggong*," she said, "You are not lying to me, are you?"

"Why would I lie to you?" Wei Xiaobao said, "This dog official is your enemy, he is not mine. He was going to send me great riches and honor, yet I don't give it a damn. As long as little Shuang'er is sincerely nice to me, it is stronger than anything in the world!"

Shuang'er was very grateful in her heart, she leaned on him, and could not help but broke out in crying again. Wei Xiaobao pulled her soft, slender waist closer, he was very happy in his heart; he mused, "This readily available passion, even having it ten or eight a day, it's can't be considered too much. Why didn't that dog official Wu Zhirong kill Ah Ke's father? If Ah Ke also came to me asking me to avenge her, and let me to embrace her tightly, wouldn't it be nice?" But he immediately had a second thought: Ah Ke's father was either Li Zicheng or Wu Sangui, how could Wu Zhirong kill them?

They heard footsteps outside, and knew that Li Lishi and the others have arrived. "Don't worry about it," Wei Xiaobao said, "Right now I have something important I need to discuss with these people, go guard outside the door, don't let anybody come in, and don't eavesdrop our conversation either."

"Yes," Shuang'er replied, "I have never eavesdropped on your conversations." Suddenly she pulled Wei Xiaobao's hand, stooped down and kissed his hand, and then slipped out of the door.

Li Lishi and the other Tian Di Hui warriors entered the room and sat down. Wei Xiaobao said, "All *Gege*, last night I heard big news, it was an urgent matter, there was not enough time to discuss it with you all, hastily I went to Lovely Spring Courtyard. In the end my luck was not bad, although I created chaos, in the end I managed to save Mr. Gu Yanwu and Wu Liuqi *Dage*'s lives."

The warriors were greatly surprised; the previous night Wei *Xiangzhu* did indeed create preposterous scene. Visiting prostitute in a brothel was not a big deal, but taking out a big bed out of the brothel, transporting seven women and

parading the bed along the streets, it was indeed a hideous mess; turned out it was in order to save Gu Yanwu and Wu Liuqi. Even if they think until their heads explode, they would never have figured it out. Immediately everybody asked him for the details.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “When we were in Kunming, all *Gege* masqueraded as Wu Sangui’s warriors and went to the brothel to drink and fight. *Xiongdi* thought this trick was not bad, hence last night I repeated the fun and went one more time.”

The crowd of warriors nodded; they all thought, “So that’s what happened.”

Wei Xiaobao thought that if he talked too much, he would inevitably reveal the cloven foot; thereupon he said, “We do not need to talk about this matter in details.” Putting his hand into his pocket, he groped for Wu Liuqi’s letter and took it out.

Qian Laoben received it, spread it out on the table, and they all reviewed it together. They saw at the beginning of the letter it was written ‘To be inspected by my dear friend Mister Yihuang’, while at the end the signature said, ‘Iron Beggar in the snow’, four characters [xue zhong tie gai]. Everybody knew that ‘Iron Beggar in the snow’ was Wu Liuqi’s nickname, but they did not know who Mr. Yihuang was.

These people’s knowledge about literature was rather limited, when they read about ‘important event in the southwest’ they thought he was referring to Wu Sangui’s rebellion, but about ‘Passionately planning the matter of Zhong Shan, the great feat of Kaiping’, or something about ‘can’t be accomplished without Mr. Qing Tian’s planning’, et cetera, the secret language, allusion to classic story, they were completely at a loss. They all looked at each other in dismay, quietly waiting for Wei Xiaobao to explain.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “*Xiongdi*’s tummy is stuffed with Yangzhou’s steamed dumpling and long fish noodle, there is not the least bit of ink in it. I presume that in all *Gege*’s tummy there are more old wine than ink. Mr. Gu Yanwu will arrive shortly, we will invite him, old mister, to explain.”

While they were still talking, a personal guard came to report that there were guests came to visit, one was a Great Lama, the other was a Mongolian Prince.

Wei Xiaobao asked the Tian Di Hui warriors to act as his personal guards in receiving the guests, he was afraid that these two 'sworn brothers' would become hostile to him, while at the same time he also invited Ah Qi to come out.

When they met, Sangjie and Galdan was very warm, they praised Wei Xiaobao for holding *yi qi* in a very high regard. When Ah Qi finally appeared, they happily met each other, Galdan was bursting with joy. By this time Ah Qi's manacles had been removed, she wore heavy make-up and was dressed neatly.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Fortunately two *Gege*'s martial art skill is unrivalled that the sorcerers were killed and drove out; otherwise, *Xiongdi*'s little life could not be protected. That bunch of sorcerers' martial art skill was not weak, their number was superior. Two *Gege* used the few to defeat the many, you beat them until they piss in their pants in terror, and flee to the wilderness; *Xiongdi* is full of admiration. Let us have a feast to celebrate the heroic deed, to congratulate two *Gege* for your formidable renown over all the world, for your triumphal return."

Sangjie and Galdan understood clearly that they were captured by the Divine Dragon Cult, fortunately Wei Xiaobao released Madame Hong for an exchange of the two of them, yet going by Wei Xiaobao's speech it appeared that the two of them had defeated the enemy and inflicted heavy loss on them. Sangjie's face looked ashamed, but in his heart he was appreciative. But Galdan was radiant with delight, he was immensely proud in front of his sweetheart.

As soon as the Imperial Envoy mentioned a 'feast', the feast was immediately set up in the main hall. Wei Xiaobao stood up with a wine cup in his hand, flattering words continuously bubbling up toward his two sworn brothers, until finally even Sangjie had forgotten about the disgrace of being captured. Only when Wei Xiaobao praised his martial art skill as number one under the heavens that he repeatedly shook his hand, realizing that compared to Cult Leader Hong he was far inferior.

After drinking for a while, Sangjie and Galdan rose up to take their leave. Wei Xiaobao said, "Two *Gege*, I think it would be best if each of you write a memorial to the throne, let *Xiongdi* present it to the Emperor. In the future *Dage* wants to be Tibet's Living Buddha, *Er'ge* wants to be 'zheng ge'er hao' [see Chapter 39], in the Emperor's presence, *Xiongdi* will definitely 'beat the drum on the side'."

Speaking to this point, he lowered his voice and said, “Later on when that old fellow Wu Sangui deploys the troops in rebellion, and two *Gege* help the Emperor fighting the old fellow, how could our matter be possibly fail?”

The two of them were greatly delighted; they both saw the logic behind it. Wei Xiaobao took the two of them into the study room. Galdan said, “Your uncouth brother is not too competent in writing, how about *Xiongdi* write the memorial for me?”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “*Xiongdi*’s own name, only the character ‘Xiao’ (小) I can guarantee I write it correctly, my character ‘Wei’ is not reliable, and the character ‘Bao’, no matter how I do it, there’s always something not right about it. Let’s just get the secretary to write it for us.”

Sangjie said, “This matter is highly confidential, we can’t let other people know about it. Your uncouth brother’s writing is not too favorable either, but just let me do it. Fortunately we are not taking the exam for ‘*zhuangyuan*’ title, His Majesty also will not care if the writing style is good or not, as long as the intent is correct.”

Every single one of his fingers lost one section, but he was still able to write; thereupon he wrote is own memorial, and then wrote another one on Galdan’s behalf, and have Galdan put down his hand print and draw his signature.

The three of them reaffirmed their oath earlier that in the future they would enjoy riches and honor together, and support one another in trials and tribulations, and that they would never turn their back on the brotherhood sentiment. Wei Xiaobao ordered his men to fetch three trays of gold and presented the gold to his two sworn brothers and Ah Qi. He also had the men prepared horses and sedan chair and respectfully walked them out of the door.

Back to the main hall, his personal guard reported that Prefectural Magistrate Wu has arrived with the prisoners. Wei Xiaobao ordered Wu Zhirong to wait in the eastern reception hall, while he took Gu Yanwu and the others, three men, into the inner hall. He personally opened their manacles, and then ordered his personal guards to withdraw, only Tian Di Hui warriors remained. Then he closed the door and bowed and saluted. “Tian Di Hui Green Wood Hall *Xiangzhu* Wei Xiaobao, leading my fellow brethren pays our respect to Gu *Junshi* [military

strategist] and Mr. Zha, Mr. Lu."

That day when Zha Yihuang received Wu Liuqi's secret letter, in his delight he sent a message to Lu Liuliang to go to Yangzhou to see Gu Yanwu to discuss this matter. Unexpectedly Wu Zhirong happened to be investigating Gu Yanwu's poetry anthology, so that when the officers from *yamen* came to arrest him, they also arrest Zha and Lu, two people along. When the three of them were searched, Wu Liuqi's secret letter was found in Zha Yihuang's pocket. They were so ashamed and remorseful that they wished to die, thinking that their own lives were not a big deal, but if Wu Liuqi's conspiracy was exposed, their great undertaking might be spoiled. Who would have thought that a strange mountain peak suddenly appeared, the Imperial Envoy Minister unexpectedly professed himself as a *Xiangzhu* of Tian Di Hui? They could not help but were astonished and delighted, they felt as if they were dreaming.

During the Turtle-Slaying Assembly at Hejianfu the other day, Wei Xiaobao did not show his face at all, but Li Lishi, Xu Tianchuan, Priest Xuanzhen, Qian Laoben and the others were acquainted with Gu Yanwu. In the past, when Gu, Zha and Lu, three people were in distress on the boat at the canal, they received help from Tian Di Hui *Zongduozhu* Chen Jinnan. When they learned that the young imperial envoy in front of them was none other than Chen Jinnan's own disciple, all their doubts were gone; hence they happily chatted with each other.

Zha Yihuang explained the allusions of 'Zhong Shan, Kaiping, Mr. Qingtian', and so on in Wu Liuqi's letter for the benefit of Tian Di Hui warriors; they all agreed that it was indeed dangerous. Lu Liuliang sighed and said, "In the past, the three of us, plus Huang Lizhou, Huang *Xiong*, have received your revered master's help. Today we were not being careful and stirred up trouble, again we are rescued from disaster by Wei *Xiongdi*. Ay, indeed out of a hundred scholars not one is useful; worthy master and disciple's great benevolence and kindness will be even more difficult to repay."

Wei Xiaobao said, "We are all on the same side, why would Mr. Lu be modest?"

Zha Yihuang said, "When the Yangzhou *yamen* officers suddenly broke in, it was indeed like lightning on our ears. Realizing the situation was amiss, I hastily picked up Wu *Xiong*'s letter to rip it up, but my arms were grabbed by the

officers and twisted behind my back. I knew the catastrophe would not be minor. *Xiongdi* then decided on a plan, if I am tortured, I will confess that the writer of this letter, the 'Iron Beggar in the snow' is Wu Sangui. In any case *Xiongdi*'s old life cannot be guaranteed, but I must do everything I can to protect Wu Liuqi, Wu *Xiong*'s life."

Everybody burst into loud laughter; they all said that this trick was very clever. Zha Yihuang said, "That would be my last effort if I have no other choice. The name 'Iron Beggar in the snow' is renowned throughout the world, I am afraid I cannot put it on Wu Sangui's head. If the interrogator examined Wu *Xiong*'s handwriting, upon investigation it will be found to be a match, and then the truth will be revealed for sure."

Gu Yanwu said, "Twice we have leaked Wu *Xiong*'s secret, and twice we were saved; it can clearly be seen that there is an invisible Will of Heaven at work. Tatars' fate won't last long, Wu *Xiong*'s great merit will succeed. But from now on this matter can never be mentioned anymore. Perhaps for the third time we won't be as fortunate."

Everybody voiced their agreement. "Wei *Xiangzhu*," Gu Yanwu asked Wei Xiaobao, "What do you think we have to do for damage control?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "It is rare that we can meet with the three gentlemen, please stay here for a few days, we can enjoy wine together. We'll have that dog official Wu Zhirong come and let him stand on the side to watch, and so we will scare him to death. In the event that the dog official has guts and he did not die of fear, we'll simply chop his dog head with a saber."

Gu Yanwu laughed and said, "Although by doing this we vent the resentment in our hearts, I am afraid the information will leak. This dog official was appointed by the imperial court, if Wei *Xiangzhu* wants to kill him, we must have a criminal charge on him."

Wei Xiaobao pondered for a moment and then said, "I got it. I am going to ask Mr. Zha to forge a letter, supposedly written by Wu Sangui, addressed to the dog official. This dog official loves to brag, he said that according to the genealogy, Wu Sangui is his distant uncle. If forging a letter is too much trouble, just copy Wu *Dage*'s letter all the way through, but change the names on top

and bottom. No matter who colludes with Wu Sangui, I will chop his head, the young Emperor will definitely approve."

Everybody agreed that it was a good plan. Gu Yanwu laughed and said, "Wei *Xiangzhu* is creative and quick-thinking. This 'grafting flowers onto a tree' stratagem can be said 'one arrow, two golden eagles'; namely, we use the opponent's own methods to obtain retribution. Yihuang *Xiong*, please pick up your brush and start to write."

Zha Yihuang laughed and said, "I would never imagine that today I will write a letter on Wu Sangui, that old thief's behalf."

Wei Xiaobao had judged others by himself, thinking that forging a letter would be very difficult; hence he proposed to simply make a copy. But Gu, Zha and Lu, three people were famous scholars, to them, writing letters was just like Wei Xiaobao throwing dice or play Paigow, it was right down their alley; why would they want to copy someone else's letter?

Zha Yihuang picked up the brush and was ready to write; he asked, "I wonder if Wu Zhirong has an alias? If Wu Sangui wrote a letter using his alias, it will appear even more authentic."

"Gao *Dage*," Wei Xiaobao said, "Please ask the dog official."

Gao Yanchao went out to inquire. When he returned, he said with a laugh, "The dog official's alias is 'Xianyang'. He asked why we wanted to know his alias, I said that Imperial Envoy Minister wanted to write a letter to the two *Shangshu* of the Ministry of Appointments and Ministry of Justice in Beijing, to commend his meritorious service in details, submitting his official position and alias. The dog official smiled so wide that his mouth could not close, he rewarded me ten *taels* of silver." While saying that, he tossed a silver ingot in his hand up and down. Everybody roared in laughter.

Zha Yihuang finished the letter and handed it to Gu Yanwu; he said, "Ting Lin *Xiong*, do you think it can be used?"

Gu Yanwu took the letter. Lu Liuliang scooted next to him, they read together. "Marvelous," they both said.

Lu Liuliang laughed and said, "This sentence, 'Who would have known that our

Taizu [great ancestor, posthumous title for the founder of a dynasty] Emperor Gao's title Wu Guo [Wu state] unexpectedly agrees with our uncle and nephew's family name of three hundred years later?' This 'Wu' character will seal his death sentence; he can't offer excuses anymore."

Gu Yanwu laughed and said, "These two sentences, 'Desiring to behead the white snake and bestow a gale, hoping for my nephew to retrieve the shoe from underneath the bridge; consider to strive to get out of the trench and answer all calls from heaven, I sincerely hope my nephew will reach nobility.' That is a modification of Liuqi *Xiong*'s 'Passionately planning the matter of Zhong Shan, the great feat of Kaiping, will not be accomplished without Mr. Qing Tian's planning the operation.'"

Zha Yihuang laughed and said, "Blindly using the same pattern, copying the way they walk in Handan [i.e. slavishly copying others, one risks becoming a caricature]."

Tian Di Hui warriors looked at each other in dismay; they did not know what these three were talking about, they thought it was a code word of some secret society or secret language of Jianghu. Thereupon Gu Yanwu explained to everybody: Ming *Taizu* Zhu Yuanzhang at first called himself 'Wu Guo Gong' [state duke Wu], afterwards he was also known as 'Wu Wang' [king Wu]; the 'Wu' was identical to Wu Sangui, Wu Zhirong's family name. Beheading the white snake, bestowing a gale was a reference to Han Gaozu Liu Bang [first Han emperor, reigned 207-195 BC]. Retrieving a shoe from underneath the bridge was the old story of Zhang Liang. Zhu Yuanzhang rose up from the trench and was determined to answer all calls from heaven. Conferring nobility title in sincerity was a reference to Liu Bowen.

Wei Xiaobao clapped his hands and said, "This letter is better than the one Wu Liuqi *Dage* wrote; that Wu Sangui actually wanted to be the Emperor, it's just that comparing him to Hao Gaozu and Zhu Yuanzhang is holding him a bit too high."

Lu Liuliang laughed and said, "This is Wu Sangui holding himself too high, not Mr. Zha holding him up."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Right, right! I forgot that it was written by Wu

Sangui himself."

Zha Yihuang asked, "How do we sign the letter?"

"This letter," Gu Yanwu replied, "No matter who look at it, will know that it was written by Wu Sangui. The more obscure the signature, the more it will look authentic. Just sign it 'shu xi shou zha' [lit. uncle west hand write-down], four characters." Turning to Qian Laoben he said, "Qian *Xiong*, would you write down these four characters? Our writing is too scholarly, not like a military man who is used to lead troops."

Qian Laoben picked up the brush and gingerly wrote the four characters. He said apologetically, "These four characters are wobbly, they are too shapeless."

Gu Yanwu said, "Wu Sangui is a military man, naturally he would have this letter written by a scribe. These four-character signature is very good, they do not follow certain stroke rule, but look very bold, just like a military general's handwriting."

On the envelope, Zha Yihuang wrote, 'Personally presented to Yangzhou *Zhifu Laoye* [Prefectural Magistrate Master], private.' He put the letter into the envelope, and gave it to Wei Xiaobao. He smiled and said, "Forging a letter will unavoidably be harmful to our secret virtue, it's not men of honor's conduct, but in order to achieve the great undertaking, we are forced not to bother about trifles."

Wei Xiaobao mused, "To deal with this kind of dog thief Wu Zhirong, what's the big deal about forging a letter? Scholars are really ridiculous." He received the letter and said, "After this matter is accomplished, we are going to have a drink, we will have a reception for the three gentlemen."

Gu Yanwu said, "Wei *Xiongdi* and Liuqi *Xiong*, one 'wen' the other 'wu' [civil and military], are definitely the pillars of Ming family resurgence; Deng Gaomi and Guo Fenyang were no more than this. If we can really pull down that old thief Wu Sangui, it will be like severing one arm of the Tatars. Wei *Xiongdi*'s cup of wine, we'll wait until we achieve great success before we drink it. Hereby the three of us are taking our leave, so as not to tarry here too long, the information might leak, and spoil the important matter."

Although in his heart Wei Xiaobao held Gu Yanwu in high regard, but these

three scholars talked like they were ‘biting words and chewing characters’, with an allusion in every sentence so that even to understand half of what they say was not too easy; if he talked to them a bit too long, he would not feel comfortable. Thereupon when he heard that they were leaving, it was exactly what he had been hoping for. He thought, “I am sure the three of you gentlemen do not like to gamble; I am afraid if I asked you to go to the brothel to see the young women, your body and soul will be separated. If I cursed one time, ‘damn it’, your eyes will grow big, and your beard will stick out. It’s better for you to quickly excuse yourselves.” Thereupon he took out a fold of banknotes, and presented three thousand *taels* to each person as their traveling expense. And then he asked Xu Tianchuan and Gao Yanchao to escort them via the back door, and out of the city.

As soon as Gu, Zha and Lu, three people left, Wei Xiaobao immediately felt relieved. He thought, “Those people in the imperial court are also scholars, but they are interesting. Those high-ranking officers of Jiangsu province, such as Ma *Futai*, Mu *Fantai*, are also more interesting than Mr. Gu, Mr. Zha, and the other. Speaking about making friends, that dog head Wu Zhirong is still better than those three old misters.”

While he was still thinking about the inspector-general and the provincial administrative commissioner, his personal guard came to report than the inspector-general and the administrative commissioner were asking for an audience. Wei Xiaobao shivered, “Could it be that the information has leaked already?” he mused.

Wei Xiaobao went out of the hall to see the guests; seeing the two men’s solemn expression, he could not help but feeling anxious.

The host and guests saluted each other and sat. The inspector-general Ma You took out a document from his sleeve pocket, stood up, and presented it with both hands. “Imperial Envoy *Daren*,” he said, “There is an important matter.”

Wei Xiaobao received the document, and handed it over to the provincial administrative commissioner Mu Tianyan; he said, “*Xiongdi* is illiterate, would *Laoxiong* please read it?”

“Yes,” Mu Tianyan said, and opened the document. He already knew the

content of the document; thereupon he said, “*Daren*, the Ministry of War in the Capital sent a 600—*li* urgent message, instructed us to pass it on to *Daren*: Wu Sangui, that rebel thief has raised arm in rebellion.”

As soon as he heard it, Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted; he could not refrain from springing up and called out, “Damn it, that old fellow has really done it.”

Ma You and Mu Tianyan looked at each other in consternation. The imperial envoy minister heard the big news of Wu Sangui’s rebellion, unexpectedly he was wildly delighted; they wondered why he did that.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “His Majesty has a divine foresight; he had foreseen this matter long ago. Gentlemen do not need to panic, His Majesty’s troops and horses, army provisions, cannon, gunpowder, money for soldier’s pay, weapons, everything has been adequately prepared. It’s fine if that old fellow Wu Sangui does not revolt, but if he rebelled, we will definitely capture his Chen Yuanyuan.”

Although to Ma You and Mu Tianyan his words were neither fish nor fowl, when they heard that the Emperor was well-prepared, they were quite relieved. Wu Sangui was adept in the art of war, and under his command there were strong soldiers and sturdy horses. When they heard that Wu Sangui rose in rebellion, all government officials were trembling with fear; they were apprehensive that the black hat on their heads [i.e. official position] could not be guaranteed anymore.

Wei Xiaobao said, “There’s one thing I found it very strange.”

“Please advise,” the two men said together.

Wei Xiaobao said, “This news, did gentlemen learn about it just now?”

“Yes,” Ma You replied, “As soon as lowly officer received the Ministry of War’s document, I immediately notified *Fantai Daren*, and rushed over to *Daren*’s field headquarters.”

“Really no leak?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

The two of them replied together, “This is national affair involving military intelligence, we must ask *Daren* to decide. Lowly officer absolutely did not dare to leak it out.”

“But Yangzhou’s *Zhifu* already knew about it,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Don’t you think it’s a bit strange?”

Ma You and Mu Tianyan looked at each other again, they were very surprised. Ma You said, “May I ask *Daren*, what did Prefectural Magistrate Wu say?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Just now he secretively came to see me, telling me that there is something big happening in the southwest, someone wanted to make him Liu Bowen. He advised me to adapt to circumstances, and to close my mouth in front of the two of you. When I heard it, I did not understand; what Zhu Yuanzhang, Liu Bowen, and all that nonsense? While I was about to scold him, the two gentlemen arrived.”

The two men were shocked; their countenance changed greatly. Ma You’s intelligence was mediocre, but Mu Tianyan was rather good at adapting himself to changes, he said in a low voice, “If that Ol’ Wu really said that, it means that he was advising *Daren* to rebel. He really does not want his head anymore.”

“I don’t understand what he was talking about,” Wei Xiaobao said, “I was going to ask him to explain a bit clearer. He always throws literary stuff, something about arising first [xian fa] or arising later [hou fa]. I said Lao Tze was young, yet he had become high-ranking official, couldn’t it be regarded as arising first?”

Ma You and Mu Tianyan both thought, “That Wu *Zhifu* must have said, ‘gaining the initiative by striking first [xian fa zhi ren], arising later to control the people [hou fa zhi ren]’. Imperial Envoy *Daren* is unlearned, he thought it was ‘developing first, developing later’ [xian fa da, hou fa da].” The two of them were mature and experienced, they did not say anything.

Actually, Wei Xiaobao had heard the expression ‘gaining the initiative by striking first’ countless times from the storytellers since he was little; this time it was not because he was unlearned, rather, he was playing dumb.

Ma You said, “What a big guts this Wu *Zhifu* has! I wonder if he has left?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “He is still waiting here, he said he wanted to discuss important matters with me. Humph, he is just a tiny prefectural magistrate, what large-scale program of lasting importance he can possibly discuss with me? If it is Wu Sangui’s large-scale program, *Xiongdi* would rather discuss it with the

two gentlemen, I won't possibly listen to minor prefectural magistrate's long-winded words."

"Yes, yes," Ma You said, "Is it possible for *Daren* to call Wu *Zhifu* over? Let lowly officer ask him a few questions."

"Very good!" Wei Xiaobao said. He turned toward his personal guard, "Invite Wu *Zhifu* here."

As Wu Zhirong entered the hall, seeing the inspector-general and the provincial administrative commissioner were present, he could not help feeling delighted and anxious and the same time. Delighted because the Imperial Envoy Minister attached great importance to his secret report that he unexpectedly summon both *Futai* and *Fantai* over to discuss this matter, anxious because since the information already leaked out, the inspector-general and the administrative commissioner would inevitably share his great merit. Immediately he stepped forward to salute and pay his respect, and then stood with arms hung down.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Wu *Zhifu*, please sit down."

"Yes, yes," Wu Zhirong replied, "Thank you very much *Daren* for granting me a seat." He sat with his buttocks barely covered the chair.

"Wu *Zhifu*," Wei Xiaobao said, "You have an important matter you wanted to discuss with *Xiongdi*, although you repeatedly said that we can't let *Futai Daren* and *Fantai Daren* know about it, this matter is of an utmost importance, I have no choice but to invite two *Daren* to discuss it over; please do not take offense."

Wu Zhirong's countenance looked awkward; hastily he stood up and bowed to Wei Xiaobao and *Futai* and *Fantai* and said with a forced laugh, "Lowly officer was too brazen, would three *Daren* please understand, this … this …" He wanted to gloss over several things, but Wei Xiaobao got right to the point [orig. 'open the door and see the mountain'] and said it out, hence he found it very difficult to cover up. No wonder the inspector-general and the provincial administrative commissioner's countenance looked very unsightly.

Wei Xiaobao smiled and said, "Wu *Zhifu*'s information is very quick; he said that in the southwest there is a great general with authority over troops and horses that is going to deploy troops in rebellion one of these days. The way he

deploy troops is desperately serious, it will shake the world, His Majesty's dragon palace courtyard will be unstable, can't say for sure our heads might also fall down. Is that right?"

"Yes," Wu Zhirong replied, "But three *Daren*'s flood of good fortune fills the heavens, naturally the misfortune will turn into blessing, ominousness will turn into auspiciousness, definitely all taboos are off."

"In this matter we will have to depend on Wu *Daren*'s good fortune," Wei Xiaobao said, "Wu *Daren*, this general shares the same ancestor with you, he is also surnamed Wu?"

"Yes," Wu Zhirong replied, "This is our ancestor's …"

Wei Xiaobao cut him off, "You have obtained this general's letter, it was written personally by him, are you sure it is not fake?"

"Absolutely not," Wu Zhirong replied, "Definitely it is not fake."

Wei Xiaobao nodded and said, "Although in this letter there is no mention of deploying troops in rebellion, but it did mention Zhu Yuanzhang, Liu Bowen, what have you. *Xiongdi* did not study books, I do not understand what is written in the letter, Wu *Daren* explained in details the meaning of the letter, you wanted *Xiongdi* to take immediate action, something about arising first or arising later, you said it's a chance that's hard to come by in a hundred years, that great riches and honor certainly cannot be disposed of, that *Xiongdi* may be granted the title *Wang* [king], and Wu *Daren* may be granted the title *Bojue* [earl], is that right?"

Wu Zhirong replied, "That was lowly officer's erroneous views, *Daren*'s clear judgment is a hundred times better compared lowly officer's. The content of the letter is indeed as *Daren* said."

From his right hand sleeve Wei Xiaobao took out Wu Liuqi's letter and held it in front of Wu Zhirong. His body leaned sideways to cover up the letter. "This is the letter, isn't it?" he asked, "Look carefully, this is of a grave importance, must not make mistake."

"Yes, yes," Wu Zhirong replied, "This is the letter, it can't be wrong."

"Very good," Wei Xiaobao said." He put the letter back into his right hand

sleeve, and returned to his seat. “Wu *Zhifu*,” he said, “Please withdraw momentarily, I will discuss it over with *Futai Daren* and *Fantai Daren*. It seems that our three people’s glory, riches and honor, will have to depend entirely on you, Wu *Daren*. Ha ha …”

Wu Zhirong could not conceal the complacent look on his face; he bowed to salute the three men again, and said, “I depend entirely on three *Daren*’s cultivation.” Bowing, he slowly withdrew.

Wei Xiaobao waited until he reached the door before asking, ““Wu *Zhifu*, what is your alias?”

“I don’t dare,” Wu Zhirong said, “Lowly officer’s humble name is Zhirong [lit. his glory], in manuscript character Xianyang [to praise/commend/hallow].”

Wei Xiaobao nodded. “That’s all,” he said.

When Wei Xiaobao was interrogating Wu Zhirong, in their hearts Ma You and Mu Tianyan were furious, but according to bureaucratic rule, when the superior officer was talking, the subordinate must not interrupt. Ma You was hot-tempered, he was about to lash it out, but Wei Xiaobao ordered Wu Zhirong to withdraw, hence he could not help the veins from bulging out his forehead, his entire face from swelling deep red.

From his left hand sleeve Wei Xiaobao took out the letter Zha Yihuang forged. “Gentlemen, please take a look at this letter,” he said, “That servant [usually used in derogatory way] Wu Zhirong said that this letter is indeed serious. *Xiongdi* has never learned books, I don’t know if he was telling the truth or a lie.”

Ma You received the letter. He saw written on the envelope was ‘Personally presented to Yangzhou *Zhifu Laoye*, private.’ He pulled the letter out and look at it together with Mu Tianyan. They saw the addressee was ‘Xianyang my nephew’.

The more the two people looked, the angrier they were. Without waiting until he finished reading, Ma You slapped the table and shouted, “That dog head is too audacious, let me kill him with a saber.”

Mu Tianyan was more careful, he thought Wu Zhirong dared to openly advise a superior officer to rebel, it was a bit too unreasonable. However, just now Wei

Xiaobao questioned him in their presence, they heard each sentence the opposite party gave in answer, why would he doubt it? The previous day in front of the Chanzhi Temple enjoying the Chinese peony, Wu Zhirong did say that Wu Sangui was his distant uncle. Apparently Wu Zhirong knew that Wu Sangui rebellion would be successful, he must be so pleased that he lost his senses and hence had been acting absolutely unrestrained.

"Is this letter really written by Wu Sangui for him?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

"That dog head himself said that it absolutely true," Ma You replied.

"The letter is lengthy and talked about many things," Wei Xiaobao said, "What exactly is it saying? Would two gentlemen explain it to *Xiongdi*?"

Thereupon Mu Tianyan explained line by line, the classical quotations about 'Beheading the white snake and bestow a gale', and 'Retrieving the shoe from underneath the bridge', 'Striving to get out of the trench and answer all calls from heaven', and 'reaching nobility in sincerity', and so on.

Ma You said, "Just this sentence alone, 'Our *Taizu* Emperor Gao's title Wu Guo' is enough to have his entire family exterminated."

Mu Tianyan nodded; he said, "I heard that in this rebel Wu matter, it has something to do with the third Zhu crown prince's appeal, something about restoring Ming Family."

While they were still talking, suddenly came the report that the Imperial Bodyguards from the Capital had arrived to announce the Imperial Edict. Wei Xiaobao and Ma You and Mu Tianyan kneeled down to receive the decree; actually, Kangxi was summoning Wei Xiaobao to hurry back to the Capital, as for the imperial order to build Martyr Shrine in Yangzhou, it was to be handed over to Jiangsu Province's Administrative Commisioner to finish it. Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted, he thought, "The young Emperor is fighting Wu Sangui; if he sent me to be the Grand Marshal, that would be very impressive."

Ma You and Mu Tianyan could hear the encouragement and exhortation tone in the Imperial Edict, they immediately congratulated him on his coming promotion. Wei Xiaobao said, "Tomorrow *Xiongdi* will return to the Capital. When I kowtow in front of His Majesty, I will commend on two gentlemen's great accomplishment in your official duty. It's just that how well two gentlemen

are doing your official duty, I am ashamed to admit, but honestly *Xiongdi* is not too clear; I am forced to ask two gentlemen to tell me."

Futai and *Fantai* were greatly delighted, they cupped their fist to express their thanks. And thus Mu Tianyan spoke highly of the inspector-general's political achievements. He racked his brains to recall Kangxi's temperament, and tried his best to explain how Ma You worked diligently in the government, how he loved the people, how he promoted religion and virtue, and so on. Among these, nine out of ten were bogus. Ma You listened with smile so wide that he was unable to put his lips together. Afterwards Mu Tianyan also listed several achievements of his own; although the words were simple, all were real meritorious service.

"I have remembered all of these," Wei Xiaobao said, "We will also add another big contribution: Rebel Wu's Rebellion. His Majesty abhorred this matter extremely, this Wu Zhirong wanted to be the one who respond from within, he wanted all civil and military officials of the entire province of Jiangsu to revolt together, fortunately the three of us investigated and found it out. Once this report goes up, we won't be able to avoid titles and rewards. Tomorrow *Xiongdi* will leave for the Capital, two gentlemen please write a memorial to the Emperor."

Futai and *Fantai* spoke together, "This is Wei *Daren*'s great merit, lowly officers do not dare to claim credit due to others."

"No need to be polite," Wei Xiaobao said, "Let's just consider the three of us render the merit together."

Mu Tianyan added, "*Zongdu* [governor-general] Ma *Daren* has returned to Jiangning, when Imperial Envoy Minister returns to present the memorial to the Holy Sage, it would be best if you also speak a few good words on Ma *Daren*'s behalf."

"Very well," Wei Xiaobao said, "Speaking a few good words does not need any capital."

Ma You and Mu Tianyan expressed their gratitude again before taking their leave. Wei Xiaobao immediately ordered Xu Tianchuan and the others to bind Wu Zhirong and stuffed his mouth with a piece of hemp cloth so that he could not talk even if he wanted to. The fear and bewilderment in Wu Zhirong's heart

was unspeakable.

Early in the morning the next day, each and every one of civil and military officials in the city of Yangzhou had already lined up in the hall, waiting for the Imperial Envoy Minister to grant them audience. Each one had a heavy gift. Actually, being a government official in Yangzhou, they were already stationed at the world's most plentiful place; each government official was not looking for promotion, they were only hoping that when the Imperial Envoy Minister returned to Beijing, he would say a few good words on their behalf, then they would be perfectly contented if they could occupy their current position for a few more years.

The previous day the governor-general had also obtained the news, and had travelled overnight to Yangzhou. Naturally the gift he and the inspector-general brought was more serious. Yangzhou prefecture received three years of land tax exemption, there would be considerable amount of commission all-around. Although Wei Xiaobao did not have time to personally manage it, the *Fantai* had already presented the commission due him. The military leaders and personal attendants who came with Wei Xiaobao also received ample gifts and gold.

Ma You already prepared a memorial to the throne, which he asked Wei Xiaobao to personally present it to the Emperor. In the memorial it was detailed how Wei Xiaobao opened inquiries and secret investigation, how he personally enter dangerous zone before he could uncover Wu Sangui and Wu Zhirong conspiracy, et cetera; naturally it was greatly exaggerated, even the governor-general, the inspector-general, and the administrative commissioner, three people, who were rendering their assistance on the side, were not without merit.

Mu Tianyan said, "His Majesty is deploying the troops against Wu Sangui, it's a pity that lowly officer is a civil officer, I do not have the skill to go into battle and kill the traitor. Lowly officer has received order from *Zongdu Daren* and *Futai Daren* that within ten days we are going to send a batch of army provisions to Hunan, to be used by His Majesty."

Wei Xiaobao happily said, "The main force has not been deployed, the army provisions are already in place. Three gentlemen are very thoughtful, His Majesty will definitely be very happy."

After all the government officials were dismissed, Wei Xiaobao sent his personal guard to Lovely Spring Courtyard to pick his mother. He changed into civilian clothes and met his mother. Wei Chunfang did not know that her son was a high-ranking official, she thought he cheated in gambling, and had won a large sum of money. When she heard that he wanted to take her to Beijing to have a happy and prosperous life there, she shook her head at once and said, “Money from gambling, today the left hand wins it, tomorrow the right hand loses it. By the time I get to Beijing, you will have lost everything; perhaps you will sell *Laoniang* [your old mother] to the joy house. If *Laoniang* wants to do business, staying in Yangzhou is better. In Beijing, that bent-tongue language of the bureaucrat, *Laoniang* cannot speak.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Ma, please set your hundred and twenty hearts at ease. When we get to Beijing, you will have servant girls and older female servants, you won’t need to do anything. The money that I have, we won’t be able to spend it forever.”

Wei Chunfang did not stop shaking her head, “If I don’t have anything to do, I will be suffocated to death of boredom. Servant girls and older female servants, *Laoniang* has never had the good fortune to enjoy it, in less than three days I would have to cut my braids.”

Wei Xiaobao knew his mother’s temperament; he thought that if she had to sit all day long in a big courtyard without doing anything, she would not have the least bit of interest. Thereupon he took out a stack of banknotes, altogether there were fifty thousand *taels*, and said, “Ma, I am giving you this money. Go and buy the Lovely Spring Courtyard, you can be the proprietress. I’ll say you can also buy three more courtyards; we can open Lovely Spring Courtyard, Lovely Summer Courtyard, Lovely Autumn Courtyard and Lovely Winter Courtyard, the four seasons. We can make money all year long.”

But in her bosom Wei Chunfang did not have high aims; she laughed and said, “I will go have someone look at these banknotes, whether they are genuine or fake. If they indeed can be cashed, *Laoniang* will be very happy to manage a small courtyard. If you want to open big courtyard, we’ll wait until you grow up, and then you can be the boss.” Lowering her voice, she asked, “Xiaobao, your large sum of money, you did not get it from stealing or robbing, did you?”

From his pouch Wei Xiaobao took four dice and called out, “House full of red!” [See also note 22, Chapter 34] while throwing the dice onto the table. Sure enough, all four dice showed four dots on the top face.

Wei Chunfang was greatly delighted and felt relieved instantly. She laughed and said, “Little b@stard has mastered this trick, even if you lose, you won’t be poor.”

(Book note: In the original block printed edition of Gu Yanwu’s poem, there were a lot of codeword, rhyming characters to substitute the intended words, such as ‘yu’ [expect/anticipate] for ‘hu’ [non-Han people, barbarian], ‘zhi’ [support/sustain] for ‘yi’ [barbarian], and so on, to avoid violating the taboo, making it hard for the later generations to decipher. Mr. Pan Zhonggui wrote ‘Examination on Ting Lin Poems’ [‘pavilion forest’ was Gu Yanwu’s alias]; he added comprehensive explanation to make the poems clear. Our book uses Mr. Pan’s work as reference.)

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[1] Zhuge Liang (181-234), military leader and prime minister of Shu Han during the Three Kingdoms period, the main hero of the fictional Romance of Three Kingdoms, where he is portrayed as a sage and military genius. Liu Bowen (1311-1375), general under the first Ming emperor Zu Yuanzhang, also has a reputation as a military genius.

[2] ‘Han jian’ literally means ‘traitor to China (i.e. Han people)’, I usually just simplify it to ‘traitor’. Here Wei Xiaobao was going to say ‘da han jian’.

[3] Three-long two-short (三长两短) is an idiom means ‘unexpected misfortune/accident’.

[4] An idiom from Zhuangzi: female beauty captivating even the birds and beasts.

[5] These seven substances are considered life’s daily necessities in ancient China.

[6] The phrase ‘written order’ is actually ‘shou yu’, with ‘shou’ means ‘hand’.

[7] Orig. ‘chu jia ren’ – those who left home to become monk or nun (applicable to either Buddhist or Taoist). Jijing literally means ‘peace’ or ‘quiet’. Reminder: ‘Daren’ (lit. big person) is the term used by commoner/subordinate to address government official/superior.

[8] Xi Shi (c. 450 BC), famous Chinese beauty, foremost of the Four legendary beauties, given by King Gou Jian of Yue as concubine to King of Wu as part of a successful plan to destroy Wu. Yáng Guìfēi, or Yang Yuhuan (719-756), famous Tang beauty, consort of Emperor Xuanzhong, blamed for extravagance and killed as a scapegoat during the Anshi rebellion.

[9] Daji (c. 11th century BC), mythical fox spirit and concubine of the last Shang Dynasty Emperor Zhou Xin.

[10] Lit. lowly concubine; it can also mean ‘I, your servant’ (deprecatory self-reference for women).

[11] I found partial translation in The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature, Vol. 2, edited by Kang-I Sun Chang and Stephen Owen, copyright Cambridge University Press 2010. Unfortunately, I can’t find the rest. Therefore, as you see the shift from highly polished sentences to crude, literal translation, you know where the real translator’s work ends and the half-baked translator’s work starts.

[12] **夫差**, I am not sure what it is, a friend says that it was government official, like governor or deputy.

[13] **娘个贱胎踏踏叫**, again, I don’t know what it is. Perhaps a saying or an idiom.

[14] Li Zicheng, the Roaming King (Chuang Wang), see also Chapter 27, note 1.

[15] Orig. ‘die die’ (pronounced dee-eh), also in subsequent sentences. See also Chapter 1.

[16] Orig. ‘bo mu’ – wife of father’s elder brother, a polite form of address for a

woman who is about the age or older than one's mother.

[17] Ah Yi – maternal aunt, a polite form of address for a woman who is younger than one's parents.

[18] Hong Niangzi literally means Red Madame. Coincidentally, these two names (Li Yan and Hong Niangzi) also appeared in Liang Yusheng's White Haired Demoness (See WHD, translated by Faerie Queene and yours truly. The story of Li Yan and the Red Madame can be found in Chapter 21).

[19] Orig. 'Jiao' – a legendary dragon with the ability to control rain and floods.

[20] This book note does not exist in the book (3rd edition), but it does in the online text (2nd edition).

[21] My dictionary did not give me any names, but Yahoo! Babelfish returned 'Ferdinand Verbiest'. Wikipedia has an article on him. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ferdinand_Verbiest [22] Johann Adam Schall von Bell, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tang_Ruowang.

[23] Regnal name of the 15th Ming Emperor, Zhu Youxiao (1605-1627), reigned 1620-1627. Zhu Youxiao (or Youjiao?) also appeared in Liang Yusheng's White Haired Demoness (See WHD, translated by Faerie Queene and yours truly).

[24] Yang Guangxian, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yang_Guangxian (Courtesy of Smurf120) [25] In Chinese, ten to nineteen start with the character 'ten', shi, shi yi, shi er (ten, eleven, twelve), and so on. Hence Shuang'er birthday could be anywhere between ten and nineteen.

[26] Orig. 'shengshang' [lit. 'the saint'], courtier's or minister's form of address for the current Emperor.

[27] Orig. 'wan shui' – ten thousand years.

[28] Northeast China/Manchuria. Lit. 'east of the Pass' (Shanhai Pass).

[29] Jing – quiet/peaceful/to make tranquil/to pacify, Hai – ocean/sea.

[30] Lit. old younger brother, an affectionate form of address to a much younger man.

[31] Shuntian (lit. 'obey-the-heaven') is an another name for Beijing.

[32] A general of Shu in Romance of the Three Kingdons, portrayed as an old fighter.

[33] FYI, Wei Xiaobao was a *Dutong* [commander], under him was *Fu Dutong* [deputy commander]; and then *Canling*. Hence he made Shi Lang two ranks below him.

[34] 1 tael = 1/16 catty, approximately equal to modern 50 grams.

[35] Da – great, Gu – abbreviation for Tianjin (also called Jin Gu).

[36] Lit. 'eat all', in the context of playing cards: 'sweeping the (card) deck clean'.

[37] Orig. 'tong pei', again, in the context of playing cards: 'lost to everybody'.

[38] According to Chinese legend, the Dragon Palace is where the Dragon King resides, at the bottom of the Eastern Sea.

[39] A form of theatrical double act, popular since Qing dynasty, with one player seated stage front and acted out the poem or song of the second player hidden backstage.

[40] Hall full of red (Man tan hong) – success across the board, victory in everything one touches.

[41] Yellow way [huang dao] – the ecliptic (plane of the solar system); Black Way [hei dao] – usually refer to underground/clandestine operation.

[42] Wooden percussion instrument used in Buddhist meditation.

[43] A prefecture level city in Heilongjiang province, northeast China.

[44] Orig. ‘gui po’, foreign b1tch or foreign woman (Courtesy of Ren Wo Xing and CFT).

[45] Albazino is a village (selo) in Skovorodinsky District of Amur Oblast, Russia, noted as the site of Albazin, the first Russian settlement on the Amur River. Later in 17th century, the town was center of a petty kingdom known as Yagsi (Manchu: Yaksa; Chinese: Yakesa). The name of state came from Nikifor Chernigovsky's coat of arms - Jaxa.

[46] Actually, the literal translation is: one who passes on a story or communicates a message, not necessarily an interpreter.

[47] Tou laozi: tou – classifier for animal, laozi – old man, father, ‘I, your father’.

[48] Laotouzi: old man, used contemptuously.

[49] Fyodor (Theodore) III Alexeyevich of Russia (9 June 1661 – 7 May 1682) was the Tsar of all Russia between 1676 and 1682. (From Wikipedia) [50] The dictionary definitions are gunmen/musketeer (from ‘musket’), but when the word ‘musketeer’ my mind, I would imagine Athos, Porthos, Aramis and D’Artagnan; hence I opted to use the first definition. Addtitional info, courtesy of Ace High: Streltsý is the Russian version of musketeers. They were armed with firearms (arquebuses, muskets). They are also collectively known as Marksman Troops (Стрелецкое Войско).

[51] Wu Zetian (624-705), Tang Empress, reigned 690-705.

[52] Jiang Ziya (dates of birth unknown - 1015 B.C.), a Chinese historical and legendary figure who resided next to the Weishui River about 3,000 years ago. A sage and military strategist, Jiang Ziya was called upon by King Wen of Zhou to serve as prime minister. His purported teachings to King Wen form the basis of the Six Secret Teachings.

[53] King Wu of Zhou (-1043), personal name Ji Fa, reigned 1046-1043 BC as

first king of Western Zhou dynasty 1046-1043 BC

[54] Cao Cao (155-220), famous statesman and general at the end of Han, noted poet and calligrapher, later warlord, founder and first king of Cao Wei, father of Emperor Cao Pi. Cao Cao was the main villain of novel the Romance of Three Kingdoms.

[55] Zhang Xianzhong (September 18, 1606 – January 2, 1647), nicknamed Yellow Tiger, was a Chinese rebel leader who conquered Sichuan Province in the middle of the 17th century. Upon capturing it, he declared himself emperor of the Daxi Dynasty. According to Chinese chronicles, many scholars rejected that claim, so he had them massacred. After killing the scholars, he went after the women, merchants, and all the officials. Then he had his soldiers kill each other and the officers' wives' feet cut off and put on top of a mound.

[56] Hung Taiji (1592-1643), 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; posthumous name Qing Taizu.

[57] According to legend, fox demon often disguise itself as beautiful woman, but it was not able to hid its tail; hence the saying ‘exposing the fox tail’ means ‘revealing one’s evil nature’.

[58] These idioms mean ‘surreptitiously substitute one thing for another’, and ‘walk off with someone else’s possession’, respectively.

[59] Lao-tze, Chinese philosopher (c. 500BC), the founder of Taoism.

[60] These four characters are surnames. I don’t know what it is, but I am guessing it refers to some great literary talent of the past.

[61] Shi Jin is a fictional character in the Water Margin. He ranks twenty third of the thirty Heavenly Spirits of the 108 Liangshan heroes and is nicknamed Nine Tattooed Dragons. He is one of the Eight Tiger Cub Vanguard Generals of the Liangshan cavalry. He sports flowery tattoos all over his body, as well as nine dragon tattoos on his upper torso, which earns him the nickname Nine Tattooed

Dragons. (Courtesy of Ace High) [62] A shàngshū (尚書) is a board chairman, president or in this case, a minister. Ming Zhu is a Chairman/President of Board of War, or the Minister of War, possible the Left Minister of War. (Courtesy of Ace High) [63] Croton has been used in traditional Chinese medicine to treat severe constipation since the seed of the plant can cause diarrhoea to human. Apparently, it has the same effect on horses. (Courtesy of Ace High) [64] Orig. 'jiaolong' – legendary dragon with the ability to control rain and floods.

[65] All were female warriors. I could not find any useful information on them other than from Hong Kong TV series/movies: Fan Lihua from 'Lady Fan' and Yu Taijun from 'Saving General Yang', Mu Guiying from 'Legendary Amazons' (Yang Saga/Stories of the Yang Clan). *Additional info courtesy of Ace High*:

1. Fan Lihua was the wife of Tang Dynasty General Xue Dingshan. She was a woman warrior from a minority tribe. As a capable and independent fighter, she insisted on being accepted as her husband's partner and not his subordinate; the mutually strong-willed and unyielding couple argued constantly. At last, she moved back to her old home, and the hurt and angry husband decided to divorce her. Three times General Xue wrote her a letter of divorcement, but each time he could not bring himself to send it. Meanwhile, their old enemy had regrouped, and attacked. Xue Dingshan resisted, but soon realized that victory was impossible without the aid of his estranged wife. Swallowing his pride, the General called on her to seek her help. After arguing out their mutual grievances, the couple reunited and together forced the enemy into retreat.
2. She (Yu) Taijun was the widow of General Yang Ye of the Yang Family Generals. At the age of 100, widow She Taijun, persuaded the Emperor to allow her to lead the troops with her granddaughter-in-law, Mu Guiying. Under She Taijun and Mu Guiying's leadership, the Northern Song army successfully defeated the enemy.
3. Mu Guiying was the daughter of Mu Ke, an official of the Song court who had been wrongfully sent into exile. Mu Guiying grew up in his fortress on Mount Mu which was where young people who distrusted the Emperor came. She practiced martial art skills from young age and mastered many

esoteric aspects of it. The special skills she developed proved useful in helping her break the famous Heavenly-Gate Formation of the Liaos. But hers is a story of turning her back on her father and joining the side of her husband's illustrious family of generals. Her life greatly changed when she met Yang Zongbao, scion of the illustrious Yang family of generals. He was the only male heir of this illustrious family. Rash and hot-headed, he provoked an argument with Mui Guiying which escalated into a full-blown duel. In the process, the two fell in love and Yang demanded the Dragon-Subduing Wood which the Song forces direly needed to counter the Heavenly-Gate Formation. Mu Guiying helped her husband get the Wood and chose to cast her lot with the Yang family. She thus left Mount Mu to serve the court her father despised. She was the second woman, after her grandmother-in-law, Yu Taijun, to hold the seal of Supreme Commander, and with it she led the Imperial Song troops to crack the Heavenly-Gate Formation.

[66] Gao Lishi (684–762), formally the Duke of Qi, was a eunuch official of the Chinese dynasty Tang Dynasty and Wu Zetian's Zhou Dynasty, becoming particularly powerful during Emperor Xuanzong of Tang's reign. He is believed to have been in charge of many decisions that were supposed to be the emperor's responsibility during Emperor Xuanzong's later years, and was believed to have been richer than many of the nobility of the era.

Wei Zhongxian (1568 – October 19, 1627) is considered by most historians as the most powerful and notorious eunuch in Chinese history. Originally a hoodlum and gambler, he took the step of becoming a eunuch and entering palace service to escape from his creditors. After entering the palace, he got into the service of Madam Ke, the wet-nurse of the future Ming emperor. The couple began manipulating the Tianqi Emperor, who renamed him Wei Zhongxian. The emperor's favor later gave Wei absolute power over the court.

Wikipedia has full article on each man. (Incidentally, Wei Zhongxian was an important character in White Hair Demoness, translated by Faerie Queene and yours truly.) [67] Tumu Rebellion or Battle of Tumu Fortress http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tumu_Crisis.

[68] Paradise here refers to 'the dwelling place of Buddhist Immortals'.

[69] Not sure if this is a place's name. Chai – firewood, Sang – mulberry tree, Kou – mouth/entrance.

[70] The Viceroy of Liangjiang (两江总督), fully referred to as the Governor General of the two Yangtze Provinces and surrounding areas, overseeing military affairs, food production; Manager of waterways; Director of Civil Affairs, was one of eight regional viceroys in China proper during the Qing Dynasty of China. The Viceroy of Liangjiang had jurisdiction over the provinces of Jiangsu, Jiangxi and Anhui. Because Jiangsu and Anhui were once the combined province of Jiangnan (South of the Yangtze), the province was known, along with Jiangxi (west of the Yangtze) as the two rivers (jiang), hence the name 'Liangjiang'. Chinese historians often rank the Viceroy of Zhili as the most honorable and powerful, and the Viceroy of Liangjiang as the richest of the eight (Courtesy of Ace High).

[71] Compiled by Li Shizhen, c. 1596.

[72] Wang Anshi (1021-1086), Song Dynasty politician and writer, one of the Eight Giants.

[73] Duke of Wenzheng, 'wen (culture/literature/gentle) zheng (upright/just)' being his posthumous title.

[74] In these three phrases, the word 'tremble' (han) rhymes with the surname Han, the word 'busted guts' (po dan) rhymes with the surname Fan, and the word 'knee down' [xia gui] rhymes with the surname Wei.

[75] A Message To Han Cho The Yangzhou Magistrate, http://www.shiku.org/xlib/lingshidao/hanshi/dumu.htm [76] A Confession, from the same web site.

[77] Qin Guan (1049-1100), Song Dynasty Poet. I found an English version (Translated by Laijon Liu), but it seems to be a different poem. Perhaps Mr. Liu was translating the essence, while I translate it literally?

http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/qin-guan-wang-hai-chao-watching-the-waves/

[78] 'Bao the Dragon Image', fictional name used for Bao Zheng (999-1062), Northern Song official renowned for his honesty. Justice Bao stories were based on this character.

[79] Gelugpa School of Tibetan Buddhism.

[80] Wikipedia has a couple articles on *Dzungar* and *Galdan*, as well as Sangjie (*Sengge*). If you are interested, search using those three keywords.

[81] Tang Bohu or Tang Yin (1470 – 1523), Ming painter and poet, one of four great Jiangnan talents of the Ming Dynasty.

[82] Hero and Heroines: Orig. 'qun xiong' and 'qun ci', with the word 'xiong' and 'ci' refer to 'male' and 'female' species, usually used to describe animals.

[83] Xi Shi (c. 450 BC), famous Chinese beauty, foremost of the Four legendary beauties, given by King Gou Jian of Yue as concubine to King of Wu as part of a successful plan to destroy Wu. Yang Yuhuan or Yang Guifei (719-756), famous Tang beauty, consort of Emperor Xuanzhong, blamed for extravagance and killed as a scapegoat during the Anshi rebellion.

[84] Qiang – ethnic group of northwestern Sichuan, Hu – non-Han people, barbarian.

[85] The word 'banner' here refers to Manchurian ruling class (Eight Banners).

[86] Wu Zhirong read 'yi' – barbarians, Wei Xiaobao said 'yi' – onomatopoeia.