Book 2: The Great Desert

Translated by Fox

Book 2 – The Great Desert

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Synopsis:

Returning to his houseboat, Chu Liuxiang discovered that Su Rongrong, Li Hongxiu, Song Tian'er had been kidnapped by Hei Zhenzhu (see Book 1). Chu Liuxiang immediately set forth on a long journey to the Great Desert [i.e. Gobi] with his friends, Hu Tiehua and Ji Bingyan. In the desert, they encountered the most beautiful, the most vicious, the most ruthless, but with the highest martial art skill – foe, the Stone Avalokiteśvara (Shi Guanyin), while were also being sucked into the political struggle within the tiny kingdom of Qiuci.

Chapter 28 – Encountering a Close Friend of Many Years in the Desert

A jet-black pearl was lying on a pile of yellow sand.

Who would have thought that such an originally simple and beautiful object would give rise to a succession of complicated and secretive affairs?

Chu Liuxiang returned to his boat, just like a wanderer returning to his home. The sea breeze was humid and warm, just as warm as his mood right now.

Far away at the horizon where the sea and sky met, there was a clump of white cloud floating leisurely. The boat was rocking on the cradle of green jade waves. Under the bright sunlight, the glossy deck looked even shinier than a mirror.

He took off his clothes, and he took off his shoes and socks. The burning hot deck was scalding his bare feet and burning his lazy mood; his entire being seemed to want to float up. He could not help shouting at the top of his lungs,

“Su Rongrong, Li Hongxiu, Song Tian’er, if you don’t get some delicious thing out to eat, I will swallow the boat whole.”

There was no voice, there was no response; there was practically not even one person on the entire boat. Su Rongrong, Li Hongxiu, and Song Tian’er have disappeared.

In that instant, all the warm, cozy feeling in Chu Liuxiang’s heart also disappeared. He searched every nook and cranny on the boat, even the closet, the rice bucket, everywhere. But he could not find even a strand of hair belonging to them.

Where could they go?

From time to time, Li Hongxiu might go ashore to buy a case of sandalwood; Song Tian’er might go strolling around the marketplace. But the three of them leaving the boat at the same time, there has never been such thing.

Could it be that they were leaving without saying good-bye?

This was even more impossible. For the last many years the three of them and Chu Liuxiang have become an entity; they were practically an integral part of Chu Liuxiang’s life, something that no one would be able to separate.

In that case, how come they were not on the boat?

Could it be that they met a misfortune and suffered other people’s treacherous assault?

Chu Liuxiang rushed into the hold of the ship again. He trusted that these three girls’ martial art skill and resourcefulness were sufficient to deal with any unforeseen event. Yet he still installed forty-nine ingenious mechanisms around the cabin of the boat.

These mechanisms could, in the blink of an eye, incapacitate anybody – some could make people lose consciousness, some could lock up someone's four limbs, some could eject somebody into the sea.

But now, none of these mechanisms have been activated. Inside and outside the cabin, there was not the slightest bit of disorder either. Inside the green jade muslin cabinet, there were three cooked-chickens. His favorite grape wine was still hanging inside the seawater. The wine cup that he liked to use had already been wiped clean and shiny.

Li Hongxiu's journal [orig. account of true records] was still lying by her bedside; the page was opened to the 'Awakened From A Dream' section. By Su Rongrong's bedside, there was a pair of socks that she had been making but not finished yet. Evidently they were leaving the boat peacefully and quietly.

Unless there was someone who could subdue all three of them together in a flash.

But such person, until now, has not been born yet!

Chu Liuxiang was even more puzzled.

He was so anxious that he was like an ant on a hot pan; he floated in and out on the boat incessantly, and ran around in circles.

After running around for seventy, eighty times, he suddenly found out that on his favorite big chair, there was a pile of shiny yellow sand.

And on top of this pile of yellow sand, there was a shiny black pearl.

This was originally the easiest place to find. But when one was so anxious, one would oftentimes miss looking at the most obvious place.

Chu Liuxiang grabbed a handful of yellow sand. The grain of sand leaked from the crack between his fingers like rain. Thereupon he also found a slip of paper buried inside the pile of sand. The note said:

Chu Liuxiang stole the horse by the lakeside.

Hei Zhenzhu [black pearl] seized the beauty on the sea.
Now Chu Liuxiang is to ride on *Hei Zhenzhu*'s horse.
Here is the small town of Ma Lian [lit. horse company (military)] on the river plain.

Scorching sun, sandstorm, loess [yellow sandy soil typical of north China], impoverished small town, married women with clothes-not-covering-the-body [idiom: poverty-stricken] – leading along children who looked famished, hid themselves behind wooden plank doors, peeking out at strangers.

But on the barren Loess Plateau [of northwest China], this small town could be considered prosperous and bustling, simply because within a hundred *li* around, this was the only place with fresh water.
Therefore, quite surprisingly, the town actually had several brick houses and several shops. After going through an arduous journey, when Chu Liuxiang arrived here, he felt like he had reached the paradise.

He was practically rushing over day and night nonstop; he nearly forgot what wine tasted like. Sleep also seemed to be the affair of several days ago.

If not for this horse, he practically would be unable to reach this place this quickly. From here, when the sky was clear and there was no wind, one could look into the distance and saw the battlements of the Great Wall.

But today was windy, the yellow sand on the road was rising, the shopkeeper of the small wine shop by the road constantly swept the pancake-like sand blown by the wind. As soon as his hand stopped, the pancake would have a layer of yellow dirt as if it was buttered. Such a cake, in such a place, could be considered a delicacy.

Chu Liuxiang gently stroked the horse's mane, and said with a sigh, "These two days were very hard for you. It seems like today the two of us are going to have a good meal."

A broken down carriage came over from the other side of the street like the wind. The big man driving the carriage seemed like he wanted to whip out every ounce of strength from the thin, pathetic horse.

Right this moment, a cat sprang out from the wine shop to cross the street. The carriage was galloping over, even if the cat wanted to dodge, it was simply too late, so it looked like it was going to be trampled to death by the horse's hooves.

Also right this moment, there was a human figure springing out of the wine shop, as fast as an arrow. Unexpectedly he used his body to shield the cat. Thereupon the horse's hooves were trampling over his body. The wheels of the carriage were also rolling over his body.

The people on the street could not help crying out in alarm. Chu Liuxiang's countenance changed as well.

This man unexpectedly did not spare his own life to save the cat; could he be a lunatic?

Seeing that he had just taken someone's life, the big man driving the carriage also could not help but was shocked. Only afterwards did he hurriedly rein the carriage and jump down to rush over to take a look. Only to see the man lying on the ground, cradling the cat in his arms, grinning and saying, "Little guy, next time you are crossing the street, you must be careful. Nowadays there are a lot of blind men with their eyes open. If you are crushed to death by this kind of muddled-egg [scoundrel/b@stard], won't you just die in vain?"

The entire carriage was running over his body, but unexpectedly there was not even a trace of injury or harm from head to toe. However, the raggedy clothes he was wearing had become even more tattered.

The big man driving the carriage was startled and scared at the same time. He cursed, “Who’s the muddled-egg? You are the muddled-egg. If you die, *Laozi* [I, your father] will sue you for manslaughter.”
The more he talked, the angrier he got. His leg flew, he tried to kick the man.

With his right hand still holding the cat, the man did not even look, but his left hand lightly pushed, the big man driving the carriage was sent flying onto the roof.

The passers-by were startled and amused at the same time. On the roof, the big man driving the carriage was both startled and scared. Yet the man, holding the cat in his arm, walked leisurely back into the wine shop as if nothing had happened.

The sunlight illuminated the green, wretched stubble all across his face, while also illuminating the lazy smile on his face, and a pair of big, black and shiny eyes.

A moment ago his movement was faster than an arrow; it was indeed like lively dragon and animated tiger. But now it seemed like he was too lazy to even walk the street, wishing that someone would carry him back into the wine shop.

Chu Liuxiang suddenly jumped down from the horse and called loudly, “Hu Tiehua, Hu *Fengzi* [madman], what are you doing here?”
The man turned around to look at Chu Liuxiang; he also jumped and laughed heartily, “Chu Liuxiang, you, this old stinky bug, what are you doing here?”

The cat in his arm did not even move, the man flew straight and punched Chu Liuxiang’s shoulder. Chu Liuxiang did not want to lose out either; he also sent a punch toward his abdomen.

Both men were in so much pain that they cried out together, but also nearly cried from laughing.

Smiling bitterly, Chu Liuxiang said, “No wonder I haven’t seen you in many years; I thought you lazily died, turns out you are hiding in here!”

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “How come you, this old stinky bug, also come here? Could it be that those girls kicked you out that you have nowhere to stay?”

Hitting each other and laughing, the two men staggered along into the small wine shop, and sat down by a rickety table. The big tabby cat also ‘Meow’ and jumped onto the table.

But Hu Tiehua picked it up and said with a laugh, “Little guy, you must not be jealous. This stinky bug is my old close friend. He is here now, you have to crouch on the side.”

Unexpectedly Chu Liuxiang has become an old stinky bug. Thinking about this, Chu Liuxiang wanted to laugh until his tummy hurt. He laughed aloud and said, “I haven’t seen you for many years, unexpectedly you, this lazy cat made another friend … Come! Little guy, since you are his friend, let’s have a couple of cups with me!”

Opening his eyes wide, Hu Tiehua said, “Only a couple of cups? If I don’t pour two hundred cups down your throat, just consider me an inadequate friend.”

He slapped the table and shouted, “Wine! Wine! Quickly get me more wine! Can’t you not kill my friend with thirst?”

A thin, small, black, and withered woman came out with a tin wine pot. ‘Bang!’ she tossed the wine pot onto the table, turned around, and went back.

She did not even give Hu Tiehua a glance from the corner of her eye, yet all along Hu Tiehua’s unblinking eyes were fixed on her, as if she was the most beautiful woman in the world.

Inwardly Chu Liuxiang found this amusing, “Must be this lazy cat has not seen women for too long that I am afraid he has already forgotten what beautiful women look like.”

The woman could not be considered ugly at all, she was not too old either, her eyes were not too small, it’s just that she was so thin that he doubted there was even four *taels* of flesh on her entire body; she looked like a small air-dried hen.
It was not until she had disappeared from his sight that Hu Tiehua turned his head around, poured two cups of wine, and said with a laugh, “Chu Liuxiang, you need to be a bit more careful; the Hu Tiehua of today’s wine capacity cannot be compared to the Hu Tiehua of the past. I remember you made me drunk eighty-eight times in a row. Now I can begin to exact revenge.”

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “Eighty-nine times. Did you forget that time with the wine jar?”

Laughing heartily, Hu Tiehua said, “How can I forget? That time I only put half a catty of croton seed [a strong purgative] into your wine, but your threw me into the Zhang Family’s big wine jar, making me drunk for three days.”

Chu Liuxiang pensively said, “Do you remember how long ago was that?”

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “Eighteen years … perhaps will be nineteen soon. At that time I was no more than eight, nine-year-old boy. If I hadn’t met you, this bad friend, how could I learn how to drink wine?”

Chu Liuxiang laughed aloud and said, “Don’t you forget, the first wine we ever drank was the wine you stole!”

Scrunching his face, Hu Tiehua said, “Really? I forgot about that …” Finally he could not help laughing heartily and said, “Honestly speaking, stolen wine tastes the best. In all my life, I have never drunk such a good wine anymore.”

He only stretched out his neck and threw his head back, the big bowl of wine suddenly disappeared.

Chu Liuxiang also drank the wine, but quickly wrinkled his nose and said, “This is really wine?”

“If not wine, then what is it?” Hu Tiehua asked.

Chu Liuxiang laughed, “I thought it was vinegar!” he responded.

Hu Tiehua roared in laughter. He poured another cup of wine and said with a laugh, “In this kind of place, we have this kind of wine to drink, you can be considered very lucky already.”

Chu Liuxiang took the wine he offered, and muttered to himself, “Looks like not only this lazy cat has forgotten the appearance of women, he has even forgotten the taste of wine.”

In the blink of an eye, more than a dozen pots of wine already went down their belly. Naturally that small lady also came out more than a dozen times; each time she banged the wine pot heavily on the table, turned around, and walked away. Until later on, whenever she came out, Chu Liuxiang tensed up immediately, he nearly could not stop using his hands to cover his ears. Too bad he had to use his hands to support the table first; otherwise, the rickety table would have been broken down by her.

But Hu Tiehua, as soon as he saw her out of the door, his eye lit up, his laughter was also getting louder, his lazy demeanor became like he suddenly had spirit.

Chu Liuxiang could not help sighing. He said, “Poor kid. How long have you lived in this ghost place?”

Hu Tiehua blinked. He said, “Do you remember the last time I met you? How long ago was that?”

Chu Liuxiang sighed and said, “Seven years. I can’t believe seven years have passed in the blink of an eye!”

Casting his gaze into the distance, Hu Tiehua pensively said, “It was summer, at the Mo Chou Lake … That year, the lotus on Chou Mo [sic] Lake were blooming beautifully. We used lotus leaves rolled into wine cups. We drank one cup, and tossed one leaf, until finally our boat was nearly full of lotus leaves. The pile of lotus leaves on your side was higher than your nose.”

Chu Liuxiang smiled and said, “The summer that year passed really fast …”

Hu Tiehua suddenly laughed. He said, “Do you remember who else was with us that year?”

Chu Liuxiang roared in laughter and said, “Even if I could forget other people, I can never forget Gao YaNan. At that time she had just learned the set of ‘*Hui Feng Wu Liu Jian*’ [Circling Wind Dancing Willow Sword] from Huashan. As soon as she was drunk, she would perform this sword technique for us, so that all day long people from Jinling *Wulin* were staying nearby our boat, refusing to leave, because they wanted to steal her sword technique.”
Hu Tiehua said, “To tell you the truth, her sword technique really was not too brilliant. Until later, whenever she practiced her sword, I wanted to go pee. I wonder, her nickname ‘*Qing Feng Nu Jian Ke*’ [Cool Breeze Female Swordsman], where did it come from?”
Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “You said her sword technique is not good, but Ji Bingyan always said that her sword is thirty-percent [or somewhat] better than Huashan *Zhangmen* [headmaster] of the past Xu Shuzhen.”
Clapping his hands, Hu Tiehua said, “That’s right. This dead rooster may not speak a single word for three days, but as soon as he talks, he boasts about her ‘sword technique’. I am guessing that most likely he is falling for her.”

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “But the one she is falling for is you. Otherwise, why did she come looking for us, these drunkards, to hang around us? Do you remember, that day you were drunk, and you promised to marry her.”

With pained expression on his face, Hu Tiehua said, “How could I not remember? The next day I sobered up, I already forgot about that. Who would have imagined that she did not forget? Unexpectedly she forced me to marry her. She even said that if I reneged on my promise, she would not have any face to keep on living, so she was going to kill herself. She scared me so that that very night I jumped into the lake and fled to the wilderness.”

He has not finished speaking, Chu Liuxiang already laughed so hard that he bent over the table. Gasping for breath, he said, “No wonder the next day at dawn, I suddenly discovered that the two of you already disappeared. I thought you were eloping! You made Ji Bingyan turning to wine to drown his sorrow; that same night he nearly died of intoxication. The next day he also left, I have not seen him since.”

Smiling bitterly, Hu Tiehua said, “If not for Gao YaNan chasing me desperately, how could I flee to such a faraway place like this?”

Chu Liuxiang blurted out, “You ran away to this place seven years ago and have not left at all?”

Hu Tiehua replied, “It was after she chased me for three years that I escaped to this place.”

“So you have been hiding in here for four years?” Chu Liuxiang asked.

‘Glug!’ Hu Tiehua drank a bowl of wine and said, “Three years and ten months.”

Chu Liuxiang said, “What is it in this ghost place that it can keep someone like you for this long? I really cannot believe it.”

‘Glug!’ Hu Tiehua drank another bowl of wine. Suddenly he stared right into Chu Liuxiang’s eyes, saying, “You really want me to tell you?”

“Tell me quickly!” Chu Liuxiang replied.

Hu Tiehua brought his head over close to Chu Liuxiang’s ear; he said, “Did you see the woman who brought the wine out for us?”

Chu Liuxiang sprang up. “You … you are staying here for her?” he asked.

“That’s right!” Hu Tiehua replied.

Chu Liuxiang quickly pressed his hands on the table, as if he was afraid he might faint. He looked at Hu Tiehua, up and down – several dozen times, as if he had never seen Hu Tiehua before in all his life. Afterwards, he slowly sat down, picked up the wine cup, downed it in one gulp, before slowly saying, “Can I ask you one thing?”

“What is it?” Hu Tiehua replied.

Chu Liuxiang said, “This woman, from head to toe, which part of her is better than Gao YaNan? Can you tell me?”

‘Glug!’ Hu Tiehua drank another bowl of wine. He said, “I can tell you this: Gao YaNan wanted to chase me, but I want to chase her. Not only that, I am chasing her for four years, but I haven’t obtained her yet. This is her only good point. Do you understand?”

Chu Liuxiang’s eyes were fixed on his face; he stared at him straight for no less than the time needed to drink a cup of tea, before he was suddenly back in a cheerful mood. Crouching over the table, he laughed aloud and said, “Retribution! Now I believe that this thing, ‘retribution’ really does exist in the world.”

“What are you laughing at?” Hu Tiehua hatefully said, “I know that this kind of great affection, for some unrefined people, they would never understand it all the days of their life.”

Covering his belly, Chu Liuxiang said, "*Laotian* [God/Heavens]! Great affection! Spare me, please!"
Hu Tiehua remained silent. He drank three bowls of wine in one breath. Suddenly he also burst in laughter. Crouching over the table, the two faced each other in a roar of laughter. They laughed until tears were streaming down their faces.

Gasping for breath, Chu Liuxiang said, "This 'great affection', how did it happen? Can you tell me?"

Glaring at him, Hu Tiehua said, "But when you hear it, you must not laugh."

"I won't laugh!" Chu Liuxiang replied, "Definitely won't laugh."

Hu Tiehua spoke in quiet voice, "By the time I got here, I have not seen any woman for three months. When I saw her, you may say that she is not beautiful, but you must admit that in this place, she is the most beautiful!"

"I admit," Chu Liuxiang responded.

Hu Tiehua said, "Therefore, I wanted to be with her … to play with her. At that time, I thought that I only needed to stretch a hand and grab it. Who would have thought that she unexpectedly regarded me like a dead person? Unexpectedly she did not even cast me a single glance."

Chu Liuxiang could not help laughing. He said, "A grand, distinguished and accomplished revered figure flower butterfly [note: the 'tie hua' of Hu Tiehua's name literally means 'iron flower'], is unexpectedly regarded as nothing by an insignificant little woman, how could it be endured? Who could endure it? Even I am angry for you."

Hu Tiehua said, "The more she is ignoring me, the more I am interested in her. I was prepared to give her a month. Who knows that after a month I still had not made any progress? So I gave her three months. Who knows …"

He smiled ruefully and said, “Even without me saying it, you would know what happened. I spent three years and ten months, yet in her eyes, I am just a dead person. She still did not give me even one smile.”

Chu Liuxiang said, “I do not feel sorry for you at all. I only admire you; I extremely admire you!”

Hu Tiehua roared in laughter. He laughed so hard that wine was spurting all over the table.

He said with a laugh, “And now, I want to listen to you. How did you run away to this place? Could it be that someone also forces you to take her as your wife?”

Chu Liuxiang’s expression suddenly turned heavy. He was silent for half a day, before slowly said, “Do you remember Su Rongrong, Li Hongxiu, and Song Tian’er?”

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “Of course I do; at that time they were still little girls, but now they must be grown ups. Could it be that all three of them wanted to marry you? No wonder so ran away this far.”

Chu Liuxiang sighed and said, “Others think that the relationship between them and me is somewhat unclear, somewhat ambiguous. The fact is, they have been with me since they were eleven, twelve years old; they just consider me their *Dage* [big brother], consider me as a good friend. And I … you must believe me, all along I have always considered them as my *Meimei* [younger sister].”
Hu Tiehua replied with a straight face, “Others may not believe you, but I know you, this old stinky bug, although when you are being bad you give other people headache, but when you are good, you are so good that others will never expect it; not even in their dream.”

Chu Liuxiang heaved a long, long sigh; he sadly said, “Now, all three of them have been kidnapped away.”

Emotionally moved, Hu Tiehua said, “They are kidnapped? Who has such a big guts?”

Chu Liuxiang said, “Have you ever heard about ‘*Shamo Zhi Wang*’ [King of the Desert] Zha Muge?”
Hu Tiehua angrily said, “That kid dares to provoke you? I will tore him off and feed him to the dog!”

“It’s not him,” Chu Liuxiang said, “It’s his son Hei Zhenzhu [lit. black pearl, see Book 1].”

Hu Tiehua shouted, “I don’t care if he is Black Pearl, White Pearl; he has enough guts to provoke us, brothers?”

He banged the table and jumped up. “Let’s go! We’ll find him to settle the account,” he said.

“You want to go with me?” Chu Liuxiang asked.

Hu Tiehua angrily replied, “You, this old stinky bug, who do you think I am? You have trouble, if I don’t help you, who will?”

Chu Liuxiang also sprang up; he laughed aloud and said, “With you accompanying me, it would be strange indeed if we don’t disturb that Great Desert until the sky and earth turning upside down.”

He suddenly stopped laughing. Casting a glance toward the door toward the back, he asked, “But what about her? Don’t you care?”

Chapter 29 – Rich and Noble Household

Hu Tiehua laughed aloud and said, “You only need to say a word, I will throw my head down for you, why can’t I abandon her?”

The two men laughed aloud as they walked out the door.

Who would have thought that the little woman [orig. *furen*, usually refers to older/married woman] suddenly flew, as if she was throwing herself out to pull Hu Tiehua's sleeve, and cried aloud, "Are you going to leave just like this?"
Hu Tiehua was stunned. "We haven't paid our bills?" he asked.

The little woman hissed, "Who wants your wine money? I want you."

As soon as this sentence came out, Chu Liuxiang and Hu Tiehua could only stare blankly.

Hu Tiehua stammered, "Then … then, why did you ignore me all along?"

The little woman said, "I ignored you, just because I know that you like me because I ignored you."

Hu Tiehua was stunned again. Smiling bitterly, he said, "Chu Liuxiang, did you hear that? You must never, ever, think that a woman was an idiot. Whoever regards women as idiots, he himself is an idiot."

Tears were already streaming down from the little woman's eyes; she said, "Please, please don't go. If you stay, I will marry you at once."

The word 'marry' was just out of her mouth, Hu Tiehua already tore his sleeve, he bolted out like a rabbit being hunted by a tiger.

Although Chu Liuxiang's movement was not slow either, although his ride was a precious horse, he still had to spend quite an effort to catch up with Hu Tiehua. Roaring in laughter, he said, "Don't be afraid, she cannot catch you; she does not have such a good *qinggong* like Gao YaNan."
Only then did Hu Tiehua relax his footsteps. Smiling wryly, he said, "Did you hear? Unexpectedly she knew that I liked her precisely because she ignored me.

Even if you killed me, I would not have believed that such a woman unexpectedly could be so smart."

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, "Even a more stupid woman will be smart in this aspect. Probably all her life she was waiting for a man like you to take the bait; therefore, don't you think she would open her eyes wide to look around?"

Hu Tiehua heaved a long sigh. "Women!" he said, "I am afraid I'll never be able to understand women in all my life."

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, "But women understand men. They know that great majority of men are contemptible individuals."

Finally Hu Tiehua also roared in laughter; he said, "You are just trying to say that I am a contemptible individual."

Chu Liuxiang also laughed and said, "Since you think so yourself, there is no need for me to deny it."

He had already dismounted his horse, and by this moment he had already walked alongside Hu Tiehua for some distance. Suddenly he discovered that the direction Hu Tiehua was taking was not the way out of the Pass; he could not help asking, "Where are you going?"

"Lanzhou [prefecture-level city and capital of Gansu province]!" Hu Tiehua replied.

"Lanzhou?" Chu Liuxiang said, "But Hei Zhenzhu is at the desert outside the Pass; what are we going to Lanzhou for?"

Hu Tiehua replied, "If the two of us are going to the desert just like this, by the time we see Hei Zhenzhu, I am afraid we can't even lift a finger; can we think about fighting then?"

Knitting his brows, Chu Liuxiang said, “I know that the desert is very dangerous.”

Hu Tiehua sighed and said, “Dangerous? Do you think these two characters ‘dangerous’ [*xiong xian*] can describe it? Those who have never been to the desert can’t even think, not even in their dreams, how terrifying the desert is.”
“Are you trying to scare me?” Chu Liuxiang said.

Closing his eyes, Hu Tiehua spoke slowly, “On the great desert that stretches as far as the eye can see, one human life is really too insignificant. Even if the celebrated Chu Liuxiang died in there, it can’t be considered anything.”

Chu Liuxiang blurted out laughing, “You can’t scare me,” he said.

Hu Tiehua did not pay him any attention; he slowly continued, “In there, the day is so hot that you could peel your skin off, but the night is so cold that your blood is freezing. A hill could turn into level ground in an instant, level ground could turn into a hill in the blink of an eye. When there is a rainstorm, the entire city could be buried under the sand. On top of that, there’s the frightening water. Reportedly, every *sichen* in the desert, there are at least ten people died of thirst.”
Chu Liuxiang said, “I have been to places more dangerous than that …”

Hu Tiehua opened his eyes and spoke loudly, “The only thing you were dealing with in the past was people, but now you are dealing with the power of the Heaven and the Earth. Besides, you know nothing about the desert, while that Hei Zhenzhu grew up in the desert; in terms of the timing, the terrain, the people, you don’t have any advantage at all. What makes you think that you could surpass him?”

Chu Liuxiang sighed and said, “Good points.”

“Besides,” Hu Tiehua went on, “I am afraid you don’t even know where he is yet, am I right?”

Chu Liuxiang nodded and said, “That’s right!”

Hu Tiehua said, “In that case, you practically have no way of finding him. Do you think the desert is just as big as your yard? In there, the sky is connected to the ground, the earth is linked to the heavens, so that you basically cannot tell east from west, north from south. Besides, the language that those shepherds speak in the desert, you practically don’t understand a word. If you want to go around in there, leaving everything to chance, two circles over and you will lose your way, unable to get out for seven days, and then you will die of thirst!”

And then he stared hard at Chu Liuxiang, and spoke loudly, “You have always had the clearest mind, how come this time you are so anxious like you have turned crazy?”

Chu Liuxiang was speechless for half a day. Finally he said with a wry smile, “I have indeed become crazy of anxiety, but I still have to go. If you don’t …”

Hu Tiehua angrily said, “You, this old stinky bug, you think I am scared?”

Chu Liuxiang said, “So you mean …”

Hu Tiehua roared, “What I mean is, if we want to go, we must do it successfully. We can’t simply throw our life away like a fool. We have to be calm and cool-headed, soon we will be able to choke that kid’s throat.”

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “Are you being calm and cool-headed now?”

Hu Tiehua could not help laughing either; he said, “I see that you suddenly become like an enthusiastic, impulsive kid; I really can’t help but angry. We are adults now; when adults do things, they have to do it like adults do.”

Smiling bitterly, Chu Liuxiang said, “These past few days, indeed my heart is a bit chaotic.”

Blurted out laughing, Hu Tiehua said, “You can think about other people this much, it can clearly be seen that you are still a lovely person, not at all like what others say, that you are a fox, a viper.”

He roared in laughter again and said, “But if we want to rescue your people back, we must become a fox, a viper. In that kind of place, lovely people don’t last long.”

Chu Liuxiang looked at him. Shaking his head, he said, “I may be able to become a fox; but viper … even I cannot become one, let alone you.”

Hu Tiehua laughed again and said, “Therefore, we are going to look for someone who could become a viper.”

“Who?” Chu Liuxiang asked.

“Dead rooster,” Hu Tiehua replied.

Chu Liuxiang blurted out, “Are you talking about Ji Bingyan? Do you know where he is?”

“He is precisely in Lanzhou,” Hu Tiehua replied.

“Are you saying that he is very familiar with the desert?” Chu Liuxiang asked.

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “You may not know, but he has made a fortune; his wealth was coming from the desert. After you guys parted ways, he went to the desert. In less than five years, he has become the most astute businessman in the desert, the biggest millionaire.”

Chu Liuxiang smiled; he sighed and said, “And you are still a pauper.”

Hu Tiehua smiled ruefully and said, “I have already said, the more people are no good with women, the more successful they are in business.”

Chu Liuxiang roared in laughter and said, “So you think you are very good with women?”

Lanzhou was the most prosperous city in the northwest, as well as the place where the wealth of the northwest was concentrated. The tycoons of the northwest, most lived here.

In this kind of place, among the people, wealth could not be considered much, but by the time you really have enough wealth, people would still feel deep veneration for you.

Ji Bingyan was precisely the man that could make people feel deep veneration for him, which goes to show that an ultra-rich man like him, no matter where – are very few.

Actually, he did not do any fixed business; as long as it was a business where he could make money, he would stick his foot in it. From all kinds of businesses in Lanzhou, if there were ten *taels* of profit that day, then one *tael* would be his. This kind of man, who did not know him?

Therefore, Chu Liuxiang and Hu Tiehua did not have any problem in finding the place where he lived.

A big and tall, huge like a deity – gatekeeper took them into a courtyard deep with trees and foliage; two youths, wearing white clothes untainted by even a speck of dust – took them into a spacious and gorgeous reception room. Everybody was treating them in refined and courteous manner, there was no flaw to be criticized, even though they were not dressed as well as the gatekeeper.

A few heavy bamboo curtains were hanging in the reception hall. The humid heat of the autumn was already separated outside the curtains. Blown by the breeze, the heavy bamboo curtains seemed like a swallow circling in the air.

Hu Tiehua sighed and said, “This is the air of a rich and noble household. Although inwardly those servants are looking down upon us, on the surface they

are still refined and courteous. It looks like our Dead Rooster was born to be wealthy, unexpectedly he does not look like a nouveau riche at all."

Chu Liuxiang's eyes were looking at the reflection of the flowers on the window, his ears were listening to the sound of water outside the window, his hands were holding a small cup of green tea, which aroma assailed his nostrils; he suddenly said, "I'll say, this will be very difficult."

"What's very difficult?" Hu Tiehua asked.

Chu Liuxiang replied, "Are you saying that you still don't understand his style of conduct? You want to pull him out of this kind of place into the great desert under the storm and the scorching sun, I am afraid no one can do it."

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, "That's right! He is indeed, from head to tail, a hundred percent self-made man; he had never asked for anybody's help, but also never have the intention to help anybody. But don't you forget, he is, after all, our good friend."

Chu Liuxiang smiled and said, "Friends can never be compared with oneself."

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, "Don't worry, I always have a way to ask him to go with us. If worst comes to worst, I can set this house of his on fire; let's see if he wouldn't go?"

He had just finished speaking, they heard light cough from outside the bamboo curtain. Four very young girls wearing clothes as white as snow carrying a soft couch came in. A man was lying of the soft couch, propping himself with his elbow, his mouth opened wide in a big laugh and said, "Chu Liuxiang,
Hu *Fengzi* [crazy Hu], I never expected that you, two drunkards, actually haven't forgotten me."
Although he was laughing to his heart's content, his pair of eyes were still as sharp as ferocious eagle.

Lazy, sluggish, indecisive; although most people usually have some shortcomings, but no matter when, no matter who, nobody would be able to find

the slightest amount of this kind of expression on his sharp, prominent angular face. His entire being was like an astute, strong and acute incarnation.

Chu Liuxiang and Hu Tiehua already laughed heartily to welcome him. Hu Tiehua said with a laugh, “Your airs seem to be getting bigger and bigger; seeing old friends coming, you don’t even stand up.”

Ji Bingyan laughed indifferently and said, “If you can make me stand up, I will give all these to you.”

Hu Tiehua was stumped for words; he stared blankly at the legs covered in soft felt. “Your legs?” he blurted out.

Ji Bingyan sighed and said, “My pair of legs can no longer be used.”

Chu Liuxiang and Hu Tiehua were both stunned! Finally Hu Tiehua could not help screaming and shouting, “When did this happen? Which d@mned b@st@rd did this? If I don’t smash this b@st@rd’s pair of eyes into pulp, my surname is not Hu.”

Smiling bitterly, Ji Bingyan said, “If you want to avenge me, it seems that I will have to disappoint you.”

Hu Tiehua angrily roared, “If Chu Liuxiang and I cannot avenge you, I’m afraid no one in this world can avenge you.”

Ji Bingyan sighed and said, “No one in this world can avenge me.”

“Why?” Hu Tiehua roared.

Ji Bingyan replied, “Because the one paralyzing my two legs was not anybody at all; it was the desert! It’s the d@mned sun of the desert, the d@mned wind …”

He smiled bitterly and went on, “I wandered around the desert for five whole years. How I passed those five years, I am afraid no one could imagine it. Once, unexpectedly I was buried alive under the sand, until two days later, I was rescued by a camel caravan. Although that d@mned desert has given me riches that I cannot spend in my lifetime, it also gave me rheumatism all over my body. Now, the rheumatism is just flaring out from my legs, that’s all.”

Listening to that, Hu Tiehua was stunned speechless again. He said sadly, “Ji Bingyan, oh, Ji Bingyan! I always thought that you were made of iron; I always thought that nothing in the world could harm you. Who knew …”

Suddenly he kicked a chair nearby, sending it flying away, and roared, “D@mned desert! Why is there such a cursed [orig. seeing ghost] place on earth? Why must we go there?”
Ji Bingyan blurted out, “You are going to the desert too?”

Chu Liuxiang heavily nodded his head and replied, “Precisely.”

Ji Bingyan sighed and said, “Take my advice: never go to the desert for the rest of your life. You may rather go to the underworld than to the desert. Believe me, that place is not someone who is in his right mind ought to go to.”

Smiling wryly, Chu Liuxiang said, “Who said right now I am still in my right mind?”

Startled, Ji Bingyan said, “Don’t tell me that there is something on earth that could make Chu Liuxiang’s head dizzy?”

Hu Tiehua briefly explained what happened, and then he said, “Originally we were going to ask you to go together with us. After hearing the tale about how you get rich from the mouth of the travelers who had been to the desert, I originally thought that you have conquered the desert. Who would have thought that now you …”

Suddenly Ji Bingyan grabbed the felt covering his legs and hissed, “But now with my two legs, I … unexpectedly I can only see with my own eyes my friends go … go …”

Unexpectedly, all of a sudden this cool-headed man got excited, as if he wanted to struggle to crawl up, but it seemed like his legs could not move, as if they were made of a block of wood; he fell off from the soft couch.

Hu Tiehua hurriedly helped him up. Seeing an old friend became like this, Hu Tiehua practically wanted to cry, but his mouth laughed aloud and said, “No need to feel bad; without you going, Old Stinky Bug and I can still make the desert the-sky-and-the-earth-turning-upside-down like always. You just wait here to see how we give vent to anger on your behalf!”

His eyes were already brimming with tears of excitement. Rubbing his eyes, he laughed aloud and said, “If you think that without you going with us it would be the same as us throwing away our lives, there must be something wrong with your head. Old Stinky Bug and I are not *Da Guniang* [big miss] who are too weak to stand up to the wind.”
Covering his face with his hands, Ji Bingyan’s body did not stop shaking.

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “But if you don’t bring the wine out, even if I have to carry you, I am going to take you into the desert.”

Finally Ji Bingyan’s shaking subsided. He also laughed aloud and said, “Chu Liuxiang and Hu Tiehua have been here for so long, how come I haven’t prepared good wine for them? I really deserve to die …” [Translator’s note: ‘gai si’, which I translated as ‘damned’, the literal translation of is ‘ought to die’.]

Exquisite chinaware, adorned with exquisite and tasty dishes, white jade carved into wine cup, filled to the brim with amber-colored wine, in the eyes of a gluttonous drunkard, it could already be considered the loveliest scene on the earth; not to mention pouring the wine by their side were two beautiful women, worthy to get a couple more glances from any man.

But Chu Liuxiang did not use his usual appreciative manner to appreciate their beauty, simply because these women were treating Ji Bingyan with such an intimacy that even the blind would be able to feel.

He was drinking an old friend's good wine – how could he let the old friend drink vinegar [i.e. jealous]?

Hu Tiehua did not look at the women either; he was just doing his utmost to eat and drink. Most people, when their mood was not good, would drink the wine to vent their anger.

Not only did he eat by himself, he also poured cup after cup for Ji Bingyan. He figured that as long as one could still eat, one could still drink, even if his leg was broken, it would not matter much.

He suddenly laughed aloud and said, "Ji Bingyan, don't worry; I know you are not going to die. A man who could drink this much wine would live at least another thirty years."

Ji Bingyan smiled and said, "Wine is not drank using legs, is it?"

Hu Tiehua roared in laughter and said, "That's right! Your legs may be broken, but other parts are still fine. Now I can finally feel relieved."

Ji Bingyan suddenly sighed. "But I am a little uneasy," he said.

Hu Tiehua's eyes grew big, he asked, "Why are you uneasy?"

Ji Bingyan said, "The two of you are thinking of going to the desert just like this?"

"As soon as my tummy is full, I am leaving," Hu Tiehua replied.

Ji Bingyan slowly said, “The two of you are going to the desert just like this, I guarantee that you cannot survive more than ten days.”

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “How long can others survive? We can survive just as long. Unless the desert is full of dead people; otherwise, we can survive just as well.”

“This is different,” Ji Bingyan said, “People who live in the desert have long ago been tempered to be as strong as iron; so strong that you cannot even imagine. And you …”

Hu Tiehua angrily said, “You think Chu Liuxiang and I are not as good as other people?”

Ji Bingyan sighed and said, “Your martial art skill and intelligence are naturally a lot higher than theirs, even much higher than anyone else in the world. But your heart, your guts – have long been softened by wine and meat, by women, by too comfortable livelihood. Life in the desert is no longer something that you can adapt to.”

Chu Liuxiang smiled and said, “You think we pass our days in comfortable life?”

Ji Bingyan slowly said, “Your life is at least ten times more comfortable than anybody living in the desert. For fear of using up the water in their body, they are able not to talk for several days, neither do they move; can you do that? When they are hungry, they could eat lizard like eating ham; can you do that? When they are thirsty, they can dig a hole one *zhang* deep in the sand using their bare hands just to suck the water from the sand underground. Relying on this bit of water, they can survive for three days; can you do that? So much so that they can drink camel’s urine; can you do that? You only sniff the smell and you will immediately spit it out, and if you spit it out, your death will come even faster!”
He spoke to this point in one breath; Chu Liuxiang and Hu Tiehua could not help but were stumped for words.

Ji Bingyan sighed, and then he continued, “The people in the desert, in order to survive they do things that you guys cannot do; not only that, you won’t dare to even think about doing it.”

Smiling wryly, Hu Tiehua said, “At least I really do not dare to drink urine.”

Ji Bingyan said, “In time of need, if you do not dare to drink, then you will die. They dare to drink; therefore they can keep on living. Therefore, they are stronger than you. This is the problem of survival; it has nothing to do whatsoever with martial art skill or intelligence.”

Chu Liuxiang was silent for half a day. He spoke slowly, word-by-word, “Some things, even if you know that you will die, you still have to go and do it.”

Ji Bingyan sighed and said, “Naturally I know as well that when Chu Liuxiang is determined to do something, nobody can stop you. But if you must go, you can’t just go like this.”

Chu Liuxiang asked, “How should we go?”

Ji Bingyan replied, “You must prepare a lot of things.”

“Prepare what?” Chu Liuxiang asked.

Ji Bingyan replied, “You have to prepare at least five camels, to carry fresh water, foodstuff, lodging equipment, as well as some bits and pieces. Although you might think that those are useless, when the time comes, those will be useful things. You also have to find an old hand to take care of the animals …”

He laughed and continued, “These things, naturally you need not worry on your own. By tomorrow at dusk, I will have everything prepared properly.”

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “But this time we are not going on a scenic tour, neither are we going to seek a happy and prosperous life; you absolutely must not spoil us. Animals, I can take care of them myself. Just two horses,

several bags of water and foodstuff – that should be enough. If you could prepare some wine for Hu *Fengzi*, we will be even more grateful."
Ji Bingyan sighed. He muttered to himself, "Chu Liuxiang, oh, Chu Liuxiang! I never thought that you would still be as bullheaded as ten years ago."

Chapter 30 – Travel Plan

Hu Tiehua rode on the horseback. Although this horse was also a choice colt [orig. a thousand pick ten thousand select], but it was as if the colt was both respectful and afraid of the black horse Chu Liuxiang was riding; no matter how Hu Tiehua whipped and urged, unexpectedly it did not dare to gallop side by side with the black horse. This way, Hu Tiehua had no choice but to ride behind Chu Liuxiang. He was sick in his stomach, his mouth continuously yelling and screaming, and he did not stop sighing.

But Chu Liuxiang did not show the slightest bit of discomfort. It's just that since they left Ji Bingyan, he has not opened his mouth to speak at all.

Finally Hu Tiehua could not bear it anymore; he said, "Chu Liuxiang, you know what, I am starting to think that perhaps you are not really a true friend like I imagined."

"Oh?" Chu Liuxiang responded.

Hu Tiehua loudly said, "Both of Dead Rooster's legs are broken, unexpectedly you did not show any sign that you are feeling bad for him; I know you were not that kind of person before."

Chu Liuxiang was silent for half a day. Suddenly he looked back, laughed and said, "How long have you known Ji Bingyan?"

Hu Tiehua replied, "Although not as long as you have, at least more than ten years."

“Have you ever heard him say that many words?” Chu Liuxiang asked.

Without even thinking, Hu Tiehua replied immediately, “Of course not! Anybody knew that to get the Dead Rooster to talk is much more difficult than to get him to invite us to dinner.”

“Have you ever seen him as excited as yesterday?” Chu Liuxiang asked.

Hu Tiehua sighed and said, “Yesterday, when I saw him falling off his chair, I simply wanted to bawl my eyes out, but you … you practically did not even blink; unexpectedly you could still laugh.”

Chu Liuxiang also sighed; he spoke slowly, “You have known him for more than ten years; could it be that you still don’t understand his character? If his legs are really broken, would he say those many words, would he still be that excited?”

Hu Tiehua was stumped; he roared, “What do you mean?”

Smiling wryly, Chu Liuxiang said, “You still don’t understand what I mean?”

Hu Tiehua shouted, “Are you saying that he did what he did, he was only pretending and was just putting a show for us?”

Chu Liuxiang sighed again and said, “Did you notice those two *Guniang* who poured the wine for us?”
Hu Tiehua asked, “Are you talking about Ying Yan [lit. welcoming/meeting wild goose] and Ban Bing [lit. partner/companion to the ice]?” [Translator’s note: these names are play on words, the ‘Bingyan’ of Ji Bingyan’s name literally means ‘ice’ and ‘wild goose’, respectively.]

“That’s right,” Chu Liuxiang replied, “Did you notice their manner toward Ji Bingyan?”

Hu Tiehua roared in laughter and said, “Could it be that you are jealous [orig. drink vinegar]? The girls in the world, not every one is good toward Chu Liuxiang; occasionally there will be one or two who will not look at Chu Liuxiang in the eye.”

Smiling wryly, Chu Liuxiang said, “You saw how they treated Ji Bingyan; was that how you would treat a crippled person? Did you notice their eyes? Their expression when they were looking at Ji Bingyan?”

Hu Tiehua suddenly did not laugh.

Chu Liuxiang went on, “You are a man with ample experience with girls, and you are certainly not blind.”

Hu Tiehua mumbled, “That’s right! If a man cannot meet the needs of a woman, the woman won’t use that kind of expression to him, and a crippled man will never be able to meet the need of other people …”

And then he shouted loudly, “But why didn’t you tell me then?”

Chu Liuxiang sighed and said, “Since he does not want to go, why would I want to force him?”

Hu Tiehua swore, “That d@mned Dead Rooster, not only he deceived me, he even made me so uncomfortable. He has the impertinence to use this kind of trick to deal with a friend of more than ten years.”

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “Toward us, he can’t be considered too bad.”

Hu Tiehua roared, “You still say he is not bad?”

Chu Liuxiang said, “He said those many words, it was to express the shame in his heart, to express that he still thinks of us as friends; otherwise, he could just say ‘I’m not going’, and we can’t kidnap him for ransom; am I right?”

Staring at him, Hu Tiehua said, “He treated you like this, you are not angry at all?”

Chu Liuxiang said, “If you want to make friends, you have to understand his temperament. If he has any shortcomings, you ought to forgive him. For all the years that I’ve known him, I know what kind of person he is; why would I want to be angry at him …”

He laughed and added, “Besides, to have someone like him treating me as his friend, I am already very satisfied.”

Hu Tiehua angrily said, “But I am not as magnanimous as you are; I …”

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “You think you are a true friend yourself? We have been friends for that many years, unexpectedly you could sneak away and leave without saying goodbye, for seven or eight years straight you did not even see me; do you think others should not be angry at you?”

“But I … I am not like him …” Hu Tiehua stammered.

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “You’re right! You are not like him. When a friend is in trouble, you absolutely will not shrink back. But you also have your shortcomings, just like Ji Bingyan also has his strong points.”

Stroking his nose, Hu Tiehua could no longer speak.

When all is said and done, he was worthy to be Chu Liuxiang’s old friend. Chu Liuxiang’s shortcomings of stroking his nose, he was able to mimic perfectly.

At noon, they found a place to stop for lunch. Chu Liuxiang was thinking of discussing how to proceed with him, who would have thought that when he looked back, Hu Tiehua unexpectedly disappeared.

Chu Liuxiang only smiled wryly; he was only waiting.

Even if he worried, what good would that bring?

Hu Tiehua was more intense than raging inferno, he was wilder than a wild horse, he was more stubborn than a mule; how could Chu Liuxiang not understand all that?

Naturally he quickly guessed where Hu Tiehua had gone. From here, Lanzhou was no more than two *sichen* away. If the horse was fast, one *sichen* would be enough.
Before dusk, Hu Tiehua already came back.

And he did not come back alone.

Chu Liuxiang saw that behind the horse he was riding, there was another horse. But Hu Tiehua held both horses' reins.

Two persons were sitting on the horse at the back. These two persons were unexpectedly Ying Yan and Ban Bing.

Their shiny hair, which was originally worn in a bun, had already been blown by the wind. Their beautiful countenance was also full of frightened expression. Their delicate small hands had been bound by Hu Tiehua.

Chu Liuxiang had been looking from the door of the small shop, but after seeing the men and horses – he walked back into the shop instead, and sat down with his back toward the door.

The two horses quickly galloped to the door before Hu Tiehua abruptly dismounted from his horse, while seizing this opportunity to rein in the horse behind him, and helped the two women got down from the horseback.

The horse was a good horse, Hu Tiehua's skill was so pleasant to look at, so strong and powerful, plus the two women with bound hands were stunningly beautiful, so all the people on the street had their eyes on them. Were it not for

they were afraid of Hu Tiehua's skill, probably everybody would have swarmed over.

But Chu Liuxiang did not turn back; he practically did not cast even one glance toward Hu Tiehua.

Hu Tiehua hesitated; trying to end the awkward silence, he said, "I am back."

"Hmm!" Chu Liuxiang said.

Hu Tiehua went on, "I also brought two guests back."

Chu Liuxiang stood up, pulled a couple of chairs, and then with a smile on his face he let the two frightened girls to sit down. And then his countenance sank again, but he still ignored Hu Tiehua.

Hu Tiehua only asked for a pot of wine. He poured the wine himself, he drank himself. But his mouth blurted out, "I know you are not happy, but Ji Bingyan really is not a good friend. If I did not expose his cheap trick, I am afraid I won't sleep peacefully for the rest of my life."

Chu Liuxiang finally could not help sighing. "But why do you bother to deal with them [feminine]?" he asked.

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, "This is the only method I could come up with."

"When you leave, was Ji Bingyan taking a nap?" Chu Liuxiang asked.

Hu Tiehua replied, "I know that this old weakness of his cannot change; therefore, I went there after making accurate calculation; sure enough, he was sleeping. I thought that as long as I could invite these two *Guniang* over, he would certainly come."
He could not help laughing heartily and said, "This is exactly like you. Someone took Su Rongrong and the others away, you did not spare any effort to give

chase to the desert. Honestly speaking, this method of mine was borrowed from Hei Zhenzhu."

Chu Liuxiang sighed and said, "Unavoidably this method is too cruel."

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, "He is that kind of person; without using a cruel method, how can we deal with him?"

He stood up. Slowly raising his clasped hands to greet the two girls, who were listening with eyes opened wide – he laughed and said, "This time, although I wronged two *Guniang*, but this can also prove his kindly feelings toward two *Guniang*. Therefore, two *Guniang* will still reap some benefit from this."
Pursing her lips, Ying Yan laughed and said, "In that case, *Jian Qie* [lit. lowly servant (deprecatory self-reference for women)] ought to be grateful to *Gongzi* instead."
"Indeed you should be grateful to me," Hu Tiehua said, "Otherwise, I am afraid for the rest of your life you won't be able to see Ji Bingyan's anxious expression …" Speaking to this point, he could not help roaring in laughter again.

Chu Liuxiang also could not help laughing heartily; he said, "Speaking about the thickness of the face, I am afraid I can't even compare with you."

Laughing tenderly, Ban Bing said, "Since that's the case, would *Gongzi* please untie *Jian Qie*'s hands? If you won't let *Jian Qie* pour a couple of cups for *Gongzi*, how could we express *Jian Qie*'s gratitude to *Gongzi*?"
[Translator's note: in this entire sentence, both *Jian Qie* and *Gongzi* are plural.]
However, not only Ji Bingyan did not rush over in one *sichen*, he did not rush over in two *sichen*, even to the middle of the night, he still did not rush over.
Ying Yan and Ban Bing gradually could not laugh anymore. Speechless, Ban Bing said, "Perhaps *Gongzi* has guessed it wrong; perhaps he is not as concerned toward *Jian Qie* as *Gongzi* imagined."
Hu Tiehua began to worry as well, but his mouth laughed and said, "Don't worry, he will definitely come."

"And if he did not?" Ying Yan asked.

Hu Tiehua was stumped; turning his head around, he looked at Chu Liuxiang.

Chu Liuxiang said, “Don’t look at me; this is your business.”

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “Of course this is my business; you think I am anxious? I have calculated accurately; he will definitely come …”

Ban Bing said, “But if he wanted to come, shouldn’t he be here a long time ago?”

Hu Tiehua could not laugh anymore; he stammered, “Perhaps … maybe he is unable to find the way.”

Chu Liuxiang said, “He sent us off to be on our way, how could he not know the way?”

Hu Tiehua sighed and said, “That’s true!”

Chu Liuxiang said, “Unless he still did not know that this is your doing.”

Hu Tiehua said, “I deliberately left a few clues in there; even if others could not see it, perhaps by the time he was five, Ji Bingyan could already see it.”

Frowning, Chu Liuxiang said, “If that’s the case, why hasn’t he come?”

Ban Bing said, “If he really does not come, what do *Gongzi* want to do with *Jian Qie*?”
With pained expression on his face, Hu Tiehua said, “This … This, I …”

Rolling her eyes, Ying Yan suddenly said with a laugh, “He does not come, that’s fine too; *Jian Qie* will simply follow *Gongzi*!”
Hu Tiehua sprang up and blurted out, “Absolutely not!”

Ying Yan said, “Could it be that *Gongzi* dislike *Jian Qie* for being too ugly?”

Hu Tiehua said, “I … that’s not what I meant at all; it’s just that … just that …”

“So what did *Gongzi* mean?” Ying Yan asked.
Ban Bing added, “*Gongzi* kidnapped us, but you don’t want us; we … how could we conduct ourselves in the future?” Speaking to this point, her eyes grew red, as if she was going to cry at any moment.
Hu Tiehua anxiously said, “Good *Guniang*, I am begging you, you must not – by any means – cry; when I see a girl crying, I will be at a loss even more.”
Her eyes red, Ban Bing said, “Then, why does *Gongzi* not want us?”
Hu Tiehua jumped and shouted loudly, “I just wanted that Dead Rooster to throw himself in; I did not mean to steal his wives. I … even though I like you, but …”

Her countenance brightened, Ban Bing said with a laugh, “If *Gongzi* likes us, we must follow *Gongzi*.”
Ying Yan also spoke sweetly, “In any case, he does not care about us at all; why would we still want to follow him?”

Hu Tiehua anxiously rubbed his hands, while Chu Liuxiang, without any qualms at all, was still sitting quietly, sipping his wine with a smile on his face. Hu Tiehua darted over and grabbed his cup away; he roared, “Chu Liuxiang, you still haven’t thought of a way to help me?”

Chu Liuxiang laughed leisurely and said, “I have already told you: this is your own business. Besides, with two such smart and beautiful girls willing to follow you, I should be happy for you!”

Hu Tiehua shrieked, “Chu Liuxiang, you, this old stinky bug, I don’t care what ghost idea you are playing in your heart, but if you don’t come with me to send them back, I will stake my life against you!”

Along the way, Ying Yan and Ban Bing did not stop giggling.

Ying Yan said with a laugh, “If you just want to send us back, why did you kidnap us in the first place?”

Ban Bing also said with a laugh, “If not for seeing how anxious you are, I will not go back at all.”

Looking at Hu Tiehua’s pained expression, Chu Liuxiang could not help laughing as well; he said, “Hu Tiehua, I hope you learned your lesson: the girls in the world, not every one is as easy to deal with as Gao YaNan. You think Gao YaNan is easy to deal with, just because she likes you.”

Hu Tiehua smiled bitterly and said, “That’s right. From now on, I no longer dare to say that I know how to deal with women. Right now I really wish I could kneel in front of Gao YaNan, to kiss her feet.”

Chu Liuxiang laughed heartily and said, “You can understand this truth, all in all, there’s still hope for you.”

Scowling, Hu Tiehua said, “Since you are so smart, do you know why Ji Bingyan did not come?”

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “If he already calculated that you will send them back, why would he still come?”

Hu Tiehua did not speak for half a day. And then he slowly said, “If he really thinks so, then he is wrong! There are really not many stupid people on earth, but some people are not willing to do things that are too smart; that’s all.”

Chu Liuxiang sighed and said, “That is precisely the reason Ji Bingyan could get rich, while you never have any money. That is also the reason why everybody says that you are so adorable.”

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “Turns out I am adorable; I did not know it until today …”

His laughter suddenly stopped. Simply because a long line of caravan suddenly appeared in the distance. There were carts, there were horses, there even seemed to be seven or eight camels.

This moment it was already very late at night. On the street, practically there was not even a single ghost shadow. This large caravan, why did they hasten on with their journey this late at night?

Hu Tiehua's eyebrows were deeply knitted; the blood coursing through his body was love-to-meddle-in-other-people's-business blood. If he came across a strange thing, not letting him to go to the bottom of it was practically more unbearable to him than killing him.

Chu Liuxiang looked at him and said with a laugh, "What thought is running around in your mind right now?"

With a frown on his face, Hu Tiehua stroked his chin and muttered, "In the dead of the night, driving these many carts, horses and camels, naturally they want to evade other people's eyes and ears. In my opinion, if these people are not bandits, then they must be robbers."

"Are you thinking of black eating black [to do the dirty work on another villain]?" Chu Liuxiang asked.

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, "It was you who put this idea in my head!"

Raising his rein, he urged his horse to meet the caravan.

He saw that although the caravan had many horses, camels they also have several, but there were only two men. One was sitting on a cart, driving it. The other was actually a dark, austere big man.

The big man was holding a whip, which was about one *zhang* long – in his hand, but he was wearing old sheepskin sleeveless garment, exposing his skin, which was darker and more rugged than iron.

He was walking at the end of the line. Although he was alone, he was able to handle the more than a dozen beasts of burden so that they obediently, one following the other – walked along the road. Unexpectedly not a single one running or screaming around, and not a single one walk out of the line, as if they were veterans that have undergone a long period of training.

The large cart looked totally weird as well; it was square-shaped, just like a coffin. The doors and windows were tightly closed, so that nobody could see what was inside.

The more Hu Tiehua looked at it, the more he felt that this caravan was weird, even demonic; they neither looked like robbers or bandits, nor did they look like merchants, much less like an escort company.

He could not help urging his horse toward the iron-tower-like big man; laughing, he tried to strike up a conversation, “Friend, you are urgently hastening on with your journey in the middle of the night, aren’t you afraid of hardship?”

The big man only stared at him, but did not speak.

Only then did Hu Tiehua notice that this man’s face was unexpectedly like air-dried tangerine peel, rough with bumps and depressions, without even half a *cun* of smooth and clean place.
Looking at his pair of eyes again, it was as grey as the sky, practically the white and the black of the eye could not be distinguished clearly. No one could imagine that unexpectedly there was such a pair of living human being eyes like this.

Although his eyes were staring at Hu Tiehua, it seemed like he was not looking at Hu Tiehua at all. His eyes appeared to be brimming with evil air, but they also seemed to be hollow, without anything inside.

In the dead of the night, suddenly coming across such a person on the road, it was really not an interesting thing. Hu Tiehua wanted to laugh, but he simply could not laugh.

But he simply had to go to the bottom of this matter; it's just in his nature. The more others ignored him, the more he wanted to investigate clearly. Turning the horse around, he chased after him and spoke in loud voice, "Only people with secret motives [orig. with a ghost in his heart] are unwilling to answer other people's question. Friend, you are not a man with a ghost in his heart, are you?"

This time the big man did not even stare at him; practically he was ignoring him completely.

Chapter 31 – Going Straight to the Great Gobi Desert

Laughing coldly, Hu Tiehua said, "Some people, you can indeed ignore him; although he is angry, he can't do anything to you, but I am definitely not that kind of person. If I get angry …"

Suddenly a head appeared from inside the carriage, looking at him and laughing indifferently, saying, "No need to get angry. He practically cannot hear you; he is deaf."

Hu Tiehua nearly fell off his horse. "Ji Bingyan, it's you!" he called out loudly, "You dead rooster, what trick are you playing?"

Unexpectedly, inside the carriage was indeed Ji Bingyan.

From the carriage window he stretched out his hand, made a signal, and the caravan immediately stopped. And then he pushed the door open and slowly got off the horse-drawn carriage.

Hu Tiehua was even more angry that he went mad, “Aren’t your legs broken?” he bellowed, “How come you can walk again now?”

It was as if Ji Bingyan did not hear him at all; he simply went to meet Chu Liuxiang, who was just coming over toward him. Chu Liuxiang also dismounted his horse and walked toward him.

The two men laughed at each other. Ji Bingyan said, “I came.”

“Very good,” Chu Liuxiang replied.

Ji Bingyan said, “I came late, because I had to make preparation to go out the Pass.”

Chu Liuxiang cast a quick glance at the caravan, he laughed and said, “You prepared too much.”

Ji Bingyan said, “Too much is always better than not enough.”

Chu Liuxiang said, “Naturally your experience is more than mine; I’ll listen to you.”

Ji Bingyan said, “We could also rest inside the carriage. How about I’ll let you inspect the equipment tomorrow morning?”

“All right,” Chu Liuxiang replied.

Unexpectedly the two had their lips sealed and did not say anything about the ‘broken legs’ thing; neither did they mention anything about Ban Bing, Ying Yan, as if it had never happened.

Hu Tiehua had been so angry that his face turned green; he could not help rushing over.

But Ji Bingyan simply laughed indifferently and said, “I have some wine on the carriage. If you are not drunk yet, drink a few more cups!”

Hu Tiehua was staring at him for half a day. Finally he also roared in laughter and said, “All right! Although you duped me, I was not being a true friend to you either. Let’s consider us even. After getting on the carriage, I will salute you three cups.”

When they got to the carriage, Hu Tiehua understood why Ji Bingyan built the carriage like a coffin, because this way, the space inside the carriage was bigger.

This was practically not like a horse-drawn carriage, but like a house.

Inside the carriage, there was a long, big, and comfortable soft couch; there were also several brocade pads, and a table. Obviously everything was arranged carefully; hence although there were many things, it did not appear too crowded.

Hu Tiehua was just thinking of asking, ‘Where’s the wine?’ Ji Bingyan already reached out to press something at the edge of the couch. A drawer popped up from under the brocade couch. Inside the drawer were six shiny silver cups, as well as ten square bottles made of cast silver.

Ji Bingyan said, “We have ten kinds of wine here, from *Maotai*, *Da Qu*, *Zhuyeqing* [green bamboo leaf], to *Yang Ru Jiu* [goat milk wine] from outside the Pass; everything. Although the bottles don’t look big, they could contain three *jin* [catty, approx. 500g] and twelve *liang* [tael, approx. 50g or 1/16 of a catty]. What do you want to drink? Just say it!”
Hu Tiehua already stared in disbelief at the drawer; half a day later, he sighed and said, “One flick of a hand, all kinds of wine came out. This is practically every drunkard’s dream. No wonder everybody wants to get rich; getting rich indeed has its advantages.”

The three drank two cups of wine each, Hu Tiehua could not help saying, “Now, if there is Jiangbei’s [lit. north of the River] big shrimp rice, and Jinhua’s ham

and paw to accompany the wine, this place would practically be heaven. Too bad …"

He has not finished speaking, another drawer popped up from underneath the brocade cushion. Inside, not only there were Jiangbei's big shrimp rice and Jinhua's ham, there were also Fuzhou's pickled fish, Fuzhou's roast goose, Haining's sea bedbug, Wuxi's meat bone, Changbai Mountain's plum blossom bear paw … In short, if you can think of the most delicious dish to accompany the wine, chances are you will find it in the drawer.

Hu Tiehua cried out; he said, "You are performing conjuring tricks!"

Ji Bingyan responded indifferently, "Life must be enjoyed, especially those who have had too many faults. There was one time I was so hungry that I wanted to chop my own hand to eat. Therefore, now, no matter where I am going, I must pile up enough things to eat; even under the bed where I sleep, I always have wine and meat."

Listening to that, Hu Tiehua wanted to laugh, but after thinking about it carefully, he no longer felt that there was nothing funny in that remark, on the contrary, there was something that made him wanting to cry. This ordinary, plain remark was actually brimming with pain and suffering. When a man was so afraid of 'hunger', the hardship and misery that he had suffered before, perhaps it was something that no one else could imagine!

Hu Tiehua was silent for a long time before he drank his third cup of wine; looking up and heaving a long sigh, he said, "Maybe I should not have forced you to come."

Ji Bingyan coldly said, "You did not force me at all; if I was really unwilling to come, no one can force me."

Hu Tiehua smiled bitterly; suddenly he asked, "What about those two *Guniang*? Why didn't we invite them to drink a cup?"
"They have gone back," Ji Bingyan replied.

“Why are you in a hurry to rush them back?” Hu Tiehua asked, “Chu Liuxiang and I are very tactful people; we could always find the opportunity to let you say goodbye to them.”

Ji Bingyan spoke indifferently, “Now there is no time to say goodbye. From now on, we are starting our journey straight toward the Great Gobi. From now on, this carriage will not stop for a rest more than the time needed to drink two cups of tea; furthermore, we can only stop a maximum of three times every day. I believe with our current endurance, we can strictly control urination and defecation.”

Hu Tiehua excitedly asked, “Are you saying we can’t even get off the car to walk?”

“Absolutely not,” Ji Bingyan replied.

“Why?” Hu Tiehua asked.

Ji Bingyan replied, “Although we do not know whether the opposite side has laid out ambushes along the way, or scouting Chu Liuxiang’s whereabouts, yet we simply must guard against this possibility.”

Hu Tiehua said, “But it doesn’t have to be …”

Ji Bingyan cut him off, “If we want to succeed, we must consider every possibility, only because since the opponent dares to provoke Chu Liuxiang, they are definitely not ordinary people.”

“Are you saying we are ordinary people?” Hu Tiehua asked.

Ji Bingyan replied, “I have already told you: these people grew up in the desert, they have also been tempered by the desert to have greater endurance than the camels, to be more refined than the foxes, to be more ruthless than the wolves, while in the desert, we are weaker than the rabbits.”

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “Aren’t you unavoidably overestimating their resolve too much, while extinguishing our own prestige?”

Ji Bingyan said, “This is because I do not want to die in the desert, to let the bald eagles to come and suck my dead body, to let the wolves to come and gnaw my bones. My life is still very interesting.”

Hu Tiehua said, “But I still think …”

Ji Bingyan laughed coldly and said, “I don’t want to know what you think; I just want to know: since you guys wanted me to come, are you willing to listen to me or not?”

All along Chu Liuxiang was listening quietly. This moment he smiled and said, “You are able to come out from the desert alive and bring this much wealth; what you say is certainly reasonable, and reasonable words, I am always willing to listen.”

Ji Bingyan stared at Hu Tiehua and asked, “What about you?”

Hu Tiehua sighed. He smiled bitterly and said, “I can only say that I should not have forced you to come, but you already came; what can I do?”

“Good!” Ji Bingyan said.

Suddenly he took the food and wine off the table. Reaching out, he pressed something, and the entire desktop unexpectedly flipped over; unexpectedly the reverse side was engraved with a detailed map.

Dipping his chopstick into the wine, Ji Bingyan drew a line on the map, saying, “We actually should not have gone out of the Pass from here, but because you did not know the way you came to this place; therefore, now we must travel along this road.”

“Is this the Yellow River?” Chu Liuxiang asked.

“That’s right,” Ji Bingyan replied, “This is precisely the upper reaches of the Yellow River. We could travel along the river all the way to Yinchuan. I know Zha Muge’s power in the past did not extend south of *Yinshan* [Yin Mountains in inner Mongolia]; therefore, in this section of the road, we cannot hope to obtain their track, but we still have to guard against their eyes and ears.” Chu Liuxiang and Hu Tiehua did not interrupt him at all.

Ji Bingyan went on, “Therefore, when we get to the Old Longwan tomorrow, you must leave your horse there. I have a partner there, you won’t need to worry.”

Chu Liuxiang could not help saying, “I must take this horse along with me.”

“That’s out of the question!” Ji Bingyan said.

“Why?” Chu Liuxiang asked.

Ji Bingyan replied, “Not only this horse is too ostentatious, it is too conspicuous, plus it originally belonged to the opposite side. If we take this horse along, it will be no different than putting up advertisement; we definitely cannot take this risk.”

Chu Liuxiang thought about it; he no longer said anything.

Ji Bingyan said, “You must know that right now not only the opponent is waiting at their ease for the exhausted enemy, but they are also occupying the best position in terms of time, favorable location, and manpower, while basically we do not have the slightest bit of favorable condition. If we want to triumph over the opponent, we can only use troops appearing suddenly, catching them off guard. Therefore, before we find their whereabouts, we must not let them discover our track. Otherwise, if they rely on the desert’s advantage to mount sneak attack, we would die without a burial site.”

Chu Liuxiang was silent for half a day. Heaving a deep sigh, he said, “I did not think that much; I …”

Ji Bingyan spoke word by word, “You must remember, it is precisely because the other side knew that they cannot kill you anywhere else that they lured you into the desert. And they are luring you into the desert, naturally because they have the confidence of killing you in the desert. This is the most difficult battle in your life; how could you not think much?”

Smiling wryly, Chu Liuxiang said, “But some things we simply can’t think too much.”

Ji Bingyan drained his cup and said, “All right! Let’s not think about anything right now; let’s go to sleep first. Even if you cannot sleep, you must force yourself to sleep, because right now we absolutely cannot waste any energy.”

The brocade couch was very big, enough for the three men to sleep together. With a wine cup in his hand, Hu Tiehua suddenly laughed and said, “In any case, right now the three of us finally sleep together, just like more than ten years ago … Ay! Those happy, beautiful old days.”

Ji Bingyan coldly said, “Those days are not necessarily that good; at that time the wine we drank was sour wine, the place we lay down was wet and cold grassy meadow. Now, we have a soft and warm bed.”

Hu Tiehua sighed; he shook his head and said, “The past is always beautiful; it’s just a pity that this kind of thing, you will never understand, only because you are unromantic, also too realistic, too snobbish. You only know …”

He suddenly stopped talking; just because he discovered that Ji Bingyan has already fallen asleep.

The next day at dusk, they reached the Old Longwan. In a ranch belonging to Ji Bingyan, Chu Liuxiang and the others dismounted their horses. He suddenly realized that he was somewhat reluctant to part with this horse; he could not

help muttering with a wry smile, “Perhaps I really am growing old, hence my heart is getting softer.”

The horse was hissing softly too.

Gently stroking the soft and smooth horseback, Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “You hate to part with me too, don’t you? Are you afraid that I am going this time, I won’t ever come back?”

But Hu Tiehua was very excited; he was on the other side, inspecting the camel, the cart and the horses with Ji Bingyan. Every single item, he had to take a look, he had to ask question.

Now he knew that the deaf and mute big man was called ‘Shi Tuo’ [lit. stone camel]; but he could not figure out how a person’s skin could become like this.

Now he also knew that the young guy driving the carriage was called ‘Xiao Pan’ [lit. little Pan (surname, also ‘Pan’ in Greek mythology)]. This Xiao Pan was actually no longer a young man for a long time already; he was at least thirty something. But because he was born with a baby face, plus he would laugh first before speaking, and he would laugh after speaking, nobody could lose his temper against him.

The more Hu Tiehua looked, the more interested he was; he could not help asking, “Xiao Pan, could you be thirty-five this year?”

Xiao Pan giggled; he replied, “To tell you a secret, in another month, *Xiaoren* will be forty-three.”
Hu Tiehua laughed in spite of himself, “Forty-three; I really can’t see it … More than forty-year-old man, you are still called ‘Xiao Pan’; you really should be happy.”

Beaming with smile, Xiao Pan said, “Even if *Xiaoren* live to be eighty, I will still be called ‘Little’ Pan. But this is not something that I am proud of; this is simply humiliating.”

Fixing his gaze on Xiao Pan, Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “Since Ji Bingyan brought you along, you must have some special skill. What skill do you have? How about opening both hands and show it to me?”

Smiling apologetically, Xiao Pan said, “*Xiaoren*’s skill is precisely I can’t do anything, I don’t understand anything. When someone lives to more than forty years and still does not have any skill, this is not an easy thing; don’t you agree?”
Hu Tiehua roared in laughter and said, “You are able to say that, obviously your skill is not small.”

It was quite a long time later that he discovered that not only Xiao Pan was able to ‘seeing people speak people’s language, seeing ghosts speak ghosts’ talk’, he also had some kind of special skill. North and south of the *Chang Jiang* [lit. long river, i.e. Yangtze River], both banks of the *Da He* [lit. great river, i.e. Yellow River], Fujian Lingnan [south of the five ranges/old term for south China, esp. Guangdong and Guangxi], Qian Gui Chuan E [Guizhou, Sichuan, Hubei], no matter which dialect, he could unexpectedly speak fluently and naturally, totally equal to the locally-born-and-bred people from that area; no matter what kind of business transaction, just leave it to him without any worries. Even if he had his eyes closed, he would not suffer any losses.
And that Shi Tuo, although he could not speak with human, he could communicate with the beasts – he seemed to be able to use some kind of mysterious language to link his thought with that of the beast. Whether it was a donkey, a horse, a camel, whatever it was thinking, he knew everything. Whatever he wanted these beasts to do, they would unexpectedly do it obediently.

Sometimes Hu Tiehua simply could not figure out what kind of strange method Ji Bingyan was using to find such two people; he really could not help but to admire him.

As expected, day and night, the carriage did not stop hurrying along the road. It appeared that Xiao Pan and Shi Tuo did not sleep at all. But after several days,

Xiao Pan was still happy and excited, with smiling expression across his face. Shi Tuo's head did not even drooping.

Hu Tiehua could not help asking, "Could it be that these two did not need any sleep?"

Ji Bingyan replied, "Some people are able to sleep, no matter what they are doing."

"Can they sleep while driving the carriage?" Hu Tiehua asked.

Ji Bingyan replied, "The horse already knew the way, why can't the driver sleep?"

Hu Tiehua thought for a moment; he said, "That's right! While driving, he is still sitting. But that Shi Tuo, not only he is not sitting, he practically is not even standing; could it be that he can sleep while walking?"

"Exactly the case," Ji Bingyan replied indifferently.

Hu Tiehua laughed aloud and said, "You think I am a three-year-old child?"

Ji Bingyan's countenance sank; he no longer spoke.

But Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, "He is not pulling your leg; some people indeed can sleep while they are walking; only because although their legs are walking, their spirit has been completely loosened, which is similar to when other people are sleeping."

Laughing in spite of himself, Hu Tiehua said, "This skill is really not a minor one."

Ji Bingyan coldly said, "This skill was not innate at all, but acquired through tempering oneself. If someone was driven by other people using a whip, constantly, without any break – walking for a year, as soon as he closed his eyes

he would suffer the whip, then later on, even if he is walking barefoot in the snow, he could still sleep just the same."

Emotionally moved, Hu Tiehua said, "Could it be that Shi Tuo has been subjected to such suffering?"

"Hmm!" Ji Bingyan responded.

Hu Tiehua sighed. And then he went on, "But why did the other people want him to keep walking, moreover, walking for a year?"

Ji Bingyan was silent for half a day. He suddenly said, "Have you seen a donkey pulling millstone?"

"I have," Hu Tiehua replied.

Ji Bingyan slowly said, "One time people were using him as the donkey pulling the millstone, but he was more miserable than a donkey. Donkey still has the time to rest, but his legs did not stop; he was pulling the millstone for a whole year."

Hu Tiehua could not help shuddering; he angrily said, "Who was that person? Why was he so cruel? Why would he treat him like that?"

Ji Bingyan shook his head, but did not open his mouth.

Hu Tiehua drank his wine again; inwardly he was still a bit skeptical. 'How could someone sleep while walking?'

He was determined to see clearly.

Although this carriage was the most comfortable vehicle in the world, but being cooped up all day and all night inside, very soon Hu Tiehua was bored, and it has driven him crazy.

Originally he wanted to find something to do. Thereupon he leaned over the carriage window, opening his eyes wide to look at that Shi Tuo. He wanted to see how this man could sleep while he was walking.

Shi Tuo's pair of grey, overcast eyes were always staring; he was always staring blankly at the distance, as if he could see some beautiful scenery that no one else could.

Hu Tiehua kept his eyes on him at all times. After a day, he suddenly roared in laughter and said, "Good Dead Rooster, turns out you are pulling my leg."

Ji Bingyan frowned; he said, "Pulling your leg?"

Hu Tiehua said, "He did not even close his eyes, how could he sleep?"

Ji Bingyan said, "When he sleeps, he does not need to close his eyes."

"Why is that?" Hu Tiehua asked.

Ji Bingyan replied indifferently, "Because he is blind."

Hu Tiehua sprang up. "He is blind?" he said, "You said this man not only deaf and mute, he is also blind?"

Ji Bingyan kept his mouth shut. When he spoke, he never said it the second time.

Hu Tiehua said, "No wonder his eyes look so strange. But … but how could a blind man walk like him? I really cannot figure it out even more."

Ji Bingyan said, "The beast by his side is his eyes."

"What if there is no beast by his side?" Hu Tiehua asked.

“Then he would find a way to call one,” Ji Bingyan replied.

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “The more you talk, the more mysterious it is; you practically say that he is not like a human, that he is practically like a beast.”

Ji Bingyan said, “Sometimes he is practically a beast, just because he himself wishes that he was a beast. He thinks that being with a beast is much easier than getting along with people.”

Hu Tiehua was silent for a long time. He said, “Then why did he want to work for you?”

Ji Bingyan kept his mouth shut again.

Hu Tiehua could see that not only he was unwilling to answer this question, he was also unwilling to continue discussing this matter.

Who would have thought that half a day later, Ji Bingyan unexpectedly said, word-by-word, “It was only because I saved his life.”

Hu Tiehua was silent for a long time again, and then he sighed and said, “In that case, why would you take such a deaf, mute, and blind man to the desert to face such dangers?”

Ji Bingyan coldly said, “Just because on the desert, he is much more useful than ten people who are not deaf, not mute, not blind.”

Chapter 32 – Desert Landscape

Desert.

They finally reached the desert.

This was a small town at the edge of the desert. Standing at the door of this only inn in the small town, one could cast one's gaze on the boundless desert.

Altogether the small town only had thirty houses. Amidst the piercing sandstorm, after going through many years of hardships, their only priced possession was a well.

Ji Bingyan bought more than a dozen big sheepskin bags of fresh water, which were more expensive than wine, and then he also sold several travel-weary horses to the small town's inhabitants, at the cheaper price than selling pigs. But the large carriage, he set it on fire – it was his beloved possession, but since he could not take it, he destroyed it. He absolutely did not want to leave his beloved possession in someone else's hands.

Hu Tiehua could not help asking, "I understand why you destroyed the big carriage; but I don't understand why you sold the horses. Even if you are stingy, I don't think you'd covet these several *taels* of silver?"
Ji Bingyan replied, "If I bring these several horses into the desert, in less than three days, they would die of exhaustion."

"In that case," Hu Tiehua said, "Why not simply let them go? By nature, horses know their way, perhaps they could walk home on their own."

"They definitely won't find their way home," Ji Bingyan replied.

"Why?" Hu Tiehua asked.

Ji Bingyan replied, "Because not only on this stretch of road robbers are going on the rampage, there are too many hungry people all year long. If I let them go, if they don't fall into the hands of the bandits, it's hard to avoid them falling into other people's belly."

Hu Tiehua asked, "Do you think the people in this small town would treat them well?"

“That’s right,” Ji Bingyan replied, “These people are frugal and good and honest; they also take a very good care of their horses, they will definitely raise the horses until they are fat.”

There was a hint of cynicism at the corners of his mouth. And then he went on, “This way, by the time they are selling the horses, they would get a good price. And those who are willing to pay good price in buying a horse will definitely not buy them for food.”

Hu Tiehua asked, “Since that’s the case, why not simply give the horses as a present to them?”

Ji Bingyan responded indifferently, “When people buy something, they will always cherish it more. If it was given by others, unavoidable they would regard it more lightly.”

Hu Tiehua was silent for half a day. Heaving a sigh, he said, “I never expected that you are giving this much consideration toward these horses. It seems that you have changed a little.”

Laughing coldly, Ji Bingyan said, “You think it was my idea?”

Ji Bingyan was stunned. “Not your idea, then whose idea?” he asked.

Actually, he did not need Ji Bingyan to answer this question, because this moment he already saw Shi Tuo’s cold-and-detached, ugly, as-if-it-was-carved-using-coarse-stone – face.

Unexpectedly, this moment, this face, which was rough like it was carved – was showing some emotion, as if he was grieving that he was about to part with his close friends. And the neigh of those horses also faintly resembled a sigh.

Now, Chu Liuxiang, Hu Tiehua and Ji Bingyan, were dressed no different than ordinary itinerant traders, traveling merchants. Shi Tuo, however, changed into a

Mongolian attire. He tied a large piece of white cloth on the top of his head, but it was not to block the sun, rather, it was to cover up his face.

As for Xiao Pan? He could wear any attire, and you could drop him anywhere among the crowd, he would not stick up like a sore thumb.

They entered the desert when it was nearly dusk.

At this time, although the sun had dropped, and the heat from the desert had evaporated, yet it was hot enough that they wished they could strip naked.

Yet before long, the heat disappeared, followed by the arrival of biting-cold air. The wind blowing on their face felt like a blade. Hu Tiehua really wished he could hide his entire body behind the camel's hump. He was sitting on the camel, but it swayed and fluttered like he was on a boat.

Chu Liuxiang, Ji Bingyan and Xiao Pan also rode the camels; seeing how Hu Tiehua was sitting on the camel, they nearly could not help laughing out loud.

Anybody sitting on a camel could not possibly look good. Only Shi Tuo was still walking step by step behind the camel, on the desert, on the plain, on the marsh, in the cold, in the heat … Nothing seemed to affect this man the least bit.

If it had been before, Hu Tiehua would have been tempted to ask, "Why don't you ride the camel too?" But now he did not need to ask. He already knew that Shi Tuo would definitely not ride on any donkey, horse, or camel. Because to him, they were his friends.

The night grew deeper, the cold hair grew heavier.

Xiao Pan was so cold that he did not stop shivering sitting on the hump of the camel. Ji Bingyan had just found a place where they could take shelter from the wind. He built a tent behind a sand dune, and lit up a fire.

A pot of hot dishes was being cooked on the fire. They sat surrounding the fire, drinking wine, sniffing the aroma of pepper, chili, green onion, ginger and beef and goat meat mixed together.

It was then that Ji Bingyan felt much more comfortable. But Shi Tuo was still sitting far away on the side.

Under the illumination of the bright starlight of the desert, not only his face looked even colder, even uglier, there was also a peculiar look.

It seemed that he was feeling very inferior, but also seemed to be very arrogant, as if he did not dare to come over and enjoy the pleasantries with Hu Tiehua and the others, but it also felt like he disdained to associate with them.

The more open the space, the quieter the moment. That kind of expression on his face also became more obvious. As he sat in the boundless desert, in the frigid and quiet night, unexpectedly he looked like an exiled emperor, silently enduring the deep loneliness, pain, and humiliation!

Even Chu Liuxiang could not help feeling curious about this mysterious figure's past, but he was unable to guess the load in this mysterious figure's mind.

But Chu Liuxiang did not want to ask Ji Bingyan at all.

Because he knew that Ji Bingyan definitely would not say anything.

In the evening, they all returned to their tents to sleep. But Shi Tuo only wrapped himself with a blanket and slept by a camel's side, looking up at the starlight in the sky.

Chu Liuxiang did not know whether he actually slept or not, but he knew that he would rather sleep by the camel than being together with anybody else.

Naturally Hu Tiehua also noticed this. But unlike Chu Liuxiang, sometimes he was unable to keep the questions in his heart. He could only endure it for half a day. In the end he still asked it out, “Why doesn’t he come in to be with us?”

Ji Bingyan replied, “Just because he looks down on us.”

Hu Tiehua jumped up and angrily asked, “Whom does he despise?”

“He despises everybody,” Ji Bingyan replied.

Stunned, Hu Tiehua asked, “He despises even you?”

Ji Bingyan laughed indifferently and said, “Precisely. He despises even me.”

Hu Tiehua said, “Since he despises you, why does he work for you?”

Ji Bingyan replied coldly, “When you do something for others, it’s not necessarily because you look up to him, is it?”

He seemed to be sighing. After that, he went on, “Right now he is working for me, just because he feels that he owes me. When he feels that he no longer owes me anything, even if I kneel down and beg him, he will not stay.”

Hu Tiehua stared blankly at him again. He got up and poured a large bowl of wine and drank it up; he just wanted to fall asleep quickly, but he was always thinking about that strange face.

“Who the hell is this man? Who the hell did that to him that he became like this?”

Naturally he was unable to understand. He had no choice but to sigh and quietly mumbled to himself, “In this ghost place, the days are really rather unbearable.”

Ji Bingyan seemed to have fallen asleep, but this moment he suddenly spoke coldly, “Now you also feel the days are unbearable? The really unbearable days have not yet begun!”

Ever since the first time Hu Tiehua jumped into the brook behind his house to swim when he was little, he had always liked the sun. From then on, as long as it was a sunny day, he could not help taking off his clothes to bask in the sun. At the edge of *Yangzijiang* [old name for Changjiang, especially lower reaches around Yangzhou], at the top of *Huanghe Lou* [Yellow Crane Tower in Wuhan City, built in 223, burnt down in 1884, rebuilt in 1985], at Qingcheng, at Luofu, under the shade of Mount Hua, on the top of Mount Tai, he had seen all kinds and sorts of sun.
Some was as fierce as the dragon-bearded husband; some was as gentle as the yellow flower [fig. young virgin] maiden. Some was vast and hazy, grey and dark, like the old man’s eyes, but some was gorgeous and flamboyant, like the young girl’s countenance.

But he had never seen the sun like this.

Although it was the same sun, but when this sun reached the desert, it suddenly became ruthless and cruel, as if it wanted to burn the entire desert in its light.

The sun was shining in such a way that Hu Tiehua did not even want to drink wine; he was only hoping that the sun would set faster – when a drunkard no longer wish to drink wine, it must be so unbearable that he wanted to die.

There was no wind. Not even a whiff of breeze. There was not the slightest bit of sound either. Under the scorching sun, all living organisms have entered some kind of comatose state.

Hu Tiehua practically could not help wanting to jump onto the hump of the camel and roar.

Right this moment, there was a groan, which no one knew where it came from.

Although the groan was very faint, but in the deathly stillness of the desert, it was clearer than if someone was talking right by his ear.

Chu Liuxiang, Ji Bingyan, Hu Tiehua, all straightened up their back. Hu Tiehua opened his eyes wide. “Did you hear that?” he asked.

“Hmm!” Chu Liuxiang responded.

“What did you hear?” Hu Tiehua asked.

“There are people around here,” Chu Liuxiang replied.

“That’s right!” Hu Tiehua said, “There is someone, but it’s someone who is about to die.”

“How do you know?” Ji Bingyan coldly asked.

Smiling bitterly, Hu Tiehua replied, “Although I do not like killing people, but the sound of groaning when someone is dying, I have heard a lot. In my opinion, this person is either about to die of heatstroke, of about to die of thirst.”

Just then, another groan was heard. This time Hu Tiehua heard the groan came from behind the sand dune to their left. He immediately jumped off the camel and said, “The man is over there; let us take a look.”

Ji Bingyan said, “Someone who is about to die, what’s good there is to look at?”

“What’s good to look at?” Hu Tiehua cried out, “You know there’s someone about to die, aren’t you going to save him?”

Ji Bingyan slowly said, “I have already told you: in the desert, you might come across several dozen dying men every day. If you want to save their lives, then you need not mind anything else.”

Shocked, Hu Tiehua said, “You … Could it be that you are *Jian Si Bu Jiu*?” [Seeing Death Without Helping, also ‘The One who Ignores the Dying’ in Jin Yong’s Heavenly Sword and Dragon Saber.]
Ji Bingyan coldly said, “Are we coming here to save lives?”

Hu Tiehua cried out again, “Is your heart so hard?”

Ji Bingyan said, “In this kind of place, only the heartless will survive. When you are about to die, there will never be anybody coming to save you, just because if someone was giving part of his water to you, he himself will die of thirst.”

Chu Liuxiang smiled and said, “But currently, don’t we have more than enough water?”

Ji Bingyan said, “There’s also some kind of people in the desert that if you save him, when his strength recovers, he would kill you instead, to rob your food, your water, and your beast to escape.”

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “With the three of us, who on earth can kill us?”

Hu Tiehua loudly echoed, “That’s right, who can kill us?”

Glaring at Ji Bingyan, he said, “It looks like not only your heart grew more and more cruel, your guts grew more and more smaller. When one has too much money, I am afraid he would become like this.”

Ji Bingyan’s countenance remained icy-cold, but he no longer speak.

Hu Tiehua said, “I don’t care if you are not going to save people, I simply must go.”

Chu Liuxiang smiled and said, “If you want to go, we all will go, right?”

Naturally his last question was addressed to Ji Bingyan.

Ji Bingyan was silent for half a day, as if he was sighing. Thereupon the entire group was turning to the left.

The sand dune on the left was not big at all; turning around the sand dune, they saw two men. But as soon as they saw these two men, Chu Liuxiang and Hu Tiehua's heart turned cold.

These two men practically did not resemble human beings anymore, but like sheep being skewered above the fire, and were about to be charred. They were butt-naked and were nailed to the ground. Their wrists, their ankles, and their foreheads were tied with cowhide. The cowhide was originally moist, but after being dried by the sun, it became tighter and tighter, until it dug into their flesh.

The skin on their entire body has been burnt by the sun, their lips were cracked, their eyes were half-closed half-open, the blacks and the whites of their eyes were no longer distinct, just like grey, dusky holes.

It was only then did Hu Tiehua understand how Shi Tuo's eyes turned blind – just like these two men, Shi Tuo's eyes were scorched by the sun.

Although Shi Tuo could not see, he could hear, but when he got here, his whole body trembled. He seemed to have some mysterious sense that could feel the current ominous happening, as well as the impending bad omen.

The cowhide was picked and snapped, Chu Liuxiang and Hu Tiehua used felt blanket to wrap these two men. And using silk dipped in water, they let them gently suck the water. Only then did they start to tremble. "Water … Water …" they moaned.

As soon as they could make a sound, they kept shouting and pleading.

But Chu Liuxiang knew that if he let them to drink freely, they might immediately die.

Hu Tiehua sighed; he spoke gently, “Friends, don’t worry, we have lots of water here; you can drink as much as you want.”

The dying man opened his eyes with blank expression; he still moaned, “Water …”

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “You don’t believe me?” He stood up, patted the sheepskin bag on the camel’s back, and then said, “You see, it’s all water here.”

Ji Bingyan suddenly spoke sternly, “Who tied you here? What crime have you committed?”

The dying man doing his utmost to shake his head; he said, “No … not … it’s the robbers.”

Shrugging his shoulders, Hu Tiehua said, “Robbers? Where?”

The dying man struggled hard to raise his hand to point to the distance, he also desperately grabbed his hair, while his face was twisting with fear, his body was trembling more violently.

Ji Bingyan spoke in stern voice, “As far as I know, there’s no trace of any robbers nearby; are you lying?”

The two men shook their heads together; they seemed to have tears in their eyes.

Hu Tiehua shouted, “They have been miserable to such degree, why do you have to force them like this? So what if they lied? There’s not even a piece of cloth on their bodies; don’t tell me that they can still hurt us.”

Ji Bingyan no longer said anything.

Just because Hu Tiehua was right. Not only these two men did not have a *cun* of steel on their body, they were completely naked. Even if they were not injured, there was nothing on them that could make Ji Bingyan feel uneasy.
Hu Tiehua turned to look at Chu Liuxiang; he asked, “Now, can we let them drink some more water?”

Muttering to himself irresolutely, Chu Liuxiang nodded his head and said, “Not too much.”

As he spoke, he walked over toward the water bag. But before the remark was finished, unexpectedly the two dying men suddenly sprang up like rabbits. Their hands, which were originally grabbing their heads, also suddenly waved as fast as lightning. Each man’s hand shot more than a dozen streaks of black light; the momentum was more pressing than lightning.

Surprisingly, these were the kind of secret projectiles that were usually shot out of the spring-loaded crossbow cylinder.

Turned out the secret projectiles were hidden in their hair.

As soon as their hands swung out, Chu Liuxiang, Hu Tiehua, and Ji Bingyan also immediately flew out like swallows. Even though it was beyond their expectation, with the speed of their movement and reaction, there would be very few secret projectiles that could injure them.

Who would have imagined that the secret projectiles were actually not shot at them, but at the water bags?

With a series of ‘Pop! Pop!’ noise, several dozen of streams of water shot out like arrows from the sheepskin bags.

Those two ‘dying men’ also flew out.

Hu Tiehua’s anger exploded; he shouted angrily, “B@stard! You want to run?”

He pounced on them almost faster than Chu Liuxiang.

But Ji Bingyan did not go after the men. He turned around to rescue the water bags. He knew that under Chu Liuxiang and Hu Tiehua's hands, there has never been anybody able to escape.

Naturally these two men could not escape either.

Before they even ran more than ten *zhang* away, they already felt a gust of strong wind attacking their neck. They wanted to turn around to face the attack, but even before they turned their heads around, they already fell down. They did not even see the opponent's hands.
Striding over the one of the men's body like he was riding a horse, Hu Tiehua continuously slapping his face and angrily shouted, "I saved you, you harmed me in return? Why? Why?"

The man did not answer, he could never answer. By the time Hu Tiehua grabbed and pulled him from the ground, his neck, like a rice straw, has been snapped into two pieces.

The other man was still falling to the ground. Chu Liuxiang did not make any move to hit him at all, he merely stood in front of him, calmly and quietly looking at him; he did not even ask any question.

When the man heard the sound of his companion's neck snapped, he curled his body into a ball, while his mouth screamed as if he went crazy, hissing, "Just kill me! It doesn't matter; you won't live long anyway. I am going to wait for you at the gates of hell [orig. devil/ghost gate pass] to settle this account with you."

Chu Liuxiang's eyes did not even blink; he slowly said, "I definitely will not kill you, as long as you tell me who sent you?"

The man suddenly burst into frenzy laughter and said, "You want to know who sent me here? Are you going to look for him?"

“Precisely to look for him,” Chu Liuxiang replied, “You think it is funny?”

The man laughed until he had tears in his eyes; gasping for breath, he said, “Naturally it is very funny. Anybody who has not gone mad can’t possibly want to look for him, unless this man is already tired of living.”

This moment Hu Tiehua already rushed over; he roared, “Was it Zha Muge’s son who sent you?”

The man laughed and said, “Zha Muge? What kind of thing is Zha Muge? He is not even worthy to carry his, the Senior’s whip.”

Knitting his brows, Chu Liuxiang said, “If not Zha Muge then who?”

The man said, “Don’t worry, when you are about to die, you will naturally meet him, the Senior … I bet you that you won’t live past five days.”

Hu Tiehua shouted angrily, “I bet you, if you don’t tell the truth, you won’t even live past five *sichen*.”
Unexpectedly the man laughed again and said, “I did not want to live another five *sichen* anyway.”
Stumped, Hu Tiehua could not help staring blankly. “You are not afraid to die?” he asked.

The man laughed aloud and said, “Why would I be afraid of death? To be able to die for him, the Senior, I am simply happier than anything else.” Suddenly his laughter died down, but some kind of strange glow burst forth from his eyes.

Emotionally moved, Chu Liuxiang said, “Not good, this man hid poison in his mouth to kill himself.”

When Hu Tiehua picked him up, he immediately realized that this man was no longer breathing.

Only after a very long time did Hu Tiehua put him down. Turning his head toward Chu Liuxiang, he said, “Have you seen anybody not afraid of death like this?”

“No,” Chu Liuxiang replied.

Hu Tiehua said, “I also know that there are a lot of people when they are caught by the enemy, they might kill themselves by taking poison, but those were due to they had no choice, yet this man was very happy to die.”

Chu Liuxiang sighed, but did not speak, only because he could not help recalling Wuhua, who killed himself by taking poison. As soon as he remembered Wuhua, he could not help sighing.

Hu Tiehua also sighed and said, “I think there must be something wrong with this man’s head; otherwise …”

He suddenly saw Ji Bingyan. Stroking his nose, he stopped talking.

Ji Bingyan simply looked down on the corpses on the ground; he practically did not look at Hu Tiehua at all.

Hu Tiehua managed to restrain himself for a long time. Trying to end the awkward silence, he muttered, “Their secret projectiles were hidden inside their hair; this moment I could think about it. But clearly they had been scorched by the sun that their skin burnt and their flesh burst open, they were half dead and not alive at all, how could they have the strength to do it?”

Ji Bingyan’s face did not show any expression. He slowly stooped down to pick up the hair on the corpse’s head and gave it a shake. Immediately there was something like a skin miraculously fell off, revealing the sleek and smooth skin inside.

Chapter 33 – Saving Others Harming Self

With eyes opened wide, Hu Tiehua stared blankly for half a day; finally he smiled wryly and said, “Turns out they were using disguising skill, plus unexpectedly the technique was not inferior to Chu Liuxiang’s. There is such talent in the desert, we really did not expect it.”

He spoke those words to Ji Bingyan, but he had not finished speaking, Ji Bingyan already walked away.

Hu Tiehua did not have any choice but to walk back either. He saw that although those more than a dozen sheepskin bags were pierced, the water inside had not completely leaked out.

Ji Bingyan and Xiao Pan already untied all the sheepskin bags down and lay them flat on the ground, with the side with the holes facing up. Each bag still had at least half of its content remained.

Hu Tiehua spoke in great delight, “Turns out those two men delivered their lives in vain; they have not harmed us at all, we still have water to drink.”

Ji Bingyan did not say anything, but he picked up the water bag and poured the water onto the ground.

Greatly shocked, Hu Tiehua said, “What are you doing?”

Ji Bingyan still did not say anything. But Chu Liuxiang came over and spoke in heavy voice, “The secret projectiles are poisonous, the poison is already dissolving into the water, naturally the water is not drinkable.”

Hu Tiehua staggered two steps back and nearly fell to the ground.

Chu Liuxiang said, “I found the needle cylinder with which they shot the secret projectiles; the structure is complex, unexpectedly it does not seem to be inferior to the ‘*Jiu Tian Shi Di*, *Tian Mo Shen Hui*’ [lit. nine heavens ten earths, devil and deity met] whose name shook the land under heaven in the

past. I really cannot think of anybody in Jianghu who could manufacture such secret projectiles?"
He spread out his palms, showing a dark metal tube on each hand.

Ji Bingyan only cast a glance, and spoke indifferently, "Let's leave this matter until the evening before we talk some more about it, now we must leave without delay!"

He still did not even cast a glance toward Hu Tiehua. Hu Tiehua finally could not help jumping up and calling out loudly, "This is entirely my bad; it was me who love to meddle in someone else's business, it was me who was blind. You … why don't you scold me? You don't want to talk? If you reprimand me severely, I would feel better instead."

Finally Ji Bingyan turned his head around, he calmly looked at Hu Tiehua, and slowly said, "You want me to scold you?"

Hu Tiehua replied, "You don't scold me, you are a muddled egg [i.e. b@stard]."

Still Ji Bingyan's countenance did not change. Slowly mounting the camel, he spoke indifferently, "Why should I scold you? Saving people is always a good thing. Besides, the one who is blind is not just you alone, the one being fooled is not just you alone either."

This time Hu Tiehua was really stunned; he was speechless for a long time.

Chu Liuxiang came over from behind, patted his shoulder, and said with a smile, "This Dead Rooster is not as repulsive as you think at all, is it?"

That night, Hu Tiehua was copying Shi Tuo, sitting under the glittering starlight, sitting on the sand of the desert, which heat had already been totally dispersed, sitting in the boundless frigid air. The air no longer carried the aroma of garlic, onion and beef and mutton.

Because what they had left was nothing more than a bag of water, which never left Ji Bingyan's side.

Without water, there would be no hot dish, no enjoyment, no life.

Shi Tuo sat not too far away. After this incident, although he did not see anything, although he did not hear anything, it was as if he had also changed.

It was as if his eternally as-straight-as-a-ramrod body has withered; his face, which was rough as if it was a carved stone, also become like it was suddenly full of dread and restlessness.

But Hu Tiehua did not notice this change in him at all.

Hu Tiehua was just blaming himself, he was just angry at himself.

There was a crystal lantern inside the tent. The lantern light was as gentle and soft as the starlight. Under such a gentle and soft starlight, the topic of Chu Liuxiang and Ji Bingyan's discussion was not the slightest bit gentle and soft at all.

Under the lantern light, the dark needle cylinder looked particularly hideous and grim. Looking at the needle cylinder, Chu Liuxiang sighed bitterly and said, "This is indeed one of the few types of the most terrifying secret projectiles that I have seen in all my life. I think, only three people on earth are capable to create such secret projectiles."

"Three people?" Ji Bingyan asked.

Chu Liuxiang said, "The first is the *Zhangmen Ren* [headmaster] of the *Tang Men* [Tang School] in *Shu* [short name for Sichuan]. The second is Zhu *Lao Xiansheng* [old mister] of the Jiangnan [i.e. south of Changjiang (Yangtze River)] *Jiu Qu Tang* [lit. nine-bent dyke]. These two naturally would never come to the desert."

“That’s right,” Ji Bingyan replied, “And the last one?”

Chu Liuxiang smiled slightly and said, “The last one is me. But these secret projectiles can’t possibly be created by me.”

Ji Bingyan did not show the slightest bit of smiling expression, not even in his eyes. He spoke word-by-word, “Although you only know three people, but I think there must be the fourth person. It’s just that who this person is, you and I don’t know it; that’s all.”

Chu Liuxiang was silent for half a day. He sighed and said, “To be able to create such a secret projectile is not terrifying at all. The terrifying thing is that this person unexpectedly can make his subordinates delightedly die for him.”

Ji Bingyan asked, “Do you think this is absolutely not that opponent of yours, Hei Zhenzhu?”

“Absolutely not,” Chu Liuxiang replied, “Hei Zhenzhu is not that powerful, he is not that ruthless either.”

Ji Bingyan said, “Who do you think this person is?”

Pondering deeply, Chu Liuxiang said, “I think, this person may be an extremely formidable friend of the dark road [i.e. criminal/underworld] from the Central Plains who went out of the Pass; perhaps the chief of roving bandits of the desert. He is not targeting me, Chu Liuxiang, at all, nor is he targeting you, Ji Bingyan. He is simply regarding us as a group of ‘fat sheep’, he just wanted to scrape some grease [fig. ill-gotten gains] from us.”

“Hmm!” Ji Bingyan responded.

Chu Liuxiang went on, “He has calculated accurately that we would pass this way, hence he laid out this trap in here beforehand; perhaps originally he wanted to take our lives, but when those two men discovered that we are not ordinary

merchants, afraid that one strike would not succeed, at the last moment they changed plan, instead of shooting at the person, they shot at the water bags."

He smiled wryly and went on, "He wanted to wait until we are so thirsty, half dead and not alive, and then he'll come to make his move. At that time we won't even have the strength to fight back; wouldn't it mean we could only let him slaughter us?"

Ji Bingyan pensively said, "Perhaps he basically did not want to kill us with one move at all; he simply wanted us to live and suffer hardship slowly."

Knitting his brows, Chu Liuxiang asked, "What makes you think so? You …"

He stopped abruptly, just because he suddenly discovered that this moment, Ji Bingyan's reserved, cold and detached eyes unexpectedly seemed to hide enormous fear and uneasiness.

This was indeed something that Ji Bingyan had never shown before. Something that could make someone like him afraid and uneasy must be something that was gravely terrifying.

Chu Liuxiang immediately started to feel uneasy as well; he tried to sound him out, "Could it be that you already guess who this person is?"

Ji Bingyan seemed to want to say something, but after casting a quick glance toward Shi Tuo sitting outside the tent, immediately he held back whatever it was he was going to say. Instead, he laughed and said, "No matter who this person is, if he thinks that he could kill us with thirst, he is wrong."

Chu Liuxiang did not press on the issue either; he also laughed and said, "With you here, I have never been afraid of dying of thirst."

Ji Bingyan laughed and said, "I know that in just over a hundred *li*, there is a secret water spring. Before sundown tomorrow, we will be able to reach that place. I did not say it before because I want Hu Tiehua to feel anxious."

He laughed and lay down. Very soon it was like he was asleep.

But Chu Liuxiang quietly went out of the tent to sit by Hu Tiehua's side. He did not come to talk with Hu Tiehua, he just wanted to sit closer to observe that mysterious, strange man.

He had a faint feeling that maybe the secret hidden inside the rock-like breast of Shi Tuo was ten times more terrifying than those seeing-blood-sealing-the-throat poisonous needles.

The next day, Ji Bingyan divided the remaining water into five equal parts; he spoke indifferently, "There is only so much water. You can drink it all in one breath right now, or you can save it for later. Anyway, this little bit of water can only support you two or three days at best."

Hu Tiehua looked at the empty water bag; he shouted, "This is the water that you saved; I am not going to drink."

He turned around and was about to walk away, Chu Liuxiang pulled him back and said with a laugh, "You must not act in a fit of pique at Ji Bingyan; if you do, you are going to be fooled."

Suddenly Hu Tiehua also roared in laughter; he said, "I am not that angry at him. Last night, I heard him boasting that today we are going to find water. It's just that I still have a pot of wine with me; why would I want to drink the potable water from this fading out bird?"

Unconsciously Ji Bingyan also laughed. Xiao Pan looked at these three arm-in-arm friends together, suddenly he felt that he was also a hundred times more courageous.

Going with such three men, what did he have to fear? Only Shi Tuo's countenance grew more and more gloomy. He was a man without any eyes, but it was as if he could see the danger that no one else could see.

Ji Bingyan only waved his hand, Shi Tuo immediately made the caravan stop. The camel crouched down, Hu Tiehua jumped from the camel hump, but immediately ran toward Ji Bingyan, asking, “It was you who wanted Shi Tuo to stop, wasn’t it?”

“That’s right,” Ji Bingyan replied.

“You just waved your hand, and he understood what you mean?” Hu Tiehua asked.

“Hmm!” Ji Bingyan replied.

Hu Tiehua cried out, “But you said he is blind and deaf; how could he see it?”

Ji Bingyan laughed indifferently and said, “I have a way to make him know what I mean.”

“What seeing-ghost method do you have?” Hu Tiehua asked, “Why not tell me?”

“You really cannot see?” Ji Bingyan asked.

“Only *Wang Ba Dan* [b@stard/s.o.b.] can see,” Hu Tiehua replied.
Ji Bingyan turned toward Chu Liuxiang, “What about you?” he asked.

Chu Liuxiang slowly said, “You use a small pebble to convey your orders. If you want the caravan to stop, you use the pebble to hit Shi Tuo’s left shoulder. If you want the caravan to move, you hit his right shoulder.”

He smiled slightly, looked at Hu Tiehua with a laugh, and said, “The method really isn’t only *Wang Ba Dan* can see it, is it?”
Hu Tiehua raised both hands with palms up; smiling ruefully, he said, “You are not *Wang Ba Dan*, I am. I just found out that I really do not look much smarter than *Wang Ba Dan*.”

It was a piece of land with yellow sand, no different to any other places in the desert. The only thing catching their attention was a tree.

The tree grew near a weathered rock, and had long since withered.

Hu Tiehua looked for half a day; he could not help asking, “There’s water here?”

“Hmm!” Ji Bingyan replied.

Stroking his head, Hu Tiehua asked, “Where’s the water? Did you see it?”

He grabbed Chu Liuxiang and asked, “Tell me honestly, have you seen it?”

Muttering to himself irresolutely, Chu Liuxiang said, “I heard there are many secret water sources in the desert; they are hidden underground.”

“That’s right,” Ji Bingyan said, “You …”

He looked at Hu Tiehua, wanted to talk, and whatever he was going to say naturally would not be anything good. But before he even started, Hu Tiehua already raised his hands and said, “No need to say anything. I admit I don’t know anything, all right?”

He stroked his head and said with a laugh, “I am not too smart to begin with. But somehow with these two people, I become an idiot. Could it be that I am infected by someone else’s stupidity illness?”

Xiao Pan was unable to stop laughing; he said, “If Hu *Ye* is really infected by stupidity illness, you must have caught it from me.”
Ji Bingyan spoke with straight face, “How could you infect him? He is much more stupid than you are.” Before he finished speaking, he could not stop from laughing himself.

But they could not laugh for long – they have spent one *sichen* digging for the underground water source, who would have thought that there was not even one drop of water underground.
Ji Bingyan was staring blankly like a stone statue.

Hu Tiehua wiped the sweats on his forehead. He wanted to say some witty remark, to have a bit of laugh, but noticing Ji Bingyan's expression, he recalled the impending crisis. How could he still have something to say? How could he still have something to laugh about?

Trying hard to make the tone of his voice as neutral as possible, Chu Liuxiang said, "Think again, perhaps you got the place wrong?"

Ji Bingyan jumped and roared, "You don't trust me?"

Chu Liuxiang knew that this moment Ji Bingyan's heart must be ten times more uncomfortable than anybody else; he could not bear to say anything anymore.

But it was as if Ji Bingyan suddenly turned limp; he leaned, nearly reclined – on the withered tree.

Xiao Pan laughed apologetically, "Sometimes underground water sources could suddenly dry up, sometimes they might suddenly be diverted. This is *Laotianye*'s playing jokes on us, there is nothing we can do."
"I know," Chu Liuxiang replied.

Ji Bingyan looked at Chu Liuxiang. In the end he spoke sadly, "Please don't blame me, my …"

Chu Liuxiang smiled and said, "I know your mood. If I were you, not only I would vent my anger just like you, I might even throw a bigger temper tantrum."

Hu Tiehua laughed heartily and said, “That’s right! When one is feeling unwell, if he does not vent his anger to good friend, whom could he vent his anger to? If the good friend cannot understand him, then who could understand him?”

Xiao Pan looked at these three; suddenly he felt as if his throat tightened. Choking, he said, “If *Xiaoren* might be so bold as to speak something, whoever could make friends with Chu *Ye* and Hu *Ye*, he is indeed the luckiest man in the world.”
Right this moment, suddenly they heard a burst of rapid hoof beats coming over.

Hu Tiehua was startled; he wanted to go up to meet these people, but Chu Liuxiang pulled him back and spoke heavily, “At this very moment, we definitely must not rush indiscriminately into action. Let’s quietly watch for changes first.”

On the other side, Ji Bingyan, Xiao Pan, and Shi Tuo already pulled the camels into the depression in the sand – just now they were looking for water source everywhere, hence the excavation area on the sand was quite big.

In front of the depression, there was a pile of rocks blocking the view from the opposite side. In this desert stretching as far as the eye can see, there won’t be a better hiding place than this.

Chu Liuxiang and Hu Tiehua had just gone into hiding, they saw several strong horses galloping over; their shadow was prominent in the midst of the yellow sand filling the sky.

These several horses were running like crazy, the riders were crouching low on the horseback, as if they were fleeing some extremely terrifying pursuing troops. But as far as the eye could see, under the sun gradually sinking to the west, brilliant like the gold – other than these several horses, there was no shadow of any men and horses behind them.

“What’s going on?” Hu Tiehua blurted out, “What are these people running away from?”

Ji Bingyan's countenance sank terrifyingly; he spoke heavily, "The desert often has some extremely secretive matters; as long as it does not cause any trouble for us, it would be best to just turn a blind eye, pretend that we don't see it."

But the horses were running straight toward them.

"And if it does cause a trouble for us?" Hu Tiehua asked.

Ji Bingyan has not answered, those several galloping-crazily hoses already exhausted their strength and collapsed. The riders rolled on the ground, but then immediately they jumped up.

There were a total of five horses, but there were only four men. All four were dressed in warrior outfit of the Central Plains, appearing to be robust, with sabers hanging on their waist. These four men's skill did not seem to be weak.

Hu Tiehua practically has never seen anybody in such a sorry state worse than them.

All four had their heads covered entirely in yellow sand; their eyes opened wide, they stared forward while gasping for breath, their face showed that kind of shocked and frightened expression, which really no one could describe.

Seeing their appearance, Hu Tiehua and the others could not help feeling nervous inwardly. "What dreadful thing did these people see? Why are they so scared?"

Suddenly they heard a wild roar; the four men pulled the saber from their waist at the same time, and then as if they were crazy, they brandished the saber, killing and chopping! Unleashing the skill that they cultivated all their life, they used the entire strength of their body.

But they did not have any opponent.

Their sabers were only chopping the dust in the empty air.

They were exhausting their strength, unexpectedly they were only fighting ‘the void’, an enemy that no one could ever chop, that no one could ever fight.

Hu Tiehua could not help asking, “Did these people see ghost?”

Ji Bingyan’s face remained calm and collected; he did not speak.

Xiao Pan shuddered; he spoke with trembling voice, “I hear there is an invisible demon in the desert, specializing in eating people’s heart and liver; they can’t possibly …”

Xiao Pan shut up, but his shudder was more violent.

Hu Tiehua looked to Chu Liuxiang for help, but Chu Liuxiang was staring at Shi Tuo.

This moment unexpectedly this unable-to-hear, unable-to-see man also curled his body into a ball; he was trembling incessantly – but why did he do that?

Hu Tiehua felt his palms cold and moist; unconsciously he was dripping cold sweat – unexpectedly this ruthless desert indeed had so many secretive and terrifying things in it.

Looking over there again, out of the four men, two were already down. The other two would soon have their spirit weary, their strength exhausted; they were gasping for breath like the cattle, but as long as they still had the last bit of strength left, they were unwilling to stop, their saber was dancing even faster.

Ji Bingyan suddenly spoke in heavy voice, “Peng Family’s Saber Technique.”

Chu Liuxiang sighed and said, “I can see that as well. Peng Family’s people, how could they become like this?”

Hu Tiehua looked carefully; he also blurted out, “That’s right! This is indeed the *Wu Hu Duan Men Dao* [lit. five-tigers-breaking-the-door saber]! Moreover, looking at these four men’s skill in saber technique, they must be important figures [orig. with head and with face] within the Peng Family’s younger generation.”
Ji Bingyan said, “*Wu Hu Duan Men Dao* has never been taught to anybody outside their family name. These men are most likely Peng Yun’s sons or nephews, the brothers from ‘*Peng Men Qi Hu*’ [seven tigers of the Peng School]. The one with big beard is perhaps Peng Yihu [lit. one tiger].”
Chu Liuxiang said, “I wonder if ‘*Peng Men Qi Hu*’ have already inherited Peng Yun’s escort company?”
“Hmm!” Ji Bingyan replied.

Chu Liuxiang said, “If that’s the case, they must be coming here on escort duty.”

“It must be so,” Xiao Pan said, “In the desert, only people from escort company don’t ride camels.”

They heard a roar, one more man fell down.

Hu Tiehua suddenly stood up and loudly said, “Peng Yun’s conduct is not bad, I can’t simply watch his son going crazy and die. I must save him.”

Chapter 34 – The Star of Happiness

Ji Bingyan coldly said, “How are you going to save him? Have you saved him?”

Hu Tiehua was ready to jump, his tense muscle suddenly relaxed. He stared blankly for half a day, but before he even spoke, the fourth man already fell.

Chu Liuxiang spoke heavily, “If these four men fell just because they are exhausted, they are not going to die. I am afraid …”

Hu Tiehua said, “Whether they are going to die or not, at least we have to take a look first.”

“You can’t go now,” Ji Bingyan said.

“Why?” Hu Tiehua asked.

He puckered his lips and said, “Could it be that these four are also pretending?”

Naturally these four were not expert in deception, because no one could pretend to be like that.

This time Hu Tiehua really stopped to observe and make sure; inwardly he was very sure, but he wanted to see how Ji Bingyan would answer.

Ji Bingyan said, “Naturally these four would not turn crazy for no cause, no reason; right?”

“Naturally someone is harming them,” Hu Tiehua replied.

Ji Bingyan said, “The person who harmed them naturally did not do it for no reason; right?”

“That’s right,” Hu Tiehua replied, “Perhaps he wanted to rob the goods that they are escorting?”

Ji Bingyan said, “Even so, they have fallen now, could it be that those people will not come to harvest the outcome of the battle? If you and I go out this moment, wouldn’t we become the new target of those people?”

Hu Tiehua said, “But if you look out now, there’s not even a shadow of the ghost out there; could it be that those people can really be invisible …”

He had not finished speaking, suddenly he felt a dark shadow flitted across overhead, followed by a sudden gust of wind. An eagle was flying swiftly; it

made a few circles in the sky above those men and horses fallen on the ground, and then folding its wings, like a shooting star it dived down and snatched a box from the horseback. Then it soared to the sky again, spreading its two large wings, and very soon it became just a dark dot in the bluish-green sky.

The eagle came so quickly, but it left even quicker. Before Hu Tiehua even figured out what happened, it had already flown until even its shadow disappeared.

Chu Liuxiang sighed and said, “Such a meticulous plan, such a formidable trick. Without even one person had to make his move, the box of goods under the Peng School’s Seven Tigers’ protection is already snatched away.”

“Do you think there are jewels inside that box?” Hu Tiehua asked.

Chu Liuxiang smiled wryly and said, “If not jewels, could it be pork fat?”

Hu Tiehua said, “A piece of fat is a bit more logical. Otherwise, even if the eagle was sent by those people, how would it recognize the box as containing some jewels?”

Chu Liuxiang shook his head and said with a sigh, “Naturally there is a special mark on the box that the eagle could recognize. Naturally the eagle had been trained well. You can’t think about this?”

Hu Tiehua was stunned. Smiling wryly, he said, “Apparently my stupidity illness is getting more and more serious.”

Ji Bingyan said, “These people already succeeded, they are not likely to come here soon. If you want to take a look, you can go now.”

Of the four men, three already died, only the last one to fall, the one with big beard, still had his chest heaving, although it was extremely weak; it appeared that the movement could stop any moment.

Hu Tiehua pried his mouth open, he poured the remaining half a pot of wine down the man's throat. The heart that was about to stop completely began to beat again.

Hu Tiehua hurriedly said, "You are Peng Yihu, aren't you? What exactly happened to you?"

The man opened his eyes. Hu Tiehua only felt that his eyes were still full of horror. But Chu Liuxiang could see that the pupil of his eyes was strangely enlarged; they were at least double their original size. He was gasping for breath, he was struggling to move, as if he wanted to stand up, but he could not move even one finger; his entire body, from top to bottom, no longer had the slightest amount of strength.

Hu Tiehua wiped the sweat on his face and shouted, "Speak up! Can you still talk?"

The man's Adam's apple was moving up and down; finally, from the parched lips he spat out a weak croak, it was unlike human's voice at all. It was merely some kind of almost-silent scream, a shout of despair, "Demons, demons, thousands, hundreds of demons … kill … kill!"

Hu Tiehua's sweats were pouring more and more, "There are no demons here! Where's the demon?" he cried out.

The man's empty eyes stared straight ahead, he hissed, "Don't think that you can steal it from me! You … you …" Suddenly he jumped out of Hu Tiehua's arms and rushed forward. But he only rushed for two steps before he fell face down, and would never be able to move again.

Hu Tiehua's wine has stirred up the last shred of strength remaining in his body.

Now, he had used up even this last shred of strength.

Xiao Pan's entire body went limp as he crumpled to the ground, and spoke in trembling voice, "He saw it. He saw the invisible demon. It's right here. Run … if we don't run for our lives immediately, I am afraid it will be too late."

Although Hu Tiehua understood that he was babbling nonsense, he could not help shuddering as well. He looked at Shi Tuo's rough-like-a-rock face again; unexpectedly it also started to shed beads of sweat.

Ji Bingyan squatted by one of the corpses, which he has been carefully examined for a long time. It was only this moment that he slowly rose, but he did not speak for a long, long time.

"Have you found out the cause of their death?" Chu Liuxiang asked.

Ji Bingyan replied slowly, "Exhaustion, weakening muscle. It seems like they had been hit by some strange poison. The toxicity is somewhat similar to cannabis or opium poppy; it did not kill, but it could make people losing their sanity."

Pondering deeply, Chu Liuxiang said, "Probably the person who harmed them is the same person who harmed us. The method they are using is the same; he made them without water to drink first. Oftentimes people who are about to die are hallucinating."

"Mirage is one of those hallucinations," Ji Bingyan said.

Chu Liuxiang said, "But before that, they were already hit by some kind of poison; therefore, they were seeing things in their eyes, like thousands and hundreds of demons were attacking them, so they ran desperately, until they could not run anymore, and then they would fight with all their might, until they ran out of the last shred of strength."

Hu Tiehua said, "We … if we don't have water to drink, would we become like them?"

Chu Liuxiang and Ji Bingyan did not answer this question.

Hu Tiehua looked at them, and then he looked at the dead bodies on the ground, and he was unable to speak.

As far as the eye could see, there was only yellow sand. Boundless, endless yellow sand. There was no water, no life, and there was no hope either.

The torrid heat of the day was finally over.

They carried the dead bodies of men and horses into the depression on the sand, and buried them in the sand. And then, they just sat on the rocks, waiting for the starlight to rise.

Nobody spoke. Nobody had the mood to speak.

“Now, what should we do? Where could we find water?”

These questions were playing over and over in Hu Tiehua’s mind, but he did not say it out loud. Because he knew that even if he said it, no one could answer it.

Weakening muscles, exhaustion … all kinds of fatal sensations were coming along with the night.

Xiao Pan wanted to eat the dry food, but Ji Bingyan knocked it off his hand. “You must not eat. If you do, the thirst will be even more unbearable.”

Hu Tiehua rubbed his chest. Suddenly he laughed and said, “Just now when I dragged Peng Yihu, I felt that there was a lump on his shoulder; round and hard, like an egg. Tell me, don’t you think it’s strange?”

He was just trying to find anything to talk about. He himself knew that this topic was extremely senseless.

Ji Bingyan suddenly stood up and walked over to Shi Tuo. He held Shi Tuo's hands. The two held each other's hands like this, sitting in front of each other – for a long time. Neither one moved.

Shi Tuo's countenance seemed to be more frightening than the gradually deepening darkness.

Hu Tiehua could not help asking, "Do you know what they are doing?"

"They are talking," Chu Liuxiang replied.

"Talking?" Hu Tiehua asked in surprise.

Chu Liuxiang said, "Talking to a deaf, mute, and blind person, naturally it can only be done with unusual method, like perhaps making signs in each other's palm to convey what's in their mind."

Hu Tiehua sighed and said, "The bottom line is that you are a ghost spirit; you know everything."

Smiling wryly, Chu Liuxiang said, "I wish I knew what they are talking about."

Finally Ji Bingyan came back, his expression was even graver. He sat down beside Chu Liuxiang and was silent for a long time before he suddenly said, "The person who is harming us now is the same person who harmed Shi Tuo many years ago."

Hu Tiehua was startled. But Chu Liuxiang unhurriedly said, "This fact, I already thought about it last night."

Hu Tiehua cried out, "Who actually is this person?"

Ji Bingyan sighed and said, "Shi Tuo is dead set against telling me the name of this person. As far as I know, not only this person's martial art skill is

frighteningly powerful, under his command, there are several hundreds people willing to die for him immediately."

Hu Tiehua said, "His martial art skill is high, I am not afraid of. His subordinates many, I am not scared either. But that kind of sneaky poison needles of his – is really unbearable for me."

He sprang up and roared, "Now, not only I have no idea how he is going to deal with me, I don't even know what he looks like. If I get killed by him, I feel that I have been wronged."

Ji Bingyan coldly said, "If you could stay calm, perhaps you won't have to die."

Hu Tiehua dejectedly sat down. Grabbing his head, he said, "It seems that I am going crazy too, you guys just ignore me."

Ji Bingyan was silent for half a day. He spoke heavily, "Right now, our greatest difficulty is not water, but this person. With Shi Tuo and me, we will eventually find water. But this person …"

He sighed, and then continued, "This person already looked upon us, he will definitely not let us off. The current situation is either we destroy him or he destroys us."

Chu Liuxiang said, "Could it be that we cannot avoid him first? Find Hei Zhenzhu, and then go look for him."

Ji Bingyan said word-by-word, "No one can avoid him. In this matter, before the conclusion is reached, we can forget about doing anything else. Not to mention that he might be Hei Zhenzhu, coming to deal with you."

Chu Liuxiang heaved a deep sigh. He pondered for half a day, suddenly he laughed and said, "Since that's the case, we will stake everything to fight him.

Besides, we don't need to fear him; we have met opponents more formidable than him, right?"

Hu Tiehua suddenly raised his head; clapping his hands, he said with a laugh, "Now, that is what Chu Liuxiang should say. This is practically the first time in two days that I hear the first human speech."

Knitting his brows, Ji Bingyan said, "However, how are we …"

He suddenly stopped talking. Chu Liuxiang and Hu Tiehua did not make any noise either.

Although all three men were sitting still, but like three sabers still inside the scabbard, their whole body was brimming with danger, it could take somebody else's life at any moment.

When they were in this kind of situation, if you are smart, it would be best not to provoke them.

Someone came. In fact, more than twenty shadows swarmed over from all directions, their footsteps were as light as a cat, when they stepped on the sand, there was no noise.

But how could they hide from Hu Tiehua, Ji Bingyan and Chu Liuxiang? Very quickly the three men exchanged glances; unanimous decision was immediately made, "Using stillness to control movement, quietly watching, waiting for changes."

Although no one spoke, these three were old comrade-in-arms who had gone to battle side by side for nobody knows how many time in the past; naturally there was some kind of tacit understanding between them that no other people could match.

Thereupon they hung their heads down, as if they were dozing off.

Very quickly the more than twenty shadows surrounded them in the middle, but they acted as if they were not aware at all. These more than twenty men felt a little strange instead.

These men were wearing skintight black clothes, with black piece of cloth wrapped around their head; every one's movement was very vigorous, evidently not a single one of them was not a dangerous character.

These men exchanged some hand signals, and then one of them spoke in heavy voice, "Gentlemen, if you are smart, it would be best for you to sit quietly without making any move, even your hands must not be raised. I don't want to scare you, but as soon as you move, you will lose your life."

He spoke very slowly, as if he did not want to frighten other people, but this was the most formidable strategy; any Jianghu veteran would know that using this kind of tone of voice could be most frightening to other people.

Chu Liuxiang, Ji Bingyan and Hu Tiehua naturally did not move. Shi Tuo could not possibly move even more. Only Xiao Pan did not dare to move because he was scared for real.

In the dark, they could vaguely see every one of these men was holding something that emitted black, dark green light. Naturally these were the deadly secret projectiles.

The person speaking walked over in large strides; he went on, "Very well; you are all very sensible. Now, take that thing out."

It was only then did Chu Liuxiang raise his eyes; he stammered, "Everything is on the camelback, whatever *Da Wangye* [master big king; 'big king' is how people usually address a robber] wants, just take it!"
The man laughed coldly and said, "You don't need to act stupid. Naturally you know what I want?"

Chu Liuxiang said, "I … I really don't know."

The man angrily said, “You are acting stupid again.”

He casually sent out a palm to slap Chu Liuxiang. Following his hand, Chu Liuxiang toppled over; but the man striking was stunned instead.

This palm strike of his clearly hit the other party, but it felt like it was hitting empty air. Clearly it struck the other party’s face, but it felt as if the palm did not hit anything that reacted to his force.

Looking at his shocked appearance, Hu Tiehua was delighted and amused at the same time, “Unexpectedly you wanted to strike Chu Liuxiang. If you really hit him, you would have lost your life early on.”

The man in black also knew in his heart that something was not right, the tone of his voice eased up as he said, “Our mission is just to get that thing. When we have the thing in our hands, the mission is accomplished, we will immediately leave; we will absolutely not going to harm you.”

He laughed and said, “You see, if we really wanted to kill you, wouldn’t we already do it early on?”

Chu Liuxiang also knew that what he said was the truth; these people’s mission must be separate from the previous men. They were only responsible to deal with the ‘Seven Tigers of Peng School’. Without receiving the order beforehand, they definitely did not dare to harm others – he knew that the few men on his side was not in immediate danger, thereupon his heart was even more at ease.

The man in black waited for half a day without seeing any response, so he continued, “Therefore, as long as you hand over that thing, not only I will guarantee that we won’t harm even a strand of your hair, we won’t take any of your stuff, moreover … we can also give you a pot of water.”

When he said that, clearly he already made great determination; it was no longer a threat but a compromise, an enticement. Clearly this ‘thing’ was very

important. If they failed to obtain this ‘thing’, evidently when they returned, they would have to face capital punishment.

The enticement of ‘water’ was really not a small matter. If Chu Liuxiang, Ji Bingyan and Hu Tiehua knew about this ‘thing’, perhaps they might really make the exchange.

It’s a pity that they really did not know.

Hu Tiehua sighed and said, “What exactly do you want? Just say it, I will give it to you. Now, I don’t care how many precious things to want in exchange for a pot of water, I will definitely agree.”

The man in black stared at him with eyes open wide, “You really don’t know?” he asked.

“Whoever know what this seeing-ghost thing is, is a *Wang Ba Gao Zi* [variant of ‘wang ba dan’ – s.o.b./b@stard],” Hu Tiehua shot back.
Chu Liuxiang snickered inwardly; he mused, “Unexpectedly this kid still cannot forget to curse even until now.”

But the man in black did not realize the slightest bit that he was actually cursing them as *Wang Ba Gao Zi*; his countenance sank, he said, “Could it be that you guys did not find anything from the corpses?”
“Aiyo!” Hu Tiehua cried out, “*Laotian* [God/Heavens], even if we are more wretched [orig. muddled-egg (scoundrel/b@stard)] than this, we would never think about stealing from dead people!” [Translator’s note: I don’t understand Chinese people’s fascination with ‘eggs’ (and ‘birds’), but it seems to me that those words are bad words.]
By saying that, he was cursing the other side again; moreover, he was cursing without using obscenity.

This time, the man in black finally understood that this was tantamount to cursing him as ‘muddled-egg’. He angrily said, “You still don’t want to confess. All right! Search them!”

Immediately Hu Tiehua's entire body tensed up; he was about to explode. But Chu Liuxiang pulled him back and spoke indifferently, "Let them search; they won't find anything anyway."

This moment several men in black sprang up from the darkness and searched their bodies thoroughly. Hu Tiehua struggled hard to suppress his anger; he did not understand why Chu Liuxiang would be this patient.

But Ji Bingyan understood, "Now Chu Liuxiang violated his own old habit; finally he could not bear his curiosity. If he did not look to the bottom of this matter, to understand everything clearly, how could he be willing to make his move?"

No matter where, no matter who he was dealing with, unless it was absolutely necessary, no way would Chu Liuxiang be willing to make his move; he was not a man who like to start a fight.

Finished searching the people, the men in black searched the camels; naturally they did not find that 'thing'. One of them thought for a bit, then suddenly said, "Maybe that thing is still on the Seven Tigers of the Peng Family's bodies."

Thereupon, they unexpectedly dug out the corpses that had been buried in the ground. They used their saber to poke around on the clothes on the corpses. Hu Tiehua clenched his teeth; he turned his head away. But he heard one of them said, "These people don't have it on them either."

The leader of the men in black was a bit flustered as well. Stomping his foot, he said, "Impossible! Search again! If we can't find it, when we return, how will we report it?"

All the men in black's eyes revealed panic and fear. They searched again, but they still could not find it. They were growing more and more anxious that they practically forgot to watch Chu Liuxiang and the others.

Ji Bingyan's eyes flickered; suddenly he spoke slowly, "What exactly are you looking for? Why don't you tell us? Perhaps we can help."

The man in black already panicked; he blurted out, "The Star of Happiness."

Hu Tiehua could not help asking, "What is this Star of Happiness?"

The man in black replied, "I don't know either. I only knew that among the goods that the Seven Tigers of the Peng Family escorted, there is the most precious article called the Star of Happiness."

Disappointed, Hu Tiehua sighed and said, "I thought it was some extraordinary thing, turns out it's no more than a piece of jewelry."

No matter how precious the jewel was, in their eyes, it was nothing.

The man in black said, "We received order to come here and snatched the box according to the plan. Who would have thought that unexpectedly that Star of Happiness is not in the box …"

In a moment of desperation, he revealed everything.

Ji Bingyan suddenly said, "If I know where this Star of Happiness is, are you willing to exchange it for water?"

The man in black was startled but anxious at the same time, "Of course!" he shouted.

Ji Bingyan spoke slowly, "Do you really have the water?"

The man in black replied, "Of course we do."

"Where is it?" Ji Bingyan asked, "Let me see."

His countenance changed, the man in black said, “Could it be that you are still suspicious of me?”

Ji Bingyan thought for a moment; he said, “All right, I believe you this time. I’ll give you the Star of Happiness first, but the water …”

Greatly delighted, the man in black said, “As long as you have the Star of Happiness, water definitely won’t be a problem.”

Watching from the side, Hu Tiehua’s belly was full of questions. He did not understand how Ji Bingyan could trust other people this easily; he did not understand even more how Ji Bingyan could get the Star of Happiness.

After all, they had not even seen the shadow of this so-called the Star of Happiness.

He saw Ji Bingyan already turned around and walked over; unexpectedly his face seemed to be full of confidence. And then he turned to look at Chu Liuxiang, but Chu Liuxiang was also smiling, without the least bit of anxiety showing on his face.

Hu Tiehua could not help coming over and quietly asked, “Do you really know where the Star of Happiness is?”

Ji Bingyan calmly replied, “Just now when you carried Peng Yihu, you felt something round and hard on his shoulder, didn’t you?”

Chapter 35 – Barren Oasis

Hu Tiehua was even more confused, “That’s right,” he said, “But …”

He had not finished speaking, Ji Bingyan already came to a dead body's side – Peng Yihu's clothes have been picked clean; how could there be any Star of Happiness on his naked body?

But Ji Bingyan already squatted down. Using his finger he lightly scratched Peng Yihu's shoulder. Under the flickering starlight, unexpectedly there was a flash of brilliant rays on his shoulder. And then, a precious stone, about the size of a pigeon egg, burst forth from the skin and flesh on Peng Yihu's shoulder and fell into Ji Bingyan's hands.

Seeing this, everybody could not help but was stunned.

Although there were countless stars in the sky, but the brilliance of this Star of Happiness on earth seemed to make the stars in the sky turned pale. Even Ji Bingyan could not help but was emotionally moved; he said, "Such a beautiful diamond; no wonder there are so many people willing to stake everything for you."

The man in black pounced over like a hungry dog and snatched the Star of Happiness away from Ji Bingyan's hand …

Unexpectedly it was as if Ji Bingyan was in a daze; he was staring blankly at the man snatching this thing away from his hands. The man in black practically never thought that it would be this easy; he was so happy that he nearly forgot to close his mouth.

Hu Tiehua was surprised and angry at the same time. But before he exploded, he heard Ji Bingyan said, "The Star of Happiness is already in your hands, what about the water?"

The man in black threw his head back and howled with laughter, "*Daye Men* [your masters] went out to work, why would we bring water? If you want water, go find it yourself. *Daye Men* not killing you now, we are already very polite to you."

While laughing, he waved his hand to signal his men; unexpectedly, along with his group of men in black, he roared away with wild laughter, while Hu Tiehua's belly practically exploded with anger.

He wanted to make his move, but Chu Liuxiang pulled him back. He wanted to run after them, but Ji Bingyan stopped him. He really did not understand; how could these two old friends of his suddenly become this gutless?

Chu Liuxiang and Ji Bingyan only watched these men swaggering off; unexpectedly they did not show the slightest sign of anger.

Hu Tiehua could not bear it anymore; he laughed coldly and loudly said, "Ridiculous! Really ridiculous! The grand Chu *Xiang Shuai* [fragrant commander, Chu Liuxiang's nickname], unexpectedly today turned into a gutless man [orig. guts as small as a mouse's]. Ridiculous! Really ridiculous! Ji Bingyan, who thinks he is smart, today he also fell into other people's trick." Ji Bingyan unhurriedly said, "Who fell into other people's trick?"

Hu Tiehua laughed coldly and said, "I already saw it, they practically did not have any water bag at all."

Ji Bingyan did not pay him any attention, he simply turned to Chu Liuxiang and said, "Traveling in the desert, only two things that one cannot be without. The first is water, the second is camel. Lacking these two things, life will be difficult to keep; right?"

"That's right," Chu Liuxiang replied with a smile.

Ji Bingyan said, "But those men, not only they did not bring any water, but they also came on foot, which shows that the place they live must not be far from here; right?"

"Exactly," Chu Liuxiang replied.

Ji Bingyan said, “After obtaining what they were looking for, they must be too busy to worry about us; they simply have to hurry up to go back and to report their merit; right?”

This time, without waiting for Chu Liuxiang to reply, Hu Tiehua already roared in laughter and said, “That’s right. We only need to follow them, we can storm directly into their old nest, rather than waiting for those fiends to come back to look for us. It’s better for us to go after them first … right?”

Chu Liuxiang smiled and said, “That’s right. This is called gaining the initiative by striking first.”

Hu Tiehua sprang up and said, “Since that’s the case, what are we waiting for?”

Ji Bingyan spoke slowly, “In the desert, we can’t follow somebody’s trail too closely. Anyway, they are not going to escape.”

He listened to the wind, smiled, and said, “If you are in a hurry, you can go now.”

It was only a little over half a *sichen* from their original location. There were several wooden cabins, which were originally the guard station of the garrison soldiers patrolling the border in the past, but now unexpectedly it has turned into the gathering place of the *Lulin* [lit. green forest, i.e. criminal world] despots. The cabin was already extremely old, there were several windows that could not be closed. Inside, there was already lantern light, presumably there was somebody remained in the cabin all along.

Chu Liuxiang and the others stopped behind three withered trees about ten *zhang* away outside the cabin. They saw those men in black went in with cheers and howls of laughter. But as soon as they entered, their laughter came to a standstill.
From the open window, they could see that the men’s expression suddenly became very deferential; everybody hung his head low, no one dared to speak.

Hu Tiehua happily said, “Looking at their appearance, their boss must be inside.”

“Hmm!” Ji Bingyan responded.

Hu Tiehua said, “Let’s rush in now; we want to see who exactly is that fiend.”

Frowning, Ji Bingyan said, “Wait a minute.”

“What are we waiting for?” Hu Tiehua asked.

Ji Bingyan spoke in heavy voice, “Something’s not right.”

Hu Tiehua said, “This is your idea, and now you think something’s wrong?”

Ji Bingyan slowly said, “It was only when I saw this cabin that I feel something’s not right. Just think, with that fiend’s prestige, how could he live in such a dilapidated cabin?”

Hu Tiehua was stunned. Before he had any chance to speak, suddenly from inside the cabin came out a burst of mellow music, the melody locked the soul, making the listeners wished that they were dead.

The music abruptly rose up. Those men who were standing respectfully with head hung low, suddenly their bodies twisted, as if they wanted to dance to this soul-locking music.

But all of a sudden they all fell down.

The soul-locking music continued, but the sound was getting lower and lower.

After a very long time, the men who fell down still did not stand up.

Listening to the music, Hu Tiehua felt his heart racing, his face flushed, but he kept watching with shock and bewilderment. “What’s going on?” he croaked.

Ji Bingyan’s face trembled, but he did not speak.

Chu Liuxiang’s countenance suddenly changed. “Not good!” he blurted out.

Before his shout vanished, he already flew toward the cabin.

How could Hu Tiehua be willing to wait? He also flew over. Chu Liuxiang was outside the window looking in, but Hu Tiehua already kicked the door and shouted loudly, “Don’t you want to …”

He only spoke three words [trust me, the original only has three characters], his voice choked in his throat.

There was no one inside the house.

To be precise, there was no one alive in the room.

Just now, there were over twenty big men wearing black, but this moment they all fell dead on the floor.

Their bodies were twisted, but there was some kind of hard-to-describe radiance on their faces. They died completely without any pain; not only that, they all seemed to be very happy to die.

Hu Tiehua stared blankly for a long time. Finally he heaved a long, long sigh and said, “Crazy … these people are crazy …”

Stomping his foot, Chu Liuxiang said, “I should have thought that they would kill themselves.”

There was practically nothing inside the old, dilapidated room, except for an unusually large shrine. There was the revered Buddha image inside the shrine, making the house looked even more secretive.

The wind blew the yellow curtain in front of the shrine. Hu Tiehua could not help shuddering, “But why did they kill themselves?” he blurted out.

Chu Liuxiang sighed and said, “That fiend must have guessed that their track has been discovered by us; because he was afraid we might continue following their track, he forced them to die.”

Hu Tiehua asked, “But since they were forced to kill themselves, why did they die so happy?”

Unexpectedly there seemed to be some hint of dread in Chu Liuxiang’s eyes; he muttered, “There must be a mysterious reason behind this. Perhaps that locking-soul deadly music …”

He had not finished speaking, suddenly they heard Xiao Pan scream outside the house, calling out, “Shi Tuo went mad … Shi Tuo went mad …”

The cry was brimming with fear. In this merciless desert, inside the isolated and dilapidated cabin, with dead bodies scattered everywhere, suddenly hearing such cry, it really made people’s hair stand on its end.

Hu Tiehua was startled. Together with Chu Liuxiang and Ji Bingyan, they rushed out only to see Xiao Pan’s face twisting, cold sweats drenching his head, while his mouth did not stop crying out, “Shi Tuo went mad.”

Ji Bingyan gave him a slap with the back of his hand; he spoke sternly, “You can’t go mad. Speak up, what is it?”

Xiao Pan was shocked by the slap, before he came to his senses and spoke in trembling voice, “After you entered the house, I could not help wanting to come

in to take a look as well. I was afraid to leave Shi Tuo alone in here; I was really worried about him, so I pulled him to come inside together."

Ji Bingyan spoke with a cold laugh, "You are worried about him? I think you wanted to pull him along to strengthen your courage, right?"

Xiao Pan lowered his head; he continued haltingly, "Who would have thought … Who would have thought that Shi Tuo had just reached the front of the house, it was as if he saw a ghost; he turned around and ran away. He seemed to be so frightened. Although I did not see anything, he scared me so much that I could not help screaming."

Someone who had eyes did not see anything, what could a blind man possibly see that frightened him so much?

But this moment Chu Liuxiang and the others already had no time to investigate this matter further. Xiao Pan had not even finished speaking, they were already running after in the direction Shi Tuo was running.

The wind was howling, the sand was rolling.

The night in the desert has begun to show its terrifying power.

They finally saw the silhouette of Shi Tuo stumbling and rushing wildly.

What kind of miserable sight, what kind of mysterious scene to behold – to make someone who could not hear anything, someone who could not see anything, in this merciless sandstorm, running away for dear life in the dreadful depth of the night?

Chu Liuxiang and Ji Bingyan flew on either side of him, they caught him from both sides, but he was like a wounded beast; he broke free and rushed forward again.

Unexpectedly, in his panic, his strength grew so much than even Chu Liuxiang was unable to hold him down. Hu Tiehua pounced from behind and wrapped his arms around his waist. The two unexpectedly fell to the ground together. Ji Bingyan rushed over and pressed down on his shoulders.

At first Shi Tuo was still struggling, until Ji Bingyan gripped his hands hard, only then did he gradually calm down, but he was still panting like a wild beast.

Hu Tiehua called out loudly, “Quickly ask him, what exactly did he find?”

Under the starlight, they saw Shi Tuo’s rough-like-stone face was full of sweat, full of extreme fear. This kind of face, forget about Xiao Pan catching sight of it and was terrified, even when Hu Tiehua saw it, he could not stop the chill from creeping up from the bottom of his heart.

It was half a day later that Ji Bingyan looked up and said, “I have asked him, but he would not say anything.”

Chu Liuxiang’s eyes were fixed on a dark distance, he spoke slowly, “Is it possible that he has some kind of strange senses, and has sensed that the fiend who harmed him was inside the cabin?”

Hu Tiehua said, “But there’s practically no living being inside the cabin … there’s practically nothing inside the cabin, even if that fiend wanted to hide, it was simply impossible.”

Chu Liuxiang spoke word-by-word, “You really think there’s nothing inside the cabin?”

Hu Tiehua replied, “Other than a few broken tables and chairs, there’s only that shrine.”

Chu Liuxiang asked, “Did you see the object of worship inside the shrine?”

Hu Tiehua replied, “It seems to be a very big stone statue of *Guanyin Shan Sa* [virtuous Bodhisattva of Compassion/Goddess of Mercy/Avalokiteśvara].” His voice was suddenly choked again, his entire body tensed up as if he had just suddenly beaten by a whip.

And then, as if he had turned mad, he ran back into the cabin.

The situation inside the cabin was still the same. The wind was still blowing on the faded yellow curtain.

But the shrine was empty.

Unexpectedly the stone statue of Bodhisattva has disappeared.

Beads of sweats larger than soybeans were dripping from Hu Tiehua’s head. He stared blankly for a long time before suddenly realized that there was an iron cooking pot on the wooden table, which was not there before.

The pot was still steaming, emitting burst after burst of meat aroma.

Unexpectedly there was a piece of note pressed under the pot:

Gentlemen have come making light of traveling a thousand *li*, *Qie* [I, your servant (deprecatory self-reference for women)] should have cleaned the goblet in order to wait on noble guests. How can one help that the subordinates are stubborn and obstreperous, unexpectedly regarding extraordinary people using ordinary eyes? This, *Qie* will have to live with. Sincerely I prepared meat stew just to express *Qie*’s modest and remorseful heart, to somewhat wash away various gentlemen’s dust from the long journey, hoping that various gentlemen will have a fortunate journey. The person of the shrine pays her hundred humble respects.
The person of the shrine?

Who the hell was this person of the shrine?

When Hu Tiehua turned his head back, he saw Chu Liuxiang and Ji Bingyan's four eyes were fixed on the piece of paper in his hand as well, as if they had seen a deity.

Half a day later, Chu Liuxiang finally smiled wryly and said, "You and I, our track has been discovered."

Hu Tiehua sighed and said, "But who is this person of the shrine? We did not know even the least bit of a shadow."

Chu Liuxiang's eyes were fixed on the already empty shrine; he spoke heavily, word-by-word, "It's the Stone *Guanyin*."
Hu Tiehua jerked upright, "Stone *Guanyin*?" he blurted out, "Are you talking about the publicly known figure in Jianghu of the past, the most beautiful, the most vicious, the most ruthless, but with the highest martial art skill – woman?"
Forcing a smile, Chu Liuxiang replied, "Other than her, who could build such an elaborate secret projectile? Who else has such brilliant disguising skill? Furthermore, who else could come up with such a brilliant malicious scheme?"

Ji Bingyan slowly continued, "Other than her, who else could focus the essence and restrain the *qi* to transform the body into wood and stone, and disguise herself as a stone Bodhisattva, and hide from all of our eyes."
Hu Tiehua was stunned. Although he had not seen the Stone *Guanyin*, but he had heard all kinds of legend concerning her in Jianghu, and every single one of them nearly made the chill creeps up from the bottom of his foot to the back of his neck.
The aroma of the meat stew was getting thicker, floating above the rich broth was a layer of pearlescent steam halo. This was what they needed the most.

Hu Tiehua suddenly laughed aloud and said, "The legend in Jianghu is indeed not wrong. This Stone *Guanyin* is indeed a goblin that harms people. She did not leave anything, but she left a pot of meat stew, so that we can only look at it drooling, but do not dare to move."

Suddenly a yellow dog scampered in from outside the house; it jumped onto the table and dipped its head in the pot, lapped the soup, even bit a large piece of spare ribs.

Hu Tiehua laughed and cursed, “Have you turned mad from hunger? Aren’t you afraid of being poisoned to death?”

He picked the dog up from the table, but the dog was still biting and nibbling, even swallowing a piece of meat into its belly.

Hu Tiehua, Chu Liuxiang and Ji Bingyan, three men’s six eyes were staring at the dog. But after the time needed to drink two or three cups of tea later, Ji Bingyan opened up the dog’s eyelid to examine it, he also examined the dog’s tongue, and said slowly, “There’s no poison in the soup.”

Hu Tiehua slapped the table hard and shouted, “That goblin that harms people has predicted accurately that we would not dare to drink the soup, so she sent a dog to annoy us. Unexpectedly she wanted us to drink the leftover soup after the dog ate it.”

Ji Bingyan spoke indifferently, “Could it be that the soup that the dog drank, people cannot drink?”

His eyes were on Chu Liuxiang; Chu Liuxiang has not spoken yet, Hu Tiehua already picked up the iron pot and threw it out the window, shouting, “We will definitely not going to drink the soup left over by the dog. Even if we starve to death, we won’t be humiliated like this.”

Ji Bingyan sighed. He spoke with a cold laugh, “If I can go back alive, I must erect a monument for you [orig. memorial arch in honor of a chaste widow], engraved with eight big characters: ‘starving to death is small matter, losing face is big matter’.”

Hu Tiehua roared in laughter, “If I can go back alive, I will … I will …”

He wanted to find some smart-alecky remark to get back at Ji Bingyan, but momentarily he could not think of anything. Ji Bingyan already laughed coldly and said, “A man with a black bear [i.e. coward] temper like you, I am afraid it would be very difficult to come back alive.”

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “Now that will …”

He had not finished, suddenly they heard a scream from outside the cabin. The three rushed out together, only to see Xiao Pan, who was outside to watch over Shi Tuo, was already rolling on the ground. The meat pot was beside him, he even had some minced meat in his mouth, but his fair-skinned face has turned purple, swelling and twisting, while his mouth continuously screamed, “Meat … poison …”

Turned out while staying outside, he heard that the soup was not poisonous, seeing the meat pot was flying outside, he picked the less than half a pot of soup remaining and drank it in one breath.

Chu Liuxiang rushed to his side. He had just wanted to examine the influence of the poison on Xiao Pan, but his body was already convulsing; unexpectedly he forfeited his life over this half a pot of meat stew.

In this merciless desert, unexpectedly human’s life was so cheap.

Chu Liuxiang gently closed his eyelids and spoke sadly, “Such a powerful poison, the toxicity is so fierce, unexpectedly there’s no salvation from it.”

Ji Bingyan contemplatively said, “Such a formidable person, unexpectedly she hid the poison pellet inside the dog’s mouth. When the dog drank the soup, the poison pellet fell into the soup pot, the wax seal on the outside melted from the heat, the non-poisonous soup thus turned into a poisonous one.”

Overwhelmed with shock, Hu Tiehua said, “Are you saying that the dog was well-trained by her?”

“Hmm!” Ji Bingyan replied.

Smiling wryly, Chu Liuxiang said, “It looks like thanks to Hu Tiehua’s black bear temper that we did not fall into the Stone *Guanyin*’s poison scheme?” The three recalled the ingenuity of this chain of poison scheme, just now it was indeed a life and death crisis, they had escaped danger by a hair’s breath …

Unconsciously all three men felt the palm of their hands were wet with cold sweat.

The next day, there was still no water.

They did not dare to let the remaining water in their body to be evaporated by the sun and turned it into perspiration; thereupon they waited until the sun has set before they started to move.

By this time, Shi Tuo, the mysterious and pitiful man, seemed to have recovered his inexhaustible divine power, while Hu Tiehua and the others seemed to be shrinking.

Even higher martial art skill on earth would be powerless against the force of nature.

As the sun set in the west, from time to time Shi Tuo dropped down to the ground, using his nose to sniff the sand on the ground, he crawled like a fox.

Resisting the urge to lick his already parched lips, Hu Tiehua could not help asking, “What is he doing?”

“He is looking for water source underground,” Ji Bingyan replied.

“Could it be that he can smell it?” Hu Tiehua asked.

Ji Bingyan replied, “When there’s water, there will be the warmth that you can smell.”

Hu Tiehua still wanted to talk, but no one paid him any more attention.

Because not only talking is a waste of energy, it is also a waste of saliva. In their eyes, these two things were almost as precious as life itself.

By the evening, Shi Tuo suddenly dug frantically with all his might into the sand.

Ecstatic, Hu Tiehua said, “There’s water.”

They leaped down the camels at the same time and dug with all kinds of tools they could find. But after working hard for more than a *sichen*, they were still disappointed.
There was no water.

Laughing bitterly, Hu Tiehua said, “I am afraid his nose is not too effective?”

Ji Bingyan’s countenance remained calm and collected; he did not speak.

Only Shi Tuo was still unwilling to give up; he was still digging.

Suddenly, he jumped up; holding a handful of grain of sand, he gave it to Ji Bingyan.

Ji Bingyan put the sand in his mouth; unexpectedly his face was radiant with joy.

The sand was warm. They kept the sand in their mouth, desperately sucking the water in the sand.

Water, although pitifully small, but to a man who was about to die of thirst, was already enough to save his life. They tried hard to dig; they did everything they could to suck.

In the evening, they slept in this slightly damp excavation in the sand.

Hu Tiehua sucked until his tongue went numb; he could not help cursing, “I practically used up all my strength, unexpectedly I still cannot get a drop of water from this ghost sand. This kind of sucking method, won’t it send a man to his death quicker?”

Ji Bingyan said, “In the desert, being able to find a bit of warm sand every day is already a good luck. Although there’s very little moisture in this sand, but without it, you will not live.”

He was right. On the third day, they could not even find any moist sand, so that they could not even walk. Fortunately by the morning of the fourth day, Shi Tuo found another place where there was more water in the sand.

Ji Bingyan said, “Shi Tuo is following the water vein underground. Looking at the situation here, not far from here, there must be an even bigger water source.”

Thereupon they roused their spirit to move forwards.

Suddenly they saw a cluster of green in the distance. Unexpectedly there was an oasis.

Chapter 36 – Princess Pipa

Rubbing his eyes with all his might, Hu Tiehua said, “Am I having a blurry eyesight?”

Smiling wryly, Chu Liuxiang said, “I hope this is not a mirage playing tricks on our eyes.”

They heard from among the forest tree on the oasis, unexpectedly there were bursts of laughter.

It was actually joyous laughter, but in the ears of these people who were about to die of thirst in this cruel and unfeeling great desert, the laughter sounded more mysterious and terrifying than anything.

Hu Tiehua tensed again, he said, “Could it be this is the Stone *Guanyin*’s secret hole? Other than those goblins that harm people, how could there be such happy people in the desert?”
He waited and waited, but no one else spoke, so he went on to say, “Besides, these past couple of days she did not come to give us trouble, could it be that she already predicted accurately that we are bound to find this place by ourselves?”

Chu Liuxiang was silent for half a day. He rose up to his full height and said, “You guys wait here, I’ll go take a look.”

Hu Tiehua also stood up and said, “I’ll go.”

Ji Bingyan coldly said, “Could it be that your *qinggong* is higher than Chu Liuxiang?”
Hu Tiehua sat back down and stopped talking.

The oasis was not only beautiful, it was also not small. In this repulsive desert suddenly such a beautiful place appeared, it was almost like a fairy tale.

From time to time, there was a silver-bell-like laughter coming from among the verdant trees and leaves.

Could it be this was really a fantasy from the fairy tale, a demonic territory?

Could it be that hidden among the verdant trees and leaves were really people-eating female demons who specialized in luring solitary traveler to be devoured?

Heaving a deep, deep sigh, Chu Liuxiang cautiously flew over. Although his *qinggong* right now had weakened considerably, but undoubtedly it could still be considered the world's first-class martial art master.
He lightly flew toward a branch.

Looking from among the thick foliage, he immediately saw a moving, puzzling scene, which was simply hard to believe.

The place had two clear and green pools, one big and one small.

At the edge of the comparatively larger pool, there were three gorgeous tents. Standing respectfully in front of the tents, there were unexpectedly several warriors wearing glorious body armor, holding golden dagger-axe in their hands.

This moment, the comparatively smaller pool was surrounded by several layers of cotton yarn curtain, which blocked the view from the other side. A beautiful young lady with long hair was bathing in the pool, in the nude.

Chu Liuxiang's breathing nearly stopped.

At this very moment, although he was not in the mood to appreciate beautiful woman, but this naked young woman's beauty still made him incapable of not appreciating it, made him incapable of not having his heart moved.

Beautiful naked body, under the illumination of gradually-tilting-to-the-west sun, it was simply like the most perfect statue, with droplets of sparkling and translucent water dripping along her perfect and without blemish neck, dropping on her white-jade like breasts, her laughter that sounded like silver bell, her smile that looked like a hundred flowers blooming in the spring days.

There were also three or four young women with their hair loose on their back; one had bath towel in her hands, another was holding cotton yarn clothes, yet another had the bath utensils, standing by the pool, laughing tenderly.

They were splashing water on each other; the splashing water was also sparkling with the golden rays of the sun.

Coming from the arduous, dangerous, enduring-thirst, reeking-of-blood – journey, Chu Liuxiang suddenly saw this scene, it was truly too difficult for him to determine whether he was still in the land of the living, or he was in heaven.

Under the current situation, even Chu Liuxiang did not know what he should do.

Originally the young woman was facing the other way, but this moment her bright and beautiful fluid glance suddenly turned toward Chu Liuxiang. Instantly Chu Liuxiang knew that his presence has been detected.

If some other girls found out that someone was peeping when they were taking a bath, they would definitely seek cover to conceal themselves. But after this young woman turned her fluid glance around, unexpectedly, like a lotus flower breaking the surface [idiom: surpassingly beautiful], she stood up gracefully.

Instead, it was Chu Liuxiang's face that turned a bit red. He caught a glimpse of the young woman's lithe and beautiful naked body then hidden inside the cotton yarn clothes that the young girl by the pool was holding. And then, unexpectedly she turned around to confront Chu Liuxiang, and spoke slowly, "Peeking person, haven't you seen enough?"

Her voice was clear, gentle, and mellow, like the black-naped oriole in the valley. But her accent was somewhat not fully proficient, just like when a Wunong young woman was learning to speak *Jing* [capital city of a country] language for the first time.
Chu Liuxiang sighed inwardly. Smiling wryly, he leaped down from the tree. In all his life, he had never felt more awkward and embarrassed than this moment.

He really did not wish to be known as Dengtu Zi [famous lecherous character] peeping at others taking a bath; he did not wish even more to meet such a beautiful young woman in this kind of situation.

But he must not run away even more. He only had to brace himself to walk over.

The young woman looked at him up and down several times. Her eyes, which were originally full of anger, appeared to become a little more gentle. Staring at Chu Liuxiang, she said, “Your gut is indeed not small; unexpectedly you did not run away.”

Chu Liuxiang said with a wry smile, “Although it was absolutely intentional, *Zaixia* already feel deeply ashamed. If I ran away, won’t I lose face even more?”
The young woman’s fluid glance flickered, she said, “So, you admit your guilt?”

“Absolutely,” Chu Liuxiang replied.

A smiling expression appeared in the young woman’s eyes; she spoke slowly, “You are brave enough to admit you guilt, you still deserve to be called a man; but do you know what your crime is?”

Chu Liuxiang sighed and said, “*Guniang* [Miss] should have covered this side with cotton yarn curtain as well.”
The young woman’s eyes grew big as she stared at him and spoke angrily, “You peeked at me bathing, could it be that you are now thinking of putting the blame on me?”

Chu Liuxiang said, “*Zaixia* unintentionally broke through here, how would I know that there was a beautiful woman taking a bath here?”
“And if you knew?” the young woman asked.

After muttering to himself irresolutely for half a day, Chu Liuxiang said, “If *Zaixia* already knew that there was a beautiful woman like *Guniang* taking a bath here, and knew that there was one side here that is not covered by cotton yarn curtain …”

“You won’t come over here?” the young woman asked.

Chu Liuxiang chuckled, he said, “Even if *Zaixia*’s two legs were broken, perhaps even if I had to crawl, I would still crawl over here.”
This time the young man was really stunned – this hateful man, how could he have such a thick face, such big guts?

Practically, not even in her dream would she think that there was a man who talked like this. She should have been angered, but she could not get angry. She wanted to laugh, but was holding back.

The several girls that had their hair down finally could not hold it any longer. They giggled out loud.

After laughing, they felt that they should not laugh. Straightening up their faces, they said, “Such an audacious man, you have the impertinence to talk to *Gongzhu* [Princess] like this?”
‘*Gongzhu*’, these two characters indeed made Chu Liuxiang a little surprised. Slightly bowing down to pay his respect, Chu Liuxiang said, “*Zaixia* should not have talked like that, but *Zaixia* is a man, moreover, a man who has never lied.”
Rolling her fluid glance, the Princess slowly said, “I never thought that among the Han people there’s a man who dares to speak the truth. I only heard that in your place, someone who has the courage to speak the truth would be held in contempt instead.”

Chu Liuxiang sighed inwardly. He himself also realized that most people in the world would rather look upon hypocrites with a full mouth of lies but unwilling to look upon genuine lowly person who speak forthrightly without any scruples.

But on the surface he only had indifferent smile as he said, “In *Gongzhu*’s place, are you holding people who tell the truth in highest regard?”
“Hmm!” the Princess said.

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “In that case, *Gongzhu* ought to forgive *Zaixia* and declare me innocent.”

The Princess fixed her eyes on him for a long, long time. Suddenly a spring-flower-like smile appeared on her face, she said, “Perhaps not only I would forgive your guilt, but also see you as an honored guest. However, it depends on whether other than big guts, you also have other skill.”

Grabbing her hair with her delicate and beautiful hand, she turned around and said, “Since a moment ago you did not run away, do you dare to follow me now?”

From time to time, there was the sound of lighthearted music and joyous laughter coming from the gorgeous tent. The warriors with dagger-axe in their hands, standing respectfully outside the tent – were staring at Chu Liuxiang with their eagle-like eyes, but this moment the beautiful Princess already entered the tent, and was beckoning Chu Liuxiang to follow.

Chu Liuxiang smiled; patted the demon-like warrior’s shoulder, he swaggered in. He had already prepared inwardly that no matter how dangerous the tent was, he would not be surprised. In fact, in this seeing-ghost desert, he was prepared for the worst in everything.

Yet there was not the slightest bit sign of danger inside the tent. In fact, inside the tent was arguably the least dangerous place in the world.

Outside the tent, there was a soft and beautiful meadow, while inside the tent, the ground was covered in carpet, which was ten times softer and ten times more beautiful than any meadow in the world.

There were several low tables arranged on the carpet, and there were fresh fruits and food and drink piled on the tables, as well as several people dressed in fresh clothes, sitting happily on the carpet, drinking wine. The happiest was a man wearing red robe, dragon beard on his face [orig. *qiu* – young dragon with horns], and golden crown on his head. He was perched behind a low table in the middle, his left hand was holding a golden cup, but his right hand was wrapped around the slender waist of a beautiful woman. Roaring in joyous laughter, he said, “Gentlemen, please take a look; isn’t our Princess Pipa more beautiful

fresh from the bath?" [Translator's note: pipa is Chinese lute, with 4 strings, a large pear-shaped body and a fretted fingerboard.]
His gaze turning toward Chu Liuxiang, he laughed and said, "But my good daughter, who is this guest that you bring along? As far as I remembered, within several hundred *li* of here, there is no man as handsome as him!"
Princess Pipa pursed her lips and laughed. Graceful like a swallow she came over to her *Diedie*'s [daddy] side, and stooped over to whisper something in his ear.
While listening to her, the man in red robe nodded, but his eyes never left Chu Liuxiang. Although there was a smile on his face, there was some kind of terrifying dignity in his eyes.

Chu Liuxiang also looked at him with a smile on his face; inwardly he was happy.

He thought that the wine here was very fragrant, the food was very good, the girls were very beautiful and lovely, it seemed like this old man could not possibly be a bad person even more.

That was when four golden dagger-axes, fast as lightning, stabbed him from behind.

Four golden dagger-axes, two on top, two on the bottom. The dagger-axes were nearly two *zhang* long. Although the martial art skill of the warrior brandishing the dagger-axe could not be considered high, their strength was not low. The long dagger-axe stabbing out, it was like a viper coming out of its cave.
For a man who, for two or three days had not eaten a single grain of rice and drank a drop of water, evading such malicious concealed weapon was practically impossible.

Clearly the tragedy of bloodshed was about to happen, but the several people sitting on both sides, drinking wine, did not even look this way.

It seemed that whatever it was, nothing could move these several people's heart.

Only Princess Pipa's eyes were wide open. She saw the four golden dagger-axes almost reached Chu Liuxiang's back, but Chu Liuxiang did not even react the slightest bit. She could not stop her eyes from revealing a panic-stricken and remorseful expression. Her slender body also seemed to be wavering.

Only to hear two 'zheng!' noise of gold and iron collided against each other.

Chu Liuxiang still has not moved, neither did he look back. But somehow, unexpectedly the four golden dagger-axes were clamped under his ribs.

The four warriors wearing golden armor were bumping into each other; their hands were so numb that they were unable to raise it. Only then did the people drinking wine on both sides start to size Chu Liuxiang up; only then did their eyes reveal astonished look.

The old man in the red robe already clapped his hands and laughed heartily, saying, "Good martial art skill! It is indeed good martial art skill! My daughter indeed did not misjudge you."

Chu Liuxiang spoke indifferently, "But *Zaixia* has misjudged you. *Zaixia* really did not see that *Gexia* [your distinguished self] may plot against other people." The man in the red robe laughed aloud and said, "You must not blame me; it has nothing to do with me."

Pulling Princess Pipa's hands, he laughed and went on, "It was my daughter who wanted to test you. She said that if you could dodge a strike, you would be her distinguished guest."

"And if *Zaixia* failed to dodge?" Chu Liuxiang asked.
Pursing her lips, Princess Pipa laughed and said, "In any case, you have now dodged it, so you have become my guest. A guest should never be angry with the host."

Chu Liuxiang sighed. He also smiled bitterly.

A man with a pale face and a nose like eagle beak wearing green clothes sitting on the left suddenly laughed coldly and said, “Friend has good and talented skill, I wonder which divine figure are you?” [Just wanted to show you the complexity of the way the Chinese addressing other people …]

Stroking his nose, Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “*Zaixia* Liu Xiang [77-6 BC, Han Dynasty scholar and author, different characters from Chu Liuxiang’s name], only no more than a no-name-soldier-insignificant-pawn.”
“Oh …” the man in green replied. He looked down again, no longer paid any attention to Chu Liuxiang. ‘Liu Xiang’, this name was really nothing; he felt that it was not worthwhile to make acquaintance with such person.

But all along Princess Pipa was always looking at Chu Liuxiang. This moment she suddenly laughed and said, “Since you are already a guest here, why not sit down?”

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “When *Zaixia* is standing, my guts is a bit bigger.”
Princess Pipa laughed sweetly and said, “If you were shocked a moment ago, how about if I relieve your shock now?”

She sat cross-legged, while a young girl brought her a bent-neck, four-fret *pipa*, which she laid across her knees. Her delicate hands lightly moved.
Suddenly ‘zheng cong’ wonderful sound was heard, like rolling pearls and coiling jade, like *nichang* [rainbow colored clothes worn by the Eight Immortals, the same ‘nichang’ as in Lian Nichang of White Hair Demoness] dancing lightly. In the whole earth, only the sound of *pipa* was heard, there was no longer any other sound.
Since the Tang dynasty, the Central Earth has no shortage of *pipa* master. Jiangzhou’s [district of Chongzuo, Guangxi] Sima Bai’s carefree ‘*Pipa Xing*’ [Song of the *Pipa* Player, long poem by (according to dictionary) Tang poet Bai Juyi] was a family tradition, recited together as a family, considered to be the most perfect song to be passed on from generation to generation.
But Central Earth’s *pipa* was straight-necked, with four frets on the neck and thirteen frets on the body, so that the note-range was expanded and more gorgeous, and the position of the instrument was straight in the bosom.

This moment Princess Pipa held the instrument close to her body while stroking and plucking. The bent-neck, four-fret *pipa* was also a lot more simple and crude compared to the Central Earth ones, so that originally Chu Liuxiang did not expect to hear such a wonderful tune.
Princess Pipa looked at him and spoke with a sweet smile, “What do you think?”

Chu Liuxiang heaved a deep sigh and said, “I did not expect that in such a faraway and hard-to-reach land, there is such a beautiful music.”

The man in red robe laughed aloud and said, “What’s so strange about it? *Pipa* was originally from our country, which was being imparted to Han soil.”
“Oh?” Chu Liuxiang said.

The man in red robe said, “Have you ever heard the name ‘Su Qipo’?”

Chu Liuxiang suddenly straightened up his body; emotionally moved, he said, “Is it possible that *Gexia* is the King of Qiuci?”
The rays of light in the man in red robe flashed, stroking his beard, he laughed and said, “Finally you figure it out.”

Chu Liuxiang said, “During the Five Dynasties’ Northern Zhou’s Emperor Wu, from the Qiuci land, Su Qipo carried the skillfully hand-crafted Pipa, following the Tujue Empress entering the Han soil. All the imperial court and the ordinary people [i.e. all levels of society] were intoxicated, the story that captured the imagination was spread far and wide even until today. Although *Zaixia*’s knowledge and experience is low, I do have a slight knowledge of this matter.”
The King of Qiuci clapped his hands and said, “A small country of the Western Regions, we only have this insignificant talent that is slightly enough to brag about. I did not expect that today we came across an intimate friend. Come, come, come, let me honor you with three cups.”

Suddenly they heard someone hollering, “Old Stinky Bug! You are here!”

And then, there was a string of yelling and swearing, followed by screams of shock and pain, and a ‘Splosh!’ the sound of something fell into the water. Hence Chu Liuxiang knew that someone had been thrown into the pool by Hu Tiehua.

The pale-faced man in green stood up suddenly; frowning, he said, “Who dares to be this impudent in here? Let me go and see.”

With a smile on his face, Chu Liuxiang said, “Terribly sorry, that is *Zaixia*’s friend.”
The man in green looked at him up and down several times; finally he slowly sat down.

The King of Qiuci already laughed and said, “Fine thoroughbred horse does not associate with crossbow horse; your friend must also be an amazing person; please ask them to come on!”

Princess Pipa however, covered her mouth and said with a laugh, “Later on, you must tell me, why do people call you ‘Old Stinky Bug’?”

Although Hu Tiehua already threw two very-impressive-looking warriors in golden armor into the pool, and beat the other three until they had bloody nose and swollen face, but the more he thought about it, the more he felt he had not vented his resentment enough.

He thought that this time Chu Liuxiang really did not have enough *yiqi* [spirit of loyalty and self-sacrifice/code of brotherhood]; while drinking wine in here, he let his friends fight desperate battle on his behalf.
It was not until several cups of wine had entered his belly that his emotion started to level up; especially since the girls pouring wine for him were so pretty. In fact, they were so pretty that he practically could not get angry.

Now, Chu Liuxiang also discovered that the people drinking wine in here were not nobody – unexpectedly these five people were Wulin figures with outstanding reputation.

The three sitting on the left were, surprisingly the renowned experts '*Longyou Jian*' [Longyou is a county in Quzhou, Zhejiang, lit. dragon roam] Wu Family brothers, and the solitary bandit whose prestige shook the two rivers, Situ Liuxing.
The pale-faced man in green's reputation was even more resounding; unexpectedly he was a well-known in Jianghu – the vicious-and-merciless, when two-ways-black-and-white-see-him-they-had-a-headache – '*Shashou Wuqing*' [Merciless Killer] Du Huan.
It was said that his record in killing, very few people could match. Others feared him like they feared a viper or a scorpion, but he himself felt very proud. Yet when Chu Liuxiang heard his name, he could not help frowning.

Only a man sitting next to Du Huan called Wang Chong, whose face was full of sickly look, dispirited and downcast – not only his appearance seemed to be unimpressive, even his name has never been heard before. But contrary to expectation, Chu Liuxiang felt that this man was the most pleasing to the eye.

After the King of Qiuci finished his introduction, he raised his cup and said with a laugh, "*Xiao Wang* [little/lowly king] has no other good point, in all my life I only treat my guests well. These five gentlemen are honored guests that *Xiao Wang* invited from afar, the three of you ought to have heard their resounding reputation."
Hu Tiehua laughed and said, "The five gentlemen's resounding reputation, indeed I have long looked forward to meeting them. Come, let me salute each one a cup."

He actually never 'looked forward to meeting them' at all; he was just looking for an opportunity to drink.

The King of Qiuci turned to Ji Bingyan and asked, "Now only *Gexia*'s great name that has not been consulted."
Without even looking up, Ji Bingyan replied, "Ji."

The King of Qiuci asked, "Ji? As in female courtier 'Ji'?"

“Hmm!” Ji Bingyan replied.

“What about courtesy name?” the King of Qiuci asked.

This time Ji Bingyan did not even say one word; he simply used his finger to draw two characters in the air, just like the characters written on talisman to repel the ghosts; nobody could figure out what was written.

The King of Qiuci stared blankly; he laughed aloud and said, “*Gexia* is indeed very quiet.”
Hu Tiehua also laughed aloud and said, “His greatest skill is precisely shutting his mouth and not talking.”

The King of Qiuci’s eyes flickered, he said, “What about *Gexia*?”
He then immediately explained with a smile on his face, “In all my life, *Xiao Wang*’s best skill is to make friends with martial art talents. Just now your friend has already revealed a skill, if *Gexia* is interested in letting *Xiao Wang* to broaden my horizons, *Xiao Wang* will be extremely happy.”
Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “*Zaixia* has drank *Wangye*’s [master king] wine, I should play a hand or two for *Wangye* to see; only too bad that other than drinking wine, *Zaixia* only has a few *catty* of clumsy muscles.”
The King of Qiuci’s countenance brightened; clapping his hands and laughing, he said, “Wonderful! Wonderful! Turns out *Gexia* is a strong man.”
He suddenly clapped his hands. As soon as the clap was heard, from the purple curtain at the back of the tent, a big man, totally bald without any hair, naked from the waist up, but wearing sparkly golden feet binding – came out.

In all his life, Hu Tiehua has seen not a few big men. His own stature could not be considered small either. But compared to this big man, he practically looked like a small kid.

Other than the Four Vajra [Guardian Deity] Warriors in the temple, or perhaps the Hong Huang Giant in the pictures, he really could not think about anyone who could be compared to this big man.

Chapter 37 – The King of Qiuci

But the King of Qiuci laughed and said, “This is our humble group’s boor, Kun Mi. Although he also has a few *catties* of clumsy muscles, but his natural disposition is inept. I just hope that you would start off leniently, and yield to him somewhat.”

Hu Tiehua looked at the giant Kun Mi’s body, which seemed to be covered all over with iron muscles; exhaling a mouthful of cold air, he loudly asked, “Could it be that *Wangye* wants me to compare strength against him?”

The King of Qiuci smiled and nodded; he then mumbled something in foreign language to Kun Mi. The giant smiled and spoke something to the King of Qiuci before swaggering over.

Hu Tiehua sighed, and then he turned to Chu Liuxiang and spoke with a wry smile, “If I had known this, I would not have drunk the wine.”

Before he even finished talking, the giant’s hand, which was bigger than a cattail leaf fan – was already reaching over toward him.

Sitting on the side, Du Huan did not stop chuckling loudly. As long as others suffered, he would feel incomparably happy. The Wu Family brothers and the others also felt that this was very interesting. Only Ji Bingyan continued to eat; he did not even look up – although the way he ate was very refined, very slow, but from start to finish his mouth never stopped chewing.

They saw the giant snatched Hu Tiehua from his seat like an eagle catching a chick. Hu Tiehua’s hand still did not stop pouring wine into his mouth, while muttering to himself, “Since you want me to make a fool of myself, I might as well drink to recover my capital back!”

By this moment Kun Mi already grabbed both sides of his shoulders and pushed him down. The others only knew that at this point, even if Hu Tiehua’s bones were not crushed, he would be, at least, pressed down to half his height.

They heard ‘Bang!’ followed by ‘Crash!’ – the ‘bang!’ was the sound somebody falling down to the ground, the ‘crash!’ was the sound the bowls and cups shattering on the ground.

But the one falling down was not Hu Tiehua; unexpectedly it was the giant instead.

Turned out when his hands were pressing down, he felt that he was pressing on an empty space, Hu Tiehua’s body already slipped behind him like a swimming fish, and then reaching out with one hand to push.

It looked like a merely light push, but the giant’s three hundred *catties* body already tumbled down, so that even the cup and chopsticks on the King of Qiuci’s table were shaken and jumped.
It was certainly not Hu Tiehua who pushed him down, rather, his own strength had pushed himself down. Hu Tiehua was just helping him with a small favor.

This kind of ‘four *taels* pushing a thousand *catties*’ ingenious skill of force application sounded easy, but the *shenfa* [pose or motion of one’s body in martial arts] within it was not something that a dimwitted could obtain the slightest bit, the timing could not have the slightest mistake.
It should be noted that if Hu Tiehua dodged a bit faster, the giant’s force could not press down, then Hu Tiehua would have no way of overthrowing him from behind.

The King of Qiuci’s eyes narrowed, he pulled his daughter over and quietly asked, “Is this also true martial art skill?”

Princess Pipa laughed sweetly and said, “Something that can bring Kun Mi down, how could it not be a true martial art skill?”

The King of Qiuci immediately clapped his hands with big laughter, saying, “A hero! Indeed a hero! Let *Xiao Wang* salute you with a cup.” [Translator’s note: the word ‘hero’ here could also mean ‘fighter/brave strong man/warrior in armor.]

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “A cup? It was not worth three cups?”

Smiling, he walked over. Unexpectedly it was as if he did not see the giant was already crawling up, hiding behind him. Hu Tiehua had just taking the wine cup from the King of Qiuci’s hand, Kun Mi already grabbed his belt and lifted his entire body off the ground, and heaved him up in the air.

The King of Qiuci’s eyes narrowed again, he shouted, “This wine is not bad, drink it first and talk later!”

Being held in someone’s hands, unexpectedly Hu Tiehua’s face was still grinning; he said with a laugh, “Big man, did you hear that? This is the good wine that *Wangye* bestowed. You drop and break me, it does not matter, but you must never spill this cup of wine.”
The giant was immensely pleased with himself as he carried Hu Tiehua while walking half a circle, but not only Hu Tiehua was not anxious, Chu Liuxiang, Ji Bingyan unexpectedly did not appear to be anxious at all.

The ‘Merciless Killer’ Du Huan’s eyes were flashing with light; gasping, he said, “Throw him! Throw him hard! It doesn’t matter if you throw him to pieces.”

This man, not only he himself was bloodthirsty, watching others killing people, unexpectedly he was also extremely excited.

The giant walked over to the King of Qiuci’s presence. Suddenly he roared and hurled Hu Tiehua’s entire body onto the ground. The King of Qiuci hurriedly covered his ears and closed his eyes, while crying out, “Not so hard! Don’t scare me.”

He thought that this time, even if Hu Tiehua was not smashed to pieces, it would be hard to avoid having the bones in his entire body broken, perhaps even his brains would be thrown down into his crotch.

But it was the giant who fell down again, and this time he was unable to crawl back up.

Hu Tiehua acted as if nothing had happened, he did not even look at him; giggling, he said, “Now, at last, I should be able to drink this cup of wine!”

He raised the cup in salute and drank it all; and then he sighed and said, “It is indeed a good wine, pity that it’s too little.”

The King of Qiuci’s eyes opened wide, he quietly said, “What’s going on here? Could it be that this kid knew magic?”

Princess Pipa giggled and said, “This is not magic, it is also real martial art skill.”

“What kind of martial art skill is that?” the King of Qiuci asked.

Princess Pipa replied, “Just now, when Kun Mi exerted his strength to throw him down, this hero [see note above] also exerted his strength to lightly scratch his wrist. Immediately his strength could not be exerted anymore, and then the hero lightly jumped down, jumping behind his back, and lightly pushed – it’s just that the hero’s movement was terrifyingly fast that others practically could not see how Kun Mi fell down.”

Her voice was very soft, and she spoke very fast, but Chu Liuxiang, Ji Bingyan, already had their full attention on her. Hu Tiehua also came over to her, saluted, and said with a smile, “Surprised by *Gongzhu*’s praise; *Gongzhu* has good eyesight!”
The King of Qiuci pulled Princess Pipa’s hand, laughing aloud, he said, “Since you have figured out that he is such a hero [*yingxiong*, different word], why haven’t you honored him with a cup?”
Pursing her lips, Princess Pipa laughed, and then she poured a cup of wine and presented it to Hu Tiehua with both hands.

Hu Tiehua practically could not close his mouth; laughing heartily, he said, “The wine that *Gongzhu*’s bestow, forget about a cup, even a barrel I will drink it down.”
He just wanted to receive the cup, suddenly he heard someone spoke coldly, “This cup of wine, *Zaixia* wants to drink it as well.”
Amidst the voice, a man walked slowly over. Unexpectedly it was the ‘Merciless Killer’ Du Huan.

Hu Tiehua looked at him and said with a laugh, “If you want to drink, there are still plenty over there.”

Du Huan spoke with a cold laugh, “The one *Zaixia* wants to drink is precisely this cup.”
Stunned, Hu Tiehua asked, “I wonder if this cup of wine particularly fragrant?”

“Exactly,” Du Huan replied, “The cup that *Gongzhu* personally poured, naturally it is particularly fragrant.”
Hu Tiehua stared at him for half a day; he laughed in spite of himself and said, “I get it. You don’t want to drink wine, you simply want to bully others.”

Du Huan stared coldly at him, unexpectedly he agreed tacitly.

Hu Tiehua said, “Since both you and I want to drink this cup of wine, what do you think we should do?”

Du Huan coldly said, “If you could also throw me tumbling down, not only will I let you drink this cup, I will also kneel down and call you my ancestor three times. Otherwise, you have to call me *Yeye* [paternal grandfather] three times.”
Hu Tiehua sighed; he muttered, “Why is it very easy and comfortable for others to drink wine, but it is so difficult for me to drink just a cup of wine? All right! Let’s try it. But you are such an adult and you want to call me your ancestor, it will be a bit embarrassing for me.”

The atmosphere in the tent suddenly tensed up. It was totally different from Hu Tiehua against Kun Mi a moment ago, only because anybody could see the

murderous intent between Du Huan's eyebrows. Everybody knew that this fight was not as fun as the previous one.

Ji Bingyan quietly said to Chu Liuxiang, "I have long heard about this 'Merciless Killer' Du Huan, not only his hands are very vicious, his personal character is also very treacherous. You'd better take care of this matter for Hu Tiehua."

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, "No problem; although for the past few years this drunkard was steeped in wine jar all day long, his martial art skill has nothing to worry."

They saw Du Huan had his hands behind his back, as he stood perfectly straight in place. Under the illumination of the lantern light, his face appeared even greener than the iron, the ominous glint in his eyes flickered, staring at Hu Tiehua, he said with a cold laugh, "I am going to stand here unmoving, I wonder if *Gexia* does not dare to come over?"
Giggling, Hu Tiehua said, "How do you want me to throw you tumbling down? Would you prefer tumbling forward, or falling backward?"

Du Huan angrily said, "As long as you can bend my body down, you can be considered winning."

"Are you saying you won't hit back?" Hu Tiehua asked.

Du Huan coldly said, "Just see if you can pull me down? I do not want to pull you down at all."

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, "All right! You said it!"

He walked over step by step.

'Longyou Sword' Brothers of the Wu Family, Situ Liuxing, and the others seemed to show regret on their faces. They seemed to think that as soon as Hu Tiehua walked over, he was going to suffer Du Huan's deadly blow. Only Wang

Chong still looked dispirited as before; he looked disinclined to even open his eyes.

While walking, Hu Tiehua's mouth was grumbling; he muttered, "Himself standing there unmoving, waiting for others to pull him down; such a good thing, it is really rare in the world. It looks like my drinking this cup of wine is already decided."

He rolled up his sleeve, and reached out to pull Du Huan's shoulders. Unexpectedly it was the exact same move that Kun Mi was using to pull him, except that he was a lot shorter than Kun Mi, so that there was no way for his two hands to press down, hence he only pushed backwards.

As a result, he revealed a very big opening in front of his chest.

A hint of evil grin suddenly appeared on Du Huan's mouth, he said, "*Laozi* is not moving and simply letting you push; how could there be such a good thing in the world? Aren't you …"
When he uttered the first word, his right palm already shot out from behind his back like a viper, going straight toward the opening on Hu Tiehua's chest. Under the illumination of the lantern light, they saw black light on his hand flashed.

Unexpectedly his pair of hands was wearing five pairs of black, dark green ring of light; looking at the ugly gloss, undoubtedly the steel rings must have been quenched in seeing-blood-sealing-the-throat highly toxic poison.

This move was indeed very malicious and fast; not only Hu Tiehua's chest was widely open, it was as if his entire body was nestled in his bosom, waiting to be beaten.

Longyou Sword, Situ Liuxing, all were renowned experts in Wulin, their hand-to-hand combat experience was not a few. This time everybody thought that Hu Tiehua definitely could not escape. Even Chu Liuxiang could not help blurted out in alarm, "Watch out for his hands!"

In the time to speak this sentence, he saw Hu Tiehua's hands, which were originally pulling Du Huan's shoulders, suddenly, fast as lightning, slapped toward the middle.

This slap was like swatting a housefly. Du Huan's wrist was just like the fly. Unexpectedly it was clasped between the two hands, and unexpectedly he was unable to move a single step.

The word that Du Huan's mouth was going to say was, "Aren't you dreaming?" But the word 'dreaming' had not yet spoken, they heard 'crack!' sound, his wrist had been clamped broken,

Hu Tiehua's body already floated out, he said with a laugh, "Perhaps your hand is tired of killing people, giving it a rest may be good."

Du Huan clenched his teeth; unexpectedly he did not scream in pain, but his face went pale without the slightest sign of blood, his body swayed, finally he fainted and fell to the ground.

At this moment everybody inside the tent's countenance changed from the shock; it was only then did all of them know how high Hu Tiehua's martial art skill really was, but how many were able to see clearly how he made his move?

Although the Wu Family brothers and the others could see his move, unexpectedly they were still unable to tell which school this move belonged to, which sect's style – that unexpectedly the move was this ingenious?

Wang Chong, who always looked dispirited, suddenly rose up to his full height; emotionally moved, he said, "Good 'Butterfly Flying In Pairs' move! Could it be that *Gexia* is unexpectedly the one who, ten years ago, together with the equally famous '*Dao Shuai*' [bandit chief/commander], were known as the '*Xiaoxiang* [other name of the Xiangjiang River in Hunan province] *Xia* [hero/knight] *Dao* [thief/bandit]' colorful wings filling the flowers, Hua *Hudie* [butterfly]?" [Translator's note: Hu Tiehua's surname, 'hua' literally means flower, hence his nickname could mean 'flower and butterfly'.]

Hu Tiehua was startled. He stared at him for half a day, before laughing and saying, “Only this Hua *Hudie* has been soaking inside the wine jar for ten years, unexpectedly *Gexia* still did not forget him.”
As soon as this sentence was out, the Wu Family brothers, Situ Liuxing, all could not help but were excited and emotionally moved.

Wang Chong heaved a deep, deep sigh, and said with a wry smile, “Hu Tiehua, Hu Tiehua … *Zaixia* should have recognized *Gexia* early on.”
Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “But until now *Zaixia* has not recognized who *Gexia* is?”
Wang Chong chuckled; unexpectedly his laugh seemed to be somewhat mournful. He laughed indifferently and said, “Lowly name is not worth mentioning; however …”

His eyes suddenly looked at Chu Liuxiang intently, and then he said, “If this gentleman is not Chu Liuxiang, whose name shook the land under heaven, then *Zaixia* is as blind as a bat even more.”
The crowd went abuzz again, and this time naturally the commotion was even bigger.

Chu Liuxiang also laughed indifferently and said, “The one by Hua *Hudie*’s side, it may not necessarily be Chu Liuxiang, is it?”
Wang Chong’s eyes flickered, he said, “Although *Zaixia* is short-sighted and lowly, I also know ‘wild goose [*yan* from Ji Bingyan] and butterfly [*hudie*] as the pair of wings, the fragrance of flowers [*hua xiang* from Hu Tiehua and Chu Liuxiang’s names] filled the earth’. In the former years Chu *Xiang Shuai* [fragrant commander] had flying wild goose on the left, and colorful butterfly on the right, laughing across the Jianghu, crisscrossing the world.”
He suddenly laughed; changing his tune, he said, “But what *Gexia* said was not wrong either. These three gentlemen for the past few years have each been to the east and west, naturally *Gexia* may not necessarily be Chu Liuxiang, while this gentleman may not necessarily be Ji *Xiansheng* [Mr. Ji], Ji Bingyan.”
Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “I can’t believe *Gexia* is very familiar with their, three men’s situation. I wonder if *Gexia* knew either one of the three personally?”

Wang Chong heaved a deep sigh, and said with a wry smile, “A Jianghu refugee, how could I have the predestined affinity to claim connections with dragon and phoenix?”

All along the King of Qiuci’s eyeballs did not stop moving from one person to the next among them, his ears also did not stop listening to their exchange. This moment he suddenly laughed heartily and said, “No matter who gentlemen really are, gentlemen’s martial art skill and talent already toppled over *Xiao Wang* endlessly. Today *Xiao Wang* could gather happily under one roof with gentlemen, let *Xiao Wang* dry three cups for respect first.”
Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “But *Gongzhu*’s cup of wine, *Zaixia* must drink first, otherwise I won’t feel comfortable.”
Princess Pipa smiled sweetly. But before she could talk, suddenly they saw a golden-armored warrior rushing inside the tent, and hurriedly coming to the King of Qiuci and spoke something in low voice.

Not only this warrior appeared to be in panic, he did not even give careful consideration to court etiquette, not even to his own king. When the King of Qiuci heard him, his countenance immediately changed as well.

Ji Bingyan cleared his throat and suddenly stood up and said, “*Zaixia* and my companions had been in difficulty for many days, wine and meat entered our belly, our eyes do not want to open anymore. I wonder if *Wangye* would allow us to leave the banquet and let us sleep first?”
The King of Qiuci immediately laughed and said, “Of course you can. Even if three gentlemen wanted to leave, *Xiao Wang* will exhaust everything to try to ask three gentlemen to stay.”
Not only his laughter was forced, his words appeared to have deep meaning behind it.

It was a very exquisite tent. With a cup of wine in his hand, all four limbs of his body relaxed, Hu Tiehua was lying on a soft fur, heaving a long sigh, and said with a laugh, “The things of the world are indeed strange; last night we curled up like a dog in that wet and cold sand, tonight unexpectedly we become like immortals.”

“You think this place is very comfortable?” Ji Bingyan asked coldly.

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “If you could find a more comfortable place than this, I admire you.”

Ji Bingyan said, “In my opinion, not only this place is not comfortable, it is also brimming with trouble.”

Twisting his waist, Hu Tiehua sat up straight and asked, wide-eyed, “What trouble?”

Ji Bingyan replied, “Let me ask you first; this King of Qiuci, why isn’t he in his own country’s territory, living comfortably in his own palace, but taking a large contingent to run away to this desolate place where you can’t see any sign of human habitation for hundreds of *li*?”
Hu Tiehua was stumped. “Perhaps they came here to play,” he replied.

Ji Bingyan said, “In his capacity as the lord of a country, how could he do things as he pleases like this?”

Stroking his nose, Hu Tiehua smiled wryly and said, “Even if there’s something strange in this, what does it have to do with us?”

Ji Bingyan said, “Let me ask you again, although Qiuci is a small country, but as the ruler of a country, he is a nobility, his position is still high above common people, why would this King of Qiuci want to make friends with Jianghu characters?”

Hu Tiehua mumbled, “That’s right! This is indeed a bit strange. With a thousand ways, a hundred plans he sought out those Jianghu friends and had them come here; moreover, he did not ask their identity and history, as well as he did not care whether they are from the black way or white way, as long as their martial art skill is all right. What exactly is happening here? What exactly is his idea in getting all these people?”

Chuckling, Chu Liuxiang said, “The reason is very clear: this King of Qiuci must be caught in trials and tribulations; his difficulty, perhaps only Wulin people can solve.”

Hu Tiehua said, “He made friends with us, because he wanted to ask us for help, is that right?”

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “Exactly. This cup of wine of yours is not good to drink at all.”

“What does it have to do with it?” Hu Tiehua asked, “I’ll say that they are not bad, he did not flaunt his air as the king of a country either. If he has difficulty, we could do him a favor, what’s wrong with that?”

Ji Bingyan coldly said, “It seems that you are really a hero who sees what is right and act courageously. Too bad that right now we don’t even have time to mind our own business, how could we have the strength to meddle into other people’s business?”

Hu Tiehua said, “But we cannot drink other people’s wine in vain either!”

Laughing coldly, Ji Bingyan said, “Don’t you forget, that Stone *Guanyin* also invited us to drink a pot of soup.”
At the mention of ‘Stone *Guanyin*’, three characters, Hu Tiehua’s thought of wine diminished more than half, his body started to get cold as well.
After staring blankly for half a day, he could not help asking, “In your opinion, what should we do?”

Ji Bingyan slowly said, “You and I will rest in here about a *sichen* and then we’ll leave. Before leaving, naturally there’s no harm in getting several pots full of water and wine. Even those pleasant-to-the-eye but not pleasant-to-be-eaten warriors will be helpless in stopping us.”
Hu Tiehua cried out, “Good kid! Others treat us as honored guests, but you want to be little thief.”

Ji Bingyan coldly said, “Living thief is always better than dead honored guest.”

Hu Tiehua was speechless again. He stared blankly for another half a day, before sighing, and said with a wry smile, “I can’t argue with you. It was not like we came here to be other people’s honored guests anyway.”

Chu Liuxiang suddenly said, “But we can’t leave.”

Hu Tiehua was immediately grinning from ear to ear. But Ji Bingyan puckered up his eyebrows. “Why?” he asked.

Chu Liuxiang slowly said, “If we want to find Stone *Guanyin*, we have to obtain her whereabouts in here.”
Chu Liuxiang was not the kind of person who talked randomly; as soon as he said that, Ji Bingyan was immediately shocked and turned pale. Hu Tiehua was unable to laugh as well. “Are you saying that Stone *Guanyin* is here?” he blurted out.
Chu Liuxiang replied, “Although she herself is not here, but from among her men, I have no doubt that some has infiltrated this place.”

Sucking in a mouthful of cold air, Hu Tiehua asked, “How do you know?”

Chu Liuxiang slowly said, “Do you know where those Peng Family brothers supposed to deliver the ‘Star of Happiness’ to?”

Hu Tiehua blurted out, “Are you saying that they were going to deliver it here?”

“Precisely!” Chu Liuxiang replied.

“How do you know?” Ji Bingyan asked.

Chu Liuxiang replied, “Just now when that golden-armored warrior was rushing into the tent to report, although his voice was very soft, I was able to hear a few words.”

“What did he say?” Ji Bingyan asked.

Chu Liuxiang said, “Although he was speaking Qiuci language, when it comes to people’s name, he was using Han language. Unexpectedly he was mentioning ‘Peng Yihu … Stone *Guanyin* … Star of Happiness …’ When the King of Qiuci heard it, his countenance changed.”
He slowly continued, “Therefore, I think that this ‘Star of Happiness’ must be closely related to the King of Qiuci. Perhaps the King of Qiuci’s adversary is Stone *Guanyin*.”
Slapping his thigh, Hu Tiehua said, “Great! If he is also Stone *Guanyin*’s adversary, if we help him, it would be the same as helping ourselves. One move, two gains; what can you have against it?”
Chu Liuxiang said, “Besides, by staying here, we have a lot of advantages. Not only we could wait at our ease for the exhausted enemy, waiting for the Stone *Guanyin* to come here, but also during this period, we will not be hard-pressed due to lacking food and water.”
Ji Bingyan was deep in thought for half a day; he slowly said, “If the Stone *Guanyin* really want to give the King of Qiuci trouble, naturally she had to send her people to sneak in here. But I am so sure that it cannot be the Wu Family brothers or Situ Liuxing and the like.”
“Why?” Hu Tiehua asked.

Chu Liuxiang replied, “Only because foreigners will attract attention, while the mole must not be easy for other people to detect. Besides, Situ Liuxing and those people were invited by the King of Qiuci from the Central Plains.”

Chapter 38 – Joy From Heaven

Ji Bingyan said, “Among those people, only Wang Chong is rather suspicious.”

“Correct!” Hu Tiehua commented, “I’ll say that ‘Wang Chong’, these two characters are definitely not his real name and genuine surname.”

Ji Bingyan said, “This man, not only his track is somewhat secretive, his martial art skill is also deeply concealed, not being revealed the least bit. He is covering his track like this, he must be scheming something.”

Chu Liuxiang suddenly laughed and said, “When you looked at those people, which one do you think has the highest martial art skill?”

Hu Tiehua’s eyes were flashing, he asked, “Are you saying it’s not him?”

“I don’t think it is him at all,” Chu Liuxiang replied.

“Then who is it?” Hu Tiehua asked.

Chu Liuxiang chuckled, he spoke word-by-word, “Princess Pipa.”

Hu Tiehua slapped his thigh again, he said, “That’s right! If she did not know martial arts, she could not possibly have such a brilliant eyesight.”

Chu Liuxiang said, “Not only that, compared to that Wang Chong, she is even more deeply concealed, not revealing anything at all. Unexpectedly on the outside she appears to be too weak to stand up to the wind, but if her inner power did not have deep root of maturity, how could she restraint her *qi* power that she did not reveal it the slightest bit?”
Hu Tiehua’s eyes were staring at the dome of the tent, he suddenly chuckled and muttered, “A Princess from beyond the Great Wall who is capable of causing the downfall of a city or a state – is unexpectedly a deeply-concealed, not-revealing-anything Wulin martial art master. This is really interesting, very interesting!”

He raised the wine cup and drained it in one gulp. Suddenly there was a dry cough outside the tent, someone said with a laughter, “The three gentlemen are not asleep yet? *Zaixia* has come with a specific purpose in mind to pay my respect.”
Unexpectedly it was the first hero, the ‘*Qingtian Jianke*’ [lit. clear/blue sky swordsman] Wu Qingtian [the same ‘Qingtian’ characters] of ‘*Wu Shi Shuang Xia*’ [pair of heroes from the Wu Clan], who made their name in Jianghu using

the ‘Eight-by-eight, sixty-four-hand Longyou [dragon roam] Sword’. With apologetic smile on his face, expressing regret over and over again, he exchanged pleasantries with utmost care.
Chu Liuxiang, three men were still unable to guess his intention, this renowned expert in sword technique said with a laughter, “As for the purpose of *Zaixia*’s visit, I am afraid three gentlemen would never guess.”
Smiling, Hu Tiehua said, “Not to conceal anything from you, we are guessing right now!”

Wu Qingtian laughed and said, “Actually, *Zaixia* is here because someone entrusted something to me.”
“Someone entrusted something to you?” Hu Tiehua asked, “Who is it? What is he entrusted you with?”

Pretending to be mysterious, Wu Qingtian laughed and said, “*Zaixia* was entrusted by the King of Qiuci to ask the three gentlemen’s hand in marriage.”
As soon as he said that, even Ji Bingyan was stunned. “Marriage?” he asked.

Hu Tiehua also laughed so hard that he was rocking back and forth; he said, “This *Wangye* is indeed too wonderful for words; could it be that he want all three of us as *Fuma* [emperor’s son-in-law]?”
Wu Qingtian said, “The one he wanted for the marriage is naturally only one of the three gentlemen; moreover, this is not *Wangye*’s own intention, rather, it is *Da Gongzhu* [big (could also mean ‘first’) princess], who as soon as she saw, her fragrant heart was secretly taken.”
As soon as he said that, Ji Bingyan already sat to the side. He knew that this Princess would in no way take a fancy to him. But Hu Tiehua immediately felt a bit nervous.

Although on the surface Chu Liuxiang remained calm and collected, the light in his eyes evidently showed that he was also somewhat nervous. With the cool eye of a bystander, inwardly Ji Bingyan was amused.

Until later, it was Hu Tiehua who could not help asking, “But I wonder this *Gongzhu* actually … (cough, cough) … actually fancies which one?”

He spoke with a somewhat dry voice, which was not to say that he was bent on being the *Fuma*; rather, he felt that if the one this Princess looked upon was not him, he would inevitably lose a bit of face.
He saw that with a smile on his face, Wu Qingtian was looking at him, and said with a laugh, "The one *Gongzhu* personally look upon is precisely *Gexia*."
Chu Liuxiang smiled and said, "Wonderful! Wonderful! This *Gongzhu* really has the insight to recognize the worth of a hero."
Although he was speaking pleasant words, the fact was that his heart was a bit sour. Although his face was showing a smile, the fact was that his heart was upset. This was not to say that he was jealous; rather, he just felt a little disappointed, a little unexpected, also a little lose of face – he could never have imagined that the Princess was not looking upon himself.

He saw even the cup in Hu Tiehua's hand fell upside down, the wine splashed all over his body, but he did not notice one bit. Inwardly he was very happy, but on the surface he put up an angry face and shouted loudly, "Absurd! Absurd! How could she take a fancy to me? You must be wrong?"

Wu Qingtian smiled and said, "Such an important matter, how could *Zaixia* be wrong?"
Hu Tiehua cast Chu Liuxiang a glance, as if he was showing off, but his mouth still loudly said, "You must be mistaken; go back and ask again!"

Wu Qingtian said, "No need to ask again. As soon as *Gexia* agrees, *Zaixia* will go back to report the completion of my mission."
Ji Bingyan could not help laughing and said, "This is such a big thing, how could it be decided in a hurry? *Gexia* also ought to let him think about it first."
Wu Qingtian pondered a little; he said, "Since that's the case, *Zaixia* will wait for half a *sichen* and then I'll be back. Three gentlemen might not know, this is not because *Zaixia* is anxious, but that *Gongzhu* … ha ha …"
While his mouth was still making 'ha ha', he withdrew.

Chu Liuxiang looked at Hu Tiehua and said with a laugh, "Congratulations! Congratulations! You have been playing bachelor for many years, I never expected that you were waiting to be a *Fuma*."

Hu Tiehua roared in laughter and said, “Dead Rooster, you listen: it is rare that a woman would take a fancy to me and not take a fancy to him; he is going to be sour and jealous.”

He laughed so hard that he fell onto the short couch; that he could not even speak. This time even Chu Liuxiang was overpowered by him, how could he not be happy?

Stroking his nose, Chu Liuxiang said, “I am jealous?”

Hu Tiehua also could not help saying, “I know that you are not jealous at all, just a little uncomfortable inwardly; that’s all.”

Chu Liuxiang broke into hearty laugh. The three laughed together. This matter was indeed too absurd, it was simply too wonderful for words, yet it was clearly real.

Catching his breath, Hu Tiehua said with a laugh, “A man who, even the *Laobanniang* [female boss] of a small wine shop did not look upon, suddenly is looked upon by a princess. Isn’t it like the sky suddenly drop a big meat pie?”
Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “Did you see how proud he is of himself? We’d better go find Wu Qingtian now, lest the two of them wait anxiously.”

Hu Tiehua suddenly jumped up and said, “No!”

Chu Liuxiang was stunned, “What do you mean ‘No’? Are you saying you don’t agree?”

Without even smiling Hu Tiehua opened his eyes wide and said, “Of course I don’t agree.”

Chu Liuxiang asked in surprise, “Seeing you this happy, plus earlier you toppled over that princess and prostrated yourself in admiration, when she poured the

wine for you, even your bones nearly turned into flaky pastry, why now suddenly you don't agree?"

Hu Tiehua said, "To be honest, toward that princess, I really like a little; if the one she took a fancy to was not me, perhaps I would be more broken-hearted and disappointed than the Old Stinky Bug. But if she really wanted to marry me, it is absolutely cannot happen."

"Why not?" Chu Liuxiang asked.

Hu Tiehua anxiously replied, "It simply can't."

Ji Bingyan unhurriedly said, "I think he is afraid that his old weakness would flare up again; others don't like him, he is like a housefly seeing blood, fixing his gaze on others. Others like him, he put on airs instead."

Hu Tiehua anxiously said, "Only grandson would have that kind of thought. I am just … just …"

The more anxious he was, the more speechless he became.

"Just what?" Ji Bingyan asked.

His brow was beaded with sweat, Hu Tiehua said, "You guys think, a man like me, how could I have a princess as my wife? Can I support her? If you want me to follow after her and be a *Fuma*, it's not going to happen, even if you kill me."
Chu Liuxiang blurted out laughing, "You are thinking too far. Our problem is now."

"That's right," Ji Bingyan said, "Others show such a magnificent thought, if you don't agree, our plan would come to nothing. I'll say that this time, by all possible means, you must not disagree."

Hu Tiehua roared, “If you force me, I am going to run away.”

Ji Bingyan smiled and said, “With Chu Liuxiang and I in here, can you run away?”

Hu Tiehua jumped up; he said, “This is a major turning point of lifelong importance to me, why are you forcing me? Can you still be considered my old friends? You guys … you guys are practically selling friend to seek glory.”

Chu Liuxiang and Ji Bingyan looked at each other. Chu Liuxiang suddenly stood up and said, “Since this is the case, let me go and turn it down on his behalf!”

Ji Bingyan sighed and said, “This is originally the matter between the three of us; since he is unwilling to have consideration for friends, what can we do? Tomorrow we will be driven out and that’s the end of it.”

Chu Liuxiang sighed and said, “I just feel it’s a pity. A beautiful princess capable-of-causing-the-downfall-of-a-city-or-state, also a deeply-concealed-not-revealing-anything Wulin martial art master, this kind of wife he does not want, it would be strange indeed if he would not regret it for the rest of his life.”

The two men, one throwing the other blocking, one playing [a wind instrument] the other singing, unconsciously Hu Tiehua listened with blank expression on his face.

Chu Liuxiang shook his head as he was walking out, while his mouth did not stop muttering, “I feel sorry for that passionate Princess; when she hears this news, I wonder how heart-broken will she be?”

Hu Tiehua suddenly called loudly, “Wait a minute!”

Chu Liuxiang said, “Why wait? Won’t it be better to let her know earlier so that she could put her heart to death?”

Sticking out his chest, Hu Tiehua said, “I have thought it over for a long time, and I decided to sacrifice my life for my friends; who told me to have many years of friendship with you guys?”

Chu Liuxiang exchanged eye-signals with Ji Bingyan, but his mouth loudly said, “No way! No way! Marriage is a major turning point of lifelong importance; as your friends, how could we let you sacrifice your life for us? Let me go and turn them down!”

As he spoke, he started to walk out again. But Hu Tiehua pulled him back. Smiling apologetically, he said, “Besides, other than that …”

Chu Liuxiang pretended not to understand. “Other than that what?” he asked.

Rubbing his head, Hu Tiehua stammered, “I think, marrying a princess is troublesome, but it is much less trouble than going around in circle in the desert. Besides, I … I really can’t bear to make others broken-hearted either.”

He spoke in deadly earnest, which made the others doubling up in laughter.

Ji Bingyan laughed and said, “I have long known this shortcomings of yours; a toast you don’t want to take, but clearly you want to drink a forfeit.”

Suddenly they heard someone outside the tent responding with a laugh, “What drinking a toast, drinking forfeit? *Zaixia* is just waiting to drink happiness wine!” [Translator’s note: it is difficult to carry the nuances into English – *jingjiu* (toast wine), *fajiu* (drink as the result of losing a bet), *xijiu* (toast drunk at wedding feast).]
Although the night was already deep, every tent was still bright with lantern light.

Shi Tuo was still with his camels, he meticulously looked after them. It appeared that only by taking care of others would he be able to forget the pain in

his own heart. However, who on earth would be willing to have this ugly, weird, and handicapped person taking care of him? Therefore, he could only use this pair of tender hands to take care of the beasts.

This moment, the camels were asleep, but he was still sitting there in a daze, under the starry night sky. Such a solitary, such a lonely man.

Such a bleak scene.

But actually, this moment he was not completely alone. Not too far from him, unexpectedly there was someone looking at him, lost in thought, in fact, he has been looking at him for quite a long time.

Naturally Shi Tuo was not aware of him. But Chu Liuxiang saw it – as soon as he walked out of the tent, he discovered Wang Chong was staring at Shi Tuo.

Wang Chong himself was a mysterious figure too.

Why would he pay so much attention to a handicapped man?

Chu Liuxiang knitted his brows. He was just about to walk over, Wang Chong already sensed his presence; immediately he walked away.

Chu Liuxiang still wanted to ask him to get to the bottom of this matter, but he was just chasing over for a few steps, suddenly he heard a silver-bell-like tender laugher. A black-naped-oriole-like voice said with a laugh, “Didn’t you say you wanted to go to bed earlier? How come you turned into a roaming-in-the-night deity?”

Chu Liuxiang did not need to look back, he knew it was Princess Pipa. Forcing a laughter, he said, “I am afraid *Zaixia* is not the only roaming-in-the-night deity here.”
Princess Pipa said, “Other people, I don’t care, but you are not asleep this late at night, are you thinking of peeking other people bathing?”

Clearing his throat, Chu Liuxiang said, “Originally perhaps I did have that intention, but now there are too many roaming-in-the-night deities around here, so I’d better go back to sleep!”

All along he never looked back. This moment, while saying that, he started walking away. But he heard Princess Pipa sighed and said, “Hey … come back.”

Chu Liuxiang sighed; he had no choice but to stop and slowly turned around.

Under the starlight, he saw her fluid glance was as bright as the Milky Way, yet on her beautiful face, there was a hint of coquettish anger; pursing her lips, she glowered at Chu Liuxiang and said, “Let me ask you, why do you ignore me?”

A bitter taste seemed to appear inside Chu Liuxiang’s mouth. Smiling wryly, he said, “How could *Zaixia* ignore *Gongzhu*? However, if there’s nothing else, *Zaixia* still want to go back to sleep.”
Princess Pipa’s eyes grew even bigger. “Who said I am looking for you for no reason?”

Under the starlight, her white cotton clothes appeared to be transparent. Her face, her hands, her head … under the starlight also appeared to be transparent.

Even the merciless wind, when it got here, it seemed to become exceptionally gentle and soft; gently and softly blowing the sleeve of her clothes.

Her entire being seemed to become a fairy that was molded out of crystal.

Chu Liuxiang’s heart was suddenly beating faster. Although he was doing everything he could to control himself, he was still unable not to think about her beautiful naked body in the dusk, under the setting sun, in the pool, looking like a blooming hibiscus; the sparkling and translucent water droplets flowing along her sparkling and translucent breasts. He felt that he was practically committing a crime.

He coughed desperately and spoke with an especially loud voice, “Why is *Gongzhu* looking for *Zaixia*?”

Princess Pipa bit her lips. Suddenly a smile broke on her face. This moment, the stars filling the sky seemed to be brighter, more glorious.

Princess Pipa smiled sweetly and asked, “I just wanted to ask you, why did others call you Old Stinky Bug?”

The starlight was so gentle and soft, this affectionate beautiful princess was already given to marriage with his best friend, but why did she now come to look for him?

Chu Liuxiang could only desperately rub his nose; he really had nothing to say.

But Princess Pipa’s fluid glance still refused to let him off.

Chu Liuxiang could only hang his head low, but then he saw under the lower hem of her robe that was blown by the wind, a pair of bare, slender and white, delicate ankles.

Princess Pipa spoke softly, “Why don’t you answer my question?”

Chu Liuxiang had no way out; he smiled and said, “You should not have asked me that question, right? You should go ask whoever is calling me that name, right?”

Princess Pipa cocked her head to think about it. Apparently she had not guessed the deep meaning behind his words.

Right this moment, the big matchmaker Wu Qingtian hurriedly came. Chu Liuxiang relaxed immediately. Laughing loudly, he asked, “Has Wu *Xiong* successfully accomplished your task?”
Wu Qingtian laughed and said, “*Zaixia* has reported back to *Wangye*, *Wangye* is really happy. Although he knew that three gentlemen are travel-weary, he is so happy that he cannot wait to have a chat with three gentlemen.”

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “There’s no harm in doing it. Such a happy day, we won’t be able to sleep anyway.”

Intentionally or otherwise, he cast a glance toward Princess Pipa; his meaning was really obvious, but who would have thought that Princess Pipa still did not understand? Unexpectedly she pursed her lips toward him and spoke with tender laugh, “Whatever you say, I will ask you this question again; you can’t run away from me.”

Lightly and gracefully she turned around and walked away like she was flying.

Stunned, Chu Liuxiang could only stare blankly; he really did not understand what she meant.

He heard Wu Qingtian laughed and said, “Since that’s the case, *Wangye* has already prepared wine and late-night snack in his tent, asking three gentlemen to come over. The matchmaker’s two legs have already running fast back and forth, this cup of wine simply must be drunk.”
Inside the tent, the candle was burning bright.

Princess Pipa was leaning by her daddy’s side, pouring wine for him. Seeing Chu Liuxiang, Ji Bingyan and Hu Tiehua walking in, she pursed her lips and laughed.

But Hu Tiehua’s face turned red.

He really did not expect that this bride-to-be would dare to show her face in front of other people. Even more unexpected for him was that his future wife was unexpectedly ten times more natural and relaxed than him.

Laughing aloud, the King of Qiuci said, “You are here! Good! Good! The dish is warm, quickly sit down and drink a cup.”

Wu Qingtian laughed and said, “Not so fast! The future son-in-law ought to pay his respect toward the father-in-law first.”

Unexpectedly Princess Pipa also laughed tenderly and said, “That’s right! Quickly get down and kowtow!”

Hu Tiehua practically never imagined, not even in his dream, that she would also tease him. He originally thought that the skin on his face was thicker than the city wall, but right now it was turning as red as a piece of red cloth.

Chu Liuxiang and Ji Bingyan signaled each other with their eyes, and then both men gave Hu Tiehua’s back a gentle push.

‘Poof!’ Immediately Hu Tiehua was down on his knees, but he was blushing profusely that even his neck was red.

The King of Qiuci laughed aloud and said, “Good! Good! Good!” He said the word ‘Good!’ seven, eight times in succession. From his bosom he fetched a shiny bluish green precious stone, about the size of a pigeon egg, and handed it over to Hu Tiehua, while saying with a laugh, “*Tianfang* [Arabian] Stone, bringing luck to the wearer. Take it!”
Under the lantern light, they saw the precious stone’s brilliant rays were flickering unceasingly. Even if Hu Tiehua was absolutely clueless, he could tell that this precious stone was an invaluable object. Blushing profusely, he stammered, “Such a generous gift, how could I dare to accept?”

Chu Liuxiang smiled and said, “Old Mount Tai bestowing gift on meeting, if you don’t accept it, you are being disrespectful. You’d better accept it!”

But he was knowledgeable; in just one glance he knew that this precious stone was unexpectedly the Kitten Eye, a stone that was rarely seen in the Central Earth, it was extremely valuable, definitely not under the ‘Star of Happiness’.

This King of Qiuci so casually gave this precious object as a gift to others, but why was he so serious about the Star of Happiness’ whereabouts?

Although on the surface Chu Liuxiang was still smiling, in his heart the misgivings were growing.

Suddenly he saw a young girl with bright eyes and virtuous glance, and beautiful and sweet smile, walking in gracefully from the back. Bowing to the ground, with voice like black-naped oriole, muttered some Qiuci words that no one else understood.

They heard the King of Qiuci laughed while stroking his beard, "*Wangfei*'s [princess, imperial concubine] illness has turned for the better; letting her come out to sit here will be good."
The second hero of the 'Wu Clan Twin Heroes', the '*Baiyun Jianke*' [white cloud swordsman], Wu Baiyun [same characters] laughed and said, "Could it be that *Wangfei* also wants to come to see her son-in-law?"
The King of Qiuci laughed and said, "Precisely. She has been ill for a long time, and never thought that there would be a happy occasion today, unexpectedly she is able to come out and move about. Is it possible that this is caused by what the people of the Central Earth call powerful happiness?"

Amidst the sound of laughter, there were several young girls wearing brocade clothes, supporting an out-of-the-world beauty, who was wearing long skirt that was dragging along the floor, her slightly messy cloud of hair was rolled up in a bun, carrying a noble bearing – walking out slowly.

Her starry eyes were slightly unfocused, her countenance was still showing thirty-percent sickly look, yet it was somehow increasing her tenderness and beauty. Although she could not be considered young anymore, her beauty was still shining with some kind of heavenly-looks and national-appearance.

Everybody present could not help hanging their head down and did not dare to make direct contact with her eyes.

Chu Liuxiang was the exception; he thought that since God has created such remarkable beauty, if you cannot appreciate it, not only you let down God's good intention, you will simply mistreat yourself.

With timely smile on her face, Princess Pipa rose up to welcome her. The King of Qiuci also stood up, while repeatedly saying, “Quickly help Wangfei to sit down … Quick … Quick … how come the curtain outside has not been drawn yet?”

It was obvious that this romantic and lover-of-beauty King of Qiuci was very much in love with his Wangfei, as if he was afraid that she would suddenly go with the fierce wind.

The Queen of Qiuci sat down gracefully. Although she was sitting still, in that instant, her fluid glance was already exuding ten thousand kinds of amorous feeling, so that they were nearly unable to breathe.

Unexpectedly Princess Pipa pointed to Hu Tiehua and said with a laugh, “It’s him!”

The Queen of Qiuci sweetly said, “Good! Very good!”

She made a signal by stretching out her white-jade like slender lily-white hand, a young girl appeared from behind, carrying a jade tray. On the jade tray, the precious stones were gleaming; it was unclear how many stones were on the tray.

Princess Pipa laughed and said, “This is my mother’s gift to you. Take it!”

This time, not only Hu Tiehua did not dare to refuse, he could not even utter any polite words.

Chapter 39 – Danger at the Doorstep

The King of Qiuci raised his cup and laughed aloud, “Surrounded by distinguished friends, with a happy occasion in the family, what pleasure of life could possibly be better than this. Come! Come! Come! Everybody must drink with *Xiao Wang* for three hundred cups.”

Thereupon everybody raised his cup in delight; indeed the cheerful atmosphere filled the hall. Hu Tiehua was the exception; he had the fine wine in front of him, yet he acted like a child bride, not even dared to lift his head up.

As the saying goes, “Mother-in-law looks at her daughter’s husband, the more she looks, the more interesting he appears.”

But this Queen of Qiuci’s eyes, intentionally or otherwise, were always sizing up Chu Liuxiang.

She only took two sips of wine, and she already rose up gracefully, and spoke sweetly, “Merely looking at gentlemen enjoying the merriment to the utmost, my physique is unable to endure; I will have to ask to be excused first.”

Chu Liuxiang followed her with his eyes as she walked out; unexpectedly it was as if he was in a daze.

Ji Bingyan quietly said, “Toward other women, there’s no harm in you having ideas, but this is other people’s *Wangfei*, you must never, ever, have any silly thought.”
Chu Liuxiang chuckled, as if he was about to argue, but in the end he closed his mouth again, only to hear Wu Qingtian suddenly said, “What about that Du *Daxia* [great hero]?”
The King of Qiuci sighed and said, “He seemed to be extremely restless; although *Xiao Wang* repeatedly urged him to stay, he still wanted to leave this very night. The most aggravating thing is that Situ Liuxing also went missing, nobody saw even his shadow.”
Chu Liuxiang could not help asking, “And what about that Wang *Xiong*?”
Wu Baiyun replied with a wry smile, “This man’s character seems to be a bit weird; I repeatedly asked him to come, but he unexpectedly ignored me.”

Remaining calm and collected, the King of Qiuci said, “Never mind if he does not want to come, he knew *Xiao Wang*’s thirst of talents, hence he came to offer his service on his own, but he was somewhat secretive, so *Xiao Wang* did not believe him too much.”

And then he cleared his throat and broke into big smile and said, “But since this moment everybody here is on the same side, *Xiao Wang* has something that I would like to confide with you, to take advantage of this happy occasion to speak it out. After I say it, I hope even more that gentlemen could keep the secret for *Xiao Wang*.”
Chu Liuxiang and Ji Bingyan exchanged some glances, while musing inwardly, “Indeed there’s some trick behind this; this wine is indeed not good to drink.”

The two heroes of the Wu Clan spoke together, “*Wangye*, please feel free to say it; we, brothers, are definitely not men who would go back on our words.”
The King of Qiuci’s eyes immediately turned toward Chu Liuxiang, three men.

Chu Liuxiang smiled and said, “As *Fuma*’s close friends, how could we betray *Wangye*?”
The King of Qiuci laughed heartily and said, “Precisely! Precisely! *Xiao Wang* really thinks too much.”
He suddenly stopped laughing and spoke heavily, “But gentlemen ought to empathize with *Xiao Wang*’s plight. Since being cheated by rebel ministers, *Xiao Wang* has passed my days as an exile, I cannot but be careful in all things.”
Chu Liuxiang and Ji Bingyan exchanged some glances again, while musing inwardly, “Our guess was indeed not wrong; this King of Qiuci’s land has indeed been snatched away. It seems that he is associating with Wulin people is in order to look for bodyguards.”

They heard the King of Qiuci sighed with emotion and said, “Although *Xiao Wang* is wandering on the outside, my heart is still in the motherland [orig. country with an ancient history], and the rebelling ministers are naturally also aware of this fact. Therefore, they wholeheartedly want to get rid of *Xiao Wang* sooner rather than later. In the last year, *Xiao Wang* has repeatedly escaped dangers. Furthermore, the assassins coming to kill me really were not our Qiuci warriors, rather, they were the assassins that the rebel ministers hired from the Central Plains.”
Wu Qingtian’s expression looked a bit nervous, he asked in heavy voice, “What kind of people are they?”

The King of Qiuci replied, "*Xiao Wang* is not familiar with the Central Plains heroes' tracks; I only know there was someone called '*Shen Dao Wudi*' [lit. unrivalled divine saber], also one called '*Ba Bi Na Chi*' [eight-armed Nachi (哪叱); perhaps it's a typo, since there is deity named Nezha (哪吒), a very close Chinese character. But … being a non-native Chinese speaker, I do not dare to say with 100% confidence]."
Wu Qingtian relaxed; he proudly said with a laugh, "*Wangye*, please rest assured. Forget about we have Hu *Xiong*, three very able men here, merely relying on us, two brothers, those people could forget about harming even a single strand of *Wangye*'s hair."
The King of Qiuci said, "But according to *Xiao Wang*'s intelligence, those rebel ministers recently, using huge money, invited four, five first-class martial art masters from the Central Plains. I hear that one of them has brilliant swordsmanship, practically unrivalled."
Wu Qingtian tensed up again; he asked, "Does *Wangye* happen to know their names?"
The King of Qiuci replied, "*Xiao Wang* only know that seven days ago, four of those men have arrived in this vicinity, and that the most formidable man's whereabouts is extremely secretive."
"Where did *Wangye* obtain this information from?" Wu Baiyun asked.
The King of Qiuci heaved a deep sigh and said, "Although presently *Xiao Wang* is wandering outside, with people rebelling and friends deserting, but I still have several loyal and dependable officers inside the palace, who pass on the information to *Xiao Wang*."
Hu Tiehua suddenly spoke loudly, "No matter how formidable these people are, if they dare to come here to assassinate, they can forget about returning alive."

Before he even finished speaking, Princess Pipa already cast him a glance with a smile on her face. Thus his face was blushing again.

The King of Qiuci laughed aloud and said, "Exactly! Exactly! With gentlemen, such towering figures in here, what is *Xiao Wang* afraid of? However … *Xiao Wang* has some suspicions that that man surnamed Wang might be one of the assassins sent by the rebel ministers."
Wu Baiyun spoke heavily, "That's right. This man hides the head and shows the tail, his whereabouts is really suspicious."

Chu Liuxiang smiled slightly and said, “If he is a real assassin who is going undercover here, he would act open and candid instead, so as not to arouse others’ suspicion. If on the surface he looks somewhat unnatural, on the contrary, it shows that inwardly he has a clear conscience.”

The King of Qiuci clapped his hands and said, “That’s right. *Gexia* indeed has sight like a torch, *Xiao Wang* almost blame a good man wrongly. However …” His countenance turned heavy again. He sighed and said, “Apart from this, *Xiao Wang* has another load on my mind.”
Wu Qingtian asked, “What other load is on *Wangye*’s mind?”
The King of Qiuci asked, “Have gentlemen heard the name ‘Star of Happiness’?”

Chu Liuxiang and the others, three men’s heart was moved at the same time; they have guessed this matter early on.

But Wu Qingtian said, “*Zaixia* has never heard of it.”
The King of Qiuci said, “This ‘Star of Happiness’ is a priceless precious stone; originally *Xiao Wang* entrusted it to the Peng Clan’s Five Tigers to deliver it under escort.”
Emotionally moved, Wu Baiyun said, “Aren’t those Five Tigers the last direct disciples of their school?”

“Precisely!” the King of Qiuci replied.

Wu Baiyun laughed and said, “Those five brothers can really be considered first-class martial art masters of Wulin; the Peng Family Escort Agency’s reputation is even more outstanding, they never failed. If *Wangye* entrusted the goods to them, you can sleep peacefully, why should you be anxious?”
The King of Qiuci heaved a deep sigh and said, “*Xiao Wang* is also aware that they were completely reliable, hence I dared to hand over this enormous responsibility to them. Who would have thought that this moment the five brothers are all dead, and naturally the ‘Star of Happiness’ has fallen into other people’s hands.”
Aghast, Wu Qingtian asked, “Is that true?”

Heaving a long sigh, the King of Qiuci replied, “Definitely true. Someone from among *Xiao Wang*’s men has seen their dead bodies.”
The two heroes of the Wu Clan looked at each other; immediately they went silent – someone who was able to kill the five brothers of the Peng Family was definitely not someone that they could afford to offend.

But Chu Liuxiang smiled and said, “I wonder if *Wangye* would like us to take the ‘Star of Happiness’ back?”
Smiling bitterly, the King of Qiuci replied, “*Xiao Wang* does not have this intention at all.”
Chu Liuxiang could not help being stunned; muttering to himself irresolutely, he said, “*Wangye*’s intention is …”
The King of Qiuci sighed and said, “Not to conceal anything from gentlemen, the person who robbed the ‘Star of Happiness’ just now sent a ransom note to *Xiao Wang*.”
Emotionally moved, Chu Liuxiang asked, “Where is the person who delivered the note?”

The King of Qiuci replied, “According to the report from *Xiao Wang*’s men, the person’s *qinggong* is very high, like a ghost. After delivering the letter, immediately he disappeared, even his shadow could not be seen anymore.”
Chu Liuxiang sighed in disappointment. “If that’s the case,” he said, “Where is the letter?”

“It’s right here,” the King of Qiuci replied.

The letter simply had a few lines, which read, “The ‘Star of Happiness’ has come back into my hand. If you want to recover it, in three days, at noon, bring five thousand *taels* of gold, five hundred pearls, fifty pieces of jade annulus; go fifty *li* to west, there will be someone ready to exchange the ‘Star of Happiness’ with the Lord. If the pearls are not clear, if the discs are flawed, if the intention is not sincere, once this ‘Star of Happiness’ is gone, it will never come back.”
Naturally there was no signature at the bottom, only a picture of a thousand-hand, a thousand-eye Buddhist image of the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

Wu Qingtian was incredulous, “Just a single precious stone, is it worth these many things?” he asked, “Could it be that this person is crazy?”

The King of Qiuci sighed and said, “He is not crazy at all.”

Wu Qingtian asked in astonishment, “Could it be that *Wangye* already agreed to his request?”
“Precisely,” the King of Qiuci replied.

Sucking in a mouthful of cold air, Wu Qingtian muttered,
“Actually, *Zaixia* [plural] could also snatch that precious stone back for *Wangye*.”
Under heavy reward, there must be brave men. Seeing the King of Qiuci was going to give away the wealth that was enough to buy a city, his guts suddenly grew big.

However, the King of Qiuci sighed and said, “It’s not that *Xiao Wang* did not believe that gentlemen would have the power to take the treasure back, but what I am afraid of is that after they find out, they would immediately take the treasure and run away. The world is so big, where could *Xiao Wang* go to look for it?”
Smiling wryly, he went on, “Therefore, *Xiao Wang* would rather sacrifice some possessions as long as I could get the ‘Star of Happiness’ back.”
Muttering to himself irresolutely, Chu Liuxiang said, “*Wangye*’s meaning is that you want us, in three days, at noon, to take the pearls and white jade to make the exchange with him?”
“That’s right,” the King of Qiuci replied, “Although *Xiao Wang* has every intention to keep the appointment, but I am afraid that after they obtain this batch of wealth, they would eat their words and break faith instead. If gentlemen are willing to go on *Xiao Wang*’s behalf, *Xiao Wang* would feel reassured.”
Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “*Zaixia* [plural] will not be shirked without dishonor; *Wangye* may set your heart at ease.”
Ji Bingyan suddenly spoke indifferently, “In *Zaixia*’s opinion, when *Wangye* hand the things over, perhaps they would still be unwilling to exchange.”

The King of Qiuci's countenance changed in agitation, he asked, "Why?"

Ji Bingyan said, "Seeing *Wangye* is willing to exchange, naturally they would think that the value of this 'Star of Happiness' is still above this batch of pearls and white jades; their request will certainly become higher."
The King of Qiuci's countenance turned heavy, he remained silent for a very long time, before forcing himself to laugh and said, "They would never do that."

"Oh?" Ji Bingyan wondered.

The King of Qiuci said, "In *Xiao Wang*'s eyes, although the value of this 'Star of Happiness' cannot be estimated in worldly insight, but if it remains in their hands, at most it only worth the five thousand *taels* of gold. They already gratuitouslyadd five hundred pearls and fifty jade annulus; how could they change their mind again?
Ji Bingyan's eyes brightened, he said, "But why does *Wangye* consider this 'Star of Happiness' particularly important?"
The King of Qiuci was silent for half a day. He spoke slowly, "Naturally there is a secret behind this. Among the people under the heavens, only this king, one person, knows."

Suddenly they heard the sound of camels and horses neighing outside the tent, and their cry sounded particularly mournful.

Ji Bingyan suddenly stood up and said, "I'll go out to see."

This miserable and mournful neigh unexpectedly made everybody's mood heavy. The King of Qiuci has been holding a golden cup in his hand, but all along the wine had not been drunk.

Wu Baiyun also could not help standing up. Frowning, he said, "Camels and horses neighing in the night, could it be there is some changes outside?"

He hurriedly rushed out, but happened to bump into Ji Bingyan, who was striding back into the tent.

“What happened outside?” Wu Baiyun asked.

Ji Bingyan’s countenance appeared to be slightly green. “Nothing,” he replied.

Wu Baiyun said, “If nothing happens, why did the camel and horse neigh in the middle of the night?”

Ji Bingyan responded indifferently, “That’s just because they’ve lost a friend.”

Wu Baiyun was stunned. “Friend?” he asked in astonishment, “Animals have friends too?”

Ji Bingyan coldly said, “Some people are even not as good as animals, yet they still have friends, right?”

He no longer paid any attention to Wu Baiyun, who was staring blankly, rooted in place – and came back to his seat. Other than to Chu Liuxiang and Hu Tiehua, he was unwilling to pay attention to anybody else. Let alone right now his mood was not good.

Chu Liuxiang already knew what was going on; he spoke quietly, “You mean Shi Tuo?”

Ji Bingyan’s countenance was heavy, “Hmm,” he replied.

Chu Liuxiang tensed up. “What happened to him?” he asked.

“He left,” Ji Bingyan replied.

“He’s really gone?” Chu Liuxiang asked.

Ji Bingyan replied, “Not only he’s gone, that Wang Chong has also gone.

Chu Liuxiang was shocked, “Are you saying that Wang Chong took him away?” he asked.

“It seems so,” Ji Bingyan replied.

“You did not go after them?” Chu Liuxiang asked.

“No need to go after them,” Ji Bingyan responded.

“Why?” Chu Liuxiang asked in surprise.

Ji Bingyan was silent for half a day. He replied slowly, “Since Shi Tuo is willing to go with him, there must be a reason behind it. Even if we could catch up with them, he might not necessarily be willing to come back, not to mention that I have already promised him long ago that when he is ready to leave, I will definitely not stop him.”

Chu Liuxiang heaved a long, long sigh. He said, “He is indeed a strange person. You really don’t know his background even until now?”

“Hmm,” Ji Bingyan responded.

Recalling Wang Chong’s expression when he was staring at Shi Tuo a moment ago, his eyebrows knitted, Chu Liuxiang said, “Obviously that Wang Chong’s background is also very mysterious. Do you think these two men had known each other long before now?”

But Ji Bingyan had already turned his head away, as if he did not hear him at all. Chu Liuxiang sighed. He knew that when Ji Bingyan was acting like this, it means the discussion was over.

While these two were whispering to each other, the King of Qiuci was also pulling Hu Tiehua aside and asking him the east and inquiring the west. Only Princess Pipa’s eyes had never left Chu Liuxiang.

Chu Liuxiang coughed and said with a laugh, "*Zaixia* [plural] have enough wine, our belly is full of food, and *Wangye* ought to go to bed."
He was in a hurry to terminate this long night banquet; who would have thought that right this moment, there was big commotion outside, with horses neighing and the people screaming, footsteps rushing to and fro. And then someone cried out in alarm, "Fire! Fire! Someone is releasing fire!"

His countenance changed, the King of Qiuci said, "Could it be an assassin? Gent … gentlemen quick … quickly go out to take a look."

He had not finished, Hu Tiehua already sprang up and rushed out.

Chu Liuxiang frowned. He was just about to say, "Don't fall into the others' luring-the-tiger-from-the-mountains scheme!" Who would have thought Ji Bingyan did not even give him the time to explain, he already pulled Chu Liuxiang's hand and rushed out as well.

The situation outside was not as chaotic as they imagined.

The troops under the King of Qiuci's command were obviously one-in-a-hundred-choice, able-to-travel, accustomed-to-battle warriors. Encountering unforeseen changes, although unable to remain calm, they did not panic.

But the fires sprouting up everywhere were not small, most of the trees all around, as well as the tents that these warriors were sleeping at night – were burned, some of the camels and horses inside the coral had also escaped.

At this moment most of these warriors were busy with putting out the fire, only a small number was rushing to chase the camels and the horses. The King of Qiuci stayed in the tent; unexpectedly no one was guarding him.

Ji Bingyan rushed out and grabbed a warrior by the arm, he spoke sternly, "Where are the men guarding outside *Wangy*e's tent?"
The man was only staring at him with panic all over his face; unexpectedly he did not understand Central Earth dialect. Fortunately another man came running

and respectfully said, "*Xiaoren* [plural] knew that inside *Wangye*'s tent, everybody is Wulin heroes, they are enough to protect *Wangye*'s safety."
Ji Bingyan slowly released his grip and said with a cold laugh, "What a good luring-the-tiger-from-the-mountains scheme."

Chu Liuxiang blurted out, "You mean Wu …"

Ji Bingyan coldly said, "You guys had your attention on *Wangfei*, *Gongzhu*, but I did not."
Chu Liuxiang said, "So now …"

Ji Bingyan said, "I am going to look for Xiao Hu [little Hu], you go watch the show!"

His figure flashed, he flew out just like a spear.

Chu Liuxiang shook his head and muttered to himself, "If this man's heart is a bit softer, he would simply be the loveliest person on earth."

He walked around in big circle before going back to the King of Qiuci's tent.

On top of the uniquely shaped tent, unexpectedly there were a lot of patches, which were actually ventilation windows. Chu Liuxiang lightly lifted one and quietly peeked down.

He saw the King of Qiuci still had the same wine cup in his hand, but the wine was already shaken out by his trembling hand. Princess Pipa was snuggled closely by his side. The two brothers of the Wu Family, one was at the door, looking around, the other stayed by his side.

Wu Baiyun suddenly turned back and said, "They have gone far."

Wu Qingtian smiled slightly. 'Qiang!' his long sword was out of its sheath.

The King of Qiuci spoke in trembling voice, “Two gentlemen must not go out, *Xiao Wang* …”
Before he finished speaking, the shiny sword was already pointing at his nose.

Chapter 40 – The Late Bodyguard

The King of Qiuci turned pale with fright, he said, “You … what are you doing?”

Laughing nastily, Wu Qingtian said, “Nothing. I just want your head.”

Greatly shocked, the King of Qiuci said, “With a huge sum of money *Xiao Wang* hired two gentlemen from Zhangjiakou [prefecture, Hebei], how could two gentlemen pull your blade against me instead?”
“Huge sum of money?” Wu Qingtian said, “How much silver did you give us?”

“Wasn’t it ten thousand *taels* of silver?” the King of Qiuci replied.
Showing his teeth, Wu Qingtian laughed and said, “But your opponent gave us twenty thousand.”

The King of Qiuci said, “Two gentlemen already have reputation as chivalrous heroes [*xiashi* – knight-errant], how could … how could you unexpectedly see-profit-and-forget-righteousness?”
Wu Qingtian laughed aloud and said, “Chivalrous heroes? How much does chivalry worth per catty?”

He laughed and went on, “Since you are going to die soon, there is no harm in me giving you a lesson. Men who can be bought by money are not chivalrous heroes at all; if you can move someone with money, other people can do the same.”

Smiling bitterly, the King of Qiuci said, “In that case, it was *Xiao Wang* who was blind.”

“You are indeed blind,” Wu Qingtian said, “To tell you the truth, just now you mentioned about the information you received, it was not quite accurate; this time we are coming here, there are not four of us, but six.”

The King of Qiuci said, “There are still … still four more?”

Wu Qingtian said, “Naturally now all of us are here. Can you guess who went to look for them?”

Princess Pipa suddenly interjected, “Could it be Du Huan?”

Wu Qingtian laughed aloud and said, “That’s right! You are indeed smarter than your *Laozi* [old man]; I really am somewhat reluctant to kill you.”
Frowning, Wu Baiyun said, “Time is pressing, what are you babbling about? If the others rushed in, won’t we have to divide the credit with them?”

Wu Qingtian chuckled, “You’re right,” he said, “I also forgot to mention that your head is worth fifty-thousand *taels*!”
His hand shook, the sword light, in one well-trained move – went straight to take the King of Qiuci’s head.

Unexpectedly Chu Liuxiang still did not make his move. He was extremely confident that without him needing to make his move, the King of Qiuci’s head would definitely not be removed.

A ‘Ding!’ was heard. The sword in Wu Qingtian’s hand was jolted up and nearly flew off his hand, while Princess Pipa has also raised the bent-neck *pipa* in her hands and spoke with a cold laugh, “If relying on your skill you dare to take *Fu Wang*’s [father king] head, your predecessors would have succeeded early on.”
Agitated, Wu Baiyun said, “This girl’s [orig. *yatou* (used deprecatingly)] martial art skill is not weak; those men ahead of us must have fallen head first in her hands.”
Clenching his teeth, Wu Qingtian shouted, “Stay at the door, I will deal with her.”

His sword light flashed, he pounced again.

Princess Pipa broke into a wide smile and said, “Can you really deal with me?”

The *pipa* in her hands did not move at all, but before she finished speaking, suddenly, from inside the *pipa*’s bent head – burst of silver needles were shooting out like rain; nobody could see clearly how many needles.
In his great shock, Wu Qingtian’s sword light turned back to protect his whole body.

The ‘Eight-by-eight Sixty-four-hand Longyou Sword’ has always been widely known in the world as agile and tight. Yet although his sword momentum was dense, the silver needles were denser.

They heard a miserable scream, the long sword flew up into the air, Wu Qingtian covered his face with both hands, blood was gushing out like spring from the cracks between his fingers. “What … what vicious secret projectiles!” he cried out.

As soon as the sentence was finished, the person fell face down on the ground.

Princess Pipa sighed; she spoke unhurriedly, “Ruthless secret projectiles are to be used to deal with ruthless people like you.”

While she was still speaking, Wu Baiyun grabbed a brocade pillow, his eyes turned red, he pounced over. Unexpectedly he used the brocade pillow as a shield, while the sword in his right hand stabbed seven times in the blink of an eye.

Unexpectedly Princess Pipa was overwhelmed and was forced to retreat side-by-step.

Cackling, Wu Baiyun said, “Stinky girl [*yatou*, see above], what other vicious trick do you have? Why not use them all out?”

Unexpectedly Princess Pipa was forced to withdraw to the edge of the tent, so that she could not retreat further, yet on her face she was still showing a sweet smile, without the slightest bit of anxiety or panic.

The King of Qiuci had already shrunk into the corner, while calling out loudly, "Quick, quickly make your move! You have big guts, but your *Laozi* is very timid."
Laughing like a silver bell, Princess Pipa said, "I just want to gain first-hand knowledge of their Longyou Sword. You, Senior, want me to make my move, then I'll make my move!"

Using both hands she lifted the *pipa* upward to block.
'Zheng!' Sparks flew everywhere, the long sword was jolted that it nearly flew.

Laughing nastily, Wu Baiyun said, "Good kid! Unexpectedly it's an iron *pipa*."
Surprisingly, the *pipa* was cast from refined steel; it was very heavy, it would be difficult for even a man with enormous strength to move it as in a dance with ease, Princess Pipa had to use both hands to hold it up.
Wu Baiyun accurately predicted that brandishing such weapon, her style could not possibly be nimble; therefore, he had nothing to fear, his long sword moved freely, he pounced again, except that he did not dare to meet the *pipa* head-on.
They saw Princess Pipa, holding the *pipa* with both hands – blocked, cut, touched, knocked, and pound; her style was strange and mysterious, plus it was not slow either.
Only because the *pipa* was so big that with slight movement of her hands, the *pipa* changed a lot. The strange thing was that all her moves were purely defensive. With both hands holding the *pipa*, injuring the opponent was naturally not easy.
Although Chu Liuxiang was experienced and knowledgeable, he had never thought there was such weapon on earth that needed to be held with both hands to face the enemy; furthermore, he had never seen such style – both of her hands were trapped dead; although her defensive position was good, but wouldn't she simply put herself in the 'not-winning' situation early on?

Wu Baiyun also felt strange. After a few moves, he was emboldened even more to launch more pressing offensives, until later on unexpectedly he took the

chance to enter the opponent's defensive line, wanting to seize victory by taking the risk.

Who would have thought that right this moment, there was a sudden silvery-flash?

Princess Pipa hands separated. The bent-neck of the *pipa* unexpectedly followed her hand, the frost-like naked blade on the *pipa*'s neck, fast as lightning – stabbed into Wu Baiyun's belly.
Wu Baiyun's long sword fell off his hand, he staggered back, his face was full of bewildered expression. Unexpectedly until the moment of his death he still did not know how he was killed by the opponent.

Princess Pipa watched as he slowly collapsed to the ground; sighing quietly, she said, "My weapon is indeed strange and vicious; why did you two force me to use it?"

Watching this, Chu Liuxiang smiled wryly in his heart. This Princess Pipa's power did not seem to be deep, the styles that she knew did not seem to be too many either, but each move was sharp, succinct, vicious, yet effective. He really could not figure out where she learned such style from. A young girl learning such style, it was not a good thing at all.

The King of Qiuci already stood up. While looking for a wine cup, he called out loudly, "Quick! Get someone to take these two dead bodies out! I am scared of dead people."

Princess Pipa sighed and said, "After killing people, my hands went weak too."

She was still standing with her back against the tent. Right this moment, suddenly there were two hands piercing through the tent, fast as lightning entered in on either side of her and caught Princess Pipa's two arms.

Greatly shocked, the wine cup that the King of Qiuci had just picked up fell to the ground again.

And then a couple of ‘Pop! Pop!’ was heard, as two men were crashing through the tent and came in.

Both men had pale face, and wore pitch-black clothes.

The man on the right was unexpectedly the ‘Merciless Killer’ Du Huan. His left hand was grabbing Princess Pipa’s arm tightly, but his right hand was inside a plain white cloth sling that was hung from his neck.

The man on the left was dry and thin, his head also seemed to have shrunk into his neck, but his pair of eyes was flickering with golden light, looking exactly like the piercing eyes of a big monkey.

Princess Pipa felt like her arms was gripped in iron hoops, the pain practically nearly made her cry, but she bit her teeth tightly, not even wanting to utter a humph.

The King of Qiuci spoke in trembling voice, “You … you want *Xiao Wang*’s head, go ahead, but let my daughter go!”
Du Huan giggled and said, “Don’t tell me you haven’t heard *Laozi*’s [‘I, your father’] evil reputation? When *Laozi* is able to kill two people, I will definitely not kill one.”
Frowning, the skinny-and-shriveled-like-a-monkey man in black said, “If you want to kill then kill; what are you babbling about?”

Unexpectedly Du Huan appeared to be somewhat afraid of this man; he laughed and said, “Would Sun *Xiong* like to do it? Or you want *Xiaodi* to do it?”
The man in black coldly said, “You think killing will satisfy your craving, then I’ll let you satisfy your craving!”

Du Huan laughed heartily and said, “Thank you! Thank you very much …”

Suddenly they heard someone spoke slowly, “These two people, you are not allowed to kill.”

Amidst the voice, someone was dropping down from the top of the tent. He did not show any stance or strike a posture, but when he landed on the ground, it looked like half a *tael* of cotton; not even the slightest bit of noise was heard.
Other than Chu Liuxiang, who else would have such a brilliant *qinggong*?
The man in black was originally acting high and mighty, with considering-everyone-else-beneath-him appearance across his face, but now he seemed to be petrified, even his grip was loosened.

Looking at him, Chu Liuxiang smiled slightly and said, "Sun *Houzi* [lit. monkey], do you still recognize me?"
This man in black was precisely the sole direct disciple of the '*Changbai Hou Qun*' [lit. pack of monkeys of the Changbai (mountain)], the 'Black Monkey' Sun Kong, the number one strong-hand between the Baishan and Heishui [lit. white mountain, black water (river), in northeast China], who, even the entire *Changbai Jian Pai* [lit. sword sect of Changbai] would have headache when dealing with him.
But now the one having a headache was him; unexpectedly he was stunned speechless.

Du Huan originally wanted to show off, but seeing him like this, he could only shut his mouth.

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, "A man like you also become an assassin; aren't you going to lose face?"

The 'Black Monkey' Sun Kong suddenly stomped his feet and cackled, "If I had known earlier that you are here, even if I were killed, I would not have come."

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, "You can be considered still have some conscience."

Sun Kong stared blankly for half a day. Looking up, he sighed, and then turned on his heels.

The ‘Merciless Killer’ Du Huan called out loudly, “Are you going to leave just like that?”

Sun Kong suddenly turned around and coldly said, “Are you saying I cannot leave?”

“Who is this kid?” Du Huan asked, “Why is Sun *Xiong* so afraid of him?” Sun Kong stared at him for half a day; laughing nastily, he said, “Based on who you are, you think you are worthy to call him ‘kid’? Based on who you are, you think you are worthy to ask who he is? Humph!”

When the ‘humph’ went out of his mouth, a metallic dark hand shot out as fast as lightning. Du Huan unexpectedly was unable to dodge. With a blood-curdling screech he staggered back.

Unexpectedly the hand clawed his chest, creating a bloody hole.

Sun Kong wiped his drenched-with-blood hand on his clothes, and then his leg flew, he kicked Du Huan’s body out of the tent. As if nothing had happened, he rubbed his hands and said to Chu Liuxiang with a grin, “I know you don’t kill people, but keeping him alive will only bring trouble, so I simply did it on your behalf.”

He did not wait until he finished speaking; already he walked away without even looking back.

Originally the King of Qiuci wanted to call his men to arrest him, but now he was so scared that his face was devoid of any blood. Waiting for them to go out, ‘Wah!’ suddenly the King of Qiuci threw up. Closing his eyes, he said, “Quick … quickly get the dead bodies out of here.”

He had not finished speaking, Sun Kong suddenly peeked inside again and said, “I forgot to tell you, although I owe you a favor and I must walk away immediately when I see you, but someone who is ten times more formidable

than I am will be coming here soon. You must, by all means, be a bit more careful."

Chu Liuxiang smiled and said, "I am always very careful; but … who is this formidable person?"

Sun Kong grinned and said, "Whenever I said his name, my head hurts; I'd better not say it. Too bad I have to go now; otherwise, watching you two in a desperate battle will be very interesting."

This time he left even faster; by the time he spoke the last word, he was already more than ten *zhang* away.
Princess Pipa suddenly rushed toward Chu Liuxiang, pulled his hand, and asked, "Who are you, really? You don't want to tell even me?"

Freeing himself from her grab, Chu Liuxiang laughed indifferently and said, "I am a nobody, just an old stinky bug."

Right this moment, Hu Tiehua's shout was heard from the outside, he called out from far away, "Old Stinky Bug, are you all right in there?"

Princess Pipa was still entangling Chu Liuxiang; laughing tenderly, she said, "Oh, that's right, I still have to ask, why did he call you Old Stinky Bug?"

Chu Liuxiang really did not want to pull his face away when he was talking to a girl, but now he simply had to pull away; otherwise, he felt that he would let Hu Tiehua down. Pulling his face away, he said, "It was your future husband who called me that nickname, why don't you ask him?"

Princess Pipa seemed to be stunned, but this moment Hu Tiehua and Ji Bingyan have both flown in. Ji Bingyan's eyes swept around, unexpectedly he smiled and said, "What do you think? Was it a good show?"

Chu Liuxiang sighed and said, “The two of you had it easy, chasing the thieves around outside, yet you let some thieves slipping into the house …”

Before he finished speaking, Hu Tiehua already roared in laughter.

Knitting his brows, Chu Liuxiang said, “You still think it’s funny?”

Hu Tiehua replied with a big laugh, “This time you fell into the Dead Rooster’s trick.”

Stunned, Chu Liuxiang said, “Trick?”

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “You think we did not see those two men?”

“If you did, why did you still let them slip in?” Chu Liuxiang asked.

Hu Tiehua replied with a laugh, “Dead Rooster recognized Sun Kong; he knew that all his life, this monkey obeys you the most, plus he is afraid that you’d have too much free time in here, hence he reserved them for you. I wanted to go over to fight, but he stopped me.”

Chu Liuxiang could not help smiling, which turned into laughter; shaking his head, he said, “I was wondering about that; although Sun *Houzi*’s *qinggong* is not weak, how could he sneak in under your, two men’s nose. Unexpectedly you are scheming against me.”
Ji Bingyan talked and laughed indifferently, “However, if in the way he conduct himself Sun *Houzi* did not have any redeeming quality, I would not have set him aside for you. If I let this drunkard and that monkey fight, you think that monkey could still walk away?”
Only this moment did the King of Qiuci calm down. He suddenly rushed forward and said, “He … they are coming here, six of them. Does that mean that there are still two more?”

Ji Bingyan spoke indifferently, “Does *Wangye* want to see them?”

Chu Liuxiang sighed and said, “Those two have been unlucky to come across them; I am afraid they won’t be able to come here, ever.”

Looking at him, Princess Pipa said, “What if they came across you?”

Chu Liuxiang pretended not to hear her; he even did not pay her any attention.

But Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “Coming across him could be considered very lucky. That guy Sun *Houzi* offended him three times before, unexpectedly he let him off three times. Therefore, when he sees him now, Sun *Houzi* immediately walk away without even dare to fart.”
He chuckled, and then continued, “Actually, Sun *Houzi*’s martial art skill is very high; the other five men combined together still can’t compare with him.”
The King of Qiuci immediately tensed again, he said, “But this Sun *Houzi* did say that there is someone who is ten times more formidable than him is going to come soon.”
Frowning, Ji Bingyan said, “Oh?”

But Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “On earth, people who are ten times more formidable than the ‘Black Monkey’ Sun Kong, probably there are not many; but, is it possible that that monkey was pulling our leg?”

Ji Bingyan said, “Sun *Houzi* never tells lie.”
Hu Tiehua could not help frowning as well; he said, “In that case, who do you think he is talking about?”

Ji Bingyan coldly said, “No matter who this person is, it won’t be too late to talk about it when he comes. If gentlemen are not in the habit of sleeping, then *Zaixia* is going to bed by myself.”
Before he even finished speaking, he already turned around and left. Hu Tiehua looked around. It looked like he still wanted to drink two more cups, but suddenly he noticed Princess Pipa’s countenance unexpectedly had become extremely unsightly; he could not even drink the wine in his cup anymore.
Wiping the corner of his mouth, he laughed aloud and turned on his heels and left.

Naturally Chu Liuxiang did not wish to stay even more. Cupping his fist, he was about to take his leave when suddenly he heard Princess Pipa called loudly, “Hold on!”

The King of Qiuci also called, “Please stay.”

Even if Princess Pipa called louder, he could pretend not to hear her, but since the King of Qiuci also called him to stay, Chu Liuxiang had no choice but to turn around and asked, “What other instruction does *Wangye* have?”
The King of Qiuci was silent for half a day before he smiled apologetically and said, “About my daughter and your esteemed friend’s wedding day, which day do you think is best?”

Muttering to himself irresolutely, Chu Liuxiang said, “*Wangye* means …”
Who would have thought that the King of Qiuci has not spoken, Princess Pipa already said, “Naturally the sooner the better.”

In all his life, Chu Liuxiang has seen not a few gutsy, thick-skinned women, but someone who was in a hurry to get married like her, he really had not seen any.

Stunned, he could only smile wryly and said, “The engagement has already been decided, whether the wedding day is sooner or later, it does not matter.”

Princess Pipa’s eyes flashing with light, she said, “In that case, it will be tomorrow!”

Chu Liuxiang walked back in large strides; inwardly he was upset, but was amused at the same time. “Turns out there is a bride who is anxious to get married on earth,” he muttered to himself, “It is indeed rarely seen.”

As soon as he stepped into the tent, he saw Hu Tiehua was gulping the wine from the wine pot in his arms; in one breath, more than half a pot entered his belly, and then he sighed and said, “Just now you nearly drove me to the death, waiting anxiously at the two of you drinking one cup to the left, drinking one

cup to the right. The feeling was more unbearable than Sun Wukong [the Monkey King of the Journey to the West] with a cursed gold band on his head."

Ji Bingyan unhurriedly said, "Isn't the skin on your face always very thick?"

Chu Liuxiang smiled and said, "The days that will drive you to death will only start tomorrow; the bride anxiously wanted to get married, urging me to set the wedding date to tomorrow."

Hu Tiehua sprang up and blurted out, "Tomorrow?"

"Hmm," Chu Liuxiang replied.

Grabbing Chu Liuxiang, Hu Tiehua loudly said, "You … and you said yes?"

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, "In any case, you being this *Fuma Ye* has already been decided, what harm is there in being late a few days or being early a few days?"
Ji Bingyan laughed and said, "To be a bridegroom, you don't need to prepare anything. If you don't know how to do it, Chu Liuxiang and I could teach you."

Hu Tiehua threw a pillow at him. Barefooted, he jumped out of bed – looking for wine everywhere, while continuously muttering, "Where's that wine? Unexpectedly there's not a single drop of d@mned wine when you need it. If I don't have two mouthful of wine to suppress it, my heart is going to jump out of my throat."

Looking at Ji Bingyan, Chu Liuxiang spoke in heavy voice, "Can you think about why they are so anxious to set the wedding date to tomorrow?"

Laughing indifferently, Ji Bingyan said, "After what happened today, the King of Qiuci appears to be like a bird startled by the mere twang of a bow, he does not dare to trust anybody, so he has to find a son-in-law as his bodyguard as soon as possible; otherwise …"

Suddenly Hu Tiehua cried out in alarm, “Come here quick, what do you think is this?”

He was flipping things left and right, and suddenly found a piece of paper pressed under the flower vase.

Written on the paper, with graceful characters and lines – were these words, “Gentlemen have come from afar, you have no time to look after yourselves, why meddle in other people’s business? While the sky is not yet brightened, leaving this place as quickly is possible is the best policy, otherwise regret will be too late. If you are willing to listen to my advice, *Qie* [I, your servant] shall wash my hands to prepare some soup to wish gentlemen long life. The person of the shrine pays her respects again.”
Grabbing the piece of paper in his hands, unconsciously Chu Liuxiang was dumbfounded.

Chapter 41 – Unstable Situation in the Desert

Frowning, Ji Bingyan said, “Twice she left a note, both are the same handwriting. Indeed the Stone *Guanyin*’s henchmen already penetrated the King of Qiuci’s side left and right.”
Emotionally moved, Hu Tiehua said, “Who do you think is her henchman?”

Ji Bingyan sighed and said, “It could be anybody; perhaps the golden-armored warrior inside his tent, perhaps his concubine, perhaps even them, father and daughter.”

Hu Tiehua stared blankly with eyes opened wide for half a day. Smiling wryly, he said, “I don’t want you to worry about me, whether I become *Fuma* or not, it does not matter. If you want to leave, let’s leave right now!”
Smiling slightly, Chu Liuxiang said, “If these several black characters on a piece of white paper can scare us away, even if we could keep on living, our lives will have no meaning anymore.”

Hu Tiehua's eyes lit up, rubbing his fists and wiping his palms [idiom: eager to get into action or start on a task], he spoke loudly, "Now that is the way Chu Liuxiang talks. Good or bad, we must fight a desperate battle against her first."

Chu Liuxiang spoke in heavy voice, "Now, since she must be coming here for us, we do not need to rush instead. We might as well wait here for her. Tomorrow you still tie the knot in marriage, three days later we, according to the King of Qiuci's original plan – are going to take those pearls and white jade to make the exchange with her Star of Happiness."

Ji Bingyan coldly said, "Do you think she would really do the exchange?"

Chu Liuxiang smiled and said, "Naturally she won't."

Hu Tiehua could not help asking, "Since she won't do the exchange, why do we do it this way then?"

Chu Liuxiang slowly said, "The King of Qiuci is able to casually give that Kitten Eye to you, yet he regards the Star of Happiness as more important than his life; obviously the worth of this Star of Happiness is in some kind of secret, right?"

"That's right," Hu Tiehua replied.

Chu Liuxiang continued, "The reason the Stone *Guanyin* is doing everything like this is naturally because she wants to find out what's the secret behind this Star of Happiness, to see just how big is its worth …?"
Ji Bingyan suddenly interjected, "If the King of Qiuci put so much importance to this Star of Happiness, why did he entrust the 'Five Tigers of the Peng Family' to send it away?"

Muttering to himself irresolutely, Chu Liuxiang said, "Perhaps not sending it away, but the 'Five Tigers of the Peng Family' were bringing it back."

Knitting his brows, Ji Bingyan said, "Are you saying that originally the Star of Happiness was not with the King of Qiuci here, but in somebody inside the

Pass' possession? And now that the King of Qiuci needs this object, he wanted someone to bring it back to him?"

Chu Liuxiang said, "That is naturally a possibility, isn't it?"

Ji Bingyan said, "If that so, it is even more wrong; such a precious object, how could the King of Qiuci let it fall into other people's hands? And if that person already obtained such a precious object, how could he be willing to part with it and send it back?"

Chu Liuxiang took a deep, deep breath and said, "Naturally there is some secret that is somewhat inadequate for the outsiders to know; perhaps it is really only the King of Qiuci, one person, who knows about this secret. Anyway, it's useless for us to make wild guess, I just think that …"

He chuckled, and then said, "When it is necessary, perhaps the King of Qiuci himself will tell us."

After going through such a day, even if they had layer upon layer of loads on their minds, but as soon as they closed their eyes, unconsciously they fell into a daze and was asleep.

No one knew how long they had been asleep, but suddenly there was a 'whoosh!' noise of the sleeves fluttering against the wind; someone was slipping inside the tent as fast as if he was flying. Unexpectedly, it was the Central Plains' *Xia Dao* [lit. chivalrous thief] Situ Liuxing.
His *qinggong* was indeed not weak, plus he thought that everybody inside the tent must be sound asleep; who would have thought that as soon as he sprang in, he found himself to be surrounded by them.
It seemed like a man like Chu Liuxiang has never really fallen asleep.

Ji Bingyan coldly said, "*Gexia* left without saying goodbye, and you came without any notice, isn't it too mysterious?
While wiping the sweats on his brow, Situ Liuxing forced a laughter and said, "*Zaixia* indeed has an urgent matter to report, but I hope three gentlemen would forgive my guilt of bold intrusion."

Ji Bingyan quietly stared at him for half a day before his face relaxed.

Hu Tiehua already laughed and said, “Whatever urgent matter you have, sit down first and speak up slowly!”

“Last night *Zaixia* left without saying goodbye,” Situ Liuxing began, “it was really because I was secretly following that ‘Merciless Killer’ Du Huan’s tracks. *Zaixia* always feel that this person is harboring unfathomable motives, he must be harboring some crafty scheme.”
Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “You are after all a Jianghu veteran, your insight is indeed not bad.”

Situ Liuxing said, “He seemed to be in a hurry; I followed behind him all the way, but he did not notice at all, he was simply traveling north urgently. After walking for about more than half a *sichen*, I found out that there was, unexpectedly, a black tent behind a sand dune.”
Ji Bingyan’s eyes like a torch, he spoke with a cold laugh, “Without anybody telling me, there could only be one person inside such a tent, the ‘Black Monkey’ Sun Kong. Based on *Gexia*’s martial art skill, if you want to spy on him secretly, I am afraid it would be difficult for you to come back alive.”
Smiling bitterly, Situ Liuxing replied, “Naturally *Zaixia* also know that there must be many martial art masters inside that tent, how could I dare to be careless? Seeing Du Huan entering the tent, I did not know what to do. Who would have thought that right that moment I suddenly saw a fast horse rushing over? The bow was bent, the arrow was prepared, ‘Whoosh!’ the arrow shot into the tent. Without stopping at all, the horse galloped away.”
Ji Bingyan spoke with a cold laugh, “Based on Sun *Houzi*’s hearing ability, when the horse was still a hundred *zhang* away, he ought to be able to hear it already, how could he allow the horse to gallop in front of the tent? How could he let the man shoot the arrow?”
Situ Liuxing replied, “That horse appeared to be a dragon-type precious-colt. Furthermore, unexpectedly the horse’s hooves did not have any iron horseshoe at all; when it treaded on the sand, unexpectedly it did not create any noise, it was not inferior to any first-class *qinggong* master.”
Casting a glance toward Chu Liuxiang, Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “Perhaps that horse is about the same as your black pearl [*Hei Zhenzhu*] horse.”

Smiling, Chu Liuxiang said, “There are a lot of fine horses in the desert … *Gexia*, please continue.”
Situ Liuxing said, “As soon as the horse flew past, three people shot out from inside the tent like arrows to run after the horse. *Zaixia* knew that if I did not take the risk at this time, later on I would not have another chance at all.”
“*Gexia*’s guts is indeed not small,” Ji Bingyan commented coldly.
Situ Liuxing said, “*Zaixia* quietly walked around to the back of the tent. Because there were also several horses around, the horses’ neigh was more or less able to cover *Zaixia*’s movement.”
Hu Tiehua clapped his hands and said with a laugh, “Indeed you are worthy to be the *Xia Dao* [see above] whose name shook the Central Plains; your action is surely that of an old-hand, old-feet.”
Situ Liuxing blushed; he continued, “*Zaixia* crouched low on the ground to quietly lift the bottom of the tent just a hair. I saw inside the tent, other than Du Huan, there were two Qiuci nobles wearing golden crown and brocade gown, and a sullen-looking Han.”
Ji Bingyan cast Chu Liuxiang a glance. Frowning, Chu Liuxiang said, “Could it be that in the rebellion in Qiuci this time, there are Han people being involved?”

Situ Liuxing said, “Those three men picked up the arrow that was being shot inside from the table, unexpectedly there was a piece of paper wrapped around the arrow. One of the Qiuci men looked at the note, but presumably although he can speak Han, he does not know Han characters, thereupon he handed the piece of paper to the sullen-looking Han man, asking him to read the words on the note.”

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “If it was not so, you would not know what is written on the note; it seems like your luck is not bad at all.”

Situ Liuxing said, “*Zaixia* heard that old man read in loud voice, ‘The Star of Happiness is already in my hands, if thou want to get this object, prepare five thousand *taels* of gold, five hundred pearls, and fifty jade annulus, go straight toward the northeast for fifty *li*, to make the exchange with me. If thine intention is not sincere, this object will be thus returneth to the King of Qiuci’s hands.’”
He only recited half, Chu Liuxiang, three men were already emotionally moved.

Hu Tiehua shouted, “Good kid, unexpectedly he wants to do business with both parties. Could it be that this Star of Happiness and Qiuci country …”

Ji Bingyan immediately interrupted him by asking coldly, “After those two Qiuci men heard it, how was their expression?”

“Their expression was immediately changed greatly,” Situ Liuxing replied, “Just then, the three people who went out to chase returned. Not only the men in the tent had their lips sealed and not saying anything about this matter, they even quietly hid the piece of paper.”

“Did the men who give chase catch up?” Hu Tiehua asked.

Situ Liuxing broke into a smile, he said, “They did not. One of them, whose appearance looks like a monkey, did not stop cursing and swearing, saying that the horse must be a ghost horse, otherwise, he would be able to catch up even with his eyes closed.”

Hu Tiehua blurted out, “Sun *Houzi* considers his own *qinggong* to be absolutely high, this time unexpectedly he fell head first over a horse; naturally he is so angry that he turned mad.”
Situ Liuxing said, “I knew that this man must be a martial art master, hence inwardly I was anxious that he would detect my presence. Fortunately, after a moment of discussion, this gentleman Sun *Hou* took Du Huan and the others, three men to go on an assassination mission.”
Ji Bingyan coldly said, “*Gexia* knew that they were going to commit a murder, why didn’t you come here to sound the alarm?”
Chuckling, Situ Liuxing said, “*Zaixia* knew with three gentlemen in here, even if they had ten times more men, they could forget about succeeding. Therefore, I thought I would stay there to listen on why this Star of Happiness is so valuable?”
Hu Tiehua said, “I did not expect you to think that highly of us.”

Situ Liuxing said, “After those four men left, the two Qiuci men immediately argued with the Han man. One said that they ought to immediately prepare the pearl and jade annulus, to go make the business deal with that person. The other

said that the business term was too demanding, the real value of the Star of Happiness could not possibly be that high, so they ought to wait quietly and watch for any changes to avoid being duped."

Chu Liuxiang and Ji Bingyan looked at each other. Although their mouth did not say anything, in their heart they knew that even until this moment, those three men of the opposite site still did not know the secret of the Star of Happiness, hence they still worried about personal gains and losses, and were arguing endlessly. They were afraid that if they took the deal, they might be duped, but if they did not take the deal, they were afraid this object might be really very advantageous to the King of Qiuci.

Situ Liuxing already continued, "I was feeling strange, why would these men consider such a trivial piece of precious stone to be so important? Who would have thought that this moment unexpectedly someone patted me gently on the shoulder?"

Speaking to this point, there was fear on his face; it appeared that he still had lingering fear over this matter, he even wiped the beads of sweat on his forehead before heaving a deep sigh and continuing, "Since making my debut when I was young, although my martial art skill is not high, but *Zaixia* has been doing this line of business, my eyes and ears cannot but become exceptionally keen. Who would have imagined that this man was already behind me, yet I did not even perceive his shadow."
Emotionally moved, Chu Liuxiang said, "I did not expect that other than Sun Kong, there is such a martial art master in here."

Situ Liuxing said, "That time my shock was really no small matter; by the time I looked back, that person was already more than ten *zhang* away, and he was beckoning to me. I knew that even if I did not want to go, I simply could not; hence I could only brace myself and come over …"
Cold sweats were flowing steadily from his head; smiling wryly, he went on, "It was not until I saw this man's face that I knew that I had just really collected my life back."

“Why did you say that?” Ji Bingyan asked.

Situ Liuxing sighed and said, “Were it not for this person and I have had predestined affinity to meet once in the past, this moment I would not be alive and meet gentlemen.”

“So he just let you go like that?” Hu Tiehua asked.

Situ Liuxing said, “Not concealing anything from three gentlemen, two years ago I was in Luoyang on a case, but was unfortunate to come across this person. Fortunately that time I was making my move for the purpose of saving a family, an orphan and a widow’s lives, hence he let me off. This person’s behavior is very strange, as long as he let you off once, even if later on you offend him, he would definitely not harm a single strand of hair on your body.”

Hu Tiehua clapped his hands and said, “This kid is indeed a hero [orig. *haohan* – strong and courageous person].”
Frowning, Ji Bingyan asked, “Could it be that this man is also an assassin that the Qiuci rebels invited over?”

Situ Liuxing sighed and said, “Precisely!”

Emotionally moved, Ji Bingyan asked, “Who exactly is he?”

Hanging his head, Situ Liuxing said, “*Zaixia* has sworn heavy oath that I would never reveal his name; I can only inform three gentlemen that before tonight he will come to assassinate. This man’s martial art is immeasurably high, three gentlemen must –by all means – be exceptionally careful!”
Ji Bingyan sternly said, “Since he had shown kindness to you, why did you come to warn us?”

Heaving a deep sigh, Situ Liuxing said, “A year ago, *Jiaxiong* [(polite) my elder brother] inadvertently acquired a fortune. We brothers were thinking that from then on, we’d wash our hands and retreat in hiding; who would have thought that unexpectedly the then *Bangzhu* [gang master/leader] of the *Gai Bang* [Beggars’ Union] NanGong Ling found out about this matter. Not only he

robbed and took away our belongings, he even randomly killed *Jiaxiong* and chopped off his corpse. Although *Zaixia* knew who committed this treacherous assault, but … but …"
He rubbed his eyes and continued sorrowfully, "But *Zaixia*'s martial art skill was not NanGong Ling's match. If I wanted to broadcast this matter, *Gai Bang* was like the sun at noon [idiom: to be at the peak of one's power]; who in Jianghu would believe me?"
Chu Liuxiang sighed and said, "That's right, at that time NanGong Ling was in dire need of funds; if there was a huge sum of wealth could be obtained, he would do anything to get it."

Situ Liuxing said, "This as-deep-as-the-ocean-blood-debt,
originally *Zaixia* thought that there was no hope of revenge. Who would have thought that this time Chu *Xiang Shuai* singlehandedly uncovered NanGong Ling's crafty plots and machinations, which was no different than washing away *Zaixia*'s deep-enmity-great-hatred? This matter shook the world, no one did not know. *Zaixia* shed tears of gratitude toward Chu *Xiang Shuai*, regretfully Chu *Xiang Shuai* is like divine dragon redressing the heavens, all along *Zaixia* did not have the opportunity to personally prostrate in gratitude for his big kindness."
He suddenly looked up and fixed his gaze on Chu Liuxiang, and respectfully said, "*Zaixia* is also aware that *Xiang Shuai* is roaming the earth, unwilling to reveal his track; but *Zaixia* has confidence in myself that my two eyes are not blind, and are still able to recognize the real person."
While his mouth was saying those words, he already respectfully kneeled and bowed to the ground.

Chu Liuxiang hurriedly helped him up and said with a laugh, "It does not matter whether *Zaixia* is really Chu Liuxiang, but toward your kind intention, I am very appreciative."
Situ Liuxing laughed sadly and said, "In today's matter, both sides are *Zaixia*'s benefactors; *Zaixia* really does not have any face to stay here, I wish for three gentlemen to understand *Zaixia*'s secret trouble."
He again bowed to salute, and then said, "Henceforth *Zaixia* is asking to be excused, I wish we'll meet again someday …"
His words still lingered in the air, he already turned around and left hurriedly.

Only after a long, long time later that Hu Tiehua sighed and said, “Other people mingling in Jianghu for ten years, their enemies will already be all over the world. But everywhere Chu Liuxiang goes, he will meet people who want to pay a debt of gratitude to him. So, it seems that it is still better to kill a bit less people.”

Frowning, Ji Bingyan said, “Situ Liuxing already knew that you are Chu Liuxiang, yet he still warned you to be exceptionally careful. It is thus clear that in his eyes, he believes that this person’s martial art skill is not inferior to you, Chu Liuxiang, at all.”

Emotionally moved, Hu Tiehua said, “That’s right. For the last many years, we really have not seen anybody who is able to fight a desperate fight against Chu Liuxiang. If he really came today, we really have to play a round or two with him.”

Blurted out laughing, Chu Liuxiang said, “Don’t you forget, today is your wedding day; no matter how many people came, just leave it to Ji Bingyan and me to handle it, you are going to enter the bridal chamber in peace!”

Rubbing his nose, Hu Tiehua said with a laugh, “If the number of people coming is too much, you guys should let me share the pain?”

Ji Bingyan laughed calmly and said, “You have a bride that look like that, you are still afraid it’s not enough to satisfy your cravings?”

Hu Tiehua was just thinking about picking up a pillow and throwing it at him, already there were five, six people carrying tall crown and auspicious clothes, bowing and walking in, saying, accompanied by a smile, “The wedding ceremony has been prepared, would *Fuma Ye* please change into the auspicious clothes, ready to salute the bride.”
Blurted out laughing, Chu Liuxiang said, “Gentlemen’s movement was very quick.”

Hu Tiehua stared at the tall hat, his eyes grew big. After staring for half a day, he suddenly raised his hands high while standing on the bed, shouting, “If you

guys really want me to wear this hat, you might as well chop me off with a saber!”

But no matter wearing what kind of hat, it will always feel better than being chopped off with a saber.

In the end Hu Tiehua still wore the tall hat, and changed into the auspicious clothes. Looking at his own reflection in the mirror, he suddenly felt that his appearance was not as ugly as he imagined.

The bride was also wearing tall crown and auspicious clothes, plus a thick red cloth covering her face.

Looking at the red cloth, inwardly Hu Tiehua was very pleased with himself; he snickered inwardly and mused, “Today you finally are not able to play a joke on me anymore?”

The originally already one-hundred-percent gorgeous tent, today was decorated even more grandly, richly, and beautifully. The King of Qiuci’s face was shining red, yet all along his *Wangfei* was not showing her track. Maybe because the *Wangfei* was not present, there was not a single female inside the tent. The bride hurriedly retreated to the back, and she was promptly received by the attendants and was led inside.
Turned out this was unexpectedly the marriage custom of the Qiuci country; even during her own wedding, female guests were not allowed to appear in public. Furthermore, after the bride entered the bridal chamber, the groom had to defend his property to the death outside, waiting for others to force him to drink wine. In the desert, the cold wind was as sharp as a blade; if the shepherds did not prepare several catties of roast blades [not sure, 烧刀子, perhaps a type of wine] in their bosom to defend against the cold, it was simply impossible to hasten on with their journey.

Here, everybody considered heroic drinking as a beautiful thing. The more the groom drinks, the more well-regarded the wedding ceremony is. Therefore,

afterwards, ten out of ten bridegrooms would have to be carried into the bridal chamber.

This was the occasion after Hu Tiehua's own heart. In all his life, he was most afraid that he would not have enough wine to drink. Someone pouring him wine was something that he sought, but failed to get.

They saw four big men with naked upper body, carrying a delicious-smelling roast camel into the tent. With the silver knife in his hand, the King of Qiuci cut open the camel's belly. Unexpectedly, inside the camel's belly there was a roast sheep. And inside the sheep's belly, there was a roast chicken.

In the desert, this was precisely the most solemn, most sumptuous imperial feast.

The King of Qiuci cut open the chicken's belly and using his silver knife, he picked a grease-soaked chicken egg from inside the chicken's belly. Stroking his beard, he laughed heartily and said, "This egg is the most auspicious; it has always been prepared for the most distinguished guest to taste. Today is the auspicious day of a marriage celebration, so it is not just an ordinary auspicious day at all. The distinguished guest who is going to eat this auspicious egg will not only have great luck, great profit [idiom: everything is thriving], furthermore, the next bridegroom will definitely be him."

While Chu Liuxiang was thinking that this was all very interesting, unexpectedly the King of Qiuci already walked over to him in large strides and dropped this auspicious egg on his plate. Raising his hand, he shouted loudly, "Everybody, why haven't you offer a toast to our most distinguished guest today?"

Everywhere the crowd burst into cheers, the sound of applause was thunderous. Chu Liuxiang just picked up the egg with a smile on his face, suddenly he discovered that under the lantern light, unexpectedly the tip of the King of Qiuci's silver knife emitted some darkish color.

Inwardly he was shocked, but on his face, he showed neither the slightest word nor movement. Others thought he had eaten the egg, while in fact the egg had slipped into his sleeve.

He heard Ji Bingyan sighed lightly and said, “The things of the world are really amazing; unexpectedly Xiao Hu [little Hu] really become the *Fuma* [reminder: emperor’s son-in-law] of a country. Have you ever thought about that?”
Chu Liuxiang replied with laugh, “Finally this wild horse gets a master; we really should be happy for him. It’s just that … tonight you and I must be particularly careful; me must never get drunk.”

Ji Bingyan suddenly laughed and asked, “Can you see what this is?” He quietly stuffed a piece of paper into Chu Liuxiang’s hand.

The paper was greasy, thus the handwriting was somewhat fuzzy. Unexpectedly written on it were these words, “Since today is your daughter’s wedding day, I’ll let your head stay on your neck for another day. By dusk tomorrow, I will come again to fetch it, hoping that you would keep it properly until then, do not disappoint me.”

Looking at this, unconsciously Chu Liuxiang was stunned.

Laughing indifferently, Ji Bingyan said, “Although this person’s writing and words are not as smooth and elegant as yours, but the tone is really somewhat similar to yours. It’s just that what he wants is unexpectedly someone else’s head; practically he is a lot more ruthless than you.”

“Where did you get this note from?” Chu Liuxiang asked in heavy voice.

Ji Bingyan replied, “It was stuck on that roast camel. Just now when I went out, I happened to see it, hence I swiped it along the way.”

Although he spoke it in sketching-in-light-shades manner, but if he was not being careful and already paid attention to everything, how could he notice such

a small thing the midst of such a chaotic situation, a small piece of paper stuck on such a big roasted camel, and just ‘happen’ to see it?

Smiling wryly, Chu Liuxiang said, “Luckily you saw it; if it fell into this *Wangye*’s hands, I am afraid he would be so scared that he would faint right away; won’t that greatly dampen the spirit?”
Ji Bingyan coldly said, “Xiao Hu rarely has a family; if you and I cannot let him happily entering the bridal chamber, we really might as well buy some rope and hang ourselves.”

Chu Liuxiang spoke heavily, “Even if this person did not come, we definitely won’t have less danger today; you and I must not see things too lightly. The food and drink that are delivered to us by anybody must not enter our mouth even more.”

Ji Bingyan’s eyes shone, he stared at Chu Liuxiang for half a day. Suddenly he frowned and asked, “Could it be that the auspicious egg is poisonous?”

Chu Liuxiang had not answered, there were seven or eight men coming to toast him.

Ji Bingyan spoke heavily, “I am going to guard outside. Whenever you can get away, come out to meet me.”

Without a drop of wine moistening his lips, he hurriedly went out.

But Hu Tiehua has been drinking until his face was completely red.

He could make friends with men like Chu Liuxiang and Ji Bingyan, his luck was indeed not bad.

If a man has such good fortune like him, no matter when, drinking a few more cups would not matter.

Chapter 42 – Luck With Women Flying In

The night was getting deeper, although the aroma of roast meat and fine wine was fragrant, although the happy laughter of the people was still lively, it still failed to dilute the somber and desolate feeling that the night brought in the desert.

With a blanket wrapped around his body, Ji Bingyan sat in the shade under a tree by the pool, gazing at the stars filling the night sky, which gradually grew denser, but then gradually grew sparser.

He was sitting like that, motionless, as if he could sit still like that until the last day of the heaven and the earth. And he was like a man who would never feel lonely or weary.

Suddenly a bottle of wine was thrown over toward him, and very soon it would hit his head. It seemed like he practically did not move at all, yet the bottle of wine was suddenly in his hand.

Chu Liuxiang already walked over. He looked at the blue dome of heaven and sighed, “The cold here is really like demonically cold …” He suddenly discovered that Ji Bingyan’s hair was covered in frost. Knitting his brows, he said, “You don’t drink wine, you don’t stand up to walk around, but sitting still like this, aren’t you afraid you might freeze to death?”

Laughing indifferently, Ji Bingyan replied, “Cold cannot kill me.”

But in the end he still pulled the cork and drank a mouthful of wine, and then slowly continued, “Only by sitting here unmoving will I be able to see clearly whether there are any outsiders coming here. If I walked randomly everywhere, I could not observe thoroughly.”

Looking at him, Chu Liuxiang heaved a sigh and said, “Of all the people in the world, who could see that you might be willing to go hungry and freeze to death for a friend?”

Ji Bingyan’s countenance sank, he coldly said, “I only do what I am willing to do; whatever other people think of me, what does it have to do with me?”

Chu Liuxiang only chuckled, but did not say anything. He knew that when Ji Bingyan was pulling his face, whatever you say to him, inevitably you would meet with a rebuff.

Half a day later, Ji Bingyan suddenly asked, “Xiao Hu?”

“In the bridal chamber,” Chu Liuxiang replied.

“Carried inside?” Ji Bingyan asked.

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “Like a roast camel. The difference is that there is no roast sheep stuffed inside his belly.”

Unconsciously Ji Bingyan also laughed. He muttered, “A man who can be drunk and pass out anytime can be considered somewhat blessed.”

Chu Liuxiang took the wine bottle and drank a mouthful. “Is there any movement outside?” he asked.

“I am afraid the person who left that note has long gone,” Ji Bingyan replied, “This man can stick a note on a roast camel in public place with numerous people, his ability is indeed not small; even I am thinking of meeting him.”

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “When did you were ever moved to anger? It is very rare indeed.”

Raising his gaze, Ji Bingyan said, “You think I am a dead person?”

Chu Liuxiang said, “Whatever the case, this person is mine, you guys cannot fight him.”

Laughing coldly, Ji Bingyan said, “Could it be that you are afraid I might be killed by him?”

Chu Liuxiang chuckled and said, “I am equally afraid that he might be killed by you. If this kind of person is dead, it will be a pity.”

“Humph!” Ji Bingyan replied.

Chu Liuxiang flicked his sleeve, and the egg landed in his palm. Blown by the cold wind, the egg immediately frozen solid like a rock. Chu Liuxiang said, “The silver knife already pierce the egg about half a *cun* or so, but only the tip, about the size of a grain of rice, turned black. From this, it seems that perhaps there is no poison in the egg white, but the poison is in the egg yolk.”
Ji Bingyan took the egg and examined it carefully. He took a small silver blade the size of a hairpin, and then he peeled the egg layer by layer. Surprisingly, he discovered inside the egg yolk a small needle the size of silk thread.

Using the tip of his blade, he lightly poked, instantly the entire sliver blade turned black. Chu Liuxiang heaved a long, long sigh; he laughed and said, “Inside the camel’s belly is a sheep. Inside the sheep’s belly is a chicken. Inside the chicken’s belly is the egg. And only inside the egg white is the egg yolk. Unexpectedly he put the poison inside the egg yolk. Really formidable!”

Ji Bingyan smiled and said, “He put the poison in such a place, yet you are able to find it. Wouldn’t it mean that you are more formidable than him?”

His countenance suddenly darkened; he said, “This egg was personally picked by the King of Qiuci and given to you, wasn’t it?”

“That’s right,” Chu Liuxiang replied.

Ji Bingyan said, “Other than he himself, perhaps nobody knew in advance to whom he was going to give this egg to. The person putting the poison … could it be the King of Qiuci?”

Chu Liuxiang replied, “If the King of Qiuci put the poison himself, why would he use silver knife to pick the egg?”

He pondered for a moment and then said, “Speaking about the opportunity to put the poison inside the egg, only the cook would have comparatively more chance.”

“Not the cook,” Ji Bingyan said.

“You already investigate?” Chu Liuxiang asked.

“Hmm!” Ji Bingyan replied.

“How do you know he did not lie?” Chu Liuxiang asked.

Ji Bingyan only gave him a simple answer, “I just know,” he said.

Chu Liuxiang did not pursue further. He knew that since Ji Bingyan was so certain, then there must be no problem anymore. Although when he gave his answer it was very simple, when he asked questions, it would definitely be very detailed. Furthermore, he must have use some method that would make people cannot but telling him the truth – some people, no matter how much force you use against him, would never pay lip service to you.

Naturally Chu Liuxiang understood Ji Bingyan’s character very much.

Half a day later, Ji Bingyan said, “To put poison inside the egg, not necessarily only the cook would have that opportunity. Anybody could take advantage to shoot the poison needle inside the egg while no one was watching. It’s just that … this person must be very close to the King of Qiuci, someone on his left and

right; moreover, he must have already guessed accurately that the egg was going to be given to you."

Staring at Chu Liuxiang, he asked, "Who do you think this person might be?"

Chu Liuxiang was silent for half a day. He laughed and said, "Since we are unable to guess right now, you'd better take some time to sleep."

"You …" Ji Bingyan started.

But Chu Liuxiang said, "You have kept watch for the first half of the night, naturally the second half of the night will be my turn."

However, the second half of the night will be much colder than the first half of the night.

Chu Liuxiang also sat quietly for a long time, without moving at all. Ji Bingyan was able to sit like that, it could not be considered strange; but Chu Liuxiang could also sit still like that, it was somewhat unexpected.

It was very dark in here. The lantern light of the tents seemed to be very far away in the distance. No one could see him here, but he was able to see everybody clearly.

Now, the voices in the tent were gradually quieting down as well. The crowd was slowly dispersing in twos and threes, drunk, leaning against each other. Some were still singing.

But the sound of singing finally ended as well, replaced by the sound of the wind blowing across the desert, which quickly turned into the most mournful, yet full of power and grandeur – song of lamentation in the world, which turned one's enthusiasm into misery.

In the boundless blue dome of heaven, the stars were starting to sink. In the boundless desert, it also felt like there was only Chu Liuxiang, one person – remained.

His mind gradually drifted to remember a lot of people, to recall a lot of things. Su Rongrong, Li Hongxiu, Song Tian'er. Where could they be?

Even now, Chu Liuxiang still did not have the slightest information about them.

On the contrary, his enemies have become more and more numerous. The secretive and terrifying Stone *Guanyin*, the assassin whose whereabouts was swiftly moving, yet the martial art skill was deep and immeasurable … could it be that his dead body was really going to be buried in this merciless desert? Chu Liuxiang drank a big mouthful of wine. Thinking about Hu Tiehua, he could not stop a smile from appearing on the corners of his mouth. "This kid's good fortune is indeed not bad."

He suddenly discovered that someone was walking over toward him, wrapped in goose down quilt so thick and wide, so that it looked like a small tent was moving.

"Who's there?" Chu Liuxiang said.

The person did not answer. But suddenly, 'Pfft!' she broke into a giggle.

Unexpectedly the person was Princess Pipa. The 'bride' unexpectedly slipped out of the bridal chamber and came here.

The last trace of smile on Chu Liuxiang's face froze, he blurted out, "What are you doing here?"

Inside the goose down bedding, Princess Pipa teetered over while giggling tenderly and said, "You can come over here and I can't come?"

“This is not where you are supposed to be!” Chu Liuxiang replied.

Blinking her eyes, Princess Pipa asked, “Why?”

Pulling his face, Chu Liuxiang spoke word-by-word, “If you don’t go back to he bridal chamber this instant, I will …”

He had not finished speaking, Princess Pipa’s silver-bell like laughter already cut him off. Giggling tenderly, she said, “You … you want me to go to … to the bridal chamber? What for?” [Translator’s note: there are two ‘giggling’ words here, the first above was ‘chi chi’, the second was ‘ge ge’. Just so you know …]

Chu Liuxiang loudly replied, “To the bridal chamber naturally to … naturally to …” He really did not have any idea how to continue, hence he only rubbed his nose vigorously.

Casting a glance at him, Princess Pipa said with a laugh, “Say it, naturally to do what?”

Chu Liuxiang really did not know what to do. In all his life, he practically has never seen such girl.

But Princess Pipa laughed tenderly and continued, “If I really go to the bridal chamber, it would be strange indeed if the bride did not beat me out!”

This time Chu Liuxiang was really stunned. “Bride?” he stammered, “You … you are not the bride?”

Princess Pipa laughed and said, “Who said I am the bride?”

Chu Liuxiang said, “But … but clearly …”

Princess Pipa said, “Qiuci Princesses are not only me, the one marrying Hu Tiehua is my *Jiejie* [older sister]! Dork …”
Chu Liuxiang blurted out, “Your *Jiejie* … why didn’t you say so earlier?”

Princess Pipa's eyes lit up like the stars. Biting her lip, she laughed and said, "Why would I want to tell you earlier? I wanted you to be angry, I wanted you to worry …"

Her tender laughter was like silver bell, but there was also a 'ding ding dang dang' noise coming from inside her quilt. Stretching out her hand from inside the quilt, turned out she was holding two bottles of wine.

Swinging the bottle, she laughed and said, "Dork, why haven't you come to take my bottle? If you keep rubbing your nose, you might wear off your nose."

Fixing his gaze on her, Chu Liuxiang spoke slowly, "You are really a naughty, a crafty little bad-egg [scoundrel/b@stard]."

While talking, he stood up and reached out.

Princess Pipa giggled and said, "You … what do you want?"

Opening up his eyes wide, Chu Liuxiang said, "Why don't you guess?"

Princess Pipa laughed and said, "I am not scared of you, I am not …"

She appeared to be retreating, yet she did not retreat. Suddenly, with a 'ying ning' cry [嘤拧 – I have no idea, perhaps a typo?], her hand was already caught by Chu Liuxiang, her body also fell into Chu Liuxiang's embrace.

The bright red goose down quilt seemed to be about to slip down. It slipped over her shoulders, revealing her sleek, satin-like skin.

The quilt was slipping down some more, revealing her fresh, tender, and soft breasts.

Unexpectedly, she was naked.

The quilt continued to slip down.

But Chu Liuxiang was stunned; his hand did not dare to move anymore.

Princess Pipa's shivering voice said, "Dork, are you trying to freeze me to death?"

She parted her hands and opened the quilt.

Chu Liuxiang only saw a perfect naked body, perfect breasts, perfect waist, perfect legs. And then he could not see anything anymore.

Because his entire person has been wrapped inside the goose down quilt as well.

Both of them fell down together; they fell onto the blanket on which he was sitting a moment ago. The bright red goose down quilt has become a small tent; the smallest tent in the world.

The tent was moving, and then it stopped moving.

Princess Pipa's tender laughter was heard again, "I am not scared of you, but you are scared of me instead?"

Chu Liuxiang sighed. He said, "You are a little bad egg indeed."

"Have you ever seen a little bad egg as beautiful as me in the world?" Princess Pipa asked.

Chu Liuxiang sighed, "I have not," he replied.

Princess Pipa giggled and said, "I have never seen any dork more lovely than you are in the world either. Dork … dork …"

Her voice was getting smaller and smaller, until it was finally inaudible.

After half a day, an empty wine bottle was thrown out from inside the quilt.

And then, another bottle was thrown out. But this one still had half a bottle of wine in it.

Another half a day, a delicate and beautiful, as well as exquisite like white-jade carving – leg, shook its way out of the quilt, but it was quickly pulled back inside the quilt.

Were they cold? Why did they shiver?

Finally the sun was slowly rising.

The newborn sun was as gentle and soft as a newborn baby's breath.

Finally, there was some noise coming from inside the quilt.

"The sky seems to have brightened up," Chu Liuxiang's voice said.

"Not yet, not yet," Princess Pipa's voice replied, "Even if it's daybreak, it does not matter. Last night everybody in here drank until they could not get up anymore, how could they wake up at this time?"

Her speaking voice simply sounded like a moan.

Chu Liuxiang did not speak anymore, as if he did not object to her staying.

Princess Pipa suddenly spoke again, "I am treating you like this, do you know why?"

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, "Although I am not a narcissistic man, but I really cannot think of other reasons why a girl would do this other than she likes the man."

Princess Pipa spoke quietly, “Naturally I like you; but if there were no other reason, I would not … I would not do this.”

“Why did you do this?” Chu Liuxiang asked.

Princess Pipa was silent for half a day. Finally she spoke slowly, “Because I definitely cannot marry you.”

“Oh?” Chu Liuxiang replied.

Princess Pipa said, “Not only I cannot marry you, moreover, later on … later on I am afraid our chance of meeting each other will not be many.”

Chu Liuxiang said, “Oh …”

Princess Pipa suddenly cried out, “Oh, oh, oh … Other than saying ‘Oh!’, can’t you say anything else?”

“What do you want me to say?” Chu Liuxiang asked.

Princess Pipa said, “You … you … you ought to at least ask me why I cannot marry you?”

Chu Liuxiang said, “If I did, would you tell me?”

Princess Pipa seemed to be taken aback. After a long time, she sighed and said, “I cannot tell you.”

Chu Liuxiang said, “I knew you could not tell me, that’s why I did not ask.”

Princess Pipa said, “You … are you saying that you do not feel uncomfortable the slightest bit? Even if in your heart you did not feel uncomfortable, you still ought to say something.”

Chu Liuxiang chuckled; cutting her off, he said, “I have already told you, I cannot lie.”

Her voice trembling, Princess Pipa said, “You … you, this scoundrel, you really do not feel uncomfortable?”

Chu Liuxiang sighed as well; he said, “To be frank with you, even if you have to marry me, whether I can take you as my wife, it is still a big question!”

Suddenly there was a sharp slap. Someone was scrambling out of the quilt. It looked like Chu Liuxiang … hey! But how could Chu Liuxiang have such a long hair? Could it be Princess Pipa? But how could Princess Pipa wear Chu Liuxiang’s clothes?

She rushed out as fast as flying, while did not stop raining curses, “You, this muddled-egg [scoundrel/b@stard]; you, this scoundrel; you … you this Old Stinky Bug. Even if all the men in world drop dead, I will never marry you …”

Everywhere was extremely quiet. As expected, no one woke up yet.

With the bright red quilt wrapped around his body, Chu Liuxiang slipped back into his own tent like a thief. Fortunately, Ji Bingyan was still sleeping soundly.

His entire body, from head to toe, was tightly wrapped inside the quilt. Even his breathing seemed to be very difficult. Chu Liuxiang was scrambling around looking for his clothes and put it on, yet he was still sleeping soundly like a dead person, without moving at all.

Chu Liuxiang suddenly laughed and said, “I know you have been awake for a long time. You don’t need to pretend to be sleeping. In any case, I am not trying to hide what I did from you. This is not a shameful thing anyway …”

Ji Bingyan’s head was completely under cover, he did not even make any noise.

Smiling wryly, Chu Liuxiang said, “A very normal man, and a very normal woman, in a cold and lonely night … tell me, what’s wrong with that?”

He was not sure himself whether he was trying to explain it to others, or whether he was trying to justify himself.

Ji Bingyan was still ignoring him.

Buttoning up his clothes, Chu Liuxiang sighed again and said, “Thinking about it, this time we bring suffering to Xiao Hu … this is practically like cheating on the marriage; his bride, unexpectedly, from start to finish, did not dare to show her face. I would be surprised if she is not an ugly person.”

Suddenly he saw someone walking in. Surprisingly, it was Hu Tiehua.

Chu Liuxiang originally thought that even if he was not extremely angry, he must be ashen-faced; who would have thought that unexpectedly not only Hu Tiehua was radiant with happiness, not only he was not angry, he was extremely happy.

On the contrary, Chu Liuxiang was stunned.

He saw Hu Tiehua sat down opposite him, looking at him with a grin on his face, as if he had just picked up a big *yuanbao* [silver or gold ingot in the shape of a boat] from the ground.

Chapter 43 – Blood Splash in the Bridal Chamber

Letting out a light snort, Chu Liuxiang sounded him out, “You … are you all right?”

Grinning wide, Hu Tiehua said, “Extremely all right.”

Chu Liuxiang asked, “You … you can see your bride?”

Hu Tiehua roared in laughter and said, “You really think I am a stupid son-in-law? That I ran out of the bridal chamber without even seeing my new wife?”

Rubbing his nose, Chu Liuxiang said, “Then you … you … are not mad?”

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “Why would I be mad? I practically have never been happier than this.”

Chu Liuxiang stared at him. “Have you sobered up?” he asked.

“I have never been more sober than this either,” Hu Tiehua replied.

Chu Liuxiang was stunned.

Hu Tiehua leisurely said, “You naturally know that my new bride is not Princess Pipa at all.”

“Hmm!” Chu Liuxiang responded.

Hu Tiehua said, “Therefore, you must be thinking, since my new bride did not dare to show her face, she must be a pockmarked-face, and ugly person; otherwise, why she did not dare to see people … am I right?”

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “Maybe not too ugly, just …”

Hu Tiehua roared in laughter and said, “You don’t have to feel bad for me, you need not comfort me even more. Let me tell you, my new bride, not only she is not ugly, she is ten times more beautiful than Princess Pipa.”

Now Chu Liuxiang was really stunned – this first princess, since she was so beautiful, previously, why did she not dare to see people? It was really somewhat hard to believe.

“You don’t believe it?” Hu Tiehua cried out.

Stroking his nose, Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “This … perhaps it’s … perhaps it’s …”

Hu Tiehua jumped up and cried out, “All right! You don’t believe it, I’ll take you to see her.”

Before Chu Liuxiang had any chance to respond, Hu Tiehua already pulled him and rushed out.

Unexpectedly, outside the tent was extremely quiet, not even a human shadow was to be seen.

Smiling wryly, Chu Liuxiang said, “This early in the morning, you are pulling me to charge into the bridal chamber, do you think it’s proper?”

Opening his eyes wide, Hu Tiehua said, “You are my own brother, what does it have to do with propriety?”

Chu Liuxiang said, “Even if you don’t have any problem, what about your bride?”

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “I am telling you, my new bride, not only her outward appearance beautiful, her character is also extremely good; she is gentle and soft, she is considerate, she is … she is … I just don’t know how to describe her best.”

Listening to the tone of his voice, Chu Liuxiang could not help feeling happy for him. He laughed and said, “It looks like in the end, it is still fortune favors fools [idiom: fool’s luck].”

He had not finished speaking, Hu Tiehua had already pulled him inside the bridal chamber.

This tent was newly erected, the interior was practically like the Temple of Heaven. Brocade tassels adorned the bottom of the tent like a billow of red waves. The bride was lying down lazily, she was still asleep, exposing only her cloud of hair spread over the pillow.

As soon as Hu Tiehua came in, he made a ruckus, “We have guest here, quickly get up! This is my best friend, no different than my brother, you don’t need to feel embarrassed.”

Other people, after three months of marriage, the young husband and wife would still be bashful whenever they see each other. But he was married not even for half a day, yet he already acted like old husband and old wife. While secretly Chu Liuxiang was amused, unconsciously he was happy for Hu Tiehua. Were it not for the bride’s temperament agreed with his, how could he act like this?

But the bride still has not shown her head. Hu Tiehua strode over to look, he said, “You are going to see him anyway, why would …”

His voice suddenly stopped mid-sentence, the blood from his face was suddenly drained completely.

Blood!

Unexpectedly, the edge of the brand-new embroidered quilt was fully stained with blood.

Shaking, Hu Tiehua reached out and yanked the quilt off.

The bridal chamber was as warm as the springtime, the turned-over quilt was like red wave, but lying under the quilt was unexpectedly a dead woman.

Hu Tiehua was like he was on top of a tall building and suddenly lost his footing; his entire body crumpled down to the ground.

Chu Liuxiang rushed over to hold him up; his countenance changed, he asked, “What time did you leave this place?”

Hu Tiehua replied, “I … I just went out looking for you a moment ago …”

Chu Liuxiang said, “Within that short period of time, someone came and dealt treacherous assault! Who could this person be? What enmity does he have against you? This is the night of your wedding, why did he kill your …”

Hu Tiehua sprang up and cried out, “You think this is my new bride?”

Chu Liuxiang was startled, “She is not?” he asked.

“Of course not,” Hu Tiehua replied, “Who this woman is, I have never seen her in my life before.”

Chu Liuxiang was stunned again; he stammered, “In … in that case … where is the bride?”

Hu Tiehua shook his head, and then he cried again, “That’s right! Where did she go? She was clearly still sleeping here.”

While crying out, he went everywhere to look, even under the bed, but the bride’s shadow was nowhere to be seen. Yet there was a dead woman lying on her bed. Who was this woman? How did she get into the bridal chamber?

Who killed her?

Where did the bride go?

Hu Tiehua had just gone out to look for Chu Liuxiang, how could there be so many astonishing changes happening in the bridal chamber?

Chu Liuxiang practically had never seen such a strange thing in his life.

Just by looking at this woman's swollen face, when she was alive, she must also be frighteningly ugly. This moment they could see that the perpetrator had clawed her, creating a gaping bloody hole on her chest, so that she looked even more indescribably hideous and terrifying.

Stomping his feet, Hu Tiehua said, "What the hell is going on here? How could this woman come up to my bed naked? When did she get here? How could my bride not know?"

Chu Liuxiang spoke heavily, "This woman did not come here on her own."

"How do you know?" Hu Tiehua asked.

Chu Liuxiang replied, "Although there's bloodstain on the quilt, there is none on the bed. It is obvious that only after this woman was murdered that the killer moved her onto the bed."

Hu Tiehua said, "This is even more strange; after the killer murdered her, why did he move her here?"

Chu Liuxiang asked, "When you went out, are you sure that the bride was still sleeping on this bed?"

"That's right," Hu Tiehua replied, "She was clearly still sleeping soundly; but now … but now she is gone?"

Chu Liuxiang knitted his brows; he really could not think of the secret behind this.

Meanwhile, Hu Tiehua already rushed out and shouted, “Help! I have a dead person in my room, come and see who this person is.”

The first to rush over was Princess Pipa, followed by the King of Qiuci, who had not yet recovered from his hangover – staggering into the tent. As the two saw the dead body on the bed, their countenance changed greatly.

Hu Tiehua asked, “Who is this woman? You …”

Before he finished speaking, the King of Qiuci already grabbed his collar and howled, “Why did you kill her?”

The King of Qiuci screamed, “Although she was a bit ugly, but good or bad she was your wife, how could you deal with her so ruthlessly? You … you are simply not a human being, you are a beast!”

Hu Tiehua jumped in fright; aghast, he said, “What did you say? This woman is … is my wife?”

The King of Qiuci’s eyes turned red, he roared wildly, “Although she was a bit ugly, she was, after all, a golden branch, jade leaves [idiom: blue-blooded nobility]; won’t that point alone worth to be matched with you, this roughneck? You … even if you did not want to marry her, you should not …”

Hu Tiehua waved his hand to push him to the floor; greatly startled, he said, “This man is crazy, this man is crazy …”

The King of Qiuci roared again, “You are the crazy one.”

Chu Liuxiang was full of bewilderment as well; helping him up from the ground, he spoke heavily, “Who actually is the lady on the bed?
Does *Wangye* recognize her?”

The King of Qiuci angrily said, “My own daughter, how could I not recognize her?”

Emotionally moved, Chu Liuxiang said, “Last night, the bride you gave away to Hu Tiehua, was it this lady?”

“Of course it was her,” the King of Qiuci replied.

Hu Tiehua cried out again, “It was not her; definitely it was not her. I saw it clearly; my bride was an exceptional beauty, definitely not this ugly person.”

The King of Qiuci roared again, “I gave my own daughter to you in marriage, do you think I did not know it?”

The groom insisted that this was not the bride, yet the father-in-law insisted that it was not fake. Such a strange thing was really rare in the world. And Chu Liuxiang was caught in the middle. Unexpectedly he did not know which one he ought to listen to.

Stomping his feet, Hu Tiehua said, “If you say that this ugly person was the bride, then who was the person I saw last night? Could it be that someone was impersonating the bride?”

The King of Qiuci angrily said, “You killed her, yet you still say these nonsense to deceive people?”

Hu Tiehua was angry as well, “Why would I want to deceive you?” he said, “Could it be that I met a ghost last night?”

Princess Pipa suddenly said, “Let me ask you this: if you say that this is not the bride, then where is the bride that you saw last night? If you could find her, we will believe you.”

Hu Tiehua said, “I … I …” He really did not know where did the ‘bride’ last night go? He had only been out for a moment, and the ‘bride’ seemed to have magically disappeared.

Laughing coldly, Princess Pipa said, “Even if the one you saw last night was not my *Jiejie*, how did my *Jiejie* die in your bed? If you did not kill her, then who did?”
Hu Tiehua said, “This must be you yourselves who swap the bride, but you accuse me wrongly.”

The King of Qiuci angrily said, “Fart! Are you saying I killed my own daughter?”

The fact was that even Hu Tiehua himself knew that what he said was really hard to believe. He could only rush over toward Chu Liuxiang, pulled his sleeve and anxiously said, “You … are you not going to say anything to help me? Could it be that you don’t believe me either?”

Chu Liuxiang sighed. He said, “What do you want me to say?”

Hu Tiehua jumped up and shrieked, “Good! All of you don’t believe me; even you are helping others to accuse me wrongly. So what if I really killed her? Who told you to deceive me into marrying an ugly person?”

Princess Pipa scolded him, “You killed people, you have to pay with your life.”

Amidst her shout, the tip of her ten fingers already stabbed toward Hu Tiehua’s throat. Her move was swift and pressing, but what kind of a figure Hu Tiehua was? How could he take such martial art seriously?

“Get out of my way!” he shouted angrily, “I don’t want to hurt you, but don’t you mess with me.”

Once his iron palm waved, the explosive force threw Princess Pipa’s body away.

The King of Qiuci said, “You … you want to run away?”

Howling with laughter, Hu Tiehua said, “So what if I want to run away? Who can stop me?”

“You can’t leave!” the King of Qiuci roared.

Amidst his roar, seven or eight golden dagger-axes were stabbing inside from outside the tent. Without even looking, Hu Tiehua casually grabbed, two golden dagger-axes were already caught in his hand. Pulling backward lightly, two men were dragged in and stumbled down on the ground.

Amidst the cry of alarm from the other several warriors, the golden dagger-axes were stabbing inside chaotically. Hu Tiehua moved like the wind. A series of ‘Aiyo!’, ‘Pow!’, ‘Snap!’ and ‘Crack!’, seven or eight warriors already fell to the ground, their long-handled dagger-axes were broken.

The King of Qiuci had seen this kind of divine might, yet unexpectedly he was frightened that he could only stare blankly. Only to see Hu Tiehua strode out with head held high and spoke sternly, “Who else dare to come over? Let me smash his head into pulp.”

Unexpectedly, from among a group of warriors holding golden dagger-axes standing far away, no one dared to come over.

Suddenly they saw a shadow flashed, someone actually blocked his way. Hu Tiehua’s countenance changed, but then he howled with laughter and said, “Good! You are here. We can decide who’s superior who’s inferior in here today.”

Chu Liuxiang sighed. “How can I fight with you?” he said.

Greatly delighted, Hu Tiehua said, “In that case, let’s go together!”

“We must not go even more,” Chu Liuxiang said.

“Why?” Hu Tiehua asked.

Chu Liuxiang sighed and said, “If you leave, the injustice cannot be washed clean even more.”

Hu Tiehua angrily said, “So what if it cannot be washed clean? As long as I look into my heart and there’s no shame in it, I don’t care what others say, I just consider it fart.”

Chu Liuxiang said, “Other matter is not a problem, but this matter absolutely must be cleared.”

Laughing coldly, Hu Tiehua said, “I know that cannot bear to leave. All right, you won’t go, then I will.”

But he had not even taken two steps, Chu Liuxiang blocked his way again.

Hu Tiehua angrily said, “You really won’t let me go?”

“Where are you going?” Chu Liuxiang asked.

“Where can’t I go?” Hu Tiehua responded.

Chu Liuxiang sighed and said, “The desert is not like the Central Plains at all. You are going alone, I am afraid you can’t go anywhere.”

Hu Tiehua roared, “Since you refuse to come with me, even if I die, there’s no need to trouble you.”

Chu Liuxiang sighed and said, “You ought to know, the person who harmed you precisely wanted you to disregard everything and leave. If you leave, that is practically what she is wishing for.”

Hu Tiehua roared, “What do you want me to do?”

Chu Liuxiang spoke in heavy voice, “I want you to stay here for three days. I will definitely find that person for you. If right now you insist on leaving, even if I have to stake my life, I am going to stop you.”

Hu Tiehua looked up to the sky and leaved a deep sigh; smiling wryly, he said, “If other people talk to me like this, it will be strange indeed if I don’t fight a desperate fight with him. But since it is you … you, this old stinky bug, seeing you, practically I don’t know what to do.”

He stomped his feet and said, “Very well! I’ll listen to you; I will stay here. In any case, even if you want my head, I will have no choice but to present it to you with both hands.”

Standing some distance away, the King of Qiuci was able to hear everything clearly; his courage rose, he thundered, “Guards! Why haven’t you arrest him quickly?”

The golden dagger-axe warriors’ spirit was aroused as well; they rushed over with a loud cry.

Suddenly there was a series of ‘Aiyo!’, ‘Pow!’, ‘Snap!’ and ‘Crack!’ sound. More than a dozen long dagger-axes, nobody knew how – were already in Chu Liuxiang’s hands. His both hands moved, like throwing brittle bamboo, all were broken and fell to the ground.

The King of Qiuci’s countenance changed, he said, “You … why did you …”

Chu Liuxiang spoke indifferently, “He said he will stay here, he will definitely not leave. Within three days, I will find the real culprit and bring him here. But none of you can even touch one finger of his.”

The King of Qiuci said, “He … what if he run away?”

Chu Liuxiang said, “If he ran away, I will pay your daughter’s life with mine.”

The King of Qiuci said, “Within three days, what if you fail to find the real culprit?”

Hu Tiehua loudly said, “Within three days, if he can’t find the real culprit, I will pay your daughter’s life with mine.”

Unexpectedly, these two men casually put their lives in the other’s hands. Such friendship, it was indeed extremely rare in the world.

The King of Qiuci stared blankly for half a day. He said, “All right, I believe you.”

Chu Liuxiang already pulled Hu Tiehua back into their own tent.

Meanwhile Princess Pipa sighed softly and muttered, “These two clearly were able to leave, yet they clearly did not leave, but make such an oath instead. What’s the reason behind it? Could it be that my *Jiejie* was really not murdered by him?”
The King of Qiuci said, “If he did not kill her, then who did? Could it be that there is really a woman in the world willing to impersonate other people’s wife?”

Hu Tiehua was mumbling to himself as well, “Frankly speaking, I did not really want to go. If this matter is not cleared up, I won’t be satisfied either. If the dead was really the King of Qiuci’s daughter, then who was the person I saw last night? Why would she come to impersonate the bride? What benefit it is for her?”

Chu Liuxiang sighed. “You still can’t figure it out?” he asked.

“I can’t figure it out,” Hu Tiehua admitted.

Chu Liuxiang said, “First of all, you must believe that the dead lady was indeed the King of Qiuci’s daughter, your bride.”

“Why should I believe?” Hu Tiehua roared.

Smiling wryly, Chu Liuxiang said, “It was because she was too ugly that all along the King of Qiuci had been hiding her from you. Otherwise, Princess Pipa dared to come out and run around all over the place, why did she hide and was afraid to see people?”

Hu Tiehua sighed; he no longer said anything.

Chu Liuxiang said, “You must also know that she was not murdered just this morning; I could see that she has been dead for at least four, five *sichen*.”
Hu Tiehua was emotionally moved, “Four, five *sichen*?” he asked, “Could it be that before I entered the bridal chamber, someone had already killed her?”
“Precisely,” Chu Liuxiang replied.

Hu Tiehua said, “But her body …”

“There was bloodstain under the bed as well,” Chu Liuxiang said, “After that person killed her, she must have hidden her corpse under the bed, while she herself pretended to be the bride sleeping on the bed.”

Hu Tiehua blurted out, “Are you saying … are you saying that when we were on the bed last night, there was a dead body under the bed?”

“That’s right,” Chu Liuxiang replied.

Hu Tiehua, heart and soul, shuddered. He stammered, “She … she knew perfectly well that there was a dead body under the bed, yet she was still able to be with me … with me on the bed …”

He only felt that he was about to throw up, and could not continue.

Chu Liuxiang said, “Today, when you went out to look for me, she immediately moved the body under the bed into the bed, for the purpose of shifting the blame onto you, so that the King of Qiuci would think that it was you who murdered her.”

Chapter 44 – Crafty Plots and Machinations

His voice cracking, Hu Tiehua said, “Why did she do that?”

Chu Liuxiang replied slowly, “Just because if we and the King of Qiuci formed an alliance, it would be very disadvantageous for her. She did that, precisely because she wanted us to have a falling out with the King of Qiuci. Also, she already accurately predicted that nobody would believe anything you said. If you get angry and leave, I am afraid it was because she wanted you to die in the desert.”

Wiping the cold sweats from his forehead, Hu Tiehua said, “Could it be that she is … she is …”

Chu Liuxiang continued word-by-word, “The person impersonating the bride, I am afraid is the *Shi Guanyin*.”
Hu Tiehua suddenly felt his entire body turning cold.

Chu Liuxiang said, “Reportedly *Shi Guanyin* is a rarely-seen beauty in Jianghu; although her age might be a bit older, she must know a method of maintaining her countenance. Besides, it was in the dark of the night, and you were extremely drunk.”
Hu Tiehua covered his face and cried out, “*Laotian* [God/Heavens]!” and fell face up.
By this time they already reached their tent, so when he fell, he was falling on the bed. Ji Bingyan was still sleeping on the bed with his head completely under cover; unexpectedly it was as if he did not feel anything at all.

Chu Liuxiang's countenance changed slightly. He pulled Hu Tiehua out of bed, and signaled him with his mouth pointing at the bed. Two men's eyes met, they both felt a chill creeping up in their heart.

Ji Bingyan has always been alert; even in his own home, there was no way that he would sleep so soundly like this. Perhaps he also met with some mishap …

Hu Tiehua roared and pounced toward the bed, he yanked the blanket up.

The person sleeping under the blanket was, unexpectedly, not Ji Bingyan at all, but a Qiuci warrior. He was still wearing the same uniform he wore last night when they were drinking the wedding toast, even the boots have not been taken off.

Hu Tiehua grabbed his hair and lifted him up out of the bed, "How did you get to sleep here?" he spoke sternly, "Speak up! Speak up!"

The warrior's body was like without any bones; it simply hung limply.

Knitting his brows, Chu Liuxiang said, "This man's sleeping acupoint has been sealed."

He had not finished speaking, Hu Tiehua already moved like the wind, he patted the warrior's acupoint, and was going to ask again, "How did you get to sleep here?"

Who would have thought that as soon as the warrior opened his eyes, he cried out in alarm, "How did I get here? What the hell is going on here?"

Hu Tiehua angrily said, "What the hell is going on here? I was just about to ask you."

The warrior shook his head with all his might; apparently he still had a hangover and had not sobered up yet, so he still had a headache. Using his hand he desperately knocked himself seven, eight times, and then suddenly shouted, "I

remember! Last night I drank too much. After I went pee, I was going to sleep; who would have thought that as I was walking pass this place, suddenly someone dragged me inside, and then I don't know anything."

"Who dragged you in?" Hu Tiehua asked.

The warrior replied, "That person moved very fast, I … even when I was clear-headed, I would not be able to see it."

Hu Tiehua angrily said, "Let *Laozi* beat you hard a little bit, and then you will be able to see."
He was going to give the man a backhand slap, Chu Liuxiang already pulled him back and said, "Just let him go!"

Hu Tiehua was totally unwilling to let go, yet as soon as he let go, the warrior immediately staggered along and ran away.

Stomping his feet, Hu Tiehua said, "This kid must also be a conspirator; I don't know where they took Dead …"

He was going to say the nickname 'Dead Rooster', but when the word was on the tip of his tongue, he suddenly realized that at this very moment, the word 'dead' was really very ominous. Immediately changing his tone, he said, "Old Ji must have fallen into their hands as well, so they told this kid to come …"

Chu Liuxiang cut him off, "As soon as his acupoint was opened, this man was immediately awake. This kind of
controlling-the-person-without-harming-his-mind sealing-acupoint technique is precisely Old Ji's unique skill."

"Are you saying that … that this kid was subdued by Old Ji?" Hu Tiehua asked.

"Precisely!" Chu Liuxiang replied.

Stamping his feet again, Hu Tiehua said, “Why did Dead Rooster play such trick? In time like this, could it be that he still has the mind to play a joke on us? Where did he go then?”

In a fit of rage, he unconsciously spoke the nickname ‘Dead Rooster’ again.

Chu Liuxiang sighed. Smiling wryly, he said, “You all think that Old Ji always keeps his composure. The fact is that this man is cold on the surface but hot in his heart, about the same as you and I. Last night I wanted him to set aside that most formidable opponent for me. When he heard it, although his mouth did not say anything, inwardly he must be refusing to accept. I dare say with eighty-percent confidence that he must be rushing over to find that person first to pit himself against him.”

“But how did he know where that person is?” Hu Tiehua asked.

Chu Liuxiang sighed. He said, “Situ Liuxing already mentioned the direction of their camp; how could Old Ji not able to find it?”

Hu Tiehua thought for a moment. Immediately he turned around and rushed outside.

But Chu Liuxiang pulled him back and asked, “What are you doing?”

Stomping his feet, Hu Tiehua said, “Old Ji may not necessarily be that kid’s match, naturally I must rush over to help him.”

Chu Liuxiang said, “Have you forgotten your promise a moment ago?”

Hu Tiehua was hopping mad with anxiety, “What should we do?” he said.

“You stay here,” Chu Liuxiang said, “I’ll go find him.”

Hu Tiehua said, “Now the three of us are scattered, if that *Shi* … *Shi Guanyin* …”

Chu Liuxiang chuckled and said, “One night being a wife, a hundred nights of kindness; how could she have the heart to harm you?”

Hu Tiehua’s face turned red as well, his neck thickened, he roared, “Dead Stinky Bug, if you make such joke again, don’t blame me if you and I are having a falling out.”

Chu Liuxiang smiled and said, “What I mean is just that *Shi Guanyin* did not hesitate to do that to drive a wedge between us and the King of Qiuci, it is obvious that for the time being she is still unwilling to show herself to meet us directly. Naturally she also knows that we are not easy to be pushed around.”
“Humph!” Hu Tiehua responded.

Chu Liuxiang patted his shoulder and said with a laugh, “You stay here, drink a couple of cups to cool your temper, I will be back shortly.”

No sooner had he walked out, than the giant Kun Mi walked in.

Opening his eyes wide, Hu Tiehua asked, “What are you doing here?”

Kun Mi folded his arms; he stared back at him, but did not say anything.

“Are you here to watch me?” Hu Tiehua asked.

“Humph!” Kun Mi replied.

Laughing heartily, Hu Tiehua said, “*Laozi* said I won’t leave, then I won’t leave. If *Laozi* wants to leave, with you, this blockhead watching me, you think you can stop *Laozi*?”
While his mouth was speaking, he suddenly sent out a punch.

Kun Mi stretched out his huge, quick palm to grab his fist; who would have thought that Hu Tiehua twisted his wrist, unexpectedly he lightly scratched under his ribs.

Although this giant had the body with steel muscle and iron bones, he was actually ticklish. As soon as Hu Tiehua scratched him, he broke into uncontrollable giggle, he laughed so hard that he doubled over.

Hu Tiehua leaned sideways and used his shoulder to bump him; Kun Mi's more than two-hundred-*jin* body was knocked and was sent flying out. Clapping his hands, he roared, "Bring wine here, bring wine here! If you want *Laozi* to stay here, you must take care of *Laozi* with delicious food and hard liquor …" Unexpectedly he was venting all the fire in his belly onto these people.

Although with his mouth Chu Liuxiang was chatting and laughing, his heart was actually extremely heavy.

Although this time he managed to peek into the Stone *Guanyin*'s plot, he was still unable to give definite proof to the King of Qiuci. Although he could figure out that the Stone *Guanyin* must be in the vicinity, he was still unable to guess where she was hiding. Not to mention that as soon as her plan failed, the Stone *Guanyin* must have already put her second plan in motion. The enemy was in the dark while he was in the open; it was always impossible to defend effectively.
Now Xiao Pan already died, Shi Tuo's whereabouts was unknown, Hu Tiehua suffered false accusations without any way to clear his name, Ji Bingyan was also entering danger zone. All five men who entered the desert together have fallen into such situation, while about Li Hongxiu, Song Tian'er and Su Rongrong's whereabouts, he still did not have the slightest clue.

In such situation, how could Chu Liuxiang's heart not be heavy?

Much less now he had to safeguard these people; he also had no choice but to safeguard the King of Qiuci, father and daughter, he simply could not let these father and daughter to meet other people's vicious attack.

But why did Princess Pipa suddenly look for him last night? By doing what she did, was she also involved in some conspiracy? Was she trying to hold Chu Liuxiang back, so that he could not take care of other things?

Chu Liuxiang sighed. He decided not to continue this train of thoughts; he must find Ji Bingyan first before thinking about other things. If the Black Monkey Sun Kong, Situ Liuxing, and the others did not exaggerate, then this moment, the one in the most dangerous situation ought to be Ji Bingyan. Speaking about the profoundness of his quick-witted, amazing scheme in meeting a contingency, although nobody could compete with Ji Bingyan, but speaking strictly about true martial art skill, Ji Bingyan might not necessarily be able to match Hu Tiehua's.

However, the desert was vast, gazing for a thousand *li*, there was no human trace in sight. Looking for one person in this vast, boundless desert was really like fishing a needle from the sea.
Chu Liuxiang was paying full attention all the time, all the place; he did not dare to take the wrong direction. In such an empty, wide area, a hairsbreadth error in direction could result in a thousand-*li* error in destination.
Fortunately this moment the red sun was just rising, the power of the blazing sun was not as brutal, while the cold air of the night was still slowly dissipating. It was precisely the most comfortable time of the day.

Chu Liuxiang unleashed his amazing, the-pinnacle-of-the-world – *qinggong*, he ran several *li* in one breath, his feet did not slacken the least bit, his eyes did not let a single blade of grass, a single tree – to escape.
Suddenly he heard a crashing noise carried by the rolling wind. In his heart Chu Liuxiang was startled, but his eyes already saw clearly that it was just a large iron cooking pot.

However, in this uninhabited desert, where did the iron cooking pot come from?

He noticed that this iron cooking pot was blown by the wind, it rolled along the desert and was coming very fast. Chu Liuxiang swept about a *zhang* sideways, and used the tip of his foot to poke lightly, and caught the pot in his hand. After looking at it for half a day, he hurriedly flew in the direction from which the iron cooking pot was blown away.

This time his eyes were even more attentive. About half the time to eat a meal later, he saw ahead a pile of weather-beaten rocks, plus several cacti, which were rarely seen in the Central Plains.

Although Chu Liuxiang has never wandered around the desert before, after going through these past several days of experience, he knew that in the desert, this kind of place was ideal to set up camp.

Could it be possible that the Qiuci rebel ministers and assassins had set their camp and spent the night here? But looking at four directions, as far as his eyes could see, he did not see even the shadow of a tent.

After pondering deeply, Chu Liuxiang went down on all four like a hound and searched the area for half a day. Suddenly, with his fingers that were like iron claw, he started digging on the sand.

Although he was using his bare hands, but with his power passing through his palms and fingers, the ten fingers unexpectedly were not inferior to a spade or a hoe. Grabbing three times, seizing twice, he excavated some charred firewood.

This was clearly the location where the Qiuci rebel ministers setup their camp. They must have found out that their track had been discovered and thus they withdrew that very night.

Unexpectedly these men had been so careful; after removing their tent, unexpectedly they got rid of any traces. Chu Liuxiang thought it over, and knew that among these people, there must be an expert with profound scheming ability.

But has Ji Bingyan looked here as well? If he had, with multitude of enemies, few friends, has he also met with vicious attack?

In his heart, Chu Liuxiang was even more anxious. His eyes scanning around, he suddenly saw on the pile of weathered rocks, there were two clear footprints.

In the desert, any footprints left on the sand would be blown away by the wind in the blink of an eye. But these two footprints were left on the rock, imprinted into the rock nearly half a *cun* deep. Although after being subjected to the weather the stone was no longer dense and solid, yet without exerting one's power onto the soles of one's feet, one would not be able to leave such a deep footprint. From this, it could be seen that these two footprints were deliberately left here.
Chu Liuxiang mused quietly, "Could it be that Ji Bingyan intentionally leave these footprints here? He had come here, hiding on these rocks to spy on them, but unexpectedly the opposite side also had martial art masters among them and thus his track was discovered. Naturally the martial art master among the assassins immediately fought with him. At that time he suddenly realize his lone power was not enough, hence he left these two footprints on the rock, to let me know his whereabouts."

Thinking to this point, he flew up onto the rocks. Immediately he found another set of two footprints. These two footprints did not go into the rock as deep as the previous two, the toes were pointing directly to the west.

Chu Liuxiang mused, "These two footprints must be left by Ji Bingyan just before he went away. By this moment he must have fought a desperate fight against that martial art master assassin, inevitably his heart was nervous, hence the footprints were comparatively shallower. Looking at the footprints pointing directly to the west, clearly their whereabouts must be in that direction."

Thinking to this point, Chu Liuxiang immediately rushed straight to the west.

But after running for several dozen *zhang*, he halted his steps and thought, "That's not right!"
Ji Bingyan's character was as stubborn as a bull; he was even more bullheaded than Hu Tiehua. Since he already determined to stake everything he had to fight the assassin, he definitely would not want anybody else to disturb him. He even left that Qiuci warrior in his place, it was precisely because he did not want Chu Liuxiang to know his whereabouts. So how could he leave footprints at this moment to let Chu Liuxiang know where to find him?

Chu Liuxiang sighed. He turned around and ran back to the pile of rocks, and stood on the rocks where the footprints were, facing the west, quietly pondering it over.

“Ji Bingyan knew that sooner or later I would find this place, hence he left behind the footprints to let me know that he was here. But he did not want me to intervene his decisive battle; therefore, he intentionally wanted to confuse my direction. In that case, where did he and the martial art master assassin actually go?”

Naturally they could not possibly go to the south, because it was the direction from which Chu Liuxiang came. If they did not go to the west, then the possibilities were only to the east or to the north.

While Chu Liuxiang was hesitant and could not make up his mind, he suddenly remembered something: Ji Bingyan always disliked the glaring sunshine. Even in his home, oftentimes he slept until after noon before he was even willing to get out of bed, and then unless it was nearly dawn, he would not want to go to sleep either.

Therefore, in his subconscious mind, he could not possibly run to the east to meet the rising morning sun, which leave only the north. Although he was not a hundred-percent certain, but this moment, good or bad, he simply must try.

Chu Liuxiang immediately turned and rushed to the north.

These days, Chu Liuxiang already knew that on the desert, water was life. Therefore, among the stuff that he carried, he would never forget to bring a sheepskin bag of water.

This moment he drank several mouthfuls of water before running straight for about two *li* in one breath, only to see a few more cacti ahead of him, but all had been chopped off.

Chu Liuxiang halted his steps; he picked up half a piece of cactus from the ground, and looked at the cut where the cactus has been chopped off. He seemed to be examining it very carefully.

This moment, if there were someone by his side, that person would certainly feel strange, wondering what might be so special about this half piece of cactus; could it be that there was still any flower growing on it?

Chu Liuxiang looked at it for half a day, his pair of eyebrows was knitted even tighter, he was continuously muttering to himself, “What a fast sword! What a fast sword technique!”

Turned out he was able to see the relative superiority of the sword technique from the cut on the chopped off cactus. Ji Bingyan did not use sword; seeing his opponent’s sword technique was unexpectedly this sharp, naturally Chu Liuxiang could not help feeling even more anxious for him.

He searched around on the ground for half a day, and picked another half a piece of cactus. The cut on this half-piece of cactus was far less flat and smooth compared to the first half-piece; apparently it was cut using an extremely blunt instrument. And the weapon Ji Bingyan used was precisely a pair of judge’s pens.

Chu Liuxiang examined again for half a day. His brows gradually loosened up, he muttered to himself, “Having been entangled with such powerful opponent for half a day, his strength did not weaken the slightest bit. I did not expect that these past few years, his martial art skill has made such progress.”

He originally thought that over the last few years Ji Bingyan has lived in riches and luxury, surrounded by wine and beauty, although his skill might not diminish, his strength might no suffer any damage, but he might not make any progress either; only this moment did he feel somewhat relieved.

But in the middle of hard fighting, why did the two combatants cut these cacti for no reason at all?

It was because the cactus contained water. The two men fought for half a day, their lips dry their tongue parched, unexpectedly they paused in here to drink some water before continuing their battle.

From this, it could be seen that the direction Chu Liuxiang took was not wrong. He also drank a mouthful of water and caught his breath. It was not because he was tired of traveling, but because he already predicted accurately that after finding them, he might be involved in the hard battle as well; therefore, he wanted to preserve and nurture his spirit, and to restore his strength here.

After a moment's walk, he saw ahead of him a towering sand dune, its height reached up to ten *zhang*.
In the desert, the blue sea turned into mulberry fields [idiom: transformations of the world]; the changes happened extremely fast, the flat ground of last night might turn into a sand dune like towering mountain peak the next morning.

Naturally these sand dunes were extremely unstable. Although an average person would be able to run up the hill, but if the sand dune collapsed, it would be hard to avoid his entire body buried alive under millions of *catties* of yellow sand.
Chu Liuxiang took a deep breath, he swept upward, light like flying cotton wadding, like dead leaves, light like a feather he stood on the summit, his eyes scanned all four directions. He saw that within several *li* in all directions, not only there were many sand dunes, big and small, there were also pile after pile of weather-beaten rocks, and bush after bush of thistles and thorns.
The desert was not 'not even a blade of grass grows' [idiom: barren] at all; some vegetation could grow without needing much water, it's just that they never grow tall.

Suddenly he heard a 'Qiang!' followed by a streak of sword light, like a long rainbow across the sky, flashing behind a pile of rocks in the distance. The sword light was pressing; it was not something that any locals could do.

Like a mandarin duck he slid down the hill; like a swallow he flew away.

He did not dare to make any noise, only because when martial art masters were fighting each other, distraction was the biggest taboo. If Ji Bingyan heard his voice, as soon as his state of mind was somewhat slacking, he might meet the disaster of losing his life.

But when Chu Liuxiang swept behind the pile of rocks, he did not see even half a shadow over there; unexpectedly, the thistles and thorns had been cut off by the light of the sword.

More and more Chu Liuxiang felt that this person's sword technique was very sharp; it was really astonishing. Unexpectedly, the 'Black Monkey' Sun Kong and Situ Liuxing's description was not exaggeration.

Suddenly he heard another 'Qiang!' the sound of metal clashing against metal. Chu Liuxiang rushed toward the sound as if he was flying, yet unexpectedly nobody was there.

However, the rocks were toppled over, crushed to become like powder, scattered all over the ground.

These rocks must have been swept over by the judge's pen in Ji Bingyan's hand; definitely it was not crushed by the sword. From this, it could be seen that Ji Bingyan still have power enough to fight a desperate battle.

Chu Liuxiang heaved a deep sigh. So far, although he has not seen these two people fighting, the intensity of the battle could be easily imagined.

Unexpectedly the two combatants have been fighting from several *li* away to this place, they have been fighting from night all the way to the morning, and then from the morning up until now; such a fierce battle was indeed very rare. Now, since the fight between the two still seemed to be a tie, Chu Liuxiang no longer need to be anxious, just because he knew that worrying would not be of any use. In this kind of terrain, trying to find them quickly was easier said than done. Not to mention that if Ji Bingyan knew that he was coming, he might be

afraid that Chu Liuxiang would intervene, perhaps he would not intentionally reveal his whereabouts.

Therefore, Chu Liuxiang might as well restrain his *qi*, and listened quietly. Sure enough, half a day later, he heard another noise of metal clashing against each other; it was coming from the left.
This time Chu Liuxiang did not rush over directly, but he made a detour from the right side, with the hope of going around and ahead of them, so that he might be able to intercept them head-on.

But this time he was still pouncing on empty air; unexpectedly the two combatants were moving away to the other side. Smiling wryly, Chu Liuxiang shook his head. But suddenly his countenance changed greatly.

Ahead, on the yellow sand, unexpectedly there were a few drops of blood [orig. 碧血 – bluish green blood: the blood shed in a just cause]. If it were Hu Tiehua, when he saw these bloodstains, perhaps he would not be this anxious, because he might think that the blood came from the opponent's body.

But Chu Liuxiang knew that Ji Bingyan's judge pen was used only to seal the opponent's acupoint; if he was hit, the opponent would fall to the ground and unable to get up, but he could not possibly bleed, plus he would not be able to continue fighting.

The more anxious he was, the more Chu Liuxiang did not dare to make any noise. This moment Ji Bingyan has been wounded, perhaps his injury was not light either; if he was distracted, wouldn't he immediately fall under the opponent's deadly blow?

Although Chu Liuxiang was completely without inhibition, but for the sake of his friends' safety, he was cautions and timid; unexpectedly he was even worse than women [orig. *furen* (married woman/older woman), and *nuzi* (girl/woman in general); Gu Long was definitely not PC].

A few drops of blood could also be found on the pile of rocks. Chu Liuxiang leaped up, thinking that he was going to quietly wait for saber light and sword shadow to appear above the tip of the rocks.

Who would have thought that right this moment, on a pile of sand dune ahead, suddenly two people appeared? Both men had weapons in their hands, which they brandished in such a way that the wind and the rain would not penetrate, yet they did not generate the slightest bit of noise of weapons clashing against each other, as if the two had been fighting for half a day, hence they were already very clear of the opponent's style, so that without having to wait until the style was launched, they already launched the strike and changed the style.

With a fight like this, naturally both sides were moving even faster, but it was also more dangerous. No matter which side made the move, if there was the slightest bit of deviation, the opponent's weapon would immediately enter by exploiting a weak spot.

But although their moves were exquisite and brilliant, their form was in disarray.

Both men's clothes have been beaten that everything was broken and in disorder; their body, their head, their hair and eyebrows, everything was covered in yellow sand. They appeared to be like a couple of living ghosts boring out of the yellow sand. Were it not for knowing what kind of weapon Ji Bingyan was using, Chu Liuxiang practically would not be able to tell which of these two was Ji Bingyan.

He saw Ji Bingyan's left shoulder was bound tightly using the cloth from his sleeve, with traces of blood still seeping out from the inside; it seemed that he was really stabbed by the opponent's sword.

However, the two were involved in tight fighting, how did he bind up his own wound? Could it be that after the opponent injured him with his sword, he waited for him to bandage his wound before continuing their fight?

These two had been fighting for half a day; could it be that a people-of-talent-appreciate-one-another [idiom] feeling grew in their heart, so that as one of them was wounded, the other did not seize this opportunity to attack?

However, looking at how the two were making their moves, all were staking-it-all moves; not move one carried the intention of letting the other side live, not one move showed any leniency.

The more Chu Liuxiang watched, the more he was confused. He noticed that for the time being, Ji Bingyan was still able to hold his ground; he knew that if he appeared and intervene, Ji Bingyan would be upset instead.

Yet looking at the other man's swordsmanship, unexpectedly Chu Liuxiang felt that it looked very familiar. He saw the man moved his sword like the wind. The speed of his sword-play was difficult to describe, only the upper part of his body was absolutely still, every strike was sent out using the strength of his wrist.

Someone who used such sword technique, according to what Chu Liuxiang knew, in all the world, there was only one person, the '*Zhongyuan Yidian Hong*' [lit. one red dot of the Central Plains – see Book 1].
But this man's swordsmanship was slightly different from Yidian Hong.

Strictly speaking, this man's swordsmanship was steadier and tighter compared to Yidian Hong, but without Yidian Hong's one-sword-sealing-the-throat vicious and tough-as-nail style.

Inwardly Chu Liuxiang had some doubt; he was not sure what this person's relationship with Yidian Hong was; it looked like even if he was not of the same school as Yidian Hong, he must be related somehow with him.

His pair of eyes was as cold as ice, as ferocious as a wolf, ash-colored like the snow covering the mountain peak, firm like the snow-capped mountain peak.

This pair of eyes, apart from '*Zhongyuan Yidian Hong*', there was no other person.

Chu Liuxiang was pleasantly surprised; he could not help but was going to call out. But suddenly he saw Yidian Hong's long sword stabbed into the opponent's chest. Ji Bingyan's pair of hands crossed each other, the judge pens formed a crucifix to meet the attack upward.

This was precisely the 'crucifix sealing the gate'. It's just that when others launched this 'crucifix sealing the gate' move, it was purely defensive; however, when Ji Bingyan launched it, there was an offensive move hidden within the defensive, the pair of judge pens cut into the opponent's weapon like a pair of scissors.

It was a strike with both offensive and defensive moves; it was actually an amazing move.

However, as soon as Chu Liuxiang saw him launching this move, his entire body turned cold.

Turned out Yidian Hong precisely wanted to lure him to use this move, just because his sword technique was not the same as various schools and sects under the heavens; by using the wrist to control the sword, the changes in moves were a lot faster than other people's.

Furthermore, Ji Bingyan's defensive move contained an offensive, thus the defensive power was somewhat distributed. If he were dealing with someone else, by this point the opponent's sword move would have reached its end, so that he would be able to scissor the opponent's blade.

But due to the aforementioned unique sword technique Yidian Hong was using, by this moment he still had enough power left; if he fully used this spare power, his long sword would rise forward and push, before Ji Bingyan was able to cut his blade, the long sword would have pierced Ji Bingyan's throat.

Chapter 45 – Heroes Sympathizing With Each Other

What a good '*Zhongyuan Yidian Hong*'! Just now he must have seen Ji Bingyan using this move, inwardly he already thought of a way to deal with it, and thus this moment he lured him to use this move again.
As the onlooker, Chu Liuxiang saw clear, while the person on the spot was baffled; he also knew well the way of Yidian Hong's sword, naturally he could see clearly. Although inwardly he was greatly shocked, he was powerless to do anything.

Yidian Hong's sword moved like the wind; who in the world would be able to stop it?

Who would have thought that this moment, Yidian Hong's sword suddenly drew an arc? Unexpectedly it circled around Ji Bingyan's judge pen. 'Swish!' it reversed its direction to slice down on Ji Bingyan's left thigh.

His sword clearly was going to succeed; why did he suddenly change his move? Although inwardly Chu Liuxiang was happy, he could not help being shocked.

Yidian Hong's sword technique has always been no-hole-left-unentered; how did he become this foolish this time?

Ji Bingyan wholeheartedly wanted to stab to injure the enemy, he could not concentrate on two things at the same time, he did not think anything was strange; the opponent was launching a stupid move, it was precisely a great opportunity for him.

His pair of pens split, he launched the 'viper out of its hole', a couple of 'Pop! Pop!' was heard, the *jianjing* acupoints on both Yidian Hong's left and right shoulders were sealed, he fell backward.
After fighting hard for half a day, finally Ji Bingyan won; he could not help laughing heartily.

But the opponent's ash-grey eyes were looking coldly at him, his gaze did not show the slightest bit of expression that he conceded or was discouraged, it was even brimming with an air of arrogance.

Ji Bingyan laughed and said, “Although your sword technique is rarely seen in the world, but this one move was executed terribly; no matter who, anybody who makes such move ought to admit defeat. You …”

His voice suddenly stopped, his countenance changed.

He suddenly discovered that on the tip of the opponent’s sword, unexpectedly there was a scorpion skewered on it.

In the desert, the air was dry, the scorpions were big and poisonous. Anybody who got bitten by it, perhaps would be beyond help. Just now unexpectedly Yidian Hong discovered a scorpion on his thigh, hence he changed his move to help. Turned out Yidian Hong’s ‘stupid move’ was launched because he wanted to save Ji Bingyan’s life.

Ji Bingyan’s countenance turned miserable; he could no longer speak.

Naturally Chu Liuxiang was able to see as well; he could not help sighing in his heart. This ‘*Zhongyuan Yidian Hong*’ was indeed worthy to be called a good man. But how about Ji Bingyan?
Was he going to kill Yidian Hong to shut his mouth because of this? Chu Liuxiang really wanted to see.

Ji Bingyan stared blankly for half a day. He slowly said, “Why did you do it? Don’t you want to kill me?”

Although Yidian Hong’s body was unable to move, his mouth could still talk. He spoke coldly, “I want to kill you, but I simply cannot let you die of scorpion bite.”

Ji Bingyan threw his head back and laughed aloud, “Good! Good! Good …” He said ‘good’ seven, eight times in succession. Suddenly with his toes he kicked up the long sword, caught it with his hand, flipped it over, and chopped it down on his own left leg. Unexpectedly he did not want to receive this kindness. Unexpectedly he wanted to cut his own left leg for Yidian Hong.

Even Yidian Hong's cold and detached eyes could not help revealing shocked and surprised expression, "Are you crazy?" he blurted out.

Amidst his shout, suddenly he heard a 'whoosh!' as a powerful gust of wind struck.

'Dang!' it knocked the sword in Ji Bingyan's hand. Sparks flew everywhere. Unexpectedly the sword in his hand was jolted that it flew out.

His countenance greatly changed, Ji Bingyan retreated; he withdrew eight *chi*, while taking the pair of judge pens, which he held in his left hand, and separated it to his left and right hands, while his mouth sternly said, "Who's there?" Only to hear someone laughed slowly, "Both of you have fiery temper; indeed it is not a minor matter."

Amidst the laughter, someone flew over, picked up the long sword from the ground, and casually patted Yidian Hong's acupoint to unseal it.

Stomping his feet, Ji Bingyan hatefully said, "Finally you are here."

Unexpectedly, Yidian Hong also said loudly, "Finally you are here."

The two spoke exactly the same thing, but Ji Bingyan was speaking about something that ought to happen; he already calculated accurately that Chu Liuxiang would come to look for him, but he was upset that Chu Liuxiang came at an importunate time.

But why did Yidian Hong say that exact same thing? Could it be that he also knew that Chu Liuxiang was nearby? Could it be that he also calculated accurately that Chu Liuxiang would come to look for him?

While Chu Liuxiang was still puzzled, Ji Bingyan blurted in astonishment, "You know this man?"

Yidian Hong also blurted, ““You know this man?”

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “I know both of you; not only that, both are old friends; therefore, you don’t need to feel uncomfortable of owing him some kindness. In any case, there will be a lot of chances that people are going to kill him in the future; if you could think of a way to save him, even only once, that should be enough.”

He spoke those words to Ji Bingyan.

Ji Bingyan stared blankly for half a day. “Humph!’ he snorted.

Chu Liuxiang said, “But how did you come here?”

This question was addressed to Yidian Hong.

Who would have thought that Yidian Hong was even more surprised? “How did I come here?” he said, “Didn’t you call on me to come here?”

As soon as this sentence went out of his mouth, Chu Liuxiang and Ji Bingyan were greatly shocked.

Rubbing his nose, Chu Liuxiang said with a wry smile, “I called on you to come here? Why would I want you to come here?”

Yidian Hong replied, “Naturally you wanted me here to kill the King of Qiuci.”

Hearing that, Chu Liuxiang stayed calm instead, only because he was able to see that this was not a simple misunderstanding, but there must be a conspiracy somewhere. He simply looked for a rock to sit down and said, “There must be twists and turns in this matter, you might as well sit down and tell me slowly.”

He chuckled, and then added, “I know you don’t like to talk, let me just ask you questions then!”

Yidian Hong's cold and detached face was changed as well; he said, "Twists and turns? Ask me … Are you …"

Yidian Hong said, "That day after you and I parted company, I only felt that the Central Plains has become a place where I have nothing worth staying for, while I have long admired the vast sky and open space outside the Pass; therefore, I decided to travel out of the Pass."

Chu Liuxiang knew this person was proud and arrogant, after suffering defeat twice, inevitably he was downhearted, unexpectedly he thought about wandering outside the Pass like he was going on an exile. However, although he had that thought in his heart, his mouth said with a laugh, "In that case, perhaps you went out the Pass even before I did?"

Yidian Hong said, "But after traveling for a few days, I discovered that someone was watching me secretly. No matter where I went, he followed quietly behind."

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, "If that person had any idea of attacking you, he must be really blind. I wonder what he looked like?"

It should be noted that Chu Liuxiang's greatest strength was that no matter how difficult or dangerous things were, he was always able to remain cool-headed and relaxed. But he also knew that not everybody was like him. He noticed that Yidian Hong appeared to be slightly nervous; hence he spoke the first two sentences to calm Yidian Hong's mind, while only the last one sentence touched the real subject.

As expected, Yidian Hong unconsciously chuckled a little and then said, "That person was indeed ordinary; there was not any distinctive feature on him at all. Even if you saw him many times before, you might not necessarily be able to remember him, just because you can see this kind of person everywhere."

Chu Liuxiang sighed inwardly. Smiling wryly, he said, "The more ordinary someone's outward appearance is, the more convenient it is for him to do bad

things. If I wanted to find someone to do some clandestine work for me, I would definitely look for such person."

Yidian Hong said, "At first I did not want to look for trouble, but he followed me for two days, until I finally could not take it anymore. Who would have thought that while I was thinking of confronting him directly, he came to me first."

"Oh?" Chu Liuxiang said.

Yidian Hong went on, "He unexpectedly came and asked me, 'I wonder if *Gexia* [reminder: your distinguished self/sire] is the '*Zhongyuan Yidian Hong*'?' Momentarily I was unable to guess his intention, I only nodded. But then he said that he was your friend and coming specifically to look for me."
Chu Liuxiang smiled and said, "And he told you that I wanted you to assassinate the King of Qiuci?"

"That's right," Yidian Hong replied, "He said, 'The King of Qiuci damages the country and causes suffering to the people, Chu *Xiang Shuai* has long wanted to get rid of him, but for the time being he could not spare the time to handle a separate task, thereupon he wished to toil your good self to do it for him.'"
"Did you believe him immediately?" Chu Liuxiang asked.

Yidian Hong said, "I did not believe him right away, but then he said something that gave me no choice but to believe him."

"What did he say?" Chu Liuxiang asked.

Yidian Hong was silent for half a day; he slowly said, "He said, 'Chu *Xiang Shuai* has always considered *Gexia* as a good friend, otherwise he would not have asked for a favor. Not to mention a real man know how to distinguish gratitude and grudges; could it be that *Gexia* forgets his kindness in not killing you?'"
Smiling wryly, Chu Liuxiang asked, "Do you think I would really say such thing?"

Yidian Hong replied, “I thought precisely because you would never broadcast such thing that I believed it must be you who said it; otherwise, how could this person know?”

Emotionally moved, Chu Liuxiang said, “That’s right; in all the world, practically only a few people knew about this, and no one knew that you and I became good friends after a fight [orig. don’t fight, won’t make friends (idiom)].”

Ji Bingyan coldly said, “Even I did not know it.”

Yidian Hong said, “Besides, my profession is assassination; if he wanted me to kill, he could use gold and silver to buy my service, why would he deceive me? Unless he already knew that I changed profession. But …”

Chu Liuxiang continued for him, “But in all the world, the number of people who knew that you have washed your hands and changed profession is not many.”

“Exactly so,” Yidian Hong replied.

Chu Liuxiang sighed. He said, “If I were you, perhaps inevitably I would also have to believe that man’s words.”

Ji Bingyan suddenly spoke again, “Those who knew the relationship between the two of you, how many are they?”

Muttering to himself irresolutely, Chu Liuxiang said, “I’ll say there are NanGong Ling, Wuhua, Rong’er, and Hei Zhenzhu.”

Ji Bingyan said, “But NanGong Ling and Wuhua are dead, Rong’er can’t possibly do such thing; therefore …”

He stopped abruptly; his eyes were fixed on Chu Liuxiang.

Chu Liuxiang heaved a long, long sigh. He said, “So it’s only Hei Zhenzhu. Could it be that the mastermind behind the treason against the King of Qiuci is he? Is it really he?”

Ji Bingyan slowly said, “You and I already knew that in the conspiracy against the Qiuci, there are Han people involved. But for a Han to initiate such a big treason in a foreign country is easier said than done. Unless this person already had great power in there; otherwise, even if he could make such treason succeed, there is absolutely no way he would be able to establish a foothold in there.”

Speaking to this point, he stopped again. Just because who this person was, he was ready to appear at the call [idiom: on the verge of coming out into the open]. Without Ji Bingyan needed to continue, the others already knew – only the son of the ‘King of the Desert’ could initiate such major event in here; this point was indeed clear and easy to see, even Yidian Hong was able to guess it.

Chu Liuxiang was silent for half a day. He spoke slowly, “Where is that person at this moment?”

Yidian Hong replied, “After accompanying me traveling out of the Pass, the man bade farewell to me, saying that he was going to see you. But from then on, there was always an envoy of the King of Qiuci meeting and escorting me along the way until here.”

“Who else did you see in here?” Chu Liuxiang asked.

Yidian Hong said, “I saw two Qiuci high-ranking ministers; I hear that their position is really high. After the King of Qiuci was banished, it was they who assist the new king to preside over the royal court government.”

“But there is also a Han, isn’t it?” Chu Liuxiang asked.

“That’s right,” Yidian Hong replied, “But that man is definitely not Hei Zhenzhu.”

“Who is that person? What does he look like?” Chu Liuxiang asked.

Yidian Hong replied, “This man is called Wu Juxuan. Reportedly, he is a famous scholar well versed in letters and military technology; furthermore, his wisdom and scheming ability is unmatched. But in my eyes, I feel like he is a roebuck-head, rat-eyed man, with loathsome appearance across his whole face.”

Chu Liuxiang sighed and said, “It was precisely because he did not want anybody to be close to him, lest people could see through his track. That loathsome appearance is his best cover.”

“That’s right,” Ji Bingyan said, “If other people practically do not feel like looking at him, then no one could see whether he is wearing disguise or not.”

Chu Liuxiang said, “Their tent has been moved away last night, hasn’t it?”

“That’s right,” Yidian Hong and Ji Bingyan replied in unison.

“Where did they move?” Chu Liuxiang asked.

Yidian Hong replied, “It is said that not far from here, there is a desert inn, a black inn [lit. inn that kills and robs guests (esp. in traditional fiction)] that is run by a local big robber ‘*Ban Tian Feng*’ [half-the-sky wind]. Apparently they are in collusion with this ‘*Ban Tian Feng*’; this moment that place is where they were going.”
“These one or two days, perhaps they are not going to leave, are they?” Chu Liuxiang pondered.

“That’s right,” Yidian Hong replied, “We could go and slaughter them now.”

Ji Bingyan coldly said, “Killing them is easy, but if these three are not the main brains, by killing them, won’t we beat the grass to scare the snake instead?”

“Besides,” Chu Liuxiang added, “They are fully aware that as soon as you see me, these things will be exposed immediately, yet they still did not have any

scruples in letting you come. This must be because they are really secure in the knowledge that they have backing."

Frowning, Yidian Hong asked, "Secure in the knowledge that they have backing?"

"That's right," Chu Liuxiang replied, "Simply because I still have three friends who had fallen into their hands."

He smiled bitterly before continuing, "I came here this time, it was precisely to look for these three friends; unexpectedly I accidentally caught them red-handed, finding out their [feminine] information in here. It would have been better if I did not know anything about this matter; now that I know, we simply have to be extremely careful in our actions."

Ji Bingyan coldly said, "Perhaps those people sought this *Renxiong* [brother/friend, honorific] over, it was precisely to tell you about this matter from the side, using this as a pretext to warn you. This way, in your actions you cannot but have some misgivings, hence they will have more free hand in their actions."
Chu Liuxiang said, "They want to warn me, why not tell Rong'er and the others to write a letter for me? Why must they spend this much effort?"

Ji Bingyan was silent for half a day. He slowly said, "That makes sense as well, but I really cannot figure out why they did what they did. Since they are fully aware that as soon as the two of you see each other the lie would be exposed, isn't it just a waste of energy?"

Muttering to himself irresolutely, Chu Liuxiang said, "This is perhaps because they did not expect me to come here and protect the King of Qiuci. Just two, three days ago, we didn't think that we would be here protecting the King of Qiuci, did we?"

Ji Bingyan thought about it; he no longer spoke.

Chu Liuxiang went on, “As the saying goes, strong dragon cannot repress a snake [idiom: fig. a local gangster who is above the law]. The opponent has already obtained the advantage of the right time, the right place; they already occupied the greatly advantageous position, but we do have a little bit of advantage as well, which is …”

Ji Bingyan could not help continuing for him, “Which is they do not know us, but we do know them.”

“That’s right,” Chu Liuxiang replied, “It is precisely because the opponent does not know us that they made one wrong step. Now we can exploit this point. If we wait until Hei Zhenzhu arrives, it will be too late.”

“Are you thinking before Hei Zhenzhu arrives, we go to that desert inn to scout the situation?” Ji Bingyan asked.

“Precisely,” Chu Liuxiang replied.

Yidian Hong’s eyes flickered, he asked, “Are we going now?”

Chu Liuxiang said, “Fortunate timing is fleeting; if we want to go, naturally the quicker the better. It’s just that …”

He sighed, and then continued, “Now, not only we have to deal with these people, we still have to deal with Shi *Guanyin* as well; precisely the both-sides-the-enemy situation. If we are a bit careless, we will be caught in the middle, then we will fail and wiped over the floor, and fall into a hopeless situation.”
Ji Bingyan has known him for many years, so that there was some kind of tacit understanding between the two. Hearing that, he only nodded. But Yidian Hong could not help asking, “You mean …”

Chu Liuxiang said, “Although the opponent does not know us, but seeing two strangers suddenly appear in their territory, inevitably they would want to pay

special attention to us, perhaps they will even deal with us like dealing with fat sheep. But if these two men are yours …"

Yidian Hong could not help continuing, "If these two men are my friends, how could they dare to make their move?"

Chu Liuxiang chuckled and said, "But the fact that *Zhongyuan Yidian Hong* has always been coming and going alone is known to everyone. How could in this kind of desolate and uninhabited place he suddenly meet two friends?"
Yidian Hong was silent for half a day. He spoke slowly, "Even in crowded-to-bursting-point place or anywhere else for that matter, I would not meet even half a friend."

Although his words were cold, inevitably there was some kind of lonely, melancholy insinuation coming out from within the tone of his voice.

Ji Bingyan cast him a glance; he suddenly said, "Friends, the less you have them the better. Even if there are no friends, there is nothing to be sorry for."

Yidian Hong also cast him a glance. Unexpectedly there was a hint of smile in his eyes.

Chu Liuxiang clapped his hands and said with a laugh, "But the two of you have identically strange character; sooner or later you will have to make friends with each other, there will be no escape."

He patted the two men's shoulders, and said with a heavy voice, "Now that we can neither go forward just like this nor pretending to be his friends, to satisfy both sides, we could only …"

His voice was gradually growing lower, and gradually growing inaudible.

Midday. Blazing sun for ten thousand *li*.

Under the scorching sun that burned people to their death, there were several camels slowly walking near.

Even these camels, which were known as the ‘boat of the desert’ – were struggling to move forward under the noonday sun. The people on the camels were at their last gasp even more; they only had half a breath left.

These people’s lips were cracked, their eyes were bloodshot, their entire body seemed to turn numb, they could not feel anything. In their heart, they could only think of one word, ‘Water … water … water …”

Suddenly they saw a wisp of smoke rising in the distance. These people’s faces immediately showed ecstasy – if there was smoke from the chimney, could there be no water?

Chapter 46 – The Sword Does Not Come Out Lightly

Everybody was roaring wildly in ecstasy; everybody scrambled desperately to rush forward.

Who would have thought that the old man, whose face was full of wind and frost [fig. hardships], who acted as the leader – suddenly callout out loudly, “Must not go! That place is not something that we can go to.”

Although his voice was low and hoarse, there was still some kind of power that made people believe in him. Sure enough, everybody halted their steps, with face full of longing and desire.

Unexpectedly, the old man’s dry and rough skin was brimming with fear; his voice cracked as he spoke, “Do you know what that place is?”

Everybody shook their head; one of them said, “We don’t care what place that is, as long as there is water there …”

When he spoke the word ‘water’, immediately everybody got excited again. “Water … water … water …” burst of beast-like howl came out of their throat.

The old man licked his lips with his tongue, but even after licking for a long time, his lips were still dry and cracked, just because his tongue was dry and was about to crack.

He sighed and said, “Water … ay! Although that place has water, but it also has blades to kill people; right now we still have a chance to live, but if we go there, we will die immediately.”

Everybody looked at each other in dismay, “Why?” they asked.

The old man replied, “Just because that place belongs to *Ban Tian Feng* [see last chapter] …”
When he spoke ‘*Ban Tian Feng*’, three words, two men already fell off from the camelback. Then two other men fell off the camelback and could not even move.
Suddenly a man screamed, “I don’t care! I want to go. I’d rather be killed than to suffer like this again.”

With all his might he beat the camel so that it rushed forward wildly. There was a look of horror on everybody’s face, as if they knew that once he left, he would never come back.

This moment, suddenly three human shadows appeared from the middle of the windblown sand; one man was slim, wearing black clothes, his face was rough as if it was carved using a stone, he had two pieces of rope in his hand, pulling along the two other men like leading a dog. Of the two men being tied, one was tall and thin, but his face was full of pockmarks as big as coins, his lips were upturned like a pig’s snout. His face was the kind of ugly face that when you

look at it, you will vomit for three days straight. The other man was not any better; he was a hunchback.

These two men's four hands were tied tightly, as they staggered along behind the first man.

The man in black actually looked haughty, his footsteps were light and strong, unexpectedly he was walking along this great desert where the windblown sand filled the sky as if he was walking along a flat and wide avenue in the middle of the city.

Seeing these three men, the group of travelers who were about to die of thirst could not help but were stunned. Nobody knew who started it, but someone suddenly screamed, "*Ban Tian Feng* … *Ban Tian Feng* …"
In the desert, who else but *Ban Tian Feng* or his subordinates would catch people and pull them along like that? In extreme shock, they scrambled away in the blink of an eye.
The hunchback sighed and spoke with a wry smile, "I never thought that these people are so scared of *Ban Tian Feng*; unexpectedly they would rather die of thirst than going there."
The man's voice was deep and low, but clear and bright, carrying within it some kind of strange inciting motive power, which was an extreme mismatch to his appearance. Strangely enough, it sounded very much like Chu Liuxiang's voice.

The pockmarked man said, "So it seems, this place must be extremely dangerous." This man's voice unexpectedly sounded like Ji Bingyan.

Turned out in order to spy on the opponent's real situation, while preventing the opponent's suspicion, unexpectedly they disguised themselves as Yidian Hong's prisoners. Just an insignificant piece of rope, how could it really bind them? One-in-ten-thousand chance that someone see through their ruse, they could still escape unscathed. Wouldn't this way be a lot more brilliant than pretending to be Yidian Hong's friends?

Chu Liuxiang was silent for half a day. “I still have more than half a bag of water here,” he said, “Let’s give it to them!”

This man was really someone who
dressed-as-a-dragon-would-look-like-a-dragon,
dressed-as-a-tiger-would-look-like-a-tiger; even disguising himself as a hunchback, it appeared that both ends could not touch the ground at all. Were it not for Yidian Hong saw it with his own eyes, he simply could not believe that the distinguished and accomplished, the confident and at ease, the fascinating ‘Bandit Chief’ Chu Liuxiang could, within half a *sichen* – transform himself to look like this.
Ji Bingyan chuckled lightly and said, “With that old man leading the way, I am sure those men will not die of thirst.”

“You know that old man?’ Chu Liuxiang asked.

Ji Bingyan replied, “That man could really be considered an old fox of the desert; other skills he may not have, but he has been going back and forth in the desert I don’t know how many times, his nose unexpectedly can sniff where there is any danger, where there is safe to go. If traveling merchants can get him to be their guide, it would be like wearing a talisman to protect them.”

He laughed, and then went on, “Ten years ago, I saw this man. At that time he already obtained enough wealth to make him, all the way to his grandson – live a comfortable life. I thought he had already washed his hands and is enjoying a comfortable retirement at home. Who would have thought that until today he is still in his old profession? It seems that he unexpectedly considers this kind of life very exciting.”

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “How could a good colt of a thousand *li* be willing to hide inside the stable? If you want this kind of man to enjoy a comfortable retirement at home, he might feel uncomfortable all over instead.”
Two *li* ahead, suddenly there was a rocky hill rising up to the sky. Although this hill was not high, in the middle of this endless desert, it appeared to be extremely eye-catching.

The strange rocks of the mountain looked like dog's teeth biting a bone; on the hill, not even a blade of grass grew, it appeared to be extremely steep. *Ban Tian Feng*'s desert inn was built against the hill.
Although it had the rocky mountain shielding it from the windblown sand, the inn was still built exceptionally sturdy. It used big tree trunks, about two-man arm length in circumference – as the main column, driven deep into the ground, about four or five *zhang* tall tree trunk, but with only no more than two *zhang* exposed above the ground. The cracks on the outside was filled with lead juice, making it as strong as a copper wall, iron bastion. If someone was locked inside, escaping would be more difficult than ascending the heavens. Although the inn had many rooms, the doors and windows were small and narrow. The openings were covered in cotton curtain, appearing shiny due to greasiness, it looked heavier than iron panel.

There was so signboard outside, only eight characters written on the wall with chalk, 'Steamed buns, fresh water, clean bed, hot pit.'

To the travelers on the desert, these eight characters carried magical power ten times stronger than 'North and South flavor, timely specialty dishes, fine wine from the spring, amiable hospitality'.

Lifting the curtain and walking in, one would see a not-too-big, not-too-small room, with four or five big tables, more than a dozen, perhaps twenty – long wooden benches.

At this moment, there were seven, eight big men around a table, playing *Tian Jiu* [Tien Gow]. On the counter to the left, a small old fellow with triangular face and a goatee was dozing off. A tobacco pipe was nestled in his mouth, but the fire had stopped burning long ago. Over yonder the men playing *Tian Jiu* were hooting, their voices shook the roof that it nearly collapsed, but he seemed to have not heard at all.
Suddenly the sound of hoof beats was heard outside, and then a man, with neither head nor brain, barged in, screaming and yelling, "Water … water …"

The shopkeeper was still dozing off, while not one of the men on the gambling table even looked back. This man staggered toward the counter and cackled,

"*Zhang* … *Zhanggui* [shopkeeper], could you sell some water to me? I have money."
The shopkeeper did not even open his eyes, but his mouth laughed and said, "You have money yet you are still afraid we won't sell water? *Caishenye* [god of wealth] is dropping by, would we push him out the door?"
Greatly delighted, the man said, "Yes … yes …"

His mouth was mumbling, unexpectedly he could not even speak clearly, yet his hand already fished out some money from his pocket, 'Dang!' he dropped it on the counter. Unexpectedly it was no less than twenty *taels*.
The shopkeeper opened his eyes just a slit, but he immediately closed it again.

Shocked, the man said, "Not … not enough?"

The shopkeeper sighed and shook his head.

The man gritted his teeth and fished out another twenty *taels*.
The shopkeeper still sighed and shook his head.

The man's eyes nearly shot out fire, but after casting a glance toward the big men on the other side, he immediately softened down again. Steeling himself, he fished for more money from his pocket.

While he was fishing out for more money, he was sweating profusely. But the shopkeeper was still sighing.

Finally the man could not help shouting, "One … one hundred and sixty *taels* of silver, still … still not enough?"
The shopkeeper giggled and said, "*Keguan* [honored guest], if you only want to buy one hundred and sixty *taels* worth of water, naturally you can."
The man happily said, "Yes, just … just that much!"

The shopkeeper coughed and said, "*Lao Yan*, get this *Keguan* one hundred and sixty *taels* worth of water."
The man called 'Old Yan' was just playing as the banker, the pile of silver on the table was pushed like a basket of steamed roll. 'Ba!' he exclaimed as he

turned the two cards [orig. tile] in his hand over; unexpectedly it was a ‘lame ten’ set. A banker with a ‘lame ten’ set in his hands, his mood could be easily imagined.

He saw this Old Yan was grinning. Unexpectedly he bit the two cards in his mouth, and then while biting, he cursed, “You, grandson of a turtle, rabbit kitten [i.e. s.o.b. and brat, respectively], dirty *Wangbadan* [lit. king eight eggs], who told you to come? You made *Laozi* lose money; it will be strange indeed if *Laozi* is not going to squeeze the yolk out of your egg.” [I know … I know … it’s a strange way to cuss, but I find it amusing … the Chinese have weird fascination with eggs, turtle, etc.]
It was unclear whether he was cursing the cards or the man, but the recipient of his cussing had no choice but to pretend that he did not hear anything.

It was half a day later that he came back with a teapot in his hands. The teapot was surprisingly not a small one. The man was ecstatic, “Thank you very much … thank you very much …” he said.

As soon as he grabbed the teapot, he poured it into his mouth. Indeed a drop of water fell onto his tongue. But his tongue has just started to cool down, the water was already gone.

Although the teapot was not small, the water inside was only one drop. The man spoke in trembling voice, “This … this pot has no water inside.”

Glaring at him, Old Yan said, “Who said there’s no water inside? What you drank just now was not water? We do business upright and honest here, why would we want to embezzle your money? Perhaps it’s you who are tired of living.”

The man was frightened and angry at the same time; he hissed, “But there is only one drop of water.”

Old Yan said, “One hundred and sixty *taels* of silver can actually buy only one drop of water; how much more do you want?”

The man could no longer help shouting; he said, “One hundred and sixty *taels* of silver for a drop of water, can you be considered running a business?”
The old man said, “Naturally we are running a business. It’s just that our business did not open for three years, so the first transaction has to cover for three years’ revenue. If you don’t like our price, who told you to come in?”

He suddenly snatched the teapot and spoke with evil grin, “But perhaps there’s still water inside the pot; let me squeeze it for you, see if we can squeeze some more out.”

As his mouth was talking, his two big hands twisted and wringed the pot. The bronze teapot immediately crumpled as if it was made of noodles. The man looked on, his mouth could not be closed, how could he dare to utter anything?

With a long drawn out laughter the shopkeeper said, “If *Keguan* is dissatisfied that the water is not enough, couldn’t you buy some more?”
The man stammered, “I … I have no more money.”

The shopkeeper said, “No money, other things can be used as well.”

The man gnashed his teeth, turned around and bolted out the door. Who would have thought that before he even reached the door, somebody already picked him up, and a large hand has already reached into his bosom.

By the time the hand came out, it had a full, bulging leather pouch in it. They heard Old Yan roared in laughter and said, “I can’t believe this kid is still very fat.”

The man spoke tremblingly, “I don’t … I don’t want to buy.”

Old Yan angrily said, “You don’t want to buy, then why did you come here? You think our place is just a joke to you?”

The man stared blankly for half a day; shedding tears, he said, “Since that’s the case, then bring the water out!”

Old Yan laughed aloud and said, “Your pouch appears to be as empty as anything, how could *Laozi* bring water out for you? Get lost and drink urine!” Waving both hands, unexpectedly he threw the man straight out. They heard the cotton door curtain made a ‘Pop!’ noise as the man, weighed several dozen *jin* [catty] passed through the door and out.
Old Yan clapped his hands and laughed heartily, “The Heaven has a road you don’t want to take, the Hell has no door yet you cast yourself into it; what are you if not blind?”

He had not finished speaking, suddenly there was another ‘Pop!’ sound as the cotton door curtain rolled up; unexpectedly the man flew back from outside the door, and ‘Bang!’ he sat on the table.

Old Yan was startled; he retreated three steps back and said, “Hey! I did not expect *Gexia* to be a sage who presents yourself as an ordinary person; unexpectedly you have some real skill.”
The shopkeeper coldly said, “You said others were blind, you are the blind one. The one with real skill is still outside the door!”

Old Yan looked carefully; he saw that the man sitting on the table had his two eyes staring blankly, he was stunned from the shock. From this, Old Yan was able to see that the man was thrown inside from outside the door, only unexpectedly the person outside was able to easily catch him and throw him back again, accurately had him sitting on the table without harming a single strand of his hair. Merely this skill in exerting the force was already extremely shocking.

Old Yan stared blankly for half a day before taking two more steps back and shouted, “The kid outside the door, get in quickly …”

‘To deliver your life’, two words [*song si*] have not yet spoken, his voice suddenly stopped, simply because the person coming in from the outside only

cast a glance toward him, unexpectedly he already felt his whole body turned cold, and he could no longer speak.
Although outside the scorching sun was high up in the sky, the room was actually quite dark.

In the dim light, he saw the man's deathly pale face was without the slightest expression, as if nothing could impress his heart.

But that pair of eyes was terrifyingly penetrating, was horrifyingly cold. From the moment he stepped in, the air inside the room seemed to suddenly condensate. The gamblers stopped their hooting, the shopkeeper could only open his eyes wide, everybody felt the chill penetrating their bones. But nobody knew why they were afraid; afraid of what?

They saw the man walked in in long strides, practically he did not even consider the crowd of men inside the room to be worthy in his eyes. His hands were still holding the two pieces of rope. Pulling the ropes, two men tumbled inside from outside the door; one man was a hunchback, the other a man had an ugly, pockmarked face. They both fell inside and did not stop panting.

The old man took a deep breath, and then said, "Fr … friend, why do you come here?"

Although he was putting on a brave face, but somehow, his voice was still trembling a bit.

"What do you do in here?" the man in black asked.

Old Yan was stunned, "We are … this is an inn," he stammered.

The man in black already sat down, 'Slap!' he slapped the table and said, "Since this is an inn, why haven't you serve tea?"

Old Yan's eyes turned around, he noticed that the seven, eight men nearby all had their eyes on him; he mused inwardly, "What am I afraid of? You, this kid, are only alone, what's so scary about you?"

Thinking to this point, his courage rose up again. He laughed coldly and said, "In here, we always pay particular attention to money-first-goods-later; if you want tea, you have to pay first."

Who would have thought that the man in black coldly said, "There's no money."

Old Yan was stunned again. He was thinking of saying something, but suddenly he saw the man in black's sharp-as-a-blade eyes were staring at him; his heart turned cold, he could not even utter a single word.

But the shopkeeper suddenly coughed lightly, and then he said with a laugh, "Since this *Keguan* wants to drink tea, why haven't you quickly poured tea?" Unexpectedly Old Yan really hung his head low and poured some tea.

Watching this, the man who was thrown to the table was amazed; he could not help commending inwardly, "Turns out these bunch of robbers are still scared of an evil person."

The tea was coming really fast. The man in black picked the teapot with both hands and drank a big mouthful. Suddenly he sprayed the mouthful of tea onto Old Yan's face, and said angrily, "The tea leaves is undrinkable, get me another pot."

Unexpectedly, the spray of this mouthful of tea knocked the entire Old Yan's seven-*chi* tall body that he fell face up on the floor, with a burning pain on his entire face. He could not help jumping up and roared as he pounced over. Seeing him making his move, the seven or eight men on the side also bared their fangs and brandished their claws immediately; one after another they cried, "Beat it!" Some lifted the bench, some rolled up their sleeves.

The man in black pressed his hands on the table, suddenly he took a sharp intake of breath; unexpectedly, he, along with the table and the bench, slid several *chi* away.
Old Yan originally aimed accurately, who would have thought that this pounce of his pounced on empty air? Instead, he pounced on the big man coming from the opposite direction. The bench in the man's hand happened to be on its way down. A 'Bang!' was heard, Old Yan's body was bent into halves. Were it not for his head was slanting outward, his skull would have been burst open.

He jumped up and roared, "Xiao Huang, you, who were raised by the dogs, are you crazy?"

That man called Little Huang's face turned red, he said, "Who told you to blindly pounce over, you are the one raised by the dogs."

This man was a big winner, Old Yan was resentful against him to begin with, this moment half of his shoulder was hurt that it went numb, so his anger went through the roof; roaring loudly he said, "*Laozi* wants to see who has been raised by a female dog [lit. son of a b1tch]?"
Amidst his roar, the two pounced toward one another; you punch I kick, 'Bing! Bing! Bang! Bang!' they hit each other. Their hands and feet were not light either, they only focused on hitting the opponent, unexpectedly they forgot to dodge. In an instant they already had bloody nose and swollen face – the man in black became the spectator watching the excitement on the side instead, his eyes did not even blink.

Surprisingly, the shopkeeper also remained calm; he did not say anything.

The six, seven men on the side, some were good friends with Old Yan, some had thick friendship with Little Huang, they went so far as to clap their hands on the side, cheering on the two men.

'Bang!' Suddenly they heard the man in black slapped the table and said, "I told you to get another pot of tea, who told you to have a dogfight?"

It was only then did Old Yan and Little Huang remembered that the person they both wanted to beat was still there. Both were stunned, and stopped their hands in embarrassment. Furthermore, Old Yan was ashamed into anger; roaring wildly, he said, "*Laozi* is going to stake everything against you!"
As if he went mad, he pounced over; the man in black pulled back, the table and the bench followed him, sliding several *chi* away. Old Yan pounced an empty air again.
This time everybody learned from experience; nobody came over to help. They saw Old Yan punching and kicking, dashing to the left pouncing to the right, but failed to touch even the sleeve of the other man's clothes.

Unexpectedly it was as if the table and the bench were grown from the man in black's body; wherever his body moved, the bench and the table followed him.

This place was not big at all, plus there were quite a few tables and chairs, yet he was able to move freely within the not-too-big space.

Old Yan's eyes also turned red, his face was swelling as well. This moment his brows were beaded with sweat; stomping his feet, he said, "If you, this kid, have guts, stand up and have a straightforward fight with *Laozi*; whoever escapes is not a human, but a domestic animal!"
The man in black laughed coldly and said, "You are not fit to fight with me."

Old Yan angrily said, "You want to make cynical remarks, you are a domestic animal!"

The man in black suddenly opened his eyes wide, cold light flashed out, he spoke word-by-word, "You really want me to make my move?"

"I … I …" Old Yan stuttered. He was originally a very ruthless man, but this time, being at the receiving end of the man in black's stare, he felt his legs went weak. Unexpectedly he turned around and rushed toward the crowd of big men, "You, these grandsons of a turtle, what are you looking at? Are your hands broken?"

Being yelled at like that, everybody was embarrassed for not continuing fighting. They only saw the man in black slowly untied a long and thin, made of black leather sword sheath, with a long sword inside that looked like a viper – from his back, and put it down on the table. Gently caressing the scabbard, he coldly said, “This sword will not get out lightly, but once it is out, it must see blood, and the blood means someone is dead!”

He seemed to be muttering to himself, but hearing that, everyone’s body emitted cold sweats. You look at me, I gaze at you, no one dared to be the first to make his move.

The shopkeeper suddenly sighed and said, “Since you don’t dare to fight, why don’t you get the hell out of here quickly? Are you going to stay here and make a fool of yourself?”

The crowd of big men hung their heads in shame. The shopkeeper looked at the man in black. He laughed aloud and said, “Friend, you have quite a skill; are you coming here with the purpose of pulling the rug under my feet?”

The man in black did not look at him, not even with the corner of his eyes, he simply snorted, “Humph!”

The shopkeeper laughed aloud and said, “All right; since friend have come, we can’t let friend down.”

There was a small bell on the counter, which he grabbed in his hand and he shook it.

A burst of clear, pleasant-to-hear ringing was heard, seven or eight small windows on the four walls, about a *chi*-square each, suddenly opened. Outside the window men’s heads were flashing, followed by a sharp arrow appearing on each window, with the arrowheads all pointing to the man in black. Obviously the arrows were already strung on the bow, and the bows were pulled taut waiting to be released.
Just now, the traveler, who had been thrown inside, took advantage while the men were fighting in confusion to steal the pot and drank the water. This

moment, as he was still catching his breath, he could not help but was secretly worried for the man in black.

The man in black himself was still showing wooden expression. These powerful crossbows and strong arrows were directly aimed at him, but he practically appeared as if he did not see it; he was only laughing coldly continuously.

They heard someone outside the door laughed aloud and said, “Friend indeed have big guts; could it be that you really are not afraid of death?”

The laughter sounded like big bell or giant drum, it shocked the eardrums, created buzzing noise. A man strode out from the single-door at the back of the room.

They saw the man was above nine *chi* tall, the dragon beard across his face was like iron. Although the door was not big, it was not small either, yet this man had to bend over and lower his head to come in.
The front piece of his clothes was open wide, revealing a black, iron-like hairy chest. His hand had a nine-ring, golden-back saber, which was about five *chi* long; it appeared to weigh around forty or fifty *jin* [catty].
Such a person, such a weapon, it really give chills to anybody who saw them.
Yet the man in black only looked at him indifferently, and spoke coldly, “You are *Ban Tian Feng*?”
The dragon-bearded big man howled with laughter and said, “Good kid! Turns out you know that there is one *Ban Tian Feng* in here. Turns out you really come with the purpose of stirring up trouble. All right, *Laoyezi* [old master] might as well help you accomplishing your purpose!”
Amidst the wild laughter, the fifty-*jin* heavy golden-back, cutting-down-the-mountain saber already chopped down. The sound of the blade splitting the air, and the rattling noise of the saber rings shocked the soul and sent them flying and scattered.
The man in black also seemed to be cowered by such display of prowess that his soul also scattered; he only stared blankly at the chopping blade, unexpectedly he did not even move.

The faces of the men all around could not help revealing happy expression; they knew that as soon as the saber chopped, it would be strange indeed if the man in black would not be chopped in halves.

They only heard a ‘Crack!’ The golden saber already chopped down.

Chapter 47 – Desert Boat

The heavy, sturdy wooden table – was indeed chopped into two halves. But the man in black was still sitting there, alive and kicking. Everybody clearly saw that he did not even move, yet nobody knew how, this saber unexpectedly failed to chop him.

The crowd of big men looked at each other in dismay. Old Yan suddenly laughed aloud and said, “You did not see it, did you? This was *ErGe*’s [second brother] saber being lenient, deliberately trying to scare this kid to jump, and then he’ll let his skull move.”
The crowd of big men was immediately happy again; they cheered and laughed and said, “That’s right, *ErGe*’s next saber chop certainly won’t be lenient again, right?”
The dragon-bearded man wiped the beads of sweat from his brows; he himself did not know how this saber chop could possibly miss. Giving a hollow laugh, he said, “Brothers, look, *ErGe*’s next chop is going to take his life!”
The man in black suddenly spoke coldly, “With a saber technique like yours, at most it is only fit to chop tables and cut down wooden bench. If you want to use it to kill people … hey, hey …! It is still far away!”

The dragon-bearded man’s face turned red, he spoke angrily, “What kind of saber technique can kill people then? Tell me!”

The man in black gently stroke the long sword inside the jet-black sheath, he spoke indifferently, “The saber technique that can kill people shall be like this.”

Amidst his voice, the crowd seemed to see his sword came out of its sheath, sword light flashed, but when that short sentence of just nine words was

finished, the viper-like sword was still sitting quietly on his knees, and that dragon-bearded man was still standing, alive – over there, but his face was twisted, his eyes also seemed to be about to bulge out.

The man in black did not look at him anymore; he simply spoke indifferently, “Do you understand it now?”

The dragon-bearded man’s voice cracked, “I … I understand …”

He has not finished speaking, ‘Crash!’ the golden saber fell off his hand, and then his huge body, like pushing golden mountain and felling jade pillar, fell face up.

There was no scar on his body at all, only there was a dot of bright red blood appearing on his throat.

Unexpectedly, the fatal wound was only one dot.

The crowd of big men was agape and tongue-tied; how could they dare to say anything anymore?

Only half a day later, one by one, their gaze furtively moved away, to look at the arrows on the window openings.

The arrows were still pointing at the man in black’s head and chest, yet the man in black was not even looking at them, he was still lightly stroking the long sword on his knees.

Old Yan retreated step by step; he could not help speaking in trembling voice, “Still … still not releasing the arrows?”

Nobody knew when the shopkeeper left the counter, but this moment he suddenly picked Old Yan’s collar and then forward and backward, he slapped him more than a dozen times on the face.

Old Yan was practically knocked dizzy, "*Laoda* [oldest child, leader, boss] …" he screamed, "Why did you hit me?"
The shopkeeper angrily said, "If I don't hit you, whom should I hit? What did you just say?"

Old Yan replied, "I … I only wanted the brothers to release the arrows."

The shopkeeper laughed coldly and said, "You wanted them to release the arrows, do you know after the arrows are released, who is going to die?"

Old Yan replied, "Naturally this kid …"

He had not finished, the shopkeeper already gave him a few more slaps and angrily said, "You are not fit to call him 'kid'; do you know who this friend is?"

Old Yan replied, "He … who is he?"

The shopkeeper did not answer; instead, he released his hand and walked over toward the main in black. Respectfully he cupped his fist in salute and spoke with an apologetic smile, "My brothers did not know that *Zhongyuan Yidian Hong* has honored us with your presence, hence they were lacking in manners; I hope *Gexia* would forgive us."
This man was indeed an old fox; he gave Old Yan a beating first to prove that his brothers indeed did not recognize Yidian Hong, and then he came to ask Yidian Hong's forgiveness.

This was called the way of a Jianghu veteran. Towering figures of Jianghu pay particular attention to this kind of reconciliation method. He expected that when the other side heard it, he must have returned the courtesy according to Jianghu etiquette. Who would have thought that unexpectedly Yidian Hong did not fall into this same old stuff at all?

No matter what kind of Jianghu veteran you are, no matter what method you are using, what kind of school you are from, but you use it in front of him, it is simply a waste.

Yidian Hong did not even bat his eyelids; he still spoke coldly, “This tea is undrinkable, get me another one.”

The shopkeeper was startled; still smiling apologetically he said, “Yes, yes, yes, this tea is undrinkable; Brothers, get another pot here.”

A moment later someone came with a teapot, which he immediately offered with both hands. Who would have thought that Yidian Hong took the teapot and ‘Bang!’ he threw it on the floor, and said coldly, “This pot of tea is not good either; get me another pot.”

The crowd of big men’s countenance changed, but the shopkeeper’s countenance and voice were unmoving; his face was still all smiles, as he laughed apologetically and said, “Yes, yes, yes, we’ll get another pot.”

He actually got another pot and offered it with both hands, while thinking inwardly, “Even if you are being unreasonable, this time you can’t say anything about it!”

Who would have thought that without even taking a sniff, ‘Dang!’ Yidian Hong already smashed it on the floor, while speaking coldly, “This pot of tea is still undrinkable.”

The shopkeeper was really able to suppress his anger as well; unexpectedly he still repeatedly told his men to get another pot of tea, while thinking inwardly, “I want to see if you are still going to throw this down?”

Who knew that Yidian Hong threw eight pots in succession, while all along his countenance did not change a bit?

By this moment everybody was able to see that he deliberately wanted them to see it well; they could not refrain soybean-size, big and small beads of sweat from seeping out their foreheads.

Although the shopkeeper’s face was still carrying a smile, he could not help asking either, “So what kind of tea would *Gexia* be willing to drink?”

Yidian Hong replied, “Only the tea that is not stinky that can be drunk.”

The shopkeeper gave out a hollow laugh and said, “Could it be that this tea is stinky?”

“Humph!” Yidian Hong responded.

The shopkeeper laughed and said, “*Xiongtai* [brother (polite appellation for a friend one’s age)] did not even drink a sip, how can you tell that this tea is stinky?”
Yidian Hong coldly said, “Just because these men’s hands are stinky.”

With the corner of his eyes the shopkeeper cast a glance on the long sword lying on his knees; he chuckled and said, “Could it be that these men’s hands are really stinky? Next time I must smell it myself.”

He slowly walked over, pulled Old Yan’s hand, he suddenly picked the golden saber on the floor with his toes, caught the saber flipped his hand, and chopped down.

Old Yan screamed in pain, and passed out on the floor. The shopkeeper picked up Old Yan’s cutoff hand, still dripping with blood; unexpectedly he really brought it to his nose and sniffed it. His face was still all smiles, he spoke leisurely, “This hand did not seem to be too stinky, it’s just somewhat too bloody.”

He seemed to think that his remark was so funny that before he even finished, he already burst into laughter. However, other than himself, no one was laughing.

In fact, he himself was unable to continue laughing. His eyes were fixed at Yidian Hong, he said in his heart, “It’s all exaggeration, you don’t need to take it seriously. Even if you came to look for trouble, won’t this be enough?”

If it were someone else, even if in his heart he was angry, the anger ought to be disappearing. A person was able to endure to such degree, others should not have anything to say.

Even that ‘pockmarked face’ and the ‘hunchback’, inwardly they could not refrain from sighing, while secretly wondering why the person Yidian Hong wanted to meet here has not appeared until now?

Who knew that Yidian Hong’s heart was like it was made of iron and stone? No matter what you say, no matter what you do, he neither heard nor saw, his expression remained unmoving.

The shopkeeper finally could not laugh anymore. After giving a couple of hollow laughs, he walked over and poured a pot of tea himself, which he delivered personally to Yidian Hong, and said with a forced laughter, “Twenty years ago, *Zaixia* has personally offered tea to a guest. Maybe this pair of hands is not stinky yet. If *Xiongtai* is willing to give *Zaixia* a bit of face, *Zaixia* will be very grateful.”
Yidian Hong did not look at him; he was only staring at the teapot in his hands. He slowly said, “Turns out you are the real *Ban Tian Feng*.”
The shopkeeper laughed apologetically and said, “An insignificant bandit title, I am making a fool of myself.”

Yidian Hong coldly said, “No wonder you can live until today. A man like you can be the *Ban Tian Feng*, I really could not see it.”
Ban Tian Feng gave a hollow laugh. He said, “In front of a good friend, *Zaixia* really cannot be considered *Ban Tian Feng*, I can only be considered a bug … Ha, ha! Nothing more than a little bug. Why would *Xiongtai* lower yourself to a bug’s level?”
Yidian Hong slowly said, “That’s right, you are indeed a little bug. Your hands must be more stinky than theirs.”

Ban Tian Feng’s dried, yellow face immediately turned deathly pale. His voice cracking, he said, “*Xiongtai*, you … what exactly do you want …”

Suddenly they heard a silver-bell-like laughter; someone was laughing tenderly and said, “Turns out *Ban Tian Feng*’s hands are stinky as well. I want to smell it myself too.”
Amidst the seductive laughter, a young girl in red clothes, a budding beauty with bright eyes and well-disposed appearance, with two jet-black shiny and big braids on her head – walked inside gracefully.

Outside, the windblown sand filled the whole sky. When others came in, everybody looked like a figure molded out of yellow sand, but this young girl’s body was untainted by even a speck of dust.

Inside the room, murderous aura was thick; a dead person was still lying in the pool of blood on the floor. But this young girl was still laughing so sweetly, so happy. It was as if she was just coming in from the garden in the lovely spring sunshine where flourishing blossoms were like embroidered work; as if she was coming into her own fragrant chamber.

The room was full of big men scowling fiercely, but it was as if those men were her young servant girls that she could order about.

Under such circumstances, suddenly such person appeared, everybody’s eyes could not help looking straight at her, while their mouth opened wide, without able to say anything.

They saw this girl in red coming over gracefully toward *Ban Tian Feng*; smiling sweetly at him, she said, “Are your hands really stinky?”
Hearing this question, everybody did not know whether they should laugh or cry. Although *Ban Tian Feng* was sinister and vicious, momentarily he did not know how to respond. “Miss … *Zaixia* …” he stammered.
The girl in red laughed tenderly and said, “Looking at how your hands are this white and clean, how could they be stinky? I don’t believe it.”

Unexpectedly she gently picked up *Ban Tian Feng*’s hand – such a beautiful girl, such a gentle and soft smile, how could *Ban Tian Feng* refuse?

Although Yidian Hong's countenance was still wooden and he did not say anything, but his eyes could not help casting a glance at the hunchback and the pockmarked face, as if asking, "What do you think is this girl's background?"

The hunchback and the pockmarked face exchanged a glance; as if agreeing by chance, inwardly they both remembered three words, '*Shi Guanyin*' [Stone Avalokiteśvara].
Even if this girl was not Stone *Guanyin*, she must have close relationship with Stone *Guanyin*.
She suddenly appeared in here, what did she want?

Suddenly a silvery light flashed, followed by a scream!

Ban Tian Feng staggered three steps back, and then he fell face up on the floor. A dagger, flickering with silvery light, suddenly appeared in the young girl's hand. Stuck on the tip of the dagger was a cutoff hand, drenching with blood. How did her silvery blade make its move? Unexpectedly no one was able to see clearly.

They only heard the girl in red giggled and said, "This hand also did not seem to be too stinky! It's just somewhat too bloody."

The crowd of big men roared and could not help pouncing forward.

Rolling her fluid glances around, the girl in red's tender and soft hand drew a line on her cheek, while speaking with a giggle, "What are you doing? So many big men bullying one little girl, aren't you ashamed of yourselves?"

While her mouth was speaking, the silvery light in her hand flashed, the first two men who were pouncing at her screamed miserably and fell face up on the ground, blood spurting out of their throat like gushing spring.

Unexpectedly, this gentle and soft and beautiful little girl had taken two men's lives, all while talking and laughing; how could the other men dare to make their move?

Looking at the spurting blood, the girl in red sighed and spoke quietly, “No wonder *Zhongyuan Yidian Hong*’s name shook the world. Now I know that although the saying ‘a killing without the shedding of blood, one red dot under the sword’ sounds simple, doing it is actually not easy at all.”
[Reminder: *Zhongyuan Yidian Hong* literally means ‘one red dot of the Central Plains’.]
Turning her gaze back to Yidian Hong, she laughed and said, “You see, I was just using very little strength on my hand, their blood already flowed that much, making those who saw it wanted to vomit, totally unlike you killing people so elegantly and pleasant to watch.”

Yidian Hong looked at her coldly, he spoke to her coldly, “No matter who killed whom, it can’t possibly be elegant and pleasant to watch.”

“Only you,” the girl in red said, “Others killing people is killing people, you are killing people is an art.”

The one called Little Huang was creeping backward quietly, he quietly signaled the men outside the window, telling them to release the arrows. Who would have thought that the girl in red’s fluid glance suddenly swept across him, while she cried tenderly, “Aiyo! You guys look, isn’t this man bad? He wants people to shoot me dead with arrows.”

Little Huang’s hands and feet turned cold; he could no longer move even for half a step.

But the girl in red sighed and spoke softly, “Too bad these arrows cannot shoot anybody dead; if you don’t believe me, just look …”

She went over to the window, using her spring-scallion-like slender lily-white hands she lightly pinched; unexpectedly the arrow was immediately pulled away by her, and snapped into two pieces.

The crowd of big men was so scared that they could not even breathe.

The girl in red laughed tenderly and said, “Are you surprised? Actually, there is nothing strange in this. Only living people can shoot arrows; how could dead people shoot arrows?”

Little Huang spoke in trembling voice, “You … you killed them?”

The girl in red giggled and said, “Just think, if there were living people aiming their arrows at me, would I enter this building? My guts are small, plus I do not have such a big skill like Yidian Hong.”

Little Huang’s legs went weak, he dropped down to the ground.

Yidian Hong could not help asking, “How do you know my name?”

The girl in red sweetly said, “How could I not know your name? You are one of the people I admire the most. Besides, I am coming here this time is to pick you up.”

Frowning, Yidian Hong asked, “Pick me up?”

“Don’t you have an appointment to meet here with someone?” the girl in red asked.

“Hmm!” Yidian Hong replied.

The girl in red laughed and said, “Because of an important matter, they can’t come here, hence they asked me to pick you up.”

Listening to this point, the crowd of big men felt the acid was rising up in their stomach – turned out these people merely agreed to meet here, yet they already gave us unending bad luck.

They heard the girl in red laughed and then went on, “Now that I am here, you should go.”

Muttering to himself irresolutely, Yidian Hong said, “Go …”

The girl in red spoke sweetly, “You don’t want to go yet? Could it be that you want to kill everybody here cleanly? That will be great; I’ve always wanted to see you kill people.”

Yidian Hong no longer talk; pulling the ropes in his hand, he started to walk outside.

The girl in red cast a glance toward the hunchback and the pockmarked face; she suddenly frowned and said, “You want to catch two people to play with like a dog, why not catching good-looking people? Like this kind of ugly men, I am disgusted just by looking at them; pulling them along is a disgrace, we’d better send them back to join their ancestors!”

With a wave of her hand, the small silver blade slashed toward the hunchback’s throat. Only to hear ‘Zheng!’ like a black snake the sword sheath blocked the sliver blade.

“Aiyo!” the girl in red exclaimed, “You still don’t want to let them die?”

Yidian Hong coldly said, “When I want to kill, I don’t need anybody else making the move for me.”

The girl in red’s face burst into a smile and said, “You think I want to compete against you in killing people?”

Yidian Hong said, “In the business of killing, no one can compete with me, plus no one dares.”

The girl in red giggled, “Don’t worry,” she said, “Killing men like them, I am afraid I will only make my hands dirty!”

When the girl in red said that she was here to pick up Yidian Hong, the hunchback immediately knew that something was not right – the rebel ministers

of Qiuci and that man called Wu Juxuan said they were going to wait Yidian Hong at the desert inn; why did they suddenly change their plan?

Where did they tell the girl in red to take Yidian Hong to?

The girl in red's background was even more mysterious. It was obvious that she came from a very special background. Someone like her, how could the rebel ministers of Qiuci order her around? Could it be that the Stone *Guanyin* was in collusion with them?
Inwardly the hunchback and the pockmarked face were somewhat puzzled and unsure, but how do you catch the tiger cub without entering the tiger's lair? Things have come to this, what choice did they have?

As they walked out of the door, they were stunned again.

A ship was moored outside the door.

In this mysterious and terrifying desert, no matter what astonishing thing happened, they would not be surprised; but they really never even dreamed about seeing a boat here.

This was the middle of the Great Desert; where did the boat come from?

They noticed that the boat was long and narrow, the bow and the stern were decorated with an extremely meticulous carving, the cabin was gorgeous all around, it even had curtains of pearls hanging over it.

It seemed like even the most entertaining, fancy decorated pleasure boat under the misty rain of the South Lake, even the light vessel covered-in-muslin-reflecting-the-shadow-of-the-moon, moored-at-night-by-the-Qinhuai-restaurant, would not look as gorgeous as this boat.

Turned out this girl in red came inside the building from this boat; no wonder there was not a single speck of dust on her. But how did the boat come here? This was practically inconceivable.

Yet they heard the girl in red said, “Why are you just staring blankly? Get on the boat!”

Yidian Hong’s eyes flickered, but he did not say anything.

The girl in red laughed and said, “You think there’s no way this boat will sail, don’t you?”

“Hmm!” Yidian Hong replied.

The girl in red laughed and said, “Come with me on board, you’ll see.”

While everybody else was paying attention to the top of the boat, the ‘hunchback’ was paying attention to the bottom of the boat.

He noticed the bottom of the boat was fitted with two slender planks that looked like snow sled, but it was cut from extremely tough and durable, extremely sleek giant bamboo stalk.

After he got on board, he found out that most of the boat’s structure was made of bamboo. The cabin was made of weaved bamboo, the deck was made of bamboo flooring as well; therefore, naturally the hull was particularly light.

Although not seen from under the ship, after getting on the boat, he could immediately see a lot of strong and healthy, powerful bald eagles, huddling up on the deck. Two boys wearing red clothes were feeding them with big strip after big strip of fresh meat.

When everybody was on board, the boy in red untied a long whip from his waist, ‘Crack!’ he flicked it high up in the sky. Immediately the eagles soared into the air. Countless silvery, flickering light of the chains also rose up; the

chains were attached to the hull. Immediately the ship glided along the flat sand like a snow sled. At the beginning it was very slow, but afterwards it was gliding like flying. The people on the boat felt as if they were traveling against the wind.

The hunchback and the pockmarked face exchanged a glance; inwardly they could not help admiring the fantastic design of the boat's master.

It should be noted that eagles were the strongest bird; sometimes they could even lift up the entire sheep up into the air. Dozens of eagles pulling a light bamboo boat on flat sand, naturally it was not a difficult matter at all.

Furthermore, eagles also had the highest endurance. Sometimes, in order to wait for someone to die to eat his flesh, they were able to hover overhead for several days and nights. Therefore, with the eagles driving the boat, certainly there was no need to be afraid that they would give up halfway.

The girl in red laughed and said, "Tell me, don't you think that traveling in the desert, taking this boat is faster and more comfortable than walking?"

"Humph!" Yidian Hong responded.

The girl in red said, "Not only that, but if you don't want to be seen by other people, sitting on this boat, there is no fear of being found, no one will ever be able to find this boat's whereabouts. Some would suddenly see this boat flitting past on the desert like the wind, they would think that they saw a mirage, they might think that they saw a ghost!"

They heard someone inside the cabin laughing slowly, "Therefore, the people on the desert call this boat the Ghost Ship."

The voice was slow and elegant; along with the voice, there was a man lifting up the curtain of the cabin and stepping out. But he only extended half of his body and immediately stepped back inside, while saying with a laugh, "Outside the sandstorm is this strong, Hong *Xiong* [lit. red brother], why don't you come in?"

This man had a waxy-yellow skin on his triangular face, his five senses seemed to be squeezed together into a pile. His beard was like rat whiskers under his chin, which seemed to have been set on fire; yellowish and scorched. His appearance could be described as roebuck-head and rat-eyes, totally unimpressive. Nobody would have thought that such an elegant and moving voice unexpectedly belonged to such a man.

The hunchback and the pockmarked face exchanged a quick glance again; they both thought, “Could it be that this man is the famous scholar Wu Juxuan? Yidian Hong said his face is repulsive; his description was right on the money.”

There were two other persons inside the cabin, whose appearances were much better.

Both men were wearing brocade clothes gorgeous attire; one man had a square face [orig. like a ‘country’ (国) character], with thick eyebrows and big eyes. He did not look angry, but was quite intimidating. In just one glance, one would know that he was a figure who often held heavy authority in his hands.

The other man, on the other hand, laughed first before he even said anything. His face appeared friendly; he looked to be a rich man, like a big merchant who made a lot of money from his successful business.

Although these two were wearing Han attire, but their hair was yellow and slightly curly, their eyes were deep and slightly bluish green; obviously they were the two rebel ministers of Qiuci country.

Since they were here, why did they say, “Because of an important matter, they can’t come here?”

Could it be that they were just trying to trick Yidian Hong to come on board this boat?

When the two men saw Yidian Hong, they immediately cupped their fist and said with a laugh, “*Zhuangshi* [lit. hero/fighter/warrior] has gone through a lot of trouble.”

Chapter 48 – The Maggot That Clings to The Bone

The man with a businessman appearance continued with a laugh, "Zaixia was afraid Zhuangshi [lit. hero/fighter/warrior] met some unexpected mishaps, but Min Jiangjun [General Min] said that with Zhuangshi's swordsmanship, nothing to worry about. Ha ha …! It still seems that it was Min Jiangjuan who has the ability to make discerning judgments."

Stroking his beard, Wu Juxuan laughed and said, "Hong [lit. big/great, a surname] Xianggong [lord/master, but 'xiang' itself can mean 'prime minister', while 'gong' is a term of respect for an elderly gentleman] has lived at the xuan ge [both words mean pavilion with a view/two-storied pavilion] for a long time, nowhere near martial art matters, naturally you did not know Hong [lit. red] Xiong's swordsmanship. Taking the commander-in-chief's head in the middle of a million army is as easy as feeling in his pocket and take it out."

Slapping the table, General Min laughed heartily and said, "I am just hoping that Hong Zhuangshi is not going to take the head of this Commander's."

His Han language was extremely fluent. It should be noted that although Qiuci was a prosperous small country, it also belonged to the Han Family as a vassal state. These people occupied important posts in the government, how could they not understand Han language?

Yidian Hong looked at them coldly; suddenly he said, "You already came, why didn't you go inside the inn to meet me?"

Wu Juxuan laughed and said, "It's inconvenient to talk too much inside the inn. Besides, there was some incense-burning karma between Ban Tian Feng and Min Jiangjun."

General Min laughed aloud and joined in, "Not to conceal anything from you, the source of this karma with Ban Tian Feng is a fierce general under this

Commander's command. After he was done being a robber, he had done not a few of things for this Commander. If Zhuangshi is looking for him to give him trouble, wouldn't it be too much of an inconvenience if this Commander came in?"

"Humph!" Yidian Hong responded.

Turned out the robbers were in collusion with the General; what else could he say?

However, the girl in red giggled and said, "You should know that most of the funds and provisions for Min Jiangjun's troops is borrowed from Ban Tian Feng!"

The hunchback mused secretly, "So that's how it is. Now that the important thing has been accomplished, afraid that he might come for a cup of soup [idiom: one's share of the action], you had him killed to close his mouth."

He saw Yidian Hong was giving him a quick glance, and then speaking in heavy voice, "Who is this woman? Why did you want her to …"

With a smile on his face, Wu Juxuan cut him off, "Could it be that jiannei [my humble wife] has offended Hong Xiongdi?"

Yidian Hong could not help but startled, "She … she is your wife?" he asked.

The girl in red laughed tenderly and said, "Are you surprised? When I married him, a lot of people were surprised, they all said a fresh flower is being stuck into … stuck into …" In the end she could not say the two words 'cow manure', but doubled up in laughter.

Wu Juxuan's countenance did not change; he was still smiling as he said, "Presumably Hong Xiong's great service has been accomplished, but I wonder where is that muddleheaded king's severed head?"

“The severed head is still on his neck,” Yidian Hong replied.

General Min and Hong Xianggong looked at each other, their countenance changed. “How could it be possible that Zhuangshi did not succeed?”

“Humph!” Yidian Hong responded.

Muttering to himself irresolutely, Wu Juxuan said, “Could it be that that muddleheaded king already got wind and hid away?”

“Hmm!” Yidian Hong responded.

General Min and Hong Xianggong heaved a long sigh simultaneously, but Wu Juxuan only laughed indifferently and said, “There’s no harm in that; in any case, sooner or later his head will be the object inside Hong Xiong’s bag.”

Casting a glance toward the hunchback on the side, he asked, “I am just wondering who these two gentlemen are?”

The hunchback answered on Yidian Hong’s behalf, “We actually did not have anything to do with that muddleheaded king, it’s just that he spent money to invite us over; we don’t know where that muddleheaded king is hiding.”

Wu Juxuan smiled and said, “Hong Xiong took them prisoner, could it be that you want to force their confession?”

“Hmm!” Yidian Hong responded.

General Min asked, “Why didn’t Zhuangshi interrogate them at that time?”

Yidian Hong replied, “I only kill people, I don’t force confession.”

Wu Juxuan laughed and said, “Zaixia is not able to kill people, but forcing confession, I can ask a couple questions.”

He slowly walked over to the two men, looked down and said with a laugh, “Two gentlemen’s honorable names and great surnames?”

The pockmarked face said, “No need to ask, we are merely insignificant soldiers.”

Although the rope binding him was tight, naturally it was just for a show; with their power, they could shake their arms free any moment.

They came in order to investigate what was true and what was false, but this moment they could not see anything anymore. The pockmarked face has already been eager to give it a try, it’s just that the hunchback has not made any move, he had no choice but to wait as well.

Wu Juxuan laughed and said, “Since these two gentlemen have absolutely nothing to do with that muddleheaded king, plus they have no enmity with us, in Zaixia’s opinion, it would be better to just let them go!”

Yidian Hong said, “They have been given to you, do whatever you please.”

Wu Juxuan laughed and said, “Since that’s the case, let Zaixia loosen their rope first and we’ll talk later.”

As he spoke, he leaned over to untie the rope. The pockmarked face and the hunchback felt it was inappropriate for them to make their move. Who would have thought that Wu Juxuan suddenly make his move like the wind? Left and right, his hands suddenly sealed seven, eight acupoints on each of the two men’s body.

Turned out this nothing-special-to-look-at famous noncommissioned officer was unexpectedly a first-class martial art master.

His countenance changed, Yidian Hong asked, “What are you doing?”

He was about to rise to his full height when he felt a dagger already pressed against the back of his neck; the tip of the blade was as cold as ice, the girl in red's voice was soft as she spoke with a laugh, "Since they have been given to him, then he could do whatever he pleases! Right?"

Yidian Hong knew that as soon as he moved, the blade would penetrate his neck all the way to his throat.

The hunchback however, remained calm and collected; he spoke with a cold laugh, "Friends' trick is very exquisite; however, using such skill to deal with two insignificant soldiers who are bound by the ropes, wouldn't it be making a big fuss over a minor issue?"

Wu Juxuan calmly said, "Can you call the magnificent Chu Xiang Shuai an insignificant soldier?"

As soon as the words came out, Yidian Hong's heart sank down. Yet the hunchback roared in laughter and said, "Chu Xiang Shuai? If I am Chu Xiang Shuai, would I be tied by a rope like this?"

He seemed to think that this matter was really ridiculous, he laughed so hard that tears were streaming down his face.

Wu Juxuan quietly looked at him. It was not until his laughter subsided that he spoke indifferently, "Such a trivial piece of rope, how could it tie Chu Xiang Shuai? After Chu Xiang Shuai investigated clearly what is true and what is false on our side, you may shake your arms any time; am I right?"

Finally that 'hunchback' could not laugh anymore; he really had not thought that this Wu Juxuan was such a formidable figure.

Wu Juxuan slowly went on, "Could it be that Chu Xiang Shuai still refuse to admit? Could it be that you want Zaixia to wash Chu Xiang Shuai's face for you?"

Chu Liuxiang could not help but said, “Friend does have good eyesight, but I wonder how did friend see the flaw?”

Wu Juxuan smiled and said, “Chu Xiang Shuai’s disguising skill is amazing, unparalleled under the heavens. But no matter how exquisite one’s disguising skill is, there are places on one’s face that can never be changed.”

“Oh?” Chu Liuxiang said.

Wu Juxuan said, “Xiang Shuai should have known that one’s facial appearance, skin color, voice, can all be changed, so much so that one’s height can be altered. But the distance between the two eyes can never be changed. Although Xiang Shuai’s disguising skill is wonderful, unparalleled in the world, you are helpless to change the position of the two eyes, right?”

Casting a glance toward Ji Bingyan, Chu Liuxiang said with a laugh, “I never thought that I would encounter a great expert today.”

Wu Juxuan said, “Furthermore, as long as you pay attention, you will discover that no one in the world with the distance between the two eyes exactly the same as someone else’s; it’s just that the difference is extremely tiny.”

“In that case,” Chu Liuxiang said, “Gexia has already measured the distance between my two eyes?”

Cupping his fist, Wu Juxuan said with a laugh, “Guilty as charge [orig. lacking in manners].”

Chu Liuxiang said, “But why don’t I remember ever seeing Gexia?”

Wu Juxuan laughed and said, “Such an insignificant soldier like Zaixia, even if Xiang Shuai has seen me, you would have forgotten about me long ago.”

“In that case,” Chu Liuxiang said, “It would be better for someone not to have too much of a reputation.”

Surprisingly, at this very moment, he was still able to laugh, while Yidian Hong and Ji Bingyan were about to go crazy really quickly. Yidian Hong’s body suddenly shot forward, while his right leg kicked backward.

His lower body skill has really reached the stove-fire-has-turned-bright-green state [allusion to Daoist alchemy; fig. (of an art, a technique etc.) brought to the point of perfection]. When his body pounced, he brought it almost parallel to the ground; who would have thought that the tip of the blade was still pressed against his neck, unexpectedly he failed to cast it off?

The girl in red’s body was already hanging from the ceiling of the cabin, she laughed and said, “I have already become the maggot that clings to your bones; you will never be able to get rid of me.”

Looking at Wu Juxuan, Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “You married a wife who can entangle people like this, your days must be extremely unbearable.”

Laughing indifferently, Wu Juxuan said, “It’s a pity that I am afraid Gexia’s days will be even more unbearable.”

It was a dark cabin under the main cabin of the boat; so dark that when you stretched out your hand, you cannot see the five fingers in front of your face. The sound of the bottom of the boat rubbing against the sand came up in waves, like sharp needles piercing the ears.

It does not matter who, but anybody laying down in such a place could not possibly feel comfortable, yet Chu Liuxiang and Ji Bingyan, who paid particular attention to comfort the most – were clearly locked up in this place.

For some reason, Wu Juxuan did not want to kill them immediately; he did not kill Yidian Hong either, as if he felt that killing them now would be a pity.

Chu Liuxiang sighed. “Wu Juxuan! Wu Juxuan!” he muttered, “Who the hell is this character? How could he recognize me in just a glance?”

Ji Bingyan spoke with a cold laugh, “Do you think you disguised yourself very well? Inside the mirror room on your boat, you may be able to dress yourself up until nobody could recognize you; but this time, even I can recognize you in just a glance.”

“Naturally you can recognize me,” Chu Liuxiang said, “But don’t you forget, how well do you and I know each other? Who is this Wu Juxuan? How could he be so familiar with me?”

Ji Bingyan was silent for half a day. “Could it be that he is Hei Zhenzhu?” he asked.

“Absolutely not,” Chu Liuxiang replied.

“Even in time like this, you are still this confident?” Ji Bingyan asked.

Chu Liuxiang said, “Naturally Hei Zhenzhu can also disguise himself to change his appearance; but martial art skill cannot be pretended. I just looked at this Wu Juxuan’s sealing acupoint technique, I knew that his martial art skill is a lot stronger than Hei Zhenzhu’s.”

Ji Bingyan stopped talking. But burst of chatter and laughter came down from the cabin above. Since this boat was mostly made of bamboo, naturally it could not be soundproofed. Since Chu Liuxiang and the others would die soon, naturally other people did not have to have any misgivings toward them.

After nobody knew how long, the boat suddenly stopped. They heard General Min said, “Is this where you and Shi Furen [Madame Shi] agreed to meet?”

Other words, they did not want to pay attention, since the friction noise of the bottom of the boat against the sand was really maddening, making them wished

that they could stop their ears; but as soon as General Min spoke those words, Chu Liuxiang, Ji Bingyan, and Yidian Hong's ears immediately perked up.

They heard Wu Juxuan said with a laugh, "It is right here, I am sure."

Hong Xianggong laughed aloud and said, "Wu Xiansheng do things, naturally it can't be wrong; however … I wonder if this Shi Furen has the intention to sincerely work together with our humble nation?"

Wu Juxuan laughed and said, "If she did not have the intention, even if you and I wanted to see her, I am afraid it would be even more difficult than ascending to the sky."

"Ah!" General Min said, "Could it be that her martial art skill is stronger than Xiansheng's?"

Wu Juxuan laughed and said, "Zaixia's little bit of martial art skill, if you want to compare it to Shi Furen's, it is indeed like the autumn firefly to the bright moon. It is simply cannot be compared."

General Min laughed and said, "In that case, with this Shi Furen helping our humble nation, henceforth we will be able to sleep peacefully."

"Precisely so," Wu Juxuan replied.

Hong Xianggong laughed and said, "Speaking of which, we are still relying on Wu Xiansheng's vigorous effort. Were it not for Wu Xiansheng, how could Shi Furen be willing to form friendship with common mortals like us?"

"That's right, that's right," General Min said with a laugh, "After all the great merits have been reported this time, from the top, Guowang Dage [big brother the king (of a country)], to the bottom, this commander, as well as Hong Xianggong, we won't forget Wu Xiansheng's favor."

Wu Juxuan laughed aloud and said, “Zaixia, a mere grass citizen [hoi polloi], can serve a sovereign king, I already feel extreme honor and favor from the superior.”

The girl in red laughed tenderly and said, “You don’t have to pretend to be polite; after this mission is accomplished, aren’t you going to ask Hong Xianggong and Min Jiangjun to give you a part time job as a government official, so that I can comfortably pass half of my lifetime in peace and good fortune?”

Hong Xianggong roared in laughter and said, “After this mission is accomplished, naturally Dasao [oldest sister-in-law] is bound to be a one-pin [the highest rank in imperial times] lady.”

The four laughed heartily together, followed by the sound of wine cups clinking against each other.

Listening to this point, Chu Liuxiang’s heart sank even deeper.

Now they knew that unexpectedly this Wu Juxuan was in collusion with the Stone Guanyin; not only that, but he also acted on behalf of the Stone Guanyin to pull some string with the rebel ministers of Qiuci. With great difficulty these people obtained the kingship of the Kingdom of Qiuci, but perhaps this time it would be tantamount to offering the country with both hands to the Stone Guanyin and Wu Juxuan.

A man like Wu Juxuan, naturally his objective was not merely ‘a part time job as a government official’. Even if the position of Commander-in-Chief or the Prime Minister was given to him, perhaps it was no more than satisfying his cravings.

However, under such circumstances, where did the Black Pearl stand?

He has been living in the desert for a long time; could it be that he was also the Stone Guanyin’s subordinate?

Now that the Stone Guanyin was coming, perhaps Chu Liuxiang and the others' fate would be decided immediately.

Ji Bingyan suddenly said, "Chu Liuxiang, you have always been very confident; this time do you think you still could walk out alive?"

Chu Liuxiang smiled slightly and said, "There were several times when other people's blade was pressed against my neck, but I am still alive until now."

Ji Bingyan spoke with wry smile, "Chu Liuxiang, ah, Chu Liuxiang, under what kind of situation would you be in despair?"

Chu Liuxiang replied with a laugh, "As long as others have not chopped my head, I will never despair."

Suddenly they heard the cry of the eagles, followed by the rustling noise of the sand moving along the ground.

Sitting up straight, Yidian Hong said, "She's here!"

Ji Bingyan said, "Turns out Shi Guanyin's ride is also this kind of ghost ship."

Chu Liuxiang said, "I'll say there is an eighty-percent chance that this ship was provided by Shi Guanyin."

During these few exchanges, the other ship must have arrived; they heard sound of footsteps on the cabin overhead, obviously Wu Juxuan and the others came out together to welcome the newcomer.

Knowing that the Stone Guanyin was about to come on board, unexpectedly Chu Liuxiang and others seemed to be intimidated by some kind strange magical power; their hearts were jumping incessantly, they did not dare to open their mouth.

They heard the girl in red spoke slowly, “Dizi [disciple] Changsun Hong [red] kowtows in salute to Furen.”

Chu Liuxiang did not guess incorrectly; this woman was indeed the Stone Guanyin’s disciple. Stone Guanyin unexpectedly allow her disciple to marry Wu Juxuan, it may be assumed that this man Wu Juxuan was really not simple.

Half a day later, the footsteps moved into the cabin again.

Hong Xianggong said, “Wansheng [junior, self-deprecatory term used in front of elders] have long admired Furen’s reputation, unexpectedly I can really see you today. It is indeed … indeed an extreme honor.”

This man was originally very eloquent, but this time he had to speak haltingly before he was able to finish his speech. General Min was stammering even more; he could not even say anything clearly.

These two were originally men who had seen big spectacles, yet seeing this Stone Guanyin, they were still inevitably very nervous. It is thus clear that the Stone Guanyin’s elegant bearing must be overwhelming, so that people did not dare to stare directly.

Only after their polite greeting and compliments were finished did a graceful, touching, as-smooth-as-satin voice spoke slowly with a laughter, “Two gentlemen are Tian Huang’s aristocrats, your meritorious deed high and unrivalled, in the future your names will rise high to the pavilion of the firmament. What kind of person Jianqie [lowly (female) servant] is, so that two gentlemen are this courteous, making Jianqie has no place to stand?”

The voice seemed to be coming directly above Chu Liuxiang’s head.

Thinking that this moment, this person, whose beauty was like a fairy, whose mystery was like a demon – was sitting right above his head, Chu Liuxiang really could not describe the feeling in his heart.

He really wished that he could rush upstairs immediately to take a look at this demon among the fairies; what kind of person she really like? What kind of mysterious magical power she really possessed?

Above, some more words were being exchanged. General Min could not help asking, “I wonder if Furen bring that Star of Happiness along?”

The Stone Guanyin asked him instead, “I wonder if Min Jiangjun know the secret of this Star of Happiness?”

“This … I don’t know yet,” General Min replied.

The Stone Guanyin said, “Since Jiangjun does not know its secret, this ‘Star of Happiness’ will be, at most, nothing more than a piece of precious stone. Even if Jianqie presented it to Jiangjun, what use will it be to Jiangjun?”

Apparently General Min was stunned.

But Hong Xianggong was laughing apologetically and said, “However, Wansheng [plural] also know that if this precious stone fell into the muddleheaded king’s hands, immediately its worth will be substantially different. Therefore, Wansheng absolutely must not let it fall the muddleheaded king’s hands.”

The Stone Guanyin smiled and said, “But Jianqie has decided to make an exchange with the muddleheaded king.”

General Min and Hong Xianggong seemed to be shocked; they blurted, “This … this is absolutely unacceptable.”

With a smile on his face, Wu Juxuan interjected, “Two gentlemen need not be surprised. Furen is returning the ‘Star of Happiness’ to the muddleheaded king, she has another intention.”

“What … what intention?” General Min asked.

Wu Juxuan said, “Only because in all the world, only the muddleheaded king knows its secret, and he would rather die than revealing the secret. If we wanted to know this secret, we have to wait until this thing is back to that muddleheaded king …”

Hong Xianggong suddenly gained an understanding, “This moment he is already at the end of the line [orig. mountain and river exhausted (idiom)]; after obtaining this object, he would certainly use it immediately. At that time, if we wait in the dark to spy on him, we would know its secret.”

Wu Juxuan laughed and said, “After all, Hong Xianggong is an intelligent man.”

General Min immediately burst into loud laughter as well; he said, “This moment that muddleheaded king already has no strong-hand bodyguard; it would be extremely easy for us to take back that ‘Star of Happiness’ any time. This is called ‘In order to capture, one must let loose’ … Ha ha! Excellent! Excellent!”

Speaking to this point, he suddenly stopped for half a day, before continuing, “Fortunately we failed to kill him; otherwise, wouldn’t this secret follow him to the underworld? The old man lost his horse, but it all turned out for the best. It seems like our luck is not bad at all.”

Chapter 49 – Warrior Dies For An Intimate Friend

Zhangsun Hong suddenly burst into a silver-bell-like tender laughter and said, “You think we really failed to kill them? If *Furen* really wanted to take that muddleheaded king’s life, even if he had ten heads, all would be gone.” Hearing this remark, Chu Liuxiang and the others under the cabin could not help but were stunned. General Min and Hong *Xianggong* were even more shocked that they were unable to say anything.

It was only half a day later that Hong *Xianggong* stammered, "If that's the case, *Xiansheng* did not hesitate to spend huge sum of money to hire those assassins, what's that for?"
Wu Juxuan smiled and said, "*Zaixia* called on those assassins to come, it's no more than to frighten the muddleheaded king. If one feels that his life is in danger, he might speak out the secret that normally he would not want to reveal to anybody else, just because if this secret is greatly advantageous to his loved ones, how could he be willing to take it with him to the underworld?"
Zhangsun Hong added, "Who would have thought that this muddleheaded king's mouth is tighter than a bottle's mouth? No matter how dangerous his situation is, he still refuses to tell the secret to others; so much so that he won't even tell his closest people."

Listening to this point, Chu Liuxiang could not help commenting with a wry smile, "No wonder the King of Qiuci could escape alive in mortal danger; turns out other people practically did not want to take his life yet. We were nervous for half a day, in the end we are still fooled by others."

Suddenly they heard the Stone *Guanyin* said with a laugh, "To fool the world-famous Chu *Xiang Shuai*, it really is not easy."
Although the cabin above was full of her people, her remark seemed to be directed to Chu Liuxiang. Her internal power was so strong, unexpectedly she was able to focus her voice.

Inwardly Chu Liuxiang was shocked, but his mouth said,
"Unavoidably *Furen* is holding *Zaixia* in too high of a regard; *Zaixia* is often fooled by others."
The Stone *Guanyin* spoke slowly, "There is no need for *Xiang Shuai* to be too modest; in all my life *Jianqie* has encountered many opponents, although not a few were very able persons, but in terms of intelligence and resourcefulness, in term of high martial art skill, indeed none can compare with *Xiang Shuai*."
Chu Liuxiang replied with a wry smile, "If *Zaixia* was really as brilliant as *Furen* makes me to be, how could I, at this moment, place myself under *Furen*'s skirt?"
The Stone *Guanyin* laughed and said, "*Xiang Shuai* ought to know that situation like this, there are people who seek but fail to get!"

Ji Bingyan coldly said, “This female devil head is provoking you using words; perhaps she does look up on you. Whether we could come out alive from here, we’ll have to rely on your, this great lover’s trick.”

Naturally he spoke with a voice so low that it could not be even lower, but Chu Liuxiang was still afraid that the Stone *Guanyin* might hear it; thereupon he quickly interrupted him by saying, “To be able to place oneself under a beauty’s pomegranate skirt, death is not enough reason for regret. Too bad although *Zaixia* wanted to see *Furen*, I could only toss and turn restlessly, to seek but fail to get.”

The last eight words he spoke [*zhan zhuan fan ce, qiu zhi bu de*] were from the poem ‘*Guan Jiu*’ [lit. shutting turtledove] of the Book of Songs [Shijing, early collection of Chinese poems and one of the Five Classics of Confucianism]. It was also the earliest, the most famous love song since the ancient times. Preceding the lines were ‘sweet, fair, and graceful lady, sought by the gentleman’. The meaning behind these short eight characters [*yao tiao shu nu, jun zi hao qiu*] was very deep. In fact, it was much deeper than other people’s thousand words, hundred sentences.

Evidently the Stone *Guanyin* has also heard the seductive meaning behind his words; she was silent for half a day before leisurely said, “Do you want to see me?”

Chu Liuxiang sighed. He said, “To seek but fail to get, tossing and turning restlessly.”

“Don’t worry,” the Stone *Guanyin* said, “I will definitely let you see me.”

“Now?” Chu Liuxiang asked.

“Why are you so impatient?” the Stone *Guanyin* asked.

Chu Liuxiang sighed and said, “It’s not that *Zaixia* don’t have any patience, but perhaps *Zaixia* won’t live much longer.”

The Stone *Guanyin* was silent for half a day. “You will live until that time,” she spoke indifferently.

Suddenly they heard Wu Juxuan shouting, “He will not live until that time.”

“Says who?” the Stone *Guanyin* coldly asked.

Wu Juxuan took a deep, deep breath. He said, “Could it be that *Furen* has not heard the saying, ‘raising a tiger breeding calamity’? If …”
The Stone *Guanyin* spoke in stern voice, “Could it be that I still need a lesson from you?”
Wu Juxuan did not dare to speak anymore.

Hong *Xianggong* cleared his throat and said with an apologetic laugh, “If it is not necessary, it is actually better to get rid of this man.”
The Stone *Guanyin*’s voice mellowed down, she gently said, “When an expert in calligraphy and painting finishes a masterpiece, if there is no one to admire it, won’t it feel like traveling in night wearing a brocade clothes? All mental and physical effort will come to naught; am I right?”
Although Hong *Xianggong* was unable to fathom the deep meaning behind her words, he was unable to reply.
The Stone *Guanyin* went on, “When a famous actor [in Chinese opera] lifts his voice in song, if nobody listens, he also feels that it was extremely senseless; am I right?”
“Hmm!” Hong *Xianggong* said.
The Stone *Guanyin* said, “What we are doing here is also like a painter creating a painting, like a famous actor singing his song, we want someone to admire it. Because what we are doing is also undoubtedly a masterpiece.”
Hong *Xianggong* laughed and said, “That’s right. Speaking about the depth of the effort, the secret of the composition, even Wang Xizhi’s [(303-361), famous calligrapher of Eastern Jin, known as the sage of calligraphy] Orchid Pavilion Gathering, Li Taibai’s [Li Bai or Li Bo (701–762), famous Tang Dynasty poet] Long Song Walk, are absolutely cannot compare to even ten-thousandth part of this matter.”
“Therefore,” the Stone *Guanyin* said, “I want him to live; live to see us accomplishing this thing. Famous painting needs discerning eye to appreciate, famous song needs intimate friend to listen respectfully. What we are doing, also only such talent like Chu *Xiang Shuai* know how to appreciate it. Am I right?”
“That’s right,” Hong *Xianggong* echoed, “*Furen*’s wise opinion, really nobody can match.”
Wu Juxuan said, “But … but this man …”

“No need for you to talk much,” the Stone *Guanyin* coldly said.

She was extremely polite to everybody, except to this Wu Juxuan, but her countenance never changed.

Unexpectedly Wu Juxuan also resigned himself to adversity; he respectfully said, “Yes.”

The Stone *Guanyin* said, “In that case, I will take the three men below with me. I wonder if gentlemen have any objection?”
Laughing apologetically, Hong *Xianggong* said, “*Zaixia* will definitely listen to *Furen*’s instruction.”
The Stone *Guanyin* laughed and said, “But please rest assured, I will definitely take a good care of them.”
After a day of being bored, Hu Tiehua practically was about to go crazy. He did not even know how much wine he had drunk. The strange thing was that the more he drank, it seemed like he grew more sober.

Seeing that the day was almost over, Hu Tiehua could not help sighing in despair. “Chu Liuxiang, Stinky Old Bug,” he muttered, “Why haven’t you returned? Did you bump into a ghost?”

He did not know that Chu Liuxiang did indeed bump into a ghost.

The door curtain was suddenly lifted, and Princess Pipa barged in. Hu Tiehua was surly in his stomach, this time finding someone he could vent his anger on, he roared, “Let me ask you: do you or do you not understand manners?”

Princess Pipa coldly stared at him and said, “What manners?”

Hu Tiehua shouted, “Mencius’s Mother said, ‘One’s etiquette, before entering the door, ask if anybody’s inside, therefore, pay respect first. When one’s about to come up the hall, the voice must be raised first, therefore, the other can guard against it’. You wanted to come in, couldn’t you call out first?”

Princess Pipa laughed and said, “Aiyo! I can’t believe you have several days of studying in your belly.”

Putting his hands behind his back, Hu Tiehua looked up and said, “You flatter me! You flatter me!”

Princess Pipa’s countenance turned wooden, she coldly said, “Too bad you have forgotten your status.”

Opening his eyes wide, Hu Tiehua said, “What’s my status?”

“Currently,” Princess Pipa said, “You are our prisoner. I practically do not need to be courteous to you.”

Hu Tiehua stared at her for half a day. Suddenly he laughed and said, “A good man will not fight with a woman. It was you who said those words, so forget about it. If it were other people, hey … hey … I am going to show him what’s good for him.”

He collapsed into bed and covered his head with a blanket; he simply ignored her.

“Are you playing dead?” Princess Pipa scolded, “Get up!”

From under the blanket, Hu Tiehua roared in laughter and said, “If I want to sleep then I’ll sleep; if I want to get up then I’ll get up, it’s none of your business!”

Stomping her feet, Princess Pipa came over and yanked the blanket away.

Hu Tiehua shouted, “I am not the Old Stinky Bug, you are looking for the wrong person!”

Princess Pipa’s face blushed beet red, but the tone of her voice softened as she said, “*Wangfei* wants to see you, quickly get up and come with me!”
Hu Tiehua was stunned. With a twist of his waist he sat up and said, “*Wangfei* wants to see me? What for?”

Princess Pipa said, “She has never liked to see people, this time she wanted to see you, naturally there is an important matter to tell you.”

Rolling his eyes, Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “Since she wants to see me, have her come here then!”

As his mouth was speaking, his body collapsed into the bed again.

Stomping her feet, Princess Pipa said, “You … how come you seem like a man without any bones [fig. moral character]?”

Sticking his foot up, Hu Tiehua leisurely said, “Don’t forget, she is the one who wants to see me, not me wanting to see her.”

Princess Pipa bit her lip. Suddenly she laughed coldly and said, “I know it, you must feel guilty as a thief, hence you do not dare to see her?”

Before she finished speaking, Hu Tiehua already sprang up and roared, “What do you mean I feel guilty as a thief? Why don’t I dare to see her?”

Holding back her laughter, Princess Pipa said, “If you have guts, then come with me!”

The tent of the Queen of Qiuci was really a lot more gorgeous than Hu Tiehua imagined. The air inside the tent was full of the scent of sandalwood and medicine; the smell was so thick that he nearly could not breathe.

Behind the hanging curtain of pearls, the Queen of Qiuci was half-sitting, half-reclining, as if she was too weak to stand. Although separated by a layer of muslin screen, she still appeared to have a magnificent style unmatched in this generation, which one must not gaze intently. Even Hu Tiehua, as soon as he came here, he seemed to be overwhelmed with shame of his own inferiority.

The Queen of Qiuci smiled slightly and said, “With the body devastated by illness, I cannot get out of bed to welcome the guest; hoping *Gongzi* would forgive me.”
Clearing his throat, Hu Tiehua said, “No … no need to be overly courteous.”

Actually, he also wanted to say a couple of sentences, “I am your prisoner, you needn’t be polite.” But when the words reached the tip of his tongue, unexpectedly he was unable to speak it out.

The Queen of Qiuci sighed and said, “The misfortune of the night before is indeed regrettable.”

At the mention of this matter, the anger in Hu Tiehua’s heart flared up; laughing coldly, he said, “Could it be that *Wangfei* wanted to interrogate me? Please forgive *Zaixia* for not being able to accompany you.”
He turned around and left. But the Queen of Qiuci laughed and said, “*Gongzi*, please stay. *Gongzi* is overly suspicious.”
Hu Tiehua responded with a cold laugh, “The one overly suspicious is not me; it’s you.”

The Queen sighed again and said, “We erred in suspecting *Gongzi*; we really shouldn’t do that. Would *Gongzi* please forgive us?”
Hu Tiehua was stunned instead. “You … you admitted that I was not the killer?” he stammered.

The Queen spoke softly, “Naturally *Gongzi* was not the killer; otherwise, how could *Gongzi* still stay here? If *Gongzi* wanted to leave, who could possibly stop you?”
Hu Tiehua was speechless for half a day. Heaving a deep sigh, he said, “When being accused wrongly to the death, suddenly seeing someone who understands reason, it indeed makes one extremely happy.”

“Is *Gongzi* still angry now?” the Queen of Qiuci asked.
Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “At first *Zaixia* was indeed a bit angry, but *Wangfei* said so, *Zaixia* feels embarrassed instead.”

The Queen smiled sweetly.

After half a day, she went on, "*Jianqie* asked *Gongzi* to come here, there is indeed something I'd like to ask."
Puffing out his chest, Hu Tiehua said, "A warrior is willing to die for an intimate friend. Whatever *Wangfei* wants *Zaixia* to do, as long as *Zaixia* is able to do it, you want me to go into the water I'll go into the water, you want me to go through the fire I'll go through the fire."
The Queen said, "*Gongzi*'s lofty righteousness [or friendship],
let *Jianqie* thank you in advance."
Hu Tiehua suddenly discovered that only he and this Queen, facing each other – remained in the tent, Princess Pipa and all the servants and maids have quietly left.

For some unknown reason, his heart was suddenly thumping very hard; he seemed to feel that the Queen behind the muslin screen was just smiling at him. Immediately he cursed himself inwardly, "How did I become so lecherous today? Others treat me as high-minded and righteous person, I must not let silly thoughts moving randomly inside my head."

Immediately he spoke loudly, "*Wangfei*, no need to be courteous, whatever instruction you have, please just say it."
The Queen of Qiuci said, "I don't know if *Gongzi* remembers, tomorrow is the day that we and the other side will exchange the 'Star of Happiness'. I wonder if *Gongzi* could …"
Although Hu Tiehua was doing his utmost to suppress his thought, but somehow, his mind went back to the night of the bridal room and ornamented candles [fig. wedding festivities], the evening of tenderness and touching emotions.

Unexpectedly the Queen of Qiuci behind the screen seemed to turn into … Hu Tiehua did not dare to continue looking at her; he shouted, "I wonder if *Wangfei* wants *Zaixia* to exchange the Star of Happiness back?"
The Queen sighed; she said, "My entire family, big and small, are homeless and miserable on the outside, it is indeed finding oneself utterly isolated [orig. people rebelling and friends deserting]; unexpectedly in this kind of trivial

matter I have no choice but to trouble *Gongzi*. In my heart *Jianqie* find it difficult to feel peace."
Hu Tiehua indignantly said, "If *Zaixia* cannot exchange the Star of Happiness back, I would rather have this head removed as a substitute."
The Queen said, "*Gongzi* is this righteous, you really make *Jianqie* … *Jianqie* …" Speaking to this point, her voice choked, she could not go on.
But suddenly from behind the gauze screen she stretched out her soft, seemingly-boneless – hand. Under the lantern light, he saw her slender fingertips trembled continuously, like a tiny orchid struggling in the storm; if no one helped and cherished it, it would be devastated by the rainstorm.

Hu Tiehua felt a burst of hot blood rushed forth in his chest, while a burst of daze attacked his head. By the time his mind cleared up, he suddenly discovered that somehow, he had actually grasped this hand tightly.

Surprisingly, the Queen of Qiuci did not flinch, neither did she evade his grip; she only spoke in trembling voice, "When *Gongzi* go, you must be very careful; *Jianqie* is entrusting everything to *Gongzi*."
Hu Tiehua felt his heart was about to jump out from his chest cavity; he was not sure if he ought to let go of her hand, or whether he should continue holding it. He did not know what to say either.

He felt that the Queen of Qiuci's hand was also grasping his hand, as she spoke softly, "In addition to this, *Jianqie* has a personal matter that I'd like to entrust to *Gongzi*."
Hu Tiehua's mind was still hazy; without even thinking, he spoke in loud voice, "*Zaixia* has already stated before, as long as it is *Wangfei*'s matter, ten thousand deaths will not be able to stop *Zaixia*."
His natural temperament was passionate and impulsive, someone who would consider the beginning but not the end; if others were good to him, he would practically be willing to gouge his own heart and give it away to that person.

At this moment he only felt that not only this Queen of Qiuci was the first person to understand him, but also the one who treated him the best in the world. Based on the Queen's status, unexpectedly she treated a Jianghu man like

him with such courtesy, not only he was so grateful, he was practically overwhelmed by favor from superior.

The Queen of Qiuci said, "*Jianqie* only asks *Gongzi* to inquire about the Star of Happiness' secret for *Jianqie*."
Hu Tiehua was stunned. "This secret," he said, "Even *Wangfei* does not know?"
The Queen sighed and said, "*Wangye* and I have been married for many years; although we could be considered having mutual respect between husband and wife [orig. treating each other as an honored guest (idiom)], yet in only this matter he has never been willing to tell me."
Pondering over it, Hu Tiehua said, "If even toward *Wangfei Wangye* did not want to reveal the secret, how could he be willing to tell *Zaixia*?"
The Queen slowly said, "According to age-old legend, the previous generation Qiuci ancestors had enormous hidden treasure, which, in normal times, nobody can use. Only when the country is in desperate situation for its survival will the treasure be used to restore it. As for the location of the hidden treasure, only the current king, who will unify the Qiuci nation – knows."

Hu Tiehua suddenly understood, "Could it be that *Wangfei* thinks that the secret of the Star of Happiness is related to the hidden treasure?"
"Presumably so," the Queen replied.

Smiling wryly, Hu Tiehua said, "If that's the case, I am afraid there is more reason for *Wangye* for not wanting to tell this secret to me."
The Queen said, "However, relying on *Wangye*'s, one person's power, it is absolutely impossible to bring the ancestor's huge treasure out, isn't it?"
"That's right," Hu Tiehua replied.

The Queen said, "Not only he will need people to transport it, he will also need people to protect it, right?"

"Yes," Hu Tiehua replied.

The Queen sighed again and said, “Just now *Jiangqie* said that among *Wangye*’s subordinates, there is not a single capable man; furthermore, there is no one has the power to escort this treasure.”
Muttering to himself irresolutely, Hu Tiehua said, “*Wangfei* is saying that *Wangye* might come to me to escort this treasure?”
“Precisely,” the Queen replied.

Hu Tiehua said, “But if *Wangye* trust me, he could not possibly accuse me wrongly as the murderer.”
The Queen spoke in soft voice, “Although *Wangye* does have some misunderstanding toward *Gongzi*, but after *Gongzi* exchange back the Star of Happiness, his opinion will undoubtedly change. Besides, other than *Gongzi*, he has no one else to trust.”
Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “*Wangfei* ought to know, *Wangye* trusts that friend of mine a lot more than he trusts me.”
The Queen was silent for half a day, “But if *Wangye* entrusts this matter to *Gongzi*, would *Gongzi* be willing to tell the secret to me?”
Hu Tiehua replied, “Didn’t *Zaixia* already promised …”
The Queen cut him off, “What if *Wangye* swears *Gongzi* to secrecy?” she asked.
Hu Tiehua thought about it, then he laughed and said, “*Zaixia* already promised *Wangfei* first, didn’t I?”
This matter was somewhat out of keeping with customs and reason; if it were someone else, he could not possibly give his promise. But in his conduct, Hu Tiehua never cared about reason; he was irrational. As long as it was something that he thought he ought to do, he would simply do it. Right now he was wholeheartedly thinking that the Queen of Qiuci was the nicest person in the world, while the King was a muddle head. If, for the sake of a nice person, he deceived a muddle head, wouldn’t it be heaven’s law and earth’s principle, and was extremely rational?

As for why this Queen of Qiuci insist on knowing the secret? This fact, Hu Tiehua did not even think about it; naturally he was not going to ask even more.

Midday. The blazing sun was burning like fire.

Leading three camels, Hu Tiehua rushed straight to the west.

Although he had layer upon layer of very long plain white cloth wrapped around his head, inevitably he was still scorched by the sun that his head was dizzy. Although the martial art skill of the three Qiuci warrior escorting him was far below his, but they had been tempered by the sandstorm and scorching sun of the desert that they had steel muscle and iron bones; they appeared to be much more comfortable than he was.

Sighing and mumbling to himself, Hu Tiehua said, “It looks like maybe I drank too much wine; how come I am like a sweet, delicate girl, being exposed to the sun and immediately my head spins? If I continue like this, won’t I be done for?”

Actually, it was also because he had been severely exhausted for many days; not only he drank too much, but the drama in the night had also greatly consumed his physical strength.

Last night, although he went to bed quite early, but thinking about the beautiful image of the woman behind the screen, which was like a Chinese peony in the mist, thinking about that slender lily-white hands, which was like it did not have any bones at all, he was tossing and turning, and was unable to sleep.

The more he thought that he should not indulge in flights of fancy, that he should not treat a beauty irreverently, the more he cursed himself as lecherous and shameless. Yet for some reason, the beautiful queen was like the lover that he yearned to the bones. The more he did not want to think about her, the more he thought about her.

Normally Hu Tiehua was not like this. Until later on, he tried to comfort himself, “Perhaps that passionate stinky old bug infected me.”

But as soon as he remembered Chu Liuxiang, he could not sleep even more.

Chu Liuxiang had been gone for more than two days. Not only he has not returned, there was not even the slightest bit of news from him. Could it be that he and Ji Bingyan have fallen into the mysterious assassin's treacherous plot?

As far as the eye could see, the great desert extended a thousand *li* and to infinity; there was not even the least bit of life; no human, no birds and beasts, no cloud, no wind.
Occasionally, one or two disgusting big lizards would crawl out of the rocks and climb onto the camel's hoof, but it somehow elevated the taste of death of the desert even more.

Chapter 50 – Drunk And Botching Things Up

Using his left fist to punch his right palm, Hu Tiehua muttered, "Even the Old Stinky Bug and the Dead Rooster won't wander leisurely on this seeing-ghost desert for two days without coming back. Since they are not coming back, they must have encountered some mishaps."

He suddenly saw a camel rushed over to catch up with him, the warrior sitting on top of the camel hump said, "There is a shady and cool place ahead, do we want to take a rest?"

Muttering to himself irresolutely, Hu Tiehua asked, "How far have we traveled?"

"About ten li," the warrior replied.

Frowning, Hu Tiehua said, "Only ten li, you already want to take a rest, how could we travel fifty li by tomorrow?"

Smiling apologetically, the warrior said, “Traveling fifty li in the desert is as exhausting as traveling five hundred li someplace else. Besides, the camels are carrying several thousand taels load of gold.”

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “No matter what, taking a rest now is too early; we must hurry to cover the fifty-li distance before dark. I want to see the people who are going to do the transaction with us, to see what do they look like?”

While his mouth was talking, he already urged his camel to speed up ahead.

The warrior sighed; he mumbled, “If you are rushing along like that, by the time you arrive, I am afraid both the people and the camels will faint from the sunburn. If the opposite side suddenly become hostile, I want to see what you are going to do?”

Another warrior also rushed alongside and commented, “In any case, the responsibility is not ours. He wants to show off, let him show off. When the moment comes and the opponents want to make their move, we will simply hide far away on the side.”

The third warrior spat on the ground; curling his mouth, he said, “This kind of southern barbarian [manzi, contemptuous term for people from southern China (used by northern Chinese people)], they don’t even understand fart; trying to show off on the desert, wouldn’t this be asking for trouble?”

These warriors had suffered several losses under Hu Tiehua and Chu Liuxiang’s hands, this moment unexpectedly they were secretly taking joy in the calamity and delight in disaster. It’s just that naturally they were speaking in Qiuci dialect, so that even if Hu Tiehua heard it, he did not understand at all.

But what they said was not wrong at all; this five-li travel was enough to make people suffer. Fortunately, after midday, the power of the scorching sun was diminishing somewhat.

By the time the sun was going down, Hu Tiehua already somewhat unable to endure it. Although he drank several times, his lips were still dry and chapped.

He saw straight ahead rocks were standing in great number. Under the gradually descending twilight, they looked like an unknown sinister monster, waiting to devour unsuspecting travelers.

Hu Tiehua was delighted, while also began to feel the evening chill. Looking back, he asked, “How many li have we traveled now?”

The warrior looked up to the sky and replied, “Perhaps already fifty li.”

Hu Tiehua said, “The letter specifically said after traveling west for fifty li, someone will come to do the exchange with us. We might as well wait here! While waiting for them to come, we could wait at our ease for the exhausted enemy; good or bad we’ll teach them a lesson.”

The warrior slowly said, “If they have been here waiting for us, waiting at their ease for the exhausted enemy, they are the one who would teach us a lesson!”

Hu Tiehua was stumped. He laughed and said, “That makes sense as well. Either way, we ought to be very careful.”

The warrior coldly said, “Just now Xiaoren [little/lowly man, referring to self] suggested to have more rest along the way, it was precisely to guard against the opponent executing this move.”

Rubbing his nose, Hu Tiehua said with a laugh, “I was anxious; please don’t blame me.”

He was a frank man; if he knew that he was wrong, he would immediately admit his mistake. Right is right, wrong is wrong; the two were clearly distinguished, he would not shirk responsibilities at all.

The warrior felt embarrassed instead. He also laughed and said, “Fortunately Xiaoren [plural] also brought wine to refresh ourselves.”

Greatly delighted, Hu Tiehua asked, “Where is it?”

The warrior immediately presented a sheepskin water bag, and said with a laugh, “This is Da Yuan [ancient state of central Asia] grape wine; getting drunk will not harm you.”

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “I know. That friend of mine, the Old Stinky Bug, loves this kind of wine the most.”

Pulling out the cork, he took two mouthfuls, took a deep breath, and said with a laugh, “Going out this time, I was ready not to drink any wine, but since we have good wine at hand, ha ha …” He filled his mouth full of wine, so that he could not even talk.

The three Qiuci warriors were standing quietly in front of him, watching him with fascination, unexpectedly they acted as if they had never seen people drinking wine in all their life.

Hu Tiehua poured most of the wine in the bag into his belly, before he felt somewhat embarrassed. Wiping his mouth with his sleeve, he awkwardly laughed and said, “You see, I nearly finished the wine by myself. You guys should take a couple mouthfuls too!”

The three Qiuci warriors pursed their lips at the same time and laughed. When they laughed, not only their manner was completely identical, they were also laughing and closing their mouth at the exact same time, just like in the puppet show.

One of them looked at his two companions and then said with laugh, “This little bit of wine will not be enough to be divided three ways, why don’t Hu Ye [master] drink it all by yourself?”

“How can I do that? How can I do that?” Hu Tiehua spoke loudly.

His mouth said those words, but his hands tightly gripped the wine bag; not only he did not have any intention to hand the bag over, it practically looked like he was afraid other people might snatch the bag away from him.

The three Qiuci warriors looked at each other, and then they burst into laughter again. This time they were laughing even more happily. The same man said with a laugh, “Why does Hu Ye feel shy in front of Xiaoren?”

Roaring in laughter, Hu Tiehua said, “Since that’s the case, deference is no substitute for obedience, I won’t be shy.”

Originally he really did not want to drink, he was also afraid wine would botch up their mission, but after half a wine bag entered his belly, the wine bugs in his belly were aroused.

Perhaps most people who love to drink wine would have this same shortcoming; when wine was aplenty, they always do their utmost to urge people to drink, wanting other people to get drunk. But when wine was sparse, they were afraid others would come and drink their wine.

The three Qiuci warriors watched as he finished the entire bag of wine. Unexpectedly all three of them were radiant with delight; they appeared to be ten times happier than if they drank the wine themselves.

Wiping his mouth, Hu Tiehua said with a laugh, “Good wine, good wine! Too bad not only it was too few, it was also too light.”

Giggling, the three Qiuci warriors said, “Hu Ye thinks the wine was too light?”

Hu Tiehua replied, “In my opinion, drinking roast blade [see Chapter 41] is a lot more satisfying.”

The warrior replied, “But drinking roast blade will not kill you.”

Hu Tiehua roared in laughter and said, “Could it be that drinking this light wine that came from a bird will kill me?”

The warrior laughed and said, “Even if you don’t die of intoxication, you are pretty much dead.”

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “But I drank so much, yet I don’t even feel the least bit of tipsy. Could it be that my wine capacity has improved so much?”

The warrior suddenly could not laugh anymore; his eyes wide open, he said, “Hu Ye really did not feel the slightest bit tipsy?”

Hu Tiehua looked askance at him and said, “This little bit of wine can intoxicate me? Hey, hey! Seven or eight more bags will not harm me.”

The three Qiuci warriors could only stare blankly; they did not even know what to say.

Hu Tiehua said, “If you don’t believe me, why don’t I let you see if I am drunk or not?”

Actually, the fact that he made that kind of remark already indicated that he was drunk. Those who are really not drunk would never try to prove their sobriety for other people to see.

But the three Qiuci warriors were shocked that they looked at him with their mouth agape, their eyes wide open. They saw Hu Tiehua staggered on his feet, drew a line on the sand, and then curling up one leg, he used the other leg to hop over the line.

He ran back and forth twice, and then laughed heartily and said, “Did you see that? Can a drunk hop like that?”

The warrior rolled his eyes and said with a laugh, “People who are really not drunk can do somersault.”

Hu Tiehua laughed aloud and said, “Somersault, what’s so difficult about that?”

While his mouth was speaking, his body already soared up into the air. With his level of martial art skill, forget about making one somersault, even seventy, eighty times, would be like eating tofu, extremely easy and mundane.

Who would have thought that he only did half a somersault, unexpectedly he suddenly dropped down from the air. ‘Thud!’ he landed hard on the ground, creating a hole in the sand.

Hu Tiehua shook his head, rubbed his eyes, pursed his lips, and said with a laugh, “I twisted my waist; it did not count.”

The warrior laughed and said, “Right, it did not count. Do it again.”

Hu Tiehua struggled to crawl back up, he forced his body to do another somersault. But with another ‘Thud!’ he dropped down from the air like a piece of rock. This time he could not crawl back up. Giggling, he said, “That’s strange; how could I not be in good condition today?”

The warrior’s eyes lit up, he said, “I wonder if Hu Ye knew what’s going on?”

Hu Tiehua roared into laughter and said, “I am afraid the sun is giving me heatstroke.”

“No, no, not that,” the warrior said.

Tilting his head sideways, Hu Tiehua pondered, “Perhaps I have been too tired these past couple of days,” he said.

“That’s not it either,” the warrior replied.

Glaring at him, Hu Tiehua said, “How do you know that’s not it? You only know fart!”

The warrior laughed aloud and said, “Of course I know, because I personally drugged this wine with my own hands.”

Hu Tiehua was startled, “Drug?” he said, “What drug?”

The warrior giggled and said, “Although our Qiuci is a small country, but our emperors are just like yours; unavoidably they all like women. Doesn’t your country have a saying, something like ‘lascivious Guaren [I (first person pronoun used by royalty or nobility)]’? Am I right?”

“So what if you are right?” Hu Tiehua said.

“Therefore,” the warrior continued, “In the inner courtyard of our imperial palace, we always have one kind of drug, which is specially prepared to deal with those ardent female and chaste women. This kind of wine is fragrant and light, not much different to syrup; but whoever consumes it, will immediately have his whole body weakened, no longer has the slightest strength.”

Hu Tiehua stammered, “You … you just gave me drink that … that thing?”

The warrior laughed and said, “That’s right. Zaixia had given Hu Ye that kind of wine. It was with great difficulty that I managed to steal a bag from the inside; Hu Ye thought it was too few, there’s nothing I can do.”

Hu Tiehua stared blankly for half a day. Suddenly he roared in laughter and said, “I am neither a chaste woman nor an ardent female, plus your boss can’t possibly fancy me, why did you use this kind of wine to deal with me? Isn’t this a waste?”

The warrior laughed and said, “Interesting, interesting … This is really extremely interesting; someone who is about to die can say such interesting words, this is really hard to come by.”

Hu Tiehua laughed heartily and said, “This is something that I learned from that dead stinky bug. In all one’s life, one would cry when coming down. During life, opportunity to laugh is really not much. When at the death’s door one does not laugh heartily several times, won’t one live his life in vain?”

The warrior said, “Does Hu Ye know that you are about to die?”

Hu Tiehua said, “I also know that you guys are doing this only for the gold and silver and jewels on the camel, am I right?”

The warrior laughed aloud and said, “I did not expect Hu Ye’s mind suddenly become this clear. That’s right, we are doing this for that. Wangye is driven away, this life could be considered over. It’s not worthwhile for us to follow him in this kind of ghost place and suffer hardship for a lifetime; it’s better to get some wealth and go someplace else to enjoy the other half of our lives.”

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “Makes sense, makes sense. But have you ever thought that these jewels are to be given to Shi Guanyin, perhaps she may be here soon; would she let you take the treasure away?”

The warrior unhurriedly said, “Hu Ye really thinks that this is the place you are going to meet Shi Guanyin?”

Hu Tiehua was stunned, “Is it not?” he asked.

The warrior said, “Westbound fifty li, that is the place to meet her, isn’t it?

“That’s right,” Hu Tiehua replied.

The warrior laughed and said, “But although when we set off we did head west, after ten li, we changed direction. In this great desert, slight mistake of direction

could result in great difference. This place is at least three hundred and fifty li away from that meeting place."

Hu Tiehua also laughed and said, "No wonder after ten li you wanted me to take a break; turns out you wanted to pour the wine down in me at that time."

The warrior said, "But at that time Hu Ye refused to take a break, so we only deliberately took wrong direction. Hu Ye thought that in the desert, we are an old horse who knows the way home, hence you did not hesitate to follow us, and did not pay attention to the direction either."

He laughed before continuing, "But Hu Ye need not feel bad; a lot of people get lost in the desert."

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, "But I always don't know the way; even walking along the road, I might get lost."

The warrior said, "When Hu Ye reincarnates [lit. throw oneself as a fetus] in your next life, it would be best if you know your way; don't make the mistake of throwing yourself as a fetus inside the pig's belly. That is certainly not worthwhile."

He himself never thought that he could make such a humorous remark. The more he thought about it, the more he was proud of himself; the more he thought about it, the more he found it amusing, so he could not help howling in laughter.

"And now," Hu Tiehua said, "Are you guys going to kill me?"

The warrior said with a laugh, "If we don't kill Hu Ye, after the drug inside Hu Ye fade away, you will certainly come for us … This is something that we do not have any choice in, I hope Hu Ye would forgive us."

Beaming with smiles, Hu Tiehua said, “But which one of you dare to make your move?”

“Any one of us is the same,” the warrior replied.

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “You think I really don’t have any strength? It might be that when you come to kill me, you would be killed by me instead.”

The three warriors were already walking over toward him, but hearing this remark, they suddenly halted their steps. Hu Tiehua was formidable; they already had first-hand experience on it.

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “Perhaps this wine was not as formidable as you imagined; perhaps this wine is not as effective to men as it is to the women, is it?”

The three Qiuci warriors looked at each other; they thought, “That’s right, perhaps he really still has some strength left; otherwise, how could he laugh this happily?”

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “All right, whoever dares to make your move, just come over!”

The three looked at each other in dismay; unexpectedly no one dared to come over.

Hu Tiehua laughed aloud and said, “In my opinion, it’s better for you guys to take these jewels and go away as fast as possible.”

The warrior rolled his eyes, he suddenly said, “If this guy still has some strength left, how could he let us take the jewels away?”

The other man said in great delight, “That’s right, he must be bluffing.”

The third man laughed aloud and said, “You want me to make my move, I’ll make my move!”

‘Shua!’ he pulled the saber from his waist and rushed toward Hu Tiehua while brandishing the saber. The bright and shiny saber was dazzling to the eyes, it seemed like cutting people’s head would be easier than cutting a melon.

Although Hu Tiehua was still laughing, his laughter has become somewhat forced. He suddenly said, “These jewels, one person spending it, he could indeed live it up for a lifetime. But divided among three people … hey, hey! Don’t you think it’s too little?”

In all his life, he had never done anything to sow dissension, but now, at the moment of desperation, he used this tactic, hoping that the three would massacre each other at once.

Who would have thought that the warrior laughed heartily and said, “Even if we want to hog the treasure for ourselves, we will definitely not kill each other in front of you first to give you the opportunity to escape. There is absolutely no such fool in the world.”

The other man giggled and said, “I am afraid Hu Ye has heard too many legends and old stories.”

The third man howled with laughter while brandishing his saber to chop down on Hu Tiehua’s head; he said, “Laugh! If you really can laugh at the moment, I will admire you very much.”

His laughter suddenly stopped. The saber was raised high, but it did not chop down.

The first warrior frowned, “What are you afraid of?” he asked, “Your hand turns soft?”

“Boat …” the third man stammered, “I saw a boat.”

The first warrior roared in laughter and said, “Boat? How could there be any boat in this place? Could it be that your eyes …”

His own laughter suddenly stopped as well, while his eyes also bulged out.

The other man already spoke in trembling voice, “The boat … there is really a boat over there heading this way.”

All three men appeared to be terrified; they were agape and tongue-tied, and were unable to move a single step.

Hu Tiehua was pleasantly surprised; he thought, “Perhaps these three are seeing ghost. If a boat could sail on the desert, perhaps we could race horses on the sea as well?”

But when he looked back, he was also frightened and dumbfounded.

Amid the sand blown by the wind filling the air, there was indeed a boat rushing over this way.

At first this boat was sailing as fast as the wind, but this moment it has gradually slowed down. Amid the cry of the eagles filling the sky, it finally slowed down to a halt, and it did actually stop in front of them.

The yellow dust filling the sky gradually settled. A person in white gradually appeared on the bow like a specter. His hands and feet, as well as his facial features, were hidden inside the white clothes and white head covering; even his eyes were not visible.

The three warriors looked at each other, they slowly stepped backward. On their faces all three of them were sweating like rain. Tugging the rope of the camels, they wanted to quietly slip away.

The person in white suddenly laughed grimly and said, “I have arrived here, you guys still want to escape?”

His voice was tender and soft, unexpectedly it was a she.

Although her eyes were hidden behind the white scarves, unexpectedly other people’s each and every move could not be hidden from her. The three warriors’ hands and feet were shaking, the ropes they had just grabbed fell down again.

His voice trembling, the warrior said, “You … who are you, actually?”

Ignoring his question, the person in white slowly said, “I was baffled, why you did not come as agreed, but now I know that it’s the three of you playing tricks.”

Nobody saw her body moved, yet she already floated down from the bow and spoke sternly, “Those things belong to me. Based on who you are, you dare to get your finger on it?”

The warrior had been terrified by her astonishing qinggong; he was stunned for half a day before stammering, “Xiaoren did not have … did not have evil intention at all.”

The person in white laughed coldly and said, “Guanyin Bodhisattva has thousands of hands and thousands of eyes; you still want to deceive me?”

Hu Tiehua could not help heaving a deep sigh and said, “Shi Guanyin, Shi Guanyin, I never expected that finally I can see you. It’s just that meeting you under this kind of situation, it is really discouraging.”

The person in white said, “So what if it is under this kind of situation? Could it be that you simply have to measure yourself against me?”

“That’s right,” Hu Tiehua replied, “I indeed have that intention.”

The person in white spoke with a cold laugh, “I am afraid you are still a long way off … Even this kind of flunkeys could dupe you. The celebrated Hu Tiehua really disappoints me very much.”

She was already facing Hu Tiehua. Behind her, the three warriors quietly exchanged an eye signal, and backhandedly pulled the sabers on their waist out of their scabbards. Three sabers, like gusting wind, chopped toward the person in white.

The person in white still had her hands behind her back, she did not even look back, as if she was completely oblivious of the attack. But by the time the three sabers arrived, her ten slender fingers suddenly shot out from inside her sleeves.

With only a ‘Qiang!’ the saber light – like well-trained horse, soared into the sky.

The three warriors practically did not see the other side making any move, they only felt their wrist was jolted, half of their body went numb, the saber in their palm already shaken out and flew away.

The three were terrified that their soul flew away, how could they still have the time to care about any gold and jewels? Practically, without even dare to look at the person in white, they turned around and ran away.

Although they did not know any lightness skill, but when their life was at stake, their escape was really not slow. They ran straight for about ten zhang before the three sabers started to fall.

The person in white lightly waved, all three sabers were caught. She spoke indifferently, “The sabers are yours, I return it to you.”

She still did not look back, but just tossed the sabers backhandedly, the three sabers flew, as fast as lightning. It was as if the sabers had eyes, in the blink of an eye they already caught up with their owners.

Three screams in a row were heard, blood splashed out, just like three streaks of sparks, the three sabers have already pierced through their hearts, and like nails – pinned the three men to the ground.

Chapter 51 – Prophesying with Supernatural Accuracy

Grieved, Hu Tiehua said, “Human beings will die for riches, just as birds will die for food [idiom]; but this … is it worth it?”

The person in white spoke unhurriedly, “Are you scared?”

Opening his eyes wide, Hu Tiehua said, “What am I scared for?”

The person in white replied, “Naturally scared that I am going to kill you?”

Hu Tiehua laughed aloud and said, “Did you see me as someone who is afraid of death?”

The person in white replied, “I see that although on the surface you are full of heroic spirit, in his heart you are still somewhat afraid.”

Without listening to Hu Tiehua’s answer, she turned around and clapped her hands. Immediately several big men jumped down from that ‘ghost ship’ and transferred the gold and pearls from the camelback aboard.

“Hey!” Hu Tiehua called loudly, “Don’t forget that these things are to be exchanged with your ‘Star of Happiness’.”

The person in white turned around and asked, “You want to take the Star of Happiness back?”

“Of course I do,” Hu Tiehua replied.

The person in white laughed coldly and said, “What makes you think I’m not going to kill you?”

Hu Tiehua shouted loudly, “Even if I die I must bring the Star of Happiness back.”

“That’s strange,” the person in white coldly said, “How could a dead person bring anything back?”

Hu Tiehua’s eyes grew big, he was speechless.

When Hu Tiehua was waiting to die, not even in his dream would he think that Chu Liuxiang and Ji Bingyan might be nearby, watching him – Chu Liuxiang and Ji Bingyan were unexpectedly on board the ghost ship that was parked about a dozen of *zhang* away.
They were transferred from another ship to this ship, only because the Stone *Guanyin* wanted to ‘take a good care of them’. But they actually had never seen the Stone *Guanyin* at all.
Hu Tiehua thought that this person in white was the Stone *Guanyin*, but she was actually only a disciple in the Stone *Guanyin*’s school. The Stone *Guanyin* herself had long gone.
Her whereabouts was indeed extremely secretive; not only she always come and go hurriedly, no one has ever known where she came from, and where she was going.

Now, Chu Liuxiang and Ji Bingyan were inside the hold of this ship; not only that, they were actually sitting at the mouth of the hold, and were looking outside from behind the curtain, hence they were able to see Hu Tiehua.

However, naturally they could not move, and they did not dare to call loudly either, because they knew that Hu Tiehua had no way of rescuing them. In fact, the person in white already warned them, “Even if you call loudly, it won’t do you any good at all, it will only make Hu Tiehua die a bit sooner. Therefore, you’d better keep your mouth shut.”

Actually, she did not need to tell them this at all, because Chu Liuxiang had been very clear about this.

But they did not keep their mouth shut at all.

When they saw the state that Hu Tiehua was in, they were really discouraged. Chu Liuxiang could not help sighing and said, “Looking at the situation, I am afraid he is harmed by the wine.”

Ji Bingyan said, “It would be strange indeed if he is not dead because of wine.”

“But he is very good,” Yidian Hong said, “He is not afraid to die.”

Ji Bingyan said with a cold laugh, “Not afraid to die is very good? Both fools and idiots are not afraid to die either.”

Yidian Hong coldly replied, “Not afraid to die is always better than being afraid of death.”

Chu Liuxiang smiled and said, “What are you two arguing about? This time he is not going to die.”

Ji Bingyan asked, “What makes you think others won’t dare to kill him?”

When he said that, it was nearly the same time when the person in white spoke. The two persons, not only they were speaking the same sentence, the tone of their voice was more or less the same.

Chu Liuxiang said, “If she killed Xiao Hu [little Hu], who would bring the Star of Happiness back?”

Hearing the person in white outside spoke similar sentence, he laughed and said, “Did you hear that? Dead person has no way of bringing anything back.”

Ji Bingyan said, “How do you know she wants Xiao Hu take that thing back?”

Chu Liuxiang smiled and said, “If nobody bring the Star of Happiness back, how could they swindle that muddleheaded king to reveal the secret?”

Although Ji Bingyan still a bit incredulous, he had no choice but to believe Chu Liuxiang, just because this moment he saw the person in white was walking back, and Hu Tiehua was still alive.

Chu Liuxiang sighed. He muttered, “If only that muddleheaded king would not be so muddleheaded that he reveals the secret; otherwise, not only he would send his life away, I am afraid Xiao Hu would also accompany him sending his life away.”

Ji Bingyan could not help asking, “Why?”

Chu Liuxiang said, “Currently perhaps *Shi Guanyin* herself knew that she has no way to make that King of Qiuci to reveal the secret, but she thinks that the King of Qiuci might tell Xiao Hu, because the King of Qiuci might ask for Xiao Hu’s help. Since she thinks that right now Xiao Hu is very useful, naturally she is really hesitant to kill him.”
Ji Bingyan no longer speak, but in his heart he uttered a silent prayer, “I hope that King of Qiuci will not tell the secret.”

The person in white went away, the boat went away as well.

Only now did Hu Tiehua start to feel afraid.

Honestly, he himself did not believe that he would be alive.

The ‘Stone *Guanyin*’ really had no reason not to kill him.
Yet the Stone *Guanyin* clearly did not kill him. Not only she did not kill him, she really left the Star of Happiness behind instead – could it be that the Stone *Guanyin* was really a person who keep her promises?

Hu Tiehua really did not believe, yet he had no choice but to believe.

The night was getting deeper, the nip in the air was getting heavier. And Hu Tiehua was so cold that his entire body shivered.

Now, although gradually the effect of the drug was dissipating, although gradually he was able to move about again, but his body still felt weak, while the camels had long gone because they were scared.

Hu Tiehua knew that he was absolutely incapable to cross this fifty-*li* of desert to go back.
In the daytime, when he had his full strength, whether or not he could walk back would still be a question; let alone this moment the night was so deep and his strength was almost completely gone.

With the ‘Star of Happiness’ in his possession, he could not take any chances.

Later on, the cold was really unbearable, so he went around to look for some brambles and bushes, and a place among the rocks where he could take shelter from the wind and where he could build the fire.

There was also a benefit of being in the desert, which was that it was very easy to make a fire, simply because the vegetation that grew in the desert must be already completely dry.

“Perhaps this is the only benefit,” Hu Tiehua muttered to himself.

He suddenly stopped talking and slowly stood up, but then slowly squatted down again, while his eyes were fixed on the piece of rock directly in front of him. Even if standing in front of him right now was a naked beauty, perhaps he would not even be as spellbound as looking at the rock.

But it was nothing more than a weathered rock.

As the flame flickered, his eyes were also brightened.

Turned out this piece of rock was unexpectedly dyed with some black and yellow pigments, with several drops of already frozen impurities, just like a piece of top-quality cowhide. This was actually not a strange thing, but what was strange was discovering such things in the most desolate and hidden corner of such a desolate desert.

Besides, after all is said and done, he was a Jianghu veteran; although he himself did not have any disguising skill, he knew that these substances were used in disguising technique.

Who might use such disguising technique in a place like this?

Chu Liuxiang has always carried this kind of things with him. Hu Tiehua exhaled slowly. He muttered, “Turns out the Old Stinky Bug was here. But why did he need to disguise himself? Looking at the color he used is yellow and black, could it be that he was scared from being chased by women, hence he disguised himself as an ugly person?”

Thinking about it, he could not help laughing at his own joke.

But this matter was not funny at all. Chu Liuxiang must be in danger; otherwise he would not need to disguise himself, not to mention that after he put on the disguise, there was no news about him.

Hu Tiehua knitted his brows. He tried to move the rock. This piece of rock was dead; he could not move it. But his heart did not die; he tried to move another piece of rock.

Unexpectedly this piece of rock could be moved away by him. The sand underneath was so loose that he was able to dig using his bare hands, and soon afterwards he dug out a large bundle, which made him surprised and happy at the same time.

Inside the bundle, there was a headscarf, with a character ‘Qu’ [surname Qu, crooked, a song] embroidered on one of the corners. There was also a small wooden bottle. Pulling the cork out, he smelled a burst of faint tulip scent.

‘The Bandit Chief Leaving Fragrance in the Night’; turned out Chu Liuxiang always brought this fragrance anywhere he went.

In addition to this, there was a black pearl, a pair of judge pens, a bundle of gold and pearls, a big string of keys, a jadeite snuff bottle, and a small silver knife. The strangest thing was that inside the bundle, surprisingly there was also a pair scarlet women bedroom slippers embroidered with twin lotus flowers of one stalk [fig. a devoted married couple], and a pink women’s *dudou* [undergarment covering the chest and abdomen] embroidered with tree peony.
Hu Tiehua smiled and said, “Small wooden bottle, black pearl and headscarf are obviously the Old Stinky Bug’s. But the character ‘Qu’ embroidered on the scarf, who is it? Could it be … could it be … that passionate princess lady’s chamber name …? Ha! Old Stinky Bug really have some skills; quickly and effortlessly he already had a girl exchanging love tokens with him.”

The judge pens were flickering under the illumination of the fire. This pair of judge pens was not only heavier than the ones usually seen in Wulin, it was also exceptionally delicately crafted.

Hu Tiehua murmured, “The judge pens, snuff bottle, keys, silver knife and the gold and pearls must be the Dead Rooster’s. This man is as overly careful as women; he even carries the keys with him. Could it be that he is afraid that after he left, others might open his door and steal his stuffs … hey, hey! Looks like he ought to change his name into *Xiao Qi Gui* [miser/penny-pincher]”
He himself had never brought any key, so when he saw someone carrying keys, he felt it was extremely ridiculous. Thinking that finally Chu Liuxiang was able to find Ji Bingyan, he was even happier.

Clapping his hands, he said with a laugh, “These two are already together, even if the sky falls they will be able to catch it; why would I be worried for them?”

But who did that red slippers and embroidered *dudou* belong to? Frowning, Hu Tiehua said, “Could it be that the Old Stinky Bug has found a new woman? Even so, he could not possibly ask for other’s *dudou*! How could the Old Stinky Bug become this maudlin?”
He pulled the *dudou* and sniffed it. Scrunching his nose and sticking out his tongue, he said, “Smells good.”
He suddenly felt that the scent smelled very familiar. Immediately he remembered that night, when he kidnapped those two pretty concubines from Ji Bingyan’s home. Turned out Ji Bingyan unexpectedly always kept his beloved concubine’s personal items close to him, to rely on these things for comfort – Hu Tiehua could not help laughing heartily and said, “Turns out our dignified Ji *Xiansheng* is a passionate kind!”
Suddenly he heard someone said, “It’s always better to be passionate [*duoqing*, lit. lots of feeling] than to be heartless [*wuqing*, lit. no feeling], isn’t it?”
‘Being passionate is always better than being heartless’. It was such an elegant and sentimental [or passionate, same characters] words. And these words were spoken in black-naped-oriole like melodious and mellow voice, wouldn’t it make people feel overwhelming joy even more?

However, here and now, when Hu Tiehua heard this voice, he was shocked. “Who’s there?” he blurted out.

Just now that person in white’s voice was also very charming, but when she killed people, it was not charming at all. Hu Tiehua only felt that this kind of voice was more unpleasant-to-hear and more terrifying than a *Poluo* [no idea, Baike Baidu says some kind of soul monster].
The cute voice laughed and said, “The grand Hu *Da Yingxiong* [big hero], how could he become this timid?”
Along with the voice, someone came out from behind the rock. Unexpectedly it was Princess Pipa.

Heaving a sigh of relief, Hu Tiehua said with a wry smile, “Turns out it is you. You are not at home plucking *pipa*, what are you doing running away to this place?”
Princess Pipa quietly said, “If a *pipa* has no intimate friend to enjoy it, it is still better not to play.”
Hu Tiehua said, “Not plucking *pipa*, don’t you have anything else to do?”

Staring at him, Princess Pipa said, “Don’t think that I am coming out to play because I have nothing else to do; this time of the day, do you think I don’t want to be at home, sleeping? But *Wangfei* told me, ‘That Hu *Zhuangshi* [hero/warrior], although he is highly skilled, it’s a pity that he is a straw bag [i.e. an idiot]; perhaps he would fall into other people’s trap. You’d better go after him to look after him!’ Therefore, I had no choice but to come.” Perhaps if Hu Tiehua did not fall into other people’s trap, he would not be too angry; but he did fall into other people’s trap. Having someone else telling him that was just akin to have his scar uncovered. Before Princess Pipa finished speaking, his face already turned red from anger; his neck bulging, he said, “I am a straw bag, what are you? An embroidered pillow?”

Princess Pipa spoke indifferently, “No need to show off your prowess to me. It wasn’t me who made that remark. If you are not satisfied, can’t you go to the person who said it and settle the account?”

She chuckled and went on, “I am afraid that when you see her, you can’t even say anything.”

Hu Tiehua was so angry that his breathing became ragged; he really could not even say anything.

Princess Pipa continued, “I was heading westward, but all along I could not find you. Braving the night I went around in circles before I saw a fire in here. Afraid that it might be someone else, I told my men to wait for me far away, and came here quietly, alone.”

Hu Tiehua spoke loudly, “You don’t have to explain; in any case, I know you have this problem; every time you want to see people, you always sneak up.”

Princess Pipa also spoke loudly, “You don’t have to show off your prowess either; what is it that you have against me? Have I ever provoked you?”

“Humph!” Hu Tiehua replied.

Princess Pipa stared at him for half a day. Suddenly she laughed and spoke softly, “Even if I did not marry you, you shouldn’t be angry every time you see me!”

Hu Tiehua’s face was turning red again; his neck was bulging again.

Princess Pipa spoke sweetly, “If you always treat me like this, it is a clear proof that you secretly love me; therefore, because I did not marry you, you became angry, you drank that Old Stinky Bug’s vinegar [drink vinegar = jealous].”

Hu Tiehua stared at her. Suddenly he also laughed loudly and said, “A woman like you, if you are really married to me, it will be strange indeed if you won’t infuriate me to death.”

Pursing her lips at him, Princess Pipa said, “Cannot eat grapes, you say that grapes are sour [from Aesop’s Fables]. Really worthless.”

The tale of the ‘Sour Grapes’ originally came from a fable from various countries of their Western Region; Hu Tiehua practically did not understand, therefore, he did not get angry. However, he originally wanted to talk about the process of returning the ‘Star of Happiness’, but now he did not say anything. Originally he wanted to leave at once, but now he did not leave either.

Princess Pipa did not ask either, and neither did she leave; instead, she sat on the rock. Taking out a silver wine bottle from her bosom, she used the bottle cap as a wine cup, and poured some for herself, while muttering, “Such a cold day, if I don’t drink a cup of wine to block the chill, I am afraid I will freeze into a dead fish.”

Hu Tiehua’s mouth was grumbling as well; he muttered, “If someone wants to use wine to anger me, that is a big and a particularly bad mistake. I had just fallen into a wine trap, and now practically seeing wine already gives me headache.”

Although his mouth said so, his head actually did not hurt at all; on the contrary, his heart was itching really bad, all the wine bugs in his belly were crawling out in full force.

But he was just quarreling with her, how could he have the face to ask for a drink from her?

Hu Tiehua could only endure silently; he deliberately did not want to look at her.

Not only Princess Pipa drank noisily, her mouth also did not stop muttering, “This wine is really not bad; once I drank it, it warms my body.”

Hu Tiehua could not help shouting, “A girl unexpectedly drinks so noisily; it is indeed very impolite.”

Princess Pipa sweetly said, “I don’t want to be polite. Only this way will I be able to infuriate polite people to death.”

Hu Tiehua was about to be infuriated to death. Rolling his eyes, he suddenly saw the headscarf. His eyes lit up instantly, he picked up the headscarf and unfolded it in front of the fire, while muttering, “This rag is ideal to blow my nose.”

Before he even finished speaking, Princess Pipa already sprang up and rushed over, while shouting, “You … Where did you get that handkerchief from?”

Hu Tiehua calmly laughed and said, “I found it.”

Princess Pipa’s voice was trembling, “Quick … quickly give it back to me.”

“Give it back to you?” Hu Tiehua asked, “Why would I want to give it back to you? Is it yours?”

This time it was Princess Pipa's turn to blush, "It …" she said, "It is mine. So what?"

"That's strange," Hu Tiehua said.

"What's strange?" Princess Pipa asked.

Hu Tiehua replied, "I clearly heard that Old Stinky Bug said, 'That vixen imagined that her love is reciprocated, she also thought that I am going to cherish this rag well!' Could it be that you are actually the vixen he is talking about?"

Even the socket of her eye turned red, Princess Pipa stomped her feet and said, "Fart! You … you are practically not a human."

Hu Tiehua unhurriedly said, "No need to show off your prowess to me. It wasn't me who made that remark. If you are not satisfied, can't you go to the person who said it and settle the account?"

He laughed aloud and said, "I am afraid that when you see that person, you can't even say anything."

Princess Pipa suddenly collapsed on the ground and burst into tears.

On the contrary, Hu Tiehua was stunned. Originally he was just trying to anger her; seeing her unexpectedly really this heart-broken, Hu Tiehua could only walk over and said with an apologetic smile, "You must not grieve like this, I was just teasing you."

Princess Pipa was simply covering her face with both hands and crying bitterly; she completely ignored him.

"It's my bad," Hu Tiehua said, "I deserve to die. That Old Stinky Bug practically had never said that you are a 'vixen'; he never said that you

imagined that your love is reciprocated even more. This is all me, big muddled egg [b@stard] speaking nonsense."

Still crying bitterly, Princess Pipa said, "But he … why did he casually and randomly throw away something that I gave to him?"

"That is only because …" Hu Tiehua started.

Hu Tiehua spoke until his tongue was about to fall off before he was finally able to clear this matter. He heaved a sigh, and then said, "Now, I don't care how you want to scold me, I am just asking that you won't cry anymore, all right?"

Rubbing her eyes, Princess Pipa said, "If you admit that you are a special grade b@stard, then I won't cry anymore."

Smiling ruefully, Hu Tiehua said, "Didn't I already admit it? Ay …!"

Biting her lip, Princess Pipa said, "Since you admit it, why sigh? Could it be that you are unwilling?"

Rubbing his nose, Hu Tiehua mumbled, "I am most willing to admit that I am a big muddled-egg; is that all right …? Ha! Going back and forth, the fault always lies on the men. When a man scolded a woman, he is a muddled-egg, but if a woman scolded a man as a straw-bag, it is perfectly fine, because women can cry. This skill is really not easy for men to learn."

Glaring at him, Princess Pipa said, "What did you say? Say that again!"

Smiling bitterly, Hu Tiehua said, "I … I said that men are muddled-eggs, women are good-eggs … all are good."

Princess Pipa broke into laughter and said, "That's good enough."

She smiled and stuffed the wine bottle into Hu Tiehua's hand, but when her eyes fell onto that pile of stuffs, her smile immediately disappeared and her countenance turned heavy.

Chapter 52 – Bewitching Sea of Flower

Laughing, Hu Tiehua muttered to himself, "If by admitting that I am a muddled-egg I can have wine to drink, I don't mind admitting it once a day."

He was about to pour the wine into his belly, who would have thought that Princess Pipa suddenly snatched the bottle back and said, "I change my mind; this wine cannot be given to you."

Opening his eyes wide, Hu Tiehua said, "You … don't you think that you changed your mind too quickly?"

Princess Pipa said, "All these stuffs belong to the Old Stinky Bug, right?"

Hu Tiehua blurted out laughing, "Bedroom slippers and *dudou* are Dead Rooster's. You must not drink vinegar [jealous]; once you drink vinegar, I won't have anything to drink anymore."
Princess Pipa sighed, "That's not what I meant," she said, "Just think … Old Stinky Bug has always carried these things with him, but now they are buried deep in the ground …"

Hu Tiehua cut her off, "That's because he is in disguise; if he brought these things along, they might reveal his true identity."

Princess Pipa said, "Just think again: if these things are hidden on his body, how could other people find out about it? Unless he is fully aware that this time there is the risk of being captured by the enemy."

Immediately Hu Tiehua's countenance changed, "That's right," he said, "I really must not drink anymore. Were it not for they were fully aware that this mission

was extremely dangerous, Dead Rooster could not possibly take these shameful personal items out.”

Princess Pipa sighed and said, “Precisely.”

Slapping his own forehead, Hu Tiehua said, “Women are indeed more attentive than men; such an important issue, unexpectedly I did not even think about it.”

Princess Pipa quietly said, “This is not because women are more attentive than men; it’s just because women are always particularly caring about the people she likes, that’s all.”

Hu Tiehua sprang up; he took the ‘Star of Happiness’ from his pocket and stuffed it in Princess Pipa’s hand, saying, “This is the Star of Happiness, you quickly bring it back!”

“What about you?” Princess Pipa asked.

“I must go looking for the Old Stinky Bug first,” Hu Tiehua replied.

“But didn’t you promise *Wangfei* that you would bring this thing back?” Princess Pipa asked.
Stamping his foot, Hu Tiehua said, “That’s right, I also promised her many other things, but now that I know the Old Stinky Bug and the Dead Rooster are in danger, even things as big as the sky must be put aside first.”

Princess Pipa’s fluid glance flickered, she hung her head low and said, “Since you and I already knew that he is in danger, do you think I can comfortably walk away?”

Stunned, Hu Tiehua asked, “You want to come with me?”

“Hmm!” Princess Pipa replied.

“But …” Hu Tiehua said, “What about the Star of Happiness?”

Princess Pipa said, “You said it yourself, even things as big as the sky can be put aside first, right?”

Hu Tiehua thought for a moment. He was just about to nod, but suddenly he shook his head and said, “Can’t do! I cannot take you with me.”

“Why?” Princess Pipa asked.

Hu Tiehua replied, “This mission is extremely dangerous, and you are a sweet, delicate lady; in case something happens …”

Princess Pipa loudly cut him off, “Don’t you forget; this is the desert. In here, I am much more useful than you. Besides, even if you really don’t want to take me, I still have to follow behind you.”

Hu Tiehua rubbed his nose again. Smiling wryly, he said, “When there’s no woman, it’s going to be cold and cheerless. When there’s a woman, not even the chickens and dogs are left undisturbed [idiom: great commotion]. This saying is absolutely true.”

It was a place full of rocks; big and small, in all shapes, colors and sizes, fantastic oddities of every description. The big one was like a tower of rock reaching to the clouds, high into the sky, straight into the vault of heaven. The small one was at least several dozen *zhang* tall, like the vicious dragon and mythical animal from the ancient great desolation, quietly crouching in here, waiting to devour all mankind.
This place, not only it looked like they had reached the end of the desert, it practically looked like they had reached the end of the Heaven and the Earth. If they continued on, they would fall into the bottomless abyss below.

The ‘ghost ship’ had reached this place at dawn.

Looking out from the window of the ship, they saw ahead was entirely stone peaks, extending as far as the eye could see; it would be difficult to continue

forward, yet unexpectedly it looked like this ship was about to crash toward the stone peaks.

Although Chu Liuxiang was cool-headed, he could not help but was shocked. He saw a strange-rock-marvelous-peak ahead, which towered into the clouds – that looked like a vicious beast of the great desolation, ready to pounce head-on. Who would have thought that the ship made a sharp turn, and slowly slipped into a cluster of peaks?

Chu Liuxiang heaved a sigh. He spoke inwardly, "Such a sinister place; perhaps this is *Shi Guanyin*'s base of operation."
Thinking to this point, he was pleasantly surprised, because he felt the ship was gradually stopping. It finally halted in a depression on the rock.

The person in white spoke coldly, "Can your two legs still move?"

Actually, she was fully aware that although Chu Liuxiang and the others' true *qi* had been sealed off by the Stone *Guanyin* using her unique school's acupoint sealing technique, their movements and speech were not affected much.
Chu Liuxiang quietly looked at her, he did not speak.

The person in white said, "If your two legs can still move, get down!"

As if he was spellbound, Chu Liuxiang was still staring at her, but he still did not speak.

The person in white angrily said, "Do you want me to gouge your eyes out?"

It was only then did Chu Liuxiang smile and said, "Just now, in order to let others think that *Guniang* [Miss] is *Shi Guanyin*, you covered your face. But *Zaixia* [plural] already knew that *Guniang* is really not *Shi Furen* [Madame Shi]; why does *Guniang* still …"
The person in white suddenly laughed aloud. Unexpectedly her laughter was unspeakably mournful. "You want to see my face?" she spoke sternly.

Chu Liuxiang smiled and said, “I had long heard that everybody in *Shi Furen*’s school is a national grace, divine fragrance [idiom: outstanding beauty]. If *Guniang* is willing to let *Zaixia* to have a glimpse at your graceful bearing, even if *Zaixia* has to die, I could be considered doing my pair of eyes justice.”
Ji Bingyan snickered inwardly and mused, “Looks like he wants to unleash the ‘beautiful man scheme’; but no matter what kind of graceful words, flowery speech you use, I wonder if she will let you off?”

He heard the person in white howled with laughter and spoke sternly, “Divine fragrance, national grace … All right, I’ll show you my divine fragrance, national grace.”

Her hand lifted the headscarf covering her face, and Chu Liuxiang’s smiling expression immediately froze.

What human face? This was practically a devil’s appearance.

Chu Liuxiang could no longer think that a young lady whose figure was this light and graceful, whose bearing was this charming, yet her face was unexpectedly this hideous, this terrifying.

He suddenly remembered Madame Ren, Qiu Lingsu’s [see Book 1] face, which was also like this. Could it be that the Stone *Guanyin*, because she was jealous of this girl’s beautiful countenance, also destroyed her appearance?
He heard the girl laughed and spoke sternly, “Did you see it? Your eyes’ luck is indeed not shallow. From now on you must remember, Qu Wurong [her given name’s literal translation is ‘no countenance’] is the world’s ugliest woman, no one can match it.”

Smiling slightly, Chu Liuxiang said, “Whether one’s countenance is beautiful or ugly, it is only in the eyes of the beholder. Were it not for *Guniang*’s magnificence unmatched in this generation, how could your appearance be destroyed by others? And since originally *Guniang*’s magnificence was unmatched in this generation, so what if your appearance was destroyed … Other people can only destroy *Guniang*’s appearance, but *Guniang*’s unrestrained strength of character, who could actually destroy it?”

Qu Wurong was silent for half a day. Suddenly she scolded in stern voice, “Get down, get down … this is not the place for you to talk too much.”

Chu Liuxiang raised his cupped fist and started to walk. Yidian Hong was bringing up the rear. As Yidian Hong was walking in front of Qu Wurong, he suddenly halted his steps and said, “You are not ugly, you are very beautiful.”

Although he merely spoke six short words [*ni bu chou, ni hen mei*], yet these six words coming from his mouth really had more power than other people’s thousand-talk-ten-thousand-speech.
Qu Wurong seemed to have never expected that this man, who had never said one word, unexpectedly would say such thing. Unexpectedly her body seemed to be slightly shocked; she said, “You … what did you say?”

Yidian Hong was unwilling to speak one extra word; he continued going down in large strides.

Lost in thought, Qu Wurong stared at him; her deep,
cold-and-detached-like-water-well fluid glance unexpectedly appeared as if a pebble was thrown inside and created ripples.

Unexpectedly there was a small path among the rocky peaks, snaking its way into the rocks like sheep intestines.

The big man who was guarding Chu Liuxiang and the others bowed toward Qu Wurong and asked, “Shall we cover their eyes now?”

Qu Wurong already returned to her usual cold and detached manner; she coldly replied, “Don’t bother. This secret-valley-ghost-trail, even if I took them along several times, they won’t be able to tell directions … anybody in the world, whoever came here, they could forget about getting out on their own.”

Her last few words were naturally directed toward Chu Liuxiang and the others.

Chu Liuxiang chuckled and said, “Really?”

Qu Wurong coldly said, “You want to go out, the only way is to be carried out.”

Actually, Chu Liuxiang already had faint idea that these stone peaks, half were natural, the other half were man-made. Unexpectedly it contained some logic of changes, just like Zhuge Wuhou’s [i.e. Zhuge Liang of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms] Eight-Troop Disposition Diagram. In addition to enormous and exhaustive manpower, it was also imbued with the might of the natural law; it was indeed ghostly-hatchet-divine-power, which was difficult for mankind to fathom.

The wind rolling up the yellow sand, lost in the boundless mists of the glens, it only served to heighten the dismal, mysterious and treacherous impression. Sandwiched between the two mountains, only a sliver of the sky was barely visible. As they were walking in the valley, they could see the yellow sand, but they could not see the sky.

Chu Liuxiang sighed. He said, “What a dangerous terrain. Actually, did Shi *Furen* really need to spend so much effort to put up this kind of formation?” Qu Wurong replied indifferently, “Do you consider this place dangerous? We have not reached the really dangerous place yet!”

“Where is it then?” Chu Liuxiang could not help asking.

But Qu Wurong no longer spoke, she simply continued leading the way. He noticed that she turned to the east and curved to the west; she seemed to be very familiar with the path, and there was no difficult or dangerous place.

But Chu Liuxiang knew that without her leading the way, even if they spent one year, even if they came to the end of their life, perhaps they would still be at their original place and did not move at all.

This moment, in the midst of the vast haze of yellow sand, suddenly appeared three, five human figures, who seemed to be holding brooms and were sweeping the ground. Their movement seemed to be very slow, yet rhythmic and in

cadence, like a group of inanimate puppets, like they have been there, sweeping the ground, since time immemorial, and they would continue sweeping the ground until the end of the world.

Walking closer, Chu Liuxiang unexpectedly discovered that these lowly slaves, although their hair was disheveled and their clothes tattered, not a single one was not a handsome man. It's just that their faces were filled with blank, in-a-daze expression, their eyes had already lost the radiance of life. It seemed like not only they had already forgotten their own lives, they practically had forgotten that they were living human beings.

Yet Chu Liuxiang knew that this kind of handsome men, in the former days they must have a glorious past, days filled with their own joy and honor.

Now, they were completely apathetic, but there must be many people who had not forgotten them, people who yearned for them, who shed tears for them.

Chu Liuxiang suddenly remembered a sad verse, 'Pitiful and at a loss, alone on the river bank – was the man in the dream of the lady's chamber in the Springtime', his heart could not help but was growing more sorrowful for them.

If there was no bemoan-the-state-of-the-universe-and-pity-the-fate-of-mankind [Buddhist term: compassionate] heart, how could a man be worthy to be called a hero or a knight-errant [*yingxiong* and *xiashi*]?
Yet these men were simply sweeping the ground, constantly sweeping the ground, as if they were born to sweep the ground, as if they existed only to sweep the ground.

Other than sweeping the ground, unexpectedly they seemed to have forgotten that there were other things in life.

Chu Liuxiang could not help patting one of the men on his shoulder and said, "Friend, why don't you sit down and rest?"

The man raised his head and looked at him blankly, but immediately lowered his head again and began to sweep the ground, saying, “No rest.”

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “Friend, could it be that you like sweeping the ground?”

Without even lifting his head, the man said, “Like it.”

Stunned, Chu Liuxiang heaved a deep sigh and said, “But the sand on the ground here, you will never sweep it clean.”

“I am not sweeping the sand,” the man replied.

“What is it then?” Chu Liuxiang asked.

The man thought for a moment and then said, “It’s the bones of the dead.”

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “But there’s no bone of the dead here.”

The man looked up at him again. Suddenly a chill rose from the corners of his mouth. Originally, he wanted to ask the man many more questions, asking him who he actually was, asking him how did he become like this?

But he suddenly realized that he did not need to ask at all.

From the man, he seemed to see the shadow of ‘Shi Tuo’. Aside from his facial features, which were somewhat different, this man was similar to Shi Tuo.

Both have forgotten their past; they have forgotten everything. Although their bodies still existed, their soul had died; they were no more than dead bodies that could move around.

They have long offered their lives to Stone *Guanyin*.

Chu Liuxiang felt his hands and feet grew cold, while inwardly he sighed and mused, "*Shi Guanyin*, *Shi Guanyin*, you really have such a great magical power?"
After walking for no one knew how long, they suddenly smelled whiff after whiff of sweet floral fragrance. The fragrance was not of peony, not of rose, not of plum blossom, not of chrysanthemum either … This floral fragrance was so sweet that it was indeed out-of-the-world; it appeared to be coming from heaven.

But the air temperature was getting warmer and warmer; it was almost hot. Unexpectedly it was as if this entire valley had turned into a great furnace, the place where human's soul was being smelted.

But after walking for a moment longer, they valley suddenly opened up to a wide panorama.

From among the peaks hugging by the clouds, unexpectedly there was a sea of flowers.

As far as the eye can see, the heaven and the earth seemed to be brimming with fresh flowers, yet even Chu Liuxiang could not recognize what kind of flowers were these? He only felt that these flowers were incomparably bright-colored, and incomparably beautiful. He could not help sighing and said, "It's hard to imagine that in this barren desert, unexpectedly there is such a sea of flowers."

Qu Wurong coldly said, "These flowers are out of the ordinary in the sense that ordinary people can only dream about."

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, "Could it be that these flowers came from heaven?"

Unexpectedly Qu Wurong nodded and said, "Precisely they came from heaven."

Chu Liuxiang cast Ji Bingyan a glance; he laughed and said, "In that case, our eyes' luck is indeed not shallow."

Ji Bingyan did not respond.

This moment he only felt that his steps became weak, his eyes blurry, unexpectedly his entire body felt drowsy. The symptoms were similar to getting drunk from the wine, but it felt much sweeter than getting drunk.

Ji Bingyan finally discovered that there was something wrong with the fragrance of the flowers, but finding out now was already too late.

Chu Liuxiang was still talking, Ji Bingyan secretly thought, “After all, his power is deep, he must be stronger …”

He heard Chu Liuxiang said, “Just now *Guniang* said we have not reached the really dangerous place, perhaps now we have?”
Qu Wurong was silent for half a day. She spoke slowly, “You think this is the very dangerous place?”

Chu Liuxiang smiled and said, “Oftentimes, dangers are hidden among the particularly beautiful things. Among the particularly sweet scent, oftentimes there is poison …”

He had not finished speaking, his body suddenly crumpled on the ground. Ji Bingyan could only smiled wryly inwardly, and thought, “Turns out he really is not as smart as I imagined.”

Looking at Yidian Hong, he noticed that that pair of cold and detached, resolute eyes – was starting to be hazy.

Ji Bingyan felt that he was back into his childhood, and that it was only a dream, just because only his dreams when he was a child could be this cozy, could be this sweet.

When he woke up, he found himself in a beautiful room like in dreamland, and that Qu Wurong actually had feeling; she suddenly acted bashful.

The girl in crimson clothes had been laughing nonstop, as if she had no way of stopping.

Qu Wurong knitted her brows, turned around, and walked out.

The girl in yellow clothes pursed her lips, and spat disdainfully, “Ugly girl, knowing that someone likes her, she deliberately putting out this fake Taoist appearance … humph! You cannot bear to see us, we also cannot bear to see you!”

Chu Liuxiang rolled his eyes and intentionally lowered his voice, “It would be better for *Guniang* to lower your voice a bit, lest she would hear it.”
The girl in yellow laughed coldly and said, “So what if she hears it?”

Chu Liuxiang said, “In *Zaixia*’s opinion, that Qu *Guniang* seems to be an important figure in here, while it seems that two *Guniang* just joined the school not too long ago. If you offended her, would it be a great inconvenience?”
The girl in yellow opened her eyes big, suddenly she laughed sweetly and said, “You don’t have to worry about us, *Shifu* treats all disciples equally favorably, we are not afraid of her.”
The girl in crimson giggled tenderly and said, “As long as you are also good to us, we will have a way to make your stay here a bit more comfortable.”

Chu Liuxiang’s eyes were fixed on her; suddenly he let out a deep sigh.

The girl in crimson asked, “What are you sighing about?”

Chu Liuxiang sighed and said, “It’s a pity that in my entire body, *Zaixia* don’t have the slightest strength. Otherwise …”
He let his voice trailed off, but he looked at them straight in the eye.

The girl in crimson’s face gradually turned crimson; lightly biting her lip, she spoke slowly, “You do not have to worry, one day …”

Chu Liuxiang laughed calmly and said, “Are you saying you are not in a hurry?”

The girl in crimson giggled and said, “Oh you … indeed your name is not in vain. You are really repulsive, yet also an adorably romantic thief.”

Chu Liuxiang sighed and said, “I really don’t understand what kind of knockout drug hit me? How come it is so formidable?”

He suddenly stopped talking. Smiling wryly, he said, “Presumably, two *Guniang* can’t possibly know what kind of knockout drug it was either. I should have asked that other *Guniang*.”
Yidian Hong had already closed his eyes. But Ji Bingyan understood Chu Liuxiang’s intention. He saw that the two girls’ faces were indeed blushing from excitement.

The girl in crimson laughed coldly and said, “You think only she knows?”

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “Could it be that *Guniang* also know?”
The girl in yellow suddenly realized that Chu Liuxiang’s pair of eyes had never left her companion, and had not turned her way for a long time. Immediately she scrambled to answer, “Have you seen the flowers?”

Chu Liuxiang sighed and said, “If *Zaixia* has not seen it, this moment how could I be in this state?”

Chapter 53 – Beautiful and Plain Character

The girl in yellow asked, “Do you know what kind of flower that is?”

Chu Liuxiang shook his head and said, “I have never seen this kind of flower before?”

Pleased with herself, the girl in yellow laughed and said, “Let me tell you, that flower is called poppy flower, the grass blade is called hemp grass [Cannabis sativa]. My *Shifu* transplanted them from *Tianzhu* [the Indian subcontinent (esp. in Tang or Buddhist context)]. They can only grow in this kind of warm and hot place.”
Inwardly Chu Liuxiang was shocked, but his mouth said, “Poppy hemp? What a strange name?”

The girl in yellow said, “The knockout drug that hit you was precisely extracted from this poppy flower and hemp grass. While admittedly if you consume a lot of this drug you will go mad, but if you consume just the right amount, you will practically float about and feel like an immortal; you will feel more comfortable than anything else.”

Chu Liuxiang pretended to be aghast, “Consuming a lot will go mad?” he asked.

The girl in yellow replied, “If you consume a lot, not only you will go mad, your eyes might see many illusions, you might see things that practically don’t exist.”

The girl in crimson also found that the wind behind her sail has been taken away by another person, she immediately snatched the opportunity to say, “On top of that, by that time their mind was already extremely confused and excited, therefore, oftentimes they would rise up and fight with some people who practically did not exist at all, all the way until their own spirit weary, their strength exhausted.”

She chuckled before continuing, “And the people who practically did not exist at all, nobody can fight. Therefore, even the number one martial art master in the world, if he was hit by this knockout drug, he can only withstand it for a short period of time; sooner or later he would collapse.”

The girl in yellow also snatched the opportunity to speak, “Therefore, if you could use this kind of drug, you will become like someone whom no one can

bring down. Tell me, isn't this a lot more formidable than any martial art in the world?"

Listening to this, inwardly Ji Bingyan was horrified, but Chu Liuxiang was laughing. He said, "But in *Zaixia*'s eyes in moment, there are only two beautiful and happy girls; I do not see any terrifying enemy … I just hope that the two ladies are not merely *Zaixia*'s illusion."
The girl in crimson giggled happily and said, "It's because the knockout drug hitting you was not much at all; therefore, right now you only feel no more than your body weakened.

The girl in yellow said, "The most mysterious part of this drug is precisely its effect, which varies according to the amount being use. When much is being used, the effect will be like deadly poison, but when it is used a little, it becomes magic potion that brings happiness."

Chu Liuxiang heaved a deep, deep sigh. He said, "Two *Guniang* are indeed erudite and multi-talented."
Suddenly they heard someone responded indifferently, "It's a pity that they talk too much."

Although this voice was extremely indifferent, but it was incredibly elegant. The charm of this kind of refined voice was far superior to the sweet, charming and coquettish voice.

When Chu Liuxiang, who was accustomed to hearing women's coquettish voices – heard the voice, his spirit suddenly felt invigorated. However, when the two girls heard the voice, their faces immediately became devoid of any color.

They saw a slender figure wearing white clothes, walking slowly in – in the wake of the voice.

Her walking posture had nothing special at all, but it made people feel the beauty of her style and spirit. There were simply no words in the world that can describe it.

The clothes she wore were pure-white-in-color, untainted-by-even-a-speck-of-dust light muslin. Although the room was without any wind, the impression was that she could ride the wind and fly away at any moment.

Her face was also covered in light muslin. But although no one could see her face, there was the impression that she must be a divine fragrance, national grace, peerless in this generation.

Qu Wurong's style was also extremely elegant; her figure was more or less comparable to hers, but even though Qu Wurong was wearing similar muslin dress, her face was also covered in light muslin, others could still be able to tell the difference in just one glance.

Only because her kind of charm, no one could imitate. It was some kind of special grace bestowed by the Heaven, the pure essence resulting from refinement over countless years. No one could have that many fantastic experiences like her; therefore, she would appear aloof and remote forever. No one could reach, nothing could compare.

In his heart, Chu Liuxiang took a deep, deep sigh and said, "*Shi Guanyin*, I finally see you! A man can see this kind of woman, the luck of his eyes is really not shallow. But I would rather there is no such person with your attractive looks in the world."
The two girls already prostrated themselves in reverence and said, "We kowtow in salute to *Shifu*."
The Stone *Guanyin* replied indifferently, "I have always treated everyone of you equally favorably, you yourselves said it just now, is that right?"
The girls remained prostrate, they responded in trembling voice, "This is your, the Senior's mercy."

"Very good," the Stone *Guanyin* said.
She suddenly beckoned Qu Wurong to come over and spoke indifferently, "If you cannot kill them, then let them kill you!"

Unexpectedly she was using such an apathetic tone to determine other people's life and death. In her eyes, other people's life and death was practically not as good as a dog's or a bird's.

Qu Wurong slowly walked over, unexpectedly she was not showing any emotion either; she spoke coldly, "Why haven't you stood up to fight?"

Chu Liuxiang could not help saying, "They only said a couple of sentences, *Furen* already wants their lives, don't you think you are being too cruel?"
The Stone *Guanyin* responded indifferently, "I treated them equally favorably, this is a fair fight, how can it be considered too cruel?"
What she said was still so bland, but no one could ever dispute it.

Rubbing his nose, Chu Liuxiang said with a wry smile, "Whatever the case, I am still asking *Furen* to spare their lives!"
"Do you know why they themselves did not come to beg me?" the Stone *Guanyin* asked.
Indeed, the two girls were already standing up; indeed, they did not say any word anymore. Although their bodies were shaking, they were ready to fight.

Chu Liuxiang sighed. Before he even said anything, the Stone *Guanyin* already continued slowly, "This is because they know that whatever I said, I will never change it."
Chu Liuxiang sighed and said, "Since that's the case, wouldn't it mean that they will die for me?"

The Stone *Guanyin* spoke indifferently, "On this, you don't have to feel bad. I want them to die, it really is not because they told you that secret. If I did not want you to hear this secret, I could have sealed their mouths early on."
Chu Liuxiang sighed and said, "That's right; when one is about to die anyway, whatever secret he hears, it does not matter anymore."

"Exactly so," the Stone *Guanyin* said.
"Since that's the case," Chu Liuxiang said, "Why does *Furen* want them dead?"

The Stone *Guanyin* coldly said, “It’s not that I want them dead at all, rather, they are the ones courting death.”
Stunned, Chu Liuxiang said, “They are the ones courting death?”

The Stone *Guanyin* no longer replied. But inwardly Ji Bingyan thought, “How come you suddenly become so dense? She already took a fancy to you, and these foolish girls had to hit on you first; isn’t that courting death?”
This moment the girl in yellow and the girl in crimson suddenly struck together.

Their skill level was not deep at all; hence Chu Liuxiang could already see that they had not joined the school for too long. But the move they were launching was strange and swift, totally beyond other people’s expectation.

It should be noted that to them, this battle was not for wealth at all, neither was it for fame, but for their own lives, so how could they not fight with all their might?

He saw the girl in crimson’s ten fingertips unexpectedly became like a pair of hungry wolf’s claws; gnashing her teeth she aimed for Qu Wurong’s throat.

As for the girl in yellow, even her eyes had turned red; her right fist like a blade, she desperately cut toward Qu Wurong’s flank, while her left fist was clenched so tight that her knuckles turned white, she sent out a punch toward the *dantian* [point two inches below the navel where one’s *qi* resides] on Qu Wurong’s lower abdomen.
Although this one-punch-one-palm-chop appeared not to have any changes, but the positioning of the attack was extremely weird; it was practically unclear from where her punch and her palm chop would strike.

Chu Liuxiang sighed inwardly, “*Shi Guanyin*’s martial art is indeed strange and marvelous; launched by this kind of people, it still has such a formidable power. If it was she herself, it would be desperately serious!”
He saw Qu Wurong’s body flashing, she easily dodged these two girls’ three attacks.

Although her martial art skill was much higher than the opponents, she appeared to be unwilling to meet such desperate moves head-on, with equal harshness. Therefore, she merely avoided direct contact and only focused on defense without offense.

The two girls' styles, however, one move was more intense than the last, one move was weirder than the last; even a figure like Chu Liuxiang was unable to see the origin of their style.

Unexpectedly this kind of style was entirely different from various schools and various sects of the world. The girl in crimson's style appeared to be somewhat based on eagle-claw technique, but it also appeared to be somewhat based on *qin na* [grab and capture, grappling] technique. Upon more careful inspection, it also had some similarity with Mongolian wrestling techniques, although without its tyrannical, overbearing characteristic.
The palm technique that the girl in yellow used seemed to be based on 'cut [as in cut off a length], slice [as in cutting at an angle], hack' three-character formula of the palm technique of inner-power school, but the execution appeared to be completely different. Unexpectedly the technique put emphasis on the 'chop [as in chopping someone's head]'. However, within the Wulin of the Central Earth, any palm technique if various schools and sects, none was using this 'chop' formula. Only when using a blade would they use this 'chop' formula.

Secretly shocked, Chu Liuxiang mused, "Looking at their technique, could it be that *Shi Guanyin*'s martial art came from a foreign country?"
He had not finished musing, Qu Wurong already sent out a backhand strike. Once the strike was launched, already he saw great difference from the two girls' move.

Naturally the girl in yellow did not dare to meet this palm strike head-on; twisting her waist, she spun around sideways. Naturally her left shoulder slid outward; but when she slid behind her, the edge of her palm chopped straight to her back.

Her footsteps were quick and nimble, her *shenfa* natural. When the two persons' figure intersected, the footwork was fast and accurate, as soon as she stepped behind Qu Wurong's back, the edge of her palm already chopped seamlessly [orig. where water flows, a canal is formed (idiom: when conditions are right, success will follow naturally)], without the slightest degree of either harshness or awkwardness. Speaking about this move alone, it indeed carried the air of a renowned expert.
It should be noted that when martial art was executed, the main objective was 'natural amazing execution', four characters [*miao zao zi ran*]; otherwise, the style would look strange, and the execution would appear somewhat forced, then the practitioner could not be considered a master.
Unexpectedly, this ordinary-looking, dull-speech girl suddenly executed this brilliant move. Watching this, Chu Liuxiang could not help cheering silently.

The Stone *Guanyin* also slightly nodded her head and said, "To be able to execute this move, your three years or martial art training indeed was not in vain."
But by the time she finished speaking, the girl in yellow already fell to the ground.

Turned out when the girl in yellow's palm was slicing, Qu Wurong's left palm was still slashing on the girl in crimson's wrist, forcing her to pull back her move and to retreat, but her right palm suddenly passed through under her ribs, and then when it reached her back, five fingers bending slightly, the palm changed into a claw. When the girl in yellow's palm chop arrived, she happened to hook it, as if she was deliberately letting herself to be caught by her.

And then they heard a 'Crack!' as her arm was broken, and she screamed as she fell to the ground.

Unexpectedly Chu Liuxiang could not help cheering loudly, "Brilliant! Absolutely brilliant …"

Any Wulin character in the world, if they saw Qu Wurong's backhand claw, nobody would be able to resist cheering. The palm strike had to slip through under the ribs, originally it was extremely difficult, it was an extremely

challenging move, but Qu Wurong casually executed the move, her arm unexpectedly appeared to have no bones, it made a sharp turn with ease, without the slightest amount of awkwardness.

Yidian Hong's eyes flickered, his cold and detached face unexpectedly lit up.

But the girl in crimson's countenance changed; suddenly she roared and pounced forward. Although her move was not exquisite, the momentum was enough to intimidate people.

Qu Wurong slightly leaned forward and lightly leaped over, her palm chopped straight down.

The top of her head was actually the most protected part of the girl in crimson; who would have thought that as Qu Wurong's palm chopped down, it still chopped the top of her head? What happened was that Qu Wurong was able to see accurately the instant she was pulling back her move and changing her style, the gap when the pair of palms intersected, and exploited it for her palm to chop down. Both the timing and positioning were very accurate, unexpectedly it did not miss even a fraction of a hairsbreadth.

She actually used the girl in crimson's technique to kill the girl in yellow, and used the girl in yellow's technique to kill the girl in crimson. Moreover, her every movement has achieved perfection. It appeared that if she wanted to, before the girl in crimson and the girl in yellow launched a single move, she could have destroyed them first.

Yidian Hong and Ji Bingyan looked at each other, they could not help being emotionally moved, only Chu Liuxiang slightly knitted his brows, as if he was thinking about something.

He only felt that the move that Qu Wurong was using seemed to be very familiar, but recalling all the martial arts of various schools and various sects throughout the world, he could not remember such a move.

They saw Qu Wurong's expression was cold; her face was devoid of any expression, as if she had not done anything at all. She slowly walked over to the Stone *Guanyin*, bowed, and said, "Do you, Senior, have any other instruction?"
But the Stone *Guanyin* was silent for a long, long time. Suddenly she chuckled and said, "I have not seen you making your move for a long time, I can't believe your martial art skill has progressed this much; it is indeed hard to come by."
Hanging her head low, Qu Wurong said, "It's not that disciple's martial art skill is making any progress, it's just that in normal times the two of them did not train diligently."

The Stone *Guanyin* laughed indifferently and said, "Even the world famous Chu *Xiang Shuai* cheered for you, what are you being modest for?"
Qu Wurong said, "This is also because you, Senior, instructed me using the correct method."

The Stone *Guanyin* was silent for a long time again. Suddenly she laughed again and said, "You call me over and over again 'Senior'; are you saying I am already very old?" [Translator's note: 'Senior', orig. *Laorenjia*, lit. old person, a polite way of addressing a superior, not necessarily older in age.]
Qu Wurong hung down her head; she did not dare to speak.

The Stone *Guanyin* sighed. She said, "That's right, I am already very old; I already ought to die. A few more years, then you can kill me, is that right?"
"Disciple does not dare," Qu Wurong said.

The Stone *Guanyin* said, "What are you afraid of? Speaking about your current martial art skill, even Zhangsun Hong won't be able to take three hundred moves of yours. In a few years, won't killing me be the exertion of lifting one's hand?"
Qu Wurong was silent for a long time. Suddenly she pulled out from her sleeve a silver knife, which was identical to Zhangsun Hong's, and then in one stroke she cut her own right wrist.

Blood shot out like arrows. But Qu Wurong's face was still expressionless. She slowly said, "Now *Shifu*, you … you should always believe … believe disciple?"

Before she finished speaking, tears already flowed down her cheeks, but her cheeks were already pale without the slightest color of blood; finally she slowly collapsed and fainted on the ground.

Chu Liuxiang and Ji Bingyan sighed; they closed their eyes, unable to bear to watch. But Yidian Hong, with eyes opened wide, was staring at the Stone *Guanyin*.
The Stone *Guanyin* unhurriedly said, "This foolish girl chopped her own hand herself, why are you staring at me? Do you think I am pushing her?"
"Humph!" Yidian Hong responded.

The Stone *Guanyin* laughed and said, "I never imagined that the One Red Dot of the Central Plains, who kills people like scything flax, unexpectedly was moved by compassion today. Could it be that you have some interest toward this foolish girl of mine?"
Yidian Hong spoke word-by-word, "I only have some interest in you; the interest to kill you."

The Stone *Guanyin* laughed and said, "Too bad you will never be able to fulfill this desire."
She no longer paid Yidian Hong any attention. Turning her head, she said, "Chu *Xiang Shuai*, can you still walk?"
Chu Liuxiang smiled and said, "If *Furen* wanted me to walk, even if I cannot move, I will still move to walk."
The Stone *Guanyin* said, "In that case, would *Xiang Shuai* please move your good self to come with me?"
She gracefully walked out the door, but suddenly looked back at Yidian Hong and said with a laugh, "Do you have any cut-wound medicine on you?"

Yidian Hong only stared at her without saying anything.

The Stone *Guanyin* said, "People who kill people for a living should always guard against being killed by others, presumably they would always bring cut-wound medicine on them. Since you have some interest on this foolish girl of mine, why don't you apply your medicine on her, take care of her?"

Chu Liuxiang smiled and said, “That’s right. Now she will never be stronger than you are, keeping her here will always be useful for you.”

The Stone *Guanyin* laughed and said, “Chu *Xiang Shuai* is indeed very understanding, no wonder there are so many women toppling over you endlessly.”
Yidian Hong really applied the medicine to Qu Wurong. Ordinarily he killed people without expending a great deal of effort, and now, doing such a trivial thing, he felt it entailed strenuous effort.

Heaving a deep sigh, Ji Bingyan said, “Poppy flower … poppy flower … I never thought that such a beautiful fresh flower is actually penetrating-intestines-eroding-bones poison; unexpected it can suck bone marrow without the victim realizing it.”

Yidian Hong coldly said, “What I never thought was that unexpectedly he really followed *Shi Guanyin*.”
“You think he is really gutless?” Ji Bingyan asked.

“Humph!” Yidian Hong responded.

Ji Bingyan said, “If it were you, even if she killed you, you can’t possibly follow *Shi Guanyin*, am I right?”
“Humph!” Yidian Hong responded.

Ji Bingyan sighed. He said, “A man like you will never understand Chu Liuxiang. But there is one thing that I can tell you: there is no one on earth who can force him to do something that he is not willing to do.”

Yidian Hong did not talk anymore.

Ji Bingyan said, “I can also tell you: although he seems to be very casual, but all his life, he has never done anything that might make his friends lose face. If anybody can have this kind of friend, it is indeed an enormous luck.”

Suddenly they heard Qu Wurong's moan; she slowly woke up.

Although when she was unconscious her face showed great pain, but as soon as she woke up, her face immediately became cold and indifferent again, completely without any emotion.

Yidian Hong asked, "You … are you still in pain?"

To a seriously injured person, this question was a bit too cold and too harsh; but for Yidian Hong, it was the most tender thing that he had ever spoken in his life. Who would have thought that Qu Wurong was actually colder than him? She said, "I am in pain or not, what is it to you? Go a bit farther away!"

Yidian Hong was silent for half a day. He really moved away.

Qu Wurong struggled to stand up. Suddenly she saw the plain white cloth bandaging her wound. "Did you bind up my wound?" she spoke sternly.

"Yes," Yidian Hong replied.

"Who told you to be meddlesome?"

"No one," Yidian Hong replied.

Qu Wurong suddenly tore the entire bandage and pulled it down. She also wiped the medicine completely from her cut wrist. This moment her would has not closed yet, so blood was gushing out again. Although she was in so much pain that her head was wet with cold sweat, her face was still cold and indifferent. She tossed the white cloth bandage heavily on the floor, and then staring at Yidian Hong, she said, "My business, I never need anybody else to care for me."

Finished speaking, she no longer look at Yidian Hong, not even a glance. She struggled up and rushed out.

Ji Bingyan said, “Such a stubborn woman, it is indeed very rare.”

Yidian Hong was silent for half a day. He spoke coldly, “She is very good.”

“Very good?” Ji Bingyan asked, “In what way?”

Yidian Hong still spoke coldly, “She is very good.”

Ji Bingyan said, “Whatever the case, you are showing kindness to her; even if she is not grateful, she shouldn’t be that vicious to you.”

Yidian Hong closed his eyes, he no longer spoke.

Ji Bingyan stared at him for half a day. Finally he chuckled and mused inwardly, “If these two can be together, they will be a real couple who were made for each other.”

No makeup table, no embroidered quilt, no brocade bed curtain with tassels, and there was no luxurious furnishings at all; there were only ordinary knickknacks and dazzling jewelry.

The elegance of this room was precisely its beautiful and plain character; if any cosmetics were added into it, it would be defiled instead.

Sitting in here, Chu Liuxiang only felt unspeakable comfort; he has practically never been in such a comfortable room in his life. Inwardly, he could not help sighing.

Whatever the case, the Stone *Guanyin* was indeed an out-of-the-ordinary person.
Right now, Chu Liuxiang only wanted to see the Stone *Guanyin*’s face. Right now, he still could not imagine how beautiful this amazing woman really was. But by the time he saw her, he still could not imagine.

The Stone *Guanyin*'s beauty was unexpectedly unimaginable. Because her beauty simply occupied people's entire imagination.
A lot of people used the phrase 'star eyes' to describe a woman's beauty. But how could the starlight compare to the brightness and the tenderness of her pair of eyes?

A lot of people used the phrase 'spring mountain' to describe a beauty's eyebrows. But even a spring mountain amidst the hazy mist still could not compare to her graceful and subdued beautiful eyebrows.

Chu Liuxiang could not help heaving a deep, deep sigh.

The Stone *Guanyin* smiled and said, "Didn't *Xiang Shuai* always want to see my face? Now that you've seen it, why sigh?"
Her voice was graceful and touching to begin with, now that he had seen her face, listening to her such gentle and beautiful voice made his mind to be intoxicated even more.

Chapter 54 – Sitting Down with Steady Heart

Chu Liuxiang said, "I sigh because I am afraid others would say I am bragging."

The Stone *Guanyin* could not help being stunned. She laughed and said, "Bragging …? I usually always understood what others are saying, but hearing this remark, I really cannot say that I understand."
Chu Liuxiang said, "If in the future someone asks me, 'Have you seen *Shi Furen*?' Naturally I would say, 'I have'. But if that person asks me further, 'What does *Shi Furen* look like?' I would not know how to answer it."
He smiled wryly and went on, "When the person sees me suddenly humming and hawing, he must have thought that I am bragging, but he does not know how beautiful Madame's countenance is. There is no one on earth capable to describe it."

The Stone *Guanyin* said sweetly, “I have heard a lot of praise in my life, but there is none that can make me happy like this.”
Naturally there was a bed in the room; spacious and comfortable.

The Stone *Guanyin* slowly sat down, she quietly looked at Chu Liuxiang.
She was just sitting quietly, she was just looking quietly; without any words, without any movement. But it was more seductive than all seductive movements or seductive words in the world.

She was still wearing light and graceful gauzed clothes covering her body, exposing only a pair of soft, seemingly without any bones – lily-white hands, and a pair of delicate and beautiful ankles. But it was more moving than any naked beauty on earth.

Chu Liuxiang was unable to take his eyes off her; unexpectedly he looked like an idiot staring at her.

Smiling sweetly, the Stone *Guanyin* said, “You have heard my name a long time ago, haven’t you?”
“Hmm!” Chu Liuxiang responded.

“But it’s only now that you see my true identity,” the Stone *Guanyin* said.
“Hmm!” Chu Liuxiang responded.

“Are you disappointed?” the Stone *Guanyin* asked.
Chu Liuxiang sighed. “*Furen*,” he said, “Do I look like a disappointed person?”
The Stone *Guanyin* said, “You … you don’t feel that I am old?”
Chu Liuxiang said, “To a woman, ‘old’ is indeed the most terrible enemy, but *Furen* has apparently conquered this terrible enemy.”
The Stone *Guanyin* chuckled; she went on, “Do you know what place is this?”
Chu Liuxiang replied, “Other than *Furen*’s boudoir, how could there be such place on earth?”
The Stone *Guanyin* said, “Do you know why I took you here?”
This time Chu Liuxiang only nodded his head.

The Stone *Guanyin*'s fluid glance suddenly became hazy, she spoke softly, "Since you do, why haven't you come over?"
On earth, there was not a single man who could resist this kind of temptation, is there?

Chu Liuxiang finally embraced her.

Her body was light and graceful as if it could really dance on his palm. Her eyes seemed like shrouded by a vast misty fog, she spoke softly, as if she was whispering – into his ear, "No matter what the future will be, what happens tonight, you will never regret it."

"I never had any regret," Chu Liuxiang replied.

He suddenly exhausted all his remaining strength to throw her as far away as possible.

The Stone *Guanyin*'s body was like a leaf. Although he threw her heavily, she still landed lightly. Only her countenance changed.
Not only she was angry, she was surprised even more. In all her life, she has had some absurd, even bizarre dreams, but never in her dreams would she expect that Chu Liuxiang might throw her off.

Grinning, Chu Liuxiang looked at her, saying, "Looking at your expression, it seems like you are thinking that I am a lunatic, isn't that right?"

In a flash, the Stone *Guanyin* already recovered her usual graceful charm; she spoke indifferently, "Are you saying you are not a lunatic?"
Chu Liuxiang laughed heartily and said, "My only regret is that right now I don't have any strength; otherwise I would have thrown you a bit farther off."

"Do you have the heart to do that?" the Stone *Guanyin* spoke softly.
She stood up gracefully. The mist-like gauze clothes hence slipped off her shoulders, exposing the naked body, which was like it was carved from ivory.

Chu Liuxiang's breathing suddenly became ragged; he nearly did not believe that unexpectedly there was such a perfect naked body in the world. Such a slender waist, such beautiful legs … this sleek and warm naked body already wrapped itself around him like a slithering snake; firm and upright pair of peaks already pressed against his chest, while the elegant voice was speaking softly in his ear, "You are a very experienced man, aren't you?"

"Hmm!" Chu Liuxiang responded.

The Stone *Guanyin* muttered so softly, as if she was talking in her dream, "Then you should know how much I want you right now. Do you have the heart to turn me down?"
Chu Liuxiang's hand was lightly slipping down along her spine; her whole body shuddered. Nothing in the world was more exhilarating than this shudder, which evolved from the depth of her soul.

Her fluid glance already glazed over, she buried her head on Chu Liuxiang's shoulder, her voice trembled as she said, "This is paradise; what are you waiting for?"

Chu Liuxiang sighed. "That's right," he murmured, "A beauty's naked body, is indeed a man's paradise … too bad this paradise is too close to hell."

He suddenly pinched the sleekest, the softest, and the most alluring place on her body heavily and also pushed her heavily onto the bed.

The Stone *Guanyin* lay on her back on the bed, the lantern was sprinkling its soft light over her milky white naked body, yet also leaving several parts in the shadow.
The shadow that would seduce people crazy.

She was waiting. This was a waiting posture, an inviting posture.

Who would have thought that unexpectedly Chu Liuxiang suddenly grabbed the golden cup by the head of the bed, raised it high, and slowly tilted it over. The

amber-colored wine in the cup, like a piece of thread, flowed out and drenched her body.

Chu Liuxiang laughed aloud and said, “Now you are thinking that I have gone mad, right?”

The Stone *Guanyin* lay quietly, she did not make any movement, allowing the ice-cold wine to flow along her erect breasts and to her smooth lower abdomen … she only took a long, long sigh and said, “You are not mad, you are just an idiot, that’s all.”
Chu Liuxiang smiled and said, “You think that a normal man would absolutely be unable to refuse you, right?”

“Never, ever,” the Stone *Guanyin* replied.
Chu Liuxiang sighed. He said, “Those slaves in the valley, perhaps it was because they were too normal.”

The Stone *Guanyin* suddenly sat up. “What did you say?” she asked.
Chu Liuxiang replied, “If I did not refuse you, I would be like them, sweeping the sand blown by the wind that will never be swept clean until the day I die. Because when you see a special man, you immediately want to conquer him, to possess him; you want his soul and spirit to be dedicated for you. But when the man really devotes everything to you, you would think that this man was too mean and low; at best, he is only worthy to sweep the floor for you.”

The Stone *Guanyin* stared at him; she did not say anything for a long, long time.
Chu Liuxiang said, “Perhaps this is because your spirit is too empty; therefore, you are constantly searching, you want to find a man who can fill this emptiness. But you will never find him.”

The Stone *Guanyin* suddenly laughed again; she spoke softly, “Maybe the man I am looking for is you.”

Chu Liuxiang said, “Now, perhaps you think that I am somewhat different from other men, but by the time I have been conquered by you, I would be the same as them.”

The Stone *Guanyin* laughed tenderly and said, “Could it be that you do not have the least bit of confidence in yourself?”
Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “It’s not that I do not have confidence, it’s just that I do not wish to take this risk, that’s all.”

The Stone *Guanyin* said, “I … I am not worth you taking the risk?”
Rubbing his nose, Chu Liuxiang said with a laugh, “Perhaps there is no woman in the world that worth my risking my life for her.”

The Stone *Guanyin* unhurriedly said, “What about Su Rongrong?”
Chu Liuxiang’s heart sank, but on the surface he was still without a word or movement; laughing indifferently, he said, “In my eyes, they [feminine] are not just women, but they are my good friends. For a good friend, most men may risk their life.”

The tender smile on the Stone *Guanyin*’s face suddenly disappeared; she spoke coldly, “But you did not know, what the consequences be for the men who rejected me?”
Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “Other than me, could it be that another man has rejected you?”

“There was one,” the Stone *Guanyin* replied, “Many years ago, there was one.” Her eyes suddenly revealed a malicious smiling expression, “Do you know what I did to him?”

“You killed him?” Chu Liuxiang said.

With an evil grin, the Stone *Guanyin* replied, “Killing him, that would be too easy … I stripped him naked and tied him on the bare ground under the scorching sun, letting the scorching sun burned and destroyed his face, burned and destroyed his eyes, and then I had him pulling the grindstone like a mule, without allowing him to take a moment’s rest, ever …”

She giggled and then went on, “Do you know what he looked like in the end?”

The shadow of ‘Shi Tuo’ floated in Chu Liuxiang’s mind. Heaving a deep sigh, he said, “I know.”

“Could it be that you want to be like that?” the Stone *Guanyin* asked.
Chu Liuxiang replied indifferently, “I only know that he did not die; later on he finally escaped. I also know that although he is suffering now, but he is much better than those men who sweep the ground.”

The Stone *Guanyin*’s countenance changed, gnashing her teeth, she said, “But you … you can forget about escaping alive.”
Chu Liuxiang smiled and said, “I also know, right now your heart has not completely died on me, you won’t torture me like that.”

The Stone *Guanyin* suddenly picked up a pillow and threw it over to him, while shouting loudly, “Get lost! Get out of here before I kill you.”
Chu Liuxiang smiled and bowed, “Order received!” he said.

He walked out with a smile, only to hear the Stone *Guanyin* was panting behind him.
Step by step Chu Liuxiang walked back to the house. This famous hero, whose *qinggong* was the first under the heavens, at this moment, every step he took seemed to exhaust all the strength of his whole body.
Two young girls followed behind him, far behind him, as if they were afraid that if they were walking closer to him, disaster might strike.

Chu Liuxiang suddenly stopped, looked back and said, “I can’t walk anymore, *Guniang*, how about helping me?”
The girl scowled at him and said, “It’s just ahead; could it be that you can’t even take these couple of steps?”

Chu Liuxiang said, “Could it be that *Guniang* is this heartless, and wanted me to crawl over?”

The other girl said, "*Da Shaoye* [big young master], we are begging you, can you not look for trouble for us? There are already two who lost their lives because of you, and one who lost a hand for you; you are still dissatisfied?"
Smiling wryly, Chu Liuxiang said, "But now … I am only asking *Guniang* to help me for a couple of steps … otherwise I won't have any choice but to sit down here."
The girl stomped her feet and said, "You are really a devil star; women meeting you is indeed a bad luck."

Seeing two girls helping Chu Liuxiang coming in, and unexpectedly Chu Liuxiang looked like he was on his dying breath, Ji Bingyan was angry, but was amused as well; he could not help speaking coldly, "Looks like you really put out a lot of energy for that *Shi Furen*."
Chu Liuxiang sighed. He said, "I can't believe your imagination is this rich; too bad you thought it all wrong."

Before he even finished talking, both of his elbows suddenly struck outward lightly, the two young girls did not even have time to cry out in surprise, they already collapsed on the ground.

Chu Liuxiang sighed and said, "Terribly sorry, although *Zaixia* did not wish to bite the hand that feeds me, but in order to save my life, I have no other way."
Shocked, Yidian Hong and Ji Bingyan stared at him wide-eyed.

Ji Bingyan blurted out, "You … where did you get your strength from?"

Chu Liuxiang chuckled, he said, "It seems to be innate."

Ji Bingyan said, "But … but that knockout fragrance …"

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, "You think I was really like you, being knocked over by that seeing-ghost fragrance?"

Ji Bingyan was stunned. And then he smiled wryly and said, "That's right, naturally you were pretending; otherwise, how could you faint ahead of us but

wake up later than us? But when *Shi Guanyin* had not returned yet, why didn't you run away?"
Chu Liuxiang unhurriedly said, "At that time I still wanted to see her face!"

Although his mouth said those words, Ji Bingyan knew that the reason he did not run away that time was because he was afraid that after he escaped, she might harm them.

Chu Liuxiang also said, "Now that I have driven that *Shi Guanyin* crazy, within this half a *sichen*, she can't possibly come over, if we want to leave, we have to take advantage of this time."
Ji Bingyan sighed and said, "But we still don't have strength; I'm afraid we cannot go out."

Chu Liuxiang did not answer immediately, but he untied the two girls' belt first, and then spoke heavily, "You tie Hong *Xiong* on your back first, use this belt to fasten him really good, and then I'll carry you on my back … you should have enough strength to stand up?"
It was a stone house, with a stream of clear spring inside, flowing into the pool from a tiger's mouth above the stonewall. Two naked girls were taking a bath under the clear spring.

Although their appearance could not be considered beautiful, they had strong body, brimming with youthful charm. They were splashing water at each other, and were giggling happily.

Suddenly, three men barged in.

The three men were stacked together, as if they were a stack of *yuanbao*.
The girls were startled; they stared wide-eyed, their mouths agape, they could no longer laugh. One of them squatted down and used her hands to cover her breasts, while the other scrambled to get her clothes.

Chu Liuxiang smiled and said, "*Guniang*, please don't worry, *Zaixia* are all upright gentlemen, our eyes will never look about indiscriminately."

His hand flicked, the girl only felt half her body went numb, the clothes she had just picked fell down again. The girl blushed so deep that the roots of her ear went red, she spoke in trembling voice, “If you are upright gentlemen, why … why did you not allow others to wear clothes?”

Chu Liuxiang spoke softly, “It’s only because *Zaixia* knew that when one is naked, there’s great chance that one would not tell a lie.”
Ji Bingyan added, “Plus one must be embarrassed to make his move.”

The girl bit her lip and could only squat down as well.

Chu Liuxiang looked up to the sky and said, “Now I just want to ask *Guniang*, where did *Shi Furen* hide Su Rongrong, Li Hongxiu and Song Tian’er, three persons?”
The girl was stunned. “Three persons?” she asked, “Are they men or women?”
[Translator’s note: it’s hard to carry over to English, because in Chinese, ‘person’ is genderless.]

Chu Liuxiang sighed and said, “Naturally they are women.”

The girl bit her lip again and said, “Our *Furen* has never hidden any women.”
The other girl said, “In here, there are altogether fifty or sixty sisters, but none has surname Su.”

Chu Liuxiang knitted his brows; he looked back and asked, “Do you think they are telling the truth?”

Ji Bingyan replied, “Under such circumstances, the number of women who can tell lies is really not many.”

Chu Liuxiang heaved a deep sigh and said, “In that case, they are really not here.”

He cast a glance at the girls, and then sighed again and said, “There are at least ten people dying of thirst every day in the desert, yet *Guniang* are taking a bath in here … Ay!”

When he was sighing, his fingers lightly flicked again.

The long corridor was extremely quiet without any human voices. Ji Bingyan spoke heavily, “Do you know the way out?”

Chu Liuxiang said, “When they carried me in, I memorized it.”

Ji Bingyan said, “Since Rong’er is not here, why haven’t you left quickly? All the women’s here, their martial art skill is not weak, if you come across several with clothes on, I am afraid we will be in trouble.”

Yidian Hong suddenly said, “I want to find someone.”

Frowning, Ji Bingyan asked, “Who is it?”

But Chu Liuxiang smiled and said, “Could it be that Qu *Guniang*?”
Yidian Hong seemed to be sighing. He said, “I just think that she can’t stay here.”

“But do you think she’ll come with us?” Ji Bingyan asked.

Yidian Hong was silent for half a day. “I am afraid not,” he replied.

Ji Bingyan said, “Since you are fully aware that she would not come with us, why do you still want to look for her?”

Yidian Hong spoke heavily, “But I know that at least she won’t stop us …”

Suddenly they heard someone laughing coldly; she said, “What makes you think that she won’t stop you? Based on your, three men’s look, if you could escape, perhaps this place would have become a pile of rubble early on.”

Hu Tiehua fell on the pile of sand, gasping for breath. Now perhaps very few people would recognize him as Hu Tiehua, simply because even he himself did not recognize himself.

He only felt dirty, tired, and hungry. His throat was burning like fire; burning him so that his entire body was about to go crazy, his entire body felt like it was going to split open.

The source I am using has this double-length chapter, while the other source I sometimes use as reference divided it into two regular-length chapters. I decided to split it per the other source, but to keep the chapter numbering consistent, I simply call them 55a and 55b.

Chapter 55a – Between Life and Death

Princess Pipa was lying beside him; her appearance seemed to be worse than him, her expensive clothes nearly torn into tatters, her jade legs were stained with sand and dust, as well as blood.

Although the scorching sun was inclining to the west, its remaining power was still there, shining onto their faces. Not too far ahead there was a place with some shade on it, yet they seemed to have no strength to walk over there.

Using his hand to cover his eyes, Hu Tiehua muttered, “I am afraid we can forget about ever finding that Old Stinky Bug in this lifetime.”

Princess Pipa sadly said, “We shouldn’t have gone this way.”

Hu Tiehua’s eyes suddenly shot hot anger, he spoke loudly, “That’s right, we shouldn’t have gone this way; are you blaming me? You must tell me, in the desert, how much more useful you are than me? How come you are just like me? Dogs also seem to lie down here, unable to do anything.”

Tears flowing down from Princess Pipa's eyes, she sobbed, "I really should not have come with you, to be a burden on you. Otherwise, if only one person drinks your bag of water, at least it could support you a while longer."

Hu Tiehua stared blankly for half a day; heaving a long, long sigh, he smiled wryly and said, "I am really a b@stard; this kind of thing, how could I blame you? I am a big man, yet I can't even protect one girl. Unexpectedly I still have the face to lose temper in here."

Princess Pipa suddenly pounced on him; wailing at the top of her voice, she said, "You are not the one to blame, it was me … I just want to die now; it would be best if I die right away."

Lightly stroking her hair, Hu Tiehua muttered, "Even if we don't want to die, I am afraid there's no way we could keep on living."

Looking up, he saw the yellow sand was connected to the sky, the sky was connected to the yellow sand; it looked like between the heaven and the earth, the only place remained was this dead, despairing yellow color, there was nothing else.

Princess Pipa slowly looked up, a hint of mournful smile floated from the corner of her mouth, she said, "Unexpectedly you and I are going to die together; I am afraid no one had ever thought this might happen?"

Hu Tiehua suddenly roared in laughter and said, "To be able to die together with you is actually a pleasant thing. You … you are really an extremely beautiful girl. You … you …"

Suddenly his throat seemed to be choked, his hoarse laughter also suddenly stopped, he only looked into her eyes in daze. With croaky voice he said, "But if we are going to die, we should die a bit more happy, right?"

Princess Pipa's body seemed to tremble a little bit. "You … you want me to …" her voice quivered.

Hu Tiehua's gaze already moved from her eyes to her legs. Although this pair of legs was covered in sand, dirt, and bloodstain, it was still slender, beautiful, strong, and captivating. Hu Tiehua's Adam's apple moved up and down, his hoarse voice became even hoarser, but his eyes were blazing hot; so hot that it was as if it was going to burn her. His hands finally shook and moved on to her waist, he spoke word-by-word, "I want you … I really want you. Other than you, I don't know what else I want?"

Princess Pipa was only shaking continuously, her pale face gradually turned red. She stretched out her hand, wanting to pull her clothes to cover up her bare legs. But the torn-to-tatters clothes already could not cover anything. Her movement was just heightening the temptation a bit; not only it excited others, it also excited herself.

She only felt that her heart was about to jump out of her chest cavity.

Humans, indeed they are some kind of strange animal.

Human's desire, oftentimes it came precisely at the time when it should not have come. The more the physique was weary, the more the desire might come even more suddenly, even more intense.

Hu Tiehua finally embraced her tightly – under the shadow of the death, his desire was suddenly blazing, ready to burn him, and he was helpless to hold back.

Princess Pipa closed her eyes, as if she was ready to accept it.

The carousal before death, was it not something that everybody had fantasized about?

Sand. It was so soft, but it was also burning.

Hu Tiehua turned over and lay on top of her. Their grief, sorrow, pain and despair, seemed to be burned completely in this flame of lust.

But right this moment, Hu Tiehua suddenly shouted in pain back and jumped up; he used both hands to cover himself, as he looked at Princess Pipa in shock. His voice cracked, "You … why are you … why are you like this? Could it be that you are not willing?"

Tears flowing down from her eyes again, Princess Pipa softly said, "I … I am willing. Before I die, I have decided to give you everything, but I simply have to tell you something."

"What is it?" Hu Tiehua asked.

Princess Pipa closed her eyes and said, "My … my body is no longer complete; I have given it to someone else."

Both hands clenched tightly, Hu Tiehua hissed, "Who?"

Princess Pipa spoke word-by-word, "It is him."

Who was the 'he' she was talking about? Could it be that Hu Tiehua did not know?

Hu Tiehua was like having a bucket of cold water poured on top of his head; his entire body froze.

Princess Pipa spoke in grief, "I wanted you as well, I really had no way to control myself, I wanted to forget everything, to die in your arms, but … but I don't know, for some reason I am not able to hide this matter from you."

Hu Tiehua suddenly sprang up and shouted, "Don't say it … don't say it …"

He kicked the sand like mad; with every kick he cursed, ‘Old Stinky Bug’, and he kicked the sand up into the air, until he was nearly surrounded by walls of sand.

Princess Pipa spoke quietly, “Do you really hate him now?”

“Humph!” Hu Tiehua responded.

Princess Pipa sighed and said, “Even if you really hate him, I won’t blame you. Sometimes I also hate him very much … No matter who is with him, victory and glory always belong to him; no matter what load in someone’s mind, he only needs a glance and he would already know what it is. But the load in his mind, there will never be anybody who would know it.”

Hu Tiehua’s legs suddenly stopped; looking at her, he said, “You think that if we are with him, we would suffer losses too much, is that right?”

“Hmm!” Princess Pipa responded.

Hu Tiehua said, “But we are most willing to be with him; he did not force us at all, did he?”

Princess Pipa hung her head down, “Hmm!” she responded.

Hu Tiehua suddenly roared in laughter and said, “Speaking back and forth, the two of us are indeed fellow sufferers empathizing with each other. Although we hate him very much, we can’t help liking him.”

Princess Pipa sighed and said, “Sometimes, I wonder why?”

Hu Tiehua smiled and said, “Because the Old Stinky Bug is really worthy to be liked by others, isn’t that right?”

Princess Pipa was silent for half a day. Finally she also smiled sweetly and said, “You are really worthy to be his good friend …”

Her voice suddenly stopped, her eyes grew big, she stared at Hu Tiehua, her gaze was filled with shock and fear. Although her mouth was open wide, she could not produce the slightness noise.

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “What are you looking at? Did my head suddenly become two?”

He reached out to feel his own head. His voice suddenly also stopped, his eyes were also filled with shock and fear, he stared at his own hand, unable to make any noise.

His hand was expectedly dyed red with blood. His head was unexpectedly drenched with blood.

Hu Tiehua’s head was not broken at all; where did the blood come from?

Hu Tiehua raised his head to look at the sky, in the midst of yellow sand filling the air, there were two dark shadows, spiraling and dancing in the breeze, but they were flying lower and lower; it looked like they were about to fall down.

The shadows were unexpectedly two eagles.

The blood, undoubtedly, fell from the eagles. The eagles, undoubtedly, have been wounded. Were it not for Hu Tiehua’s senses were already numbed, he should have been aware of the eagles early on.

Astonished, Princess Pipa said, “Where did these eagles come from? How could they be wounded? Could it be that someone is nearby?”

When speaking the last sentence, her astonishment has turned to joy – as long as someone was nearby, they had the hope to keep on living.

But Hu Tiehua's countenance turned even heavier; he suddenly remembered the flying eagle that snatched the precious stone from the dying armed escorts' body that day.

Apparently the eagles in the desert were also the Stone *Guanyin*'s slaves. They heard a 'Swish!', as one of the eagles, like a shooting star, fell down to the ground.

Hu Tiehua picked it up to take a look. The soft ash-colored feather on the belly of the eagle has also been dyed red by the blood; the eagle's stomach was nearly split open. Unexpectedly the wound was a sword wound.

Obviously, when the eagle was pouncing down to attack someone, it was struck by that person's sword instead.

Knitting his eyebrows, Hu Tiehua muttered, "What a fast sword technique."

Another ray of hope appeared in Princess Pipa's eyes, "Could it be him?" she asked.

"Definitely not," Hu Tiehua replied, "If it were him, this eagle could not possibly fly this far. Besides, even if it was only a flat-haired beast, he still could not bear to kill it."

The other eagle also fell to the ground. The fatal would was also a sword wound.

"In that case," Princess Pipa said, "Could it be your other friend?"

Hu Tiehua shook his head, "Not him either; Ji Bingyan has never used sword."

He suddenly laughed. "Whatever the case," he muttered, "These two eagles happen to come on time."

Princess Pipa did not understand what he was talking about? Hu Tiehua already handed over one of the eagles to her and said, “Eat up.”

Horrified, Princess Pipa said, “Eat up? How could this thing be eaten?”

Staring at her, Hu Tiehua said, “If you don’t want to die, you must think of a way to eat it up. Eat as much as you can, eat as much as possible, the more the better. Understand?”

Food connoisseurs all knew that among all the meats in the world, perhaps eagle meat was the coarsest; even if it was cooked thoroughly, it might not necessarily be bitable, much less a raw one.

Princess Pipa sliced a piece using her knife, and then like she was taking medicine, she put it inside her mouth and chewed it with wrinkled eyebrows; a few times she nearly wanted to throw up.

Hu Tiehua said, “You eat like this, you will never recover your strength. You must eat it like me, look …”

He took the bloody eagle meat, ripped a piece, sucked the blood first, and then cut the meat into thin strips and put it in his mouth. He chewed a couple of times, and swallowed hard.

Princess Pipa practically did not dare to even look; with bitter expression on her face, she said, “I … I cannot eat like that; I can’t eat this.”

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “You only need to close your eyes, imagine that you are eating white lamb chop marinated in soy paste plus baked sesame seed-coated cake, and then you’ll be able to eat it.”

Although eagle meat was coarse, eagle blood was fishy, but for a hungry, thirsty, and dying person, it was indeed a lot more effective than any complete dose of medicine. Hu Tiehua’s countenance gradually regained its color, Princess Pipa also slowly recover her *qi*.

Right this moment, they suddenly heard a miserable scream coming from behind the sand dunes over yonder. Hu Tiehua's countenance changed slightly, he spoke heavily, "You wait here, I am going over to see."

"I am coming with you," Princess Pipa said.

Hu Tiehua sighed. He said with a wry smile, "All right, come then … looks like other than that Old Stinky Bug, no one can control you … but you must be a bit more careful."

Behind the sand dunes saber light flashed, sword shadow crisscrossed the sky. The yellow sand was dyed red by bluish-green blood [fig. blood shed in a just cause], already there were several corpses lying down on the ground, but there were still more than a dozen big men in black surrounding two blood-soaked men in bitter battle.

All of the big men were completely strong and healthy, exceptionally dauntless; their saber technique was also completely profound and violent, fierce and malicious. Especially terrifying was every single one had that kind of murderous aura on his face, unexpectedly they would never give up until the opponent's dead body was chopped into ten thousand pieces.

But the two men under siege, their martial art skill was much higher than theirs; sword light crisscrossing the air, dancing in the breeze, as if they were practicing. Surprisingly it was the *Huashan* [Mount Hua in Shaanxi, western mountain of the Five Sacred Mountains] orthodox school's sword technique, famous throughout the land.
It's just that obviously their strength was waning, the opponents simply had too many men; if this fight continued, even if they were not killed, they would die of exhaustion.

Princess Pipa and Hu Tiehua were hiding behind the sand dunes; suddenly she blurted, "Do you see that, that is … isn't that your stable guy?"

Naturally Hu Tiehua has seen it as well; the two men in the middle of the siege, one's *shenfa* was rather sluggish, his hand movement was rather slow, surprisingly, it was Shi Tuo.
The other man's sword technique was nimble and very ruthless. It was precisely the swordsman Wang Chong, whose real name was hidden, whose whereabouts was secretive, who, in order to pursue Shi Tuo, disappeared without leaving any news.

The men in black, undoubtedly they were the Stone *Guanyin*'s men.
Hu Tiehua looked on for half a day, finally he was unable to remain calm; he said, "This time, you really must wait here."

Biting her lip, Princess Pipa said, "But if someone is running over here, I can't simply watch without doing anything, can I?"

Hu Tiehua chuckled and nodded his head. Suddenly he let out a roar and flew out.

The men in black have been fighting hard for half a day, their dead and injured were scattered about, and only now did they begin to gain the upper hand. Soon they would have these two men, whom they had been chasing for many days – chopped down under their sabers.

Who would have thought that right this moment, they suddenly heard a roar like a clap of thunder, followed by a man, like the Flying General [my dictionary says 'nickname of Han dynasty general Li Guang'] dropping in from the sky, grabbing a man's head and sending out a flying kick, to send another big man flying three *zhang* away. And then sending out a punch, the third man's teeth were all knocked out of his mouth.
Looking back at the first man, his head has been beaten flat by him.

He raised his hands and sent out his legs, already three men were falling down. Such a divine prowess, it really made people terrified and shook with fear. The big men could not help being frightened and stared at him blankly.

Over there, Shi Tuo and Wang Chong had their spirit shaken. Two swords crossed each other in scissoring move, the sword light flashed, two big men fell dead under the sword.

Hu Tiehua shouted loudly, “Ol’ Hu does not wish to hurt the innocents, if you put down your sabers, I won’t harm your lives.”

Who would have thought that these big men were unexpectedly like they had gone mad, they pounced over as if they did not want to live anymore?

The long sword in Wang Chong’s palm swept out, his mouth shouted, “These men’s mind is already confused, they are completely impervious to reason, we can only kill them, there is no other way.”

Hu Tiehua sighed. He saw two sabers already chopped like the wind, the two men’s eyes were bloodshot, unexpectedly they were no different than two mad dogs.

Hu Tiehua tilted his upper body, he slipped under one of the saber light, and then his left elbow struck outward, his right hand swept up, the saber of the man on the right suddenly moved into his hand. Only to hear ‘Crack!’ the man on the left’s ribs were broken by him. But after rushing out a few steps, unexpectedly the man roared wildly while swinging his saber backward.

Hu Tiehua sighed and said, “Why are you doing this?”

By the time he finished speaking, the two big men were already lying in a pool of blood.

Princess Pipa was watching from a distance. She saw how the big men fought valiantly [orig. one falls, the next follows], fully aware of death yet did not flinch, unexpectedly no one ran away. She could not help sighing and murmured, “If there are so many warriors in our country, why are we as wretched as we are today?”

She did not know that these men had already sold their soul to the Stone *Guanyin* long ago; although they seemed to have flesh and blood, the fact was that they were only a group of walking flesh and moving corpses.
The bloody battle finally stopped. Yellow sand, bluish-green blood [see above], and dead bodies were everywhere. Shi Tuo held the sword with both hands, he continuously panting for breath, but his face was still expressionless like a rock.

Wang Chong came over to Hu Tiehua, bowed deeply, and said with a long sigh, "Your great kindness cannot be repaid with just thank you; today, were it not for Hu *Daxia* [great hero] upholding justice to help, we brothers would definitely die without a burial site."
Hu Tiehua looked at him, and then he looked at Shi Tuo. Astonished, he said, "You are brothers?"

Wang Chong replied, "Although not flesh and blood, we are as close as one's hands and feet."

"So, you knew each other?" Hu Tiehua asked in surprise.

Wang Chong sighed and said, "*Zaixia*'s roaming far and wide, it is precisely to look for him. Say … it has been nearly twenty years."
Hu Tiehua's gaze was fixed on the sword in Wang Chong's palm; he suddenly laughed and said, "Over the last twenty years, no one in Jianghu has been able to see authentic *Huashan* School's swordsmanship. *Gexia*'s 'startling the rainbow piercing the sun' just now really could be considered Wulin's vanishing sound."
Wang Chong's countenance seemed to be slightly changed; forcing a laugh, he said, "Hu *Daxia* overpraised me."
Hu Tiehua's gaze was burning, he stared at his face and said with a smile, "According to what *Zaixia* understands, even when the *Huashan Jian Pai* [sword sect] was at its peak many years ago, the number of people who could unleash this 'startling the rainbow piercing the sun' exquisitely like this is no more than a few. And among the *Huashan* master swordsmen, definitely there was no one by the name of 'Wang Chong'. Isn't it time for *Gexia* to tell me your real surname and given name?"

Humming and hawing, Wang Chong said, "*Zaixia* is just an insignificant soldier in Jianghu, why would *Gexia* want …"
Hu Tiehua did not let him continue; he laughed aloud and said, "Until now, *Gexia* is still unwilling to show your true colors to me? You ought to know that although surname and given name can be hidden from other people, sword technique cannot."
Wang Chong was silent for a very long time. Finally he sighed deeply, and said with a wry smile, "*Zaixia* owes my life to Hu *Daxia*, I really dare not to use empty words to deceive."
He paused for a moment before continuing, "To be quite honest, *Zaixia*'s original surname is Liu [willow], little name Yanfei [lit. flying smoke] …"
"Liu Yanfei," Hu Tiehua blurted out, "Could it be the '*Shen Long Xiao Jianke*' [Divine Dragon Young (or little) Swordsman], with the most resounding reputation outside of the *Huashan* Seven Swords, the last disciple of *Huashan Pai Zhangmen Zhenren* [sect headmaster 'real person', indicating that he was a Taoist spiritual master] of the former years?"
Liu Yanfei laughed bitterly; he choked and stopped his tears before saying with a sigh, "Years have passed, the young lad of the olden days now has both his temples graying."

Hu Tiehua's eyes flashing, he cast Shi Tuo a glance, and said, "Since *Gexia* is Liu *Daxia*, then he …"
Liu Yanfei seemed to have made a great determination; he spoke word-by-word, "He is my *Da Shixiong* [first/oldest martial brother] Huangfu Gao."
Hu Tiehua was emotionally moved; he said, "Could it be that he is the head of the '*Huashan* Seven Swords', whose chivalry spread across eight provinces, none of the Wulin people under the heavens did not revere him, the '*Renyi Jianke*' [Benevolent and Righteous Swordsman]?"
"Precisely," Liu Yanfei replied sadly.

Hu Tiehua cast 'Shi Tuo' another glance; he saw his eyes were looking blankly into the distance, he still seemed to see nothing, to hear nothing.

How could this svelte, rising swordsman of the former years become like this? Hu Tiehua could not refrain from grieving for him, from heaving a deep sigh on his behalf. He could not help asking, "What enmity did the Stone *Guanyin* have against Huangfu *Daxia*? Why did she hurt him this badly?"

Liu Yanfei sighed and said, “The twists and turns in this story are complicated and not easy to express succinctly. Not only Huangfu *Dage* was harmed by her that he became a crippled, our *Huashan Pai*’s several hundred years of foundation was also destroyed under this … this demon’s hands.”
Hu Tiehua was silent for half a day. He spoke slowly, “Now, you have finally found him; what are you going to do?”

Hanging his head low, Liu Yanfei said, “I … I …” His voice choked with sobs, hot tears seemed to be about to burst out of the sockets of his eyes.

Hu Tiehua suddenly grabbed his hands and spoke loudly, “Don’t you want revenge?”

“Revenge … revenge …” Liu Yanfei mumbled.

He repeated these two words [*bao chou*] nobody knows how many times; finally tears flowed from his eyes. Suddenly he threw himself heavily into Hu Tiehua’s hands and hissed, “Do you know why my Huangfu *Dage* is willing to reduce himself to associate with camels and horses?”
Hu Tiehua sighed and said, “I have long been able to see that he must have a hidden anguish that is difficult to explain.”

Liu Yanfei said, “He is living incognito, suffering in silence, precisely because he is unwilling to take revenge.”

Hu Tiehua was taken aback. “Why?” he could not help asking.

Liu Yanfei replied, “Because he knew that with our strength, to take revenge is simply nothing more than striking a stone with an egg. He did not want our *Huashan*’s arteries and veins to be cut off at this point; he also could not bear to see all *Huashan* disciples completely die out.”
Princess Pipa has been coming over, this moment she suddenly said, “*Huashan*’s disciples, are they still alive now?”
Liu Yanfei mournfully said, “Really hardly any survived.”

Princess Pipa coldly said, “Oh! Turns out there are still a few; I thought they all died long ago.”

Liu Yanfei’s countenance changed, he cracked, “You …”

Princess Pipa did not let him continue; she laughed coldly and went on, “In the past, the ‘*Huashan* Seven Swords’ crisscrossed the Jianghu; what a prestige, what a glory. Whenever the Jianghu people mentioned ‘*Huashan Pai*’, three characters, who would dare not to withdraw somewhat? Even I, an ordinary citizen outside the sphere of civilization, have long admired *Huashan*’s elegant style, but now …”
She shook her head and sighed. “But now Jianghu people nearly forget that there is this ‘*Huashan Pai*’ name in Wulin. Even if all *Huashan* disciples are still alive, is there any difference than being dead?”

Chapter 55b – The Thrush[1]

It was as if Liu Yanfei had been slapped very hard; every muscle on his face trembled, his brow was beaded with sweat, which fell down like rain.

Princess Pipa slowly said, “A real man, rather than live long without purpose, it would be better to die in glory; don’t you agree?”

Liu Yanfei stamped his feet and hissed, “Liu Yanfei is not afraid of death, but even death has to be death with value, if only sending my life in vain …”

Princess Pipa cut him off, saying, “You think you are not *Shi Guanyin*’s match?”
Liu Yanfei said, “In all the world, the number of people who could compete against her, I am afraid is not many.”

Princess Pipa sighed. She said, “As long as you can take us to find *Shi Guanyin*, we won’t hesitate to stake our lives for you. But since you … since do not dare, we’d have no choice but to forget about it.”

Liu Yanfei's face alternated between green and white. Suddenly he clenched his teeth, turned around and rushed in front of Huangfu Gao, pulled his hand, and threw himself to kneel on the ground.

They saw Liu Yanfei's face full of tears of sorrow, he frantically wrote characters on Huangfu Gao's palm. Suddenly Huangfu Gao seemed to be angry; he kicked Liu Yanfei away. But Liu Yanfei crawled back up. Huangfu Gao's body shook. Unexpectedly, from his empty eyes came two lines of tears, as he slowly dropped down to the ground.

Half a day later, suddenly Liu Yanfei rose up to his full height, and spoke with cracked voice, "The two of you are really willing to accompany us, brothers, to look for *Shi Guanyin*?"
"Naturally we are," Hu Tiehua replied immediately.

"Even if there is no return, you still want to go?" Liu Yanfei asked.

Hu Tiehua loudly said, "Do you think Ol' Hu is a man who's greedy for life, afraid of death?"

Liu Yanfei looked up to the sky and slowly exhaled a mouthful of air. "Very well," he said, "Since that's the case, would the two of you come with me?"

A cluster of stone peaks, the plain was rising up, the earth seemed to have reached its end. When Huangfu Gao reached this place, his hands and feet seemed to be trembling a little.

Hu Tiehua swept his gaze around, he could not help but was emotionally moved, "Such a dangerous place, could it be the entrance to the underworld?" he wondered aloud.

Liu Yanfei sighed and said, "Not the entrance to the underworld; this is the underworld."

He continued heavily, “Among the mountains, there is a secret valley, *Shi Guanyin* lives there. It was also there that my Huangfu *Dage* suffered all kinds of torture that no human is capable to endure.”
Hu Tiehua’s eyes emitted light, he clenched his fists and spoke loudly, “Now the time for his revenge has arrived; let’s rush in!”

Liu Yanfei said, “But among those stone peaks, the road is long and winding; it is going forward and backward, crisscrossing each other. Not only that, it changes easily. If we just charge in like this, I am afraid we’ll never find the way out of this valley maze.”

Princess Pipa anxiously said, “Then … what do we do?”

Liu Yanfei said, “Let’s hope that when the night comes, the wind will change direction.”

Princess Pipa could not help asking, “Why do we have to wait for the wind to change?”

Liu Yanfei sighed and said, “My Huangfu *Dage*’s eyes and ears have been damaged, hence later on *Shi Guanyin* considered him no different than a dead person, and did not guard against him at all; who would have thought that after going in and out of this valley a few times, relying on some kind of unique sense of touch, he had the road and the changes in the valley memorized in his heart.”
“Hence the reason he was able to grope his way out to escape, is that right?” Princess Pipa asked.

“Precisely,” Liu Yanfei replied.

“In that case,” Princess Pipa went on, “What does this have to do with the changing of the wind direction?”

Liu Yanfei said, “To a deaf, mute, and blind man, discerning direction is really not an easy matter. He has to rely on many factors. The wind direction is naturally one of those many factors.”

Princess Pipa sighed. “I understand,” she said, “That day when he escaped, the wind direction was not the same as today; he’s afraid that if there is a difference in the feeling, he might go the wrong way, am I right?”

“That’s right,” Liu Yanfei replied, “In that valley maze, just one wrong step and we’ll be consigned to eternal damnation.”

Hu Tiehua looked up to the sky to determine the time, he anxiously asked, “How long must we wait before this seeing-ghost [d@mn] wind direction would change?”

Princess Pipa said, “In the desert, the wind blowing during the day and at night is often different.”

“That’s right,” Liu Yanfei said, “When the night comes, perhaps the wind will change.”

“And if it does not change?” Hu Tiehua asked.

Liu Yanfei sighed. “If it does not change,” he said, “Then we’ll wait for it to change.”

Fortunately Hu Tiehua’s luck was not bad at all. The wind did change that night, from southeasterly to northwesterly. The cold air also rolled in from the northwest.

Shi Tuo, with his sword pointing to the ground, started to move.

Every step he took was very slow, very carefully, as if he was afraid that one wrong step would take him into the ghost prison without any hope of reprieve.

But a moment later they were still walking into the cluster of stone peaks.

With no star, no moon, the mother earth was so dark that it felt as if they were packed inside a coffin.

Hu Tiehua could hardly see anything. His heart was so heavy that he could not even breathe.

But he also knew that the darker it was, the most advantageous it would be for Huangfu Gao. Because in such darkness, those with eyes could not move as conveniently as those who were blind.

Huangfu Gao was still walking very slowly; nevertheless, he never stopped walking. His movement was like a cat, almost entirely without creating any noise.

Actually, this moment a storm was howling angrily, even if their footsteps created any noise, other people would not hear it – but if other people made any noise, naturally they would not hear it either.

Except for Huangfu Gao. He did not need to listen; he could feel.

Just then, it was as if he suddenly felt a warning sign.

He suddenly turned around and crouched down low, flat to the stone wall. This very moment, everybody only took him as their only guide; immediately they tensed up.

Hu Tiehua grabbed the saber, which he snatched away from the men in black, and quietly circled around Huangfu Gao, keeping himself flat against the stone wall, holding his breath and waiting quietly.

The boundless darkness was brimming with murderous aura.

Hu Tiehua was like a vicious wolf, waiting to select his victim to devour.

Half a day later, from the mountain peak over yonder, indeed came the faint sound of breathing. Hu Tiehua's palm was wet with perspiration, he gripped the saber even tighter.

The sound of breathing was getting closer.

Fast as lightning Hu Tiehua's saber chopped down; he nearly used up all his strength in this one saber chop. This saber chop was fast and ruthless; perhaps very few people would be able to dodge it.

He was intent on chopping the other side's head in halves with this one saber strike.

Naturally he would never have thought that this saber strike was actually chopping on Chu Liuxiang.

Chu Liuxiang should not be here.

Fortunately, at the most dangerous beginning, they did not encounter the Stone *Guanyin*, they did not encounter the Stone *Guanyin*'s other disciples either, but unexpectedly they did encounter Qu Wurong.
" … based on your, three men's look, you think you could escape?"

This remark was exactly what Qu Wurong said.

Her whole body was covered in snow white clothes, her cut arm was wrapped in strips of white bandage, her face was also covered in snow white headscarf, so that others could only see her beautiful demeanor, but forget about the ugly scars on her face.

Their eyes wide open, Chu Liuxiang, Ji Bingyan, Yidian Hong, three men, stared at her. No one dared to speak; no one knew what she was going to do. As soon as she raised the alarm, all three of them would not be able to leave.

But surprisingly Qu Wurong was also staring at them quietly, without opening her mouth.

Yidian Hong suddenly said, “What I said, did you hear it?”

“Humph!” Qu Wurong responded.

“Are you going to leave?” Yidian Hong asked.

Laughing coldly, Qu Wurong said, “You are fully aware that you can’t get out, hence you wanted me to show the way, right?”

Yidian Hong stared at her for half a day, suddenly he burst into loud howl of laughter.

Someone who had never shown any smile on his face all year long, surprisingly was bursting into loud laughter, this was actually a very touching thing. It’s a pity that he was laughing at a very bad time. If his laughter alarmed the Stone *Guanyin*, this laughter would cost their, three men’s lives.
Ji Bingyan said, “Are you thinking of using your death to show her your true feeling? But we simply can’t do this; no matter what she thinks of us, no matter what kind of people she thinks of us, I really don’t care.”

Yidian Hong suddenly stopped laughing. “All right,” he said, “You go! I am not going.” Unexpectedly he was using all the strength he had left to push desperately, to struggle hard to untie the belt strapping him, and rolled down Ji Bingyan’s back.

Emotionally moved, Chu Liuxiang said, “You … why are you doing this?”

Yidian Hong said, “Without me, your movements will be a bit more convenient.”

Stomping his foot, Chu Liuxiang said, “But how could I leave you here?”

Yidian Hong spoke indifferently, “I never feel that life is precious; I am ready to die any moment.”

His voice suddenly screeched to a halt; that cold and detach expression was very much like he was talking to Qu Wurong, “I would never lie to you just to save my own life. If you think so, not only you are looking down on me, you are also looking down on yourself.”

The headscarf covering Qu Wurong’s face seemed to be moist.

This woman, who was colder than ice, could it be possible that she have tears running down her face?

She suddenly took out a small bottle and tossed it to Chu Liuxiang; turning around, she said, “This is the antidote, all of you may go!” Her voice was cracking.

But Chu Liuxiang only sighed. He said, “*Guniang* let us go only now, it’s already too late.”
“Why?” Qu Wurong asked.

Chu Liuxiang sighed and said, “Hong *Xiong*’s temper, I know it very well. He said he won’t go, he’ll definitely not go. If he does not go, how could the two of us go?”
Qu Wurong said, “He … what else does he want?”

Rubbing his nose, Chu Liuxiang slowly said, “He has already shown you his true feeling; if *Guniang* believes him, you should go with us. If he knew that *Guniang* no longer has any doubts toward him, naturally he would go.”

Qu Wurong said, “I … can’t go.”

Not only her voice was trembling, her entire body was also shaking violently.

Chu Liuxiang said, “What else in here worth *Guniang*’s reluctance to leave?”
Qu Wurong did not answer; she seemed to be speechless.

Right this moment, suddenly they heard someone shouted loudly, “All four of you, no one could even think of leaving.”

A girl in purple, nobody knew since when, was standing at the end of the long corridor, staring at them. Although Chu Liuxiang, Ji Bingyan, were usually calm, they could not stop their faces from turning pale.

Qu Wurong blurted out, “*Si Mei* [fourth (younger) sister], you …”
The girl in purple interrupted her by laughing coldly and said, “Who’s your *Si Mei*? You, this shameless ugly girl, usually put on Taoist façade, who would have thought that as soon as you see a man, your head becomes confused. Are you forgetting what *Shifu* will do to you?”
Qu Wurong regained her calm, she spoke indifferently, “But don’t you forget either that *Shifu* is not here right now.”
The girl in purple angrily said, “So what if *Shifu* is not here? You think with several dozens of us, sisters, we cannot handle you?”
Her hand pressed on the wall, immediately a burst of ear-splitting ringing went off.

Chu Liuxiang knew that once the ringing start, the whole nest of
Stone *Guanyin*’s disciples would come out. These young girls’ martial art skill was not weak, and obviously each one of them had secretly received one or two killer moves from the Stone *Guanyin*. Relying on the combined power of the four of them, dealing with these young girls, their chance of success was really not much.
Not to mention Ji Bingyan and Yidian Hong right now simply did not have any strength to fight. Ji Bingyan had just swallowed the antidote, “How long will it take for this medicine to be effective?” he asked quietly.

Qu Wurong replied, “At most one *sichen*, at least half.”
Ji Bingyan sighed; he really had nothing to say. In a moment the enemy would come, even if his strength could be restored in half a *sichen*, what good would it bring?
He had given the rest of the antidote to Yidian Hong, Yidian Hong also did not refuse; they only sighed that these two Wulin superb martial art masters of this generation, although they had taken the antidote, could only wait to have other people come and slaughter them.

The bell was still ringing.

The girl in purple laughed and spoke sternly, “If this moment you’ll let yourselves be bound, you might still suffer a bit of pain, otherwise …”

Qu Wurong coldly cut her off, “You say one more word, I’ll kill you first.”

The girl in purple’s face turned green, but she really did not dare to say one more word.

Ji Bingyan suddenly said, “Chu Liuxiang, you still refuse to kill today?”

Chu Liuxiang shook his head and said with a smile, “If I wanted to kill, I could have killed long ago; why do I have to wait until today?”

Ji Bingyan coldly said, “But if you don’t kill today, others will kill you.”

Chu Liuxiang sighed and said, “Even if I kill today, I am afraid inevitably I will still be killed.”

Even Chu Liuxiang spoke such discouraging words, the danger of the situation could very well be imagined. Ji Bingyan also knew that practically they did not even have the slightest odds of success.

Yidian Hong suddenly said, “I am bringing you harm.”

Although he did not specifically mention any name, everybody knew to whom he was talking to.

It was quite half a day later that Qu Wurong coldly said, “You don’t cherish your own life, do you think I do?”

“Very good,” Yidian Hong said.

The two no longer spoke; they did not even cast a glance to each other, yet the two had already given their lives to each other just like that.

Chu Liuxiang had seen not a few passionate couples, he had also seen all kinds and sorts of different romance, yet he had never imagined that unexpectedly there was something like these two on earth.

This peculiar emotion, although so apathetic, but in the danger between life and death like this, it appeared to be exceptionally strong, so strong that it even touched outsiders’ hearts.

It’s just that whether it was sweet or bitter, perhaps even they themselves were unable to tell.

Suddenly, two girls were running wildly from the end of the long corridor. Unexpectedly they were stark naked, with beads of water still dripping from their bodies; apparently these two were the girls that had just taken a bath.

Clearly their acupoint was sealed by Chu Liuxiang, yet this moment their momentum was like a gale.

Chu Liuxiang was both surprised and puzzled, the girl in purple frowned and lightly scolded, “Although the alarm is urgent, you should at least put your clothes on!”

The scold had not finished, the naked girl already ran toward Chu Liuxiang. Facing their well-developed, mature youthful naked bodies, the three men really did not know what to do.

Who would have thought that these two young girls were just rushing in front of them, they suddenly fell noiselessly to the ground, as if there was an invisible giant hand suddenly slapped them head-on?

This change not only caused huge change on the girl in purple's countenance, Chu Liuxiang and the others were also shocked. They saw that from the back of their bodies down to their ankles, they were still sleek and intact.

Qu Wurong could not help turning their bodies over. Still they could not see any bruises, only their faces had turned purple. A trace of blood slowly seeped out of the corner of their mouth. Qu Wurong shuddered and blurted out, "Could it be that they were strangled to death?"

Knitting his brows, Chu Liuxiang said, "I am afraid that seems to be the case."

Ji Bingyan said, "Since they were strangled, how could they still rush over here?"

Muttering to himself irresolutely, Chu Liuxiang said, "Whoever strangled them was using a very ingenious technique, plus he used accurate power; he deliberately wanted them to run here before breathing their last."

He seemed to suddenly find something; while still speaking, he stooped over and pried open the young girl's clenched fist, and took out a piece of turquoise-colored paper.

"Who strangled them?" Qu Wurong asked, "Why did he want them to rush over here?"

Chu Liuxiang's eyes were fixed on that piece of paper, the muscles on his face seemed to be twitching. It was quite half a day later that he finally exhaled

slowly, and spoke word-by-word, “It’s because that person wanted to give me their dead bodies.”

Qu Wurong blurted out, “Give you their dead bodies … you …”

Smiling ruefully, Chu Liuxiang handed the turquoise piece of paper to her.

She saw written on it:

Chu *Xiang Shuai*, please kindly accept.
Huamei Niao [the Thrush, see footnote] presents respectfully.
Although the girl in purple did not see this piece of paper, she could not stop her hair from standing on its end; sweats pouring down from her head like rain, she suddenly turned around and rushed out like crazy, while shouting loudly, “Help! Somebody …”

In the blink of an eye her shadow turned around the long corridor and disappeared from sight. Only to hear her cry was suddenly cut off, followed by her body unexpectedly coming back.

Chu Liuxiang and the others suddenly tensed up as well; they saw her retreating step-by-step, unexpectedly she came straight toward Chu Liuxiang and the others, yet all along she did not look back.

Qu Wurong felt chill in her palms, “You …” she crackled. But only one word came out of her mouth, the girl in purple unexpectedly fell face up.

They saw her face was full of blood. Unexpectedly there was a small sword, carved from a piece of jadeite – stuck right in the middle of the bridge of her nose, a piece of turquoise-colored paper was also dangling from the sword hilt.

Unexpectedly the paper also said:

Chu *Xiang Shuai*, please kindly accept.
Huamei Niao presents respectfully.

Everybody looked at each other in dismay, unexpectedly no one said anything.

Jadeite was brittle and could easily break, while the bridge of the nose was the toughest part of the face. This 'Thrush' unexpectedly was able to pierce a jadeite sword into the bridge of someone else's nose; the strength of his wrist was astonishing.

Chu Liuxiang suddenly said, "Time and again Friend bestowed me generous gifts, why unwilling to meet?"

Amidst his voice, his body already floated away like smoke.

Qu Wurong and the others followed closely, turning into another long corridor. But they saw Chu Liuxiang's face turned pale, as he stood motionless; unexpectedly he seemed to be petrified.

Beginning from where he stood, every two steps, there was a body of a young girl. Unexpectedly this several-dozen-*zhang* long corridor was full of dead bodies; several dozens of dead bodies were arranged neatly, like a display of merchandise. Anybody who saw the mystery and horror of this scene would find it hard to avoid having their hair standing up on its end.
Qu Wurong was, after all, a woman. These dead girls were, after all, used to be her fellow disciples. She only felt her legs weakened, and she fainted on the spot.

Ji Bingyan also nearly could not stop from throwing up. Although he was cold-hearted, but in all his life, he had never seen so many dead people like this.

Even the One Red Dot of the Central Plains, who never left his victim alive, also appeared to be stunned.

After nobody knew how long, Chu Liuxiang exhaled slowly, and said with a long sigh, "This *Huamei Niao* is really ruthless."
Ji Bingyan muttered with a wry smile, "He knew you don't kill people, so he killed for you. It's just that … he really killed a little too much."

He noticed that these young girls, some had red print on their necks, which showed that they were strangled; some were badly mutilated, they were actually cut by a saber or a sword; some had their heads hanging limply on the side, which showed that their necks were broken; some had blood spitting out of their mouth, which showed that they were killed by heavy blow; some had their tongue cut, some had their eyes gouged.

This 'Thrush' seemed to think that killing was a very interesting enjoyment, very interesting entertainment; unexpectedly he came up with all kinds of method of killing.

Every girl he killed had a piece of turquoise piece of paper on her body, saying:

Chu *Xiang Shuai*, please kindly accept.
Huamei Niao presents respectfully.
Smiling wryly, Ji Bingyan said, "*Huamei Niao* … *Huamei Niao* … I never thought a devil king who murder without blinking an eye unexpectedly took such a lovely name."
[1] The Chinese hwamei or melodious laughingthrush (Garrulax canorus) is a passerine bird of eastern Asia in the family Leiothrichidae. The name 'hwamei' comes from the Chinese 画眉 (huà-méi) and means 'painted eyebrow' referring to the distinctive marking around the bird's eyes. The species is a popular cagebird because of its attractive
song. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_hwamei

Chapter 56 – Broken Arm Debate

Chu Liuxiang said with a sigh, "Look closely at their faces."

Ji Bingyan shook his head; he said, "I don't like looking at women; even when they are alive, I don't look at them, forget about the dead ones."

Chu Liuxiang spoke heavily, "If you take a closer look, you'd find that although the way they were killed was different, but there is one thing that is identical."

Ji Bingyan finally could not bear not to look; his countenance suddenly changed greatly, he blurted out, “That’s right; all these girls have no eyebrows.”

Chu Liuxiang sighed and said, “Of course they used to have eyebrows, but someone shaved them.”

Ji Bingyan sucked in a mouthful of cold air; he said, “Could it be that before he killed them, he shaved their eyebrows first?”

Chu Liuxiang said, “This, I am afraid, is *Huamei Niao*’s trademark in killing people; it seems like not only he kills for pleasure, he also wanted other people to know that it was he who killed these people.”
Ji Bingyan was silent for half a day; he spoke slowly, “But this time he killed for you; good or bad, he is doing you a favor, right?”

Frowning, Chu Liuxiang replied, “Hmm!”

“Why would he do you a favor?” Ji Bingyan asked, “Do you know him?”

“I don’t,” Chu Liuxiang replied.

Ji Bingyan said, “It can’t be that with no cause, no reason he came for a killing spree, and then after killing he just left?”

“Of course, there must be a reason behind it,” Chu Liuxiang said.

“What reason?” Ji Bingyan asked.

Chu Liuxiang heaved a deep sighed. He said, “So far, I can’t even guess the slightest bit of clue. But I believe that whether his intentions are good or bad, he can’t possibly avoid a problem by walking away from it at this point.”

Ji Bingyan said, “You think … he will show up soon?”

Chu Liuxiang said, “Maybe he is waiting for me all along, it’s just that we cannot see him.”

Ji Bingyan suddenly felt a chill creeping up his back; he could not help sighing, “A man like this, I would rather not see him, ever,” he said.

He suddenly chuckled and said, “But whatever the case, now *Shi Guanyin*’s disciples are all dead, we can go out confidently.”
He would never think that there was a deadly saber out there, waiting for them!

Leading the way at the very front was Qu Wurong.

But it was not because she was afraid Chu Liuxiang and the others would lose their way in the valley; she just wanted to get out of this place as quickly as possible. This place was brimming with bitter memories, brimming with the reek of blood.

She was walking in a daze, her blank stare was looking straight ahead, her entire body seemed to be completely numb, her comrades were all dead, but she was still alive.

Perhaps she did not feel bad for their death, but she was remorseful for not being dead; she seemed to feel that she ought to have died in here too.

Following right behind her was Yidian Hong, and then Ji Bingyan, with Chu Liuxiang bringing up the rear. They were able to leave this place alive, they indeed deserved to be joyful.

Yet somehow, everybody’s mood was extremely heavy.

Right this moment, suddenly they saw a saber flashed; it hacked down straight toward Qu Wurong.

Unexpectedly Qu Wurong turned a blind eye to it; she neither fled nor dodged.

Greatly shocked, Yidian Hong pounced forward and pulled her away.

The One Red Dot of the Central Plains, his *shenfa* swift, his reaction fast; it could be considered walking alone [fig. outstanding] in the Central Plains. But this saber's momentum was pressing, no words could describe it even more. In the end, Yidian Hong was still one step too late.

He only managed to pull Qu Wurong down to the ground, while he himself leaped up, trying to protect her with his own body, while sending his hand back to meet the blade.

They heard a 'Crack!' followed by blood shooting out like arrow.

His left arm was chopped off clean.

Greatly shocked, Chu Liuxiang and Ji Bingyan pounced forward together.

The saw the saber blade, like golden lightning, was chopping at them again.

Chu Liuxiang bent his waist and flashed, he already entered the saber light, caught the attacker's arm, twisted it, and the saber immediately moved to his hand.

The speed, accuracy, and agility of this move has indeed reached the pinnacle of martial art study.

Ji Bingyan's hand, in the shape of a palm chop, was slicing down on the person's throat.

Chu Liuxiang and Ji Bingyan, two men working together, their cooperation was like seamless heavenly clothes. In this move their hands were flying in pairs [fig. close union as husband and wife], perhaps no one in the world would be able to evade it.

As his first strike went smoothly, Hu Tiehua wanted to follow up a victory and press home the attack, but suddenly he felt a strong wind hitting him on the face, someone already entered his line of defense, in a risky move that he unexpectedly had never seen in all his life.

In all the world, who could possibly seize control on Hu Tiehua in just one move? Hu Tiehua's heart was moved, he blurted out, "Old Stinky Bug!"

As soon as this 'Old Stinky Bug' came out, Chu Liuxiang and Ji Bingyan were shocked.

'Crash! Clang!' The saber in Chu Liuxiang's hand fell to the ground. Ji Bingyan's slicing palm chop also stiffly stopped in the air, "Xiao Hu, it's you?" he cackled.

Hu Tiehua replied, "Other than me, this hapless ghost, who else?"

Stamping their feet, Chu Liuxiang and Ji Bingyan let their hands off.

Standing up, Hu Tiehua heaved a sigh of relief and said with a laugh, "Oh man! You, Old Stinky Bug, really have some skill; but if I was not half-dead tired, you guys could forget about succeeding that quickly."

Chu Liuxiang and Ji Bingyan's countenance was heavy, they did not say anything.

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, "You did not kill me, you ought to thank the heaven and thank the earth, why …"

He suddenly felt that the atmosphere was heavy, and only then did he remember his own saber strike just now. Immediately his laughter stopped, he cleared his throat a couple of times, and stammered, "Just now … just now … just now …"

He could only spoke the words ‘just now’ repeatedly, but he seemed to be striking the wall.

Chu Liuxiang sighed and said, “Just now you are indeed striking a disaster.”

Rubbing his nose, Hu Tiehua quietly asked, “Who’s hurt?”

Chu Liuxiang had not answered, Liu Yanfei already lit up fire paper. At this time, without needing Chu Liuxiang to answer, Hu Tiehua could already see who the injured person was.

He saw in middle of a pool of blood, a woman in white was sitting in daze, not moving at all. Although blood was splashing all over her body, the one injured was not her at all.

A slender, dark, hard like iron, cold like ice – man in black, was slowly standing up from the pool of blood. The wound on his left arm was still dripping blood, but his pale face was completely expressionless; his body was unexpectedly also as straight as a spear. It seemed like even if you chop off both of his legs, he would definitely not fall down.

Hu Tiehua looked at him; he really did not know what to say.

Yidian Hong was also looking at him. Suddenly he laughed and said, “Good saber technique.”

If he were blaming him or cursing in rage, no matter how vicious he was cursing, Hu Tiehua would feel a bit better. But this compliment, it really made Hu Tiehua blush until his neck was turning red.

Yidian Hong slowly said, “You don’t need to feel bad. I can’t blame you at all; if I were you, I would also chop that saber.”

The more he did not blame Hu Tiehua, the more Hu Tiehua felt bad. This was definitely not Hu Tiehua's fault, but now Hu Tiehua felt that he had made a really big mistake.

Ji Bingyan suddenly came over, patted his shoulder, and said, "Do you know who he is?"

Heaving a long sigh, Hu Tiehua replied, "I only know that he is a good man [the same words could also mean 'hero' or 'strong and courageous person'], a good man that is rarely seen in the world."

"He is Yidian Hong," Ji Bingyan said.

Shaken, Hu Tiehua said, "*Zhongyuan Yidian Hong*?"
"Precisely," Ji Bingyan replied.

Stomping his feet, Hu Tiehua said, "I really deserve to die! Deserve to die! Deserve to die!"

He looked at the cut arm on the ground; he nearly cried. Just because this was not an ordinary hand; the number one fast sword in the Central Plains, was precisely produced by this hand.

There were a few such hands in the world. But now that this hand has been cut off by him, what could possibly replace it? What could possibly compensate for this lost?

Hu Tiehua suddenly picked up the saber from the ground and chopped it down his own arm. But Ji Bingyan pulled him back and said, "You need not do this."

"Let go of me," Hu Tiehua hissed, "I don't need you to care about me."

Ji Bingyan sighed and said, “You ought to know, not only you owe him a hand, I also owe him a leg. But we do not need to pay him in a hurry now, we could wait until he needs it later to pay him back; wouldn’t it be much better?”

Chu Liuxiang heaved a deep sigh. He said, “This debt, I wish you can still settle it clearly.”

Yidian Hong suddenly said, “There is no debt, no one need to pay back.”

Picking up his own broken arm, he looked at it for half a day; suddenly he chuckled and said, “This hand had killed too many people anyway, it would be good to let it rest.”

When his words were over, his body finally fell down.

Princess Pipa saw Chu Liuxiang. Ji Bingyan saw ‘Shi Tuo’. Naturally both were pleasantly surprised. Naturally they wanted to talk about what happened after they parted.

By this time they already left the secret valley. Qu Wurong was sitting by the exhausted and losing his consciousness Yidian Hong. She stared at him in a daze, as if she had just seen him for the first time.

Hu Tiehua had not spoken for a very long time either, but this moment he finally could not help asking, “*Huamei Niao*, who actually this kid is? He is really vicious and merciless.”
Princess Pipa said, “He likes to kill people, why didn’t he just kill *Shi Guanyin* at the same time?”
Ji Bingyan said, “Perhaps coincidentally he did not meet *Shi Guanyin*; or perhaps he is setting *Shi Guanyin* aside for Chu Liuxiang.”
“How could *Shi Guanyin* happen not to be there?” Princess Pipa asked.
Casting a glance toward Qu Wurong, Ji Bingyan said, “According to this Qu *Guniang*, *Shi Guanyin* is not always there, especially recently; she went away a lot more often than she is there.”
Frowning, Princess Pipa asked, “In that case, I wonder where she usually is?”

Nobody could answer this question. “Why aren’t you speaking?” Princess Pipa said.

Naturally this question was directed to Chu Liuxiang. It was only now did everybody find out that has been sitting quietly with eyes closed, just like a monk entering a meditative state. Nobody knew what he was thinking.

They only heard him muttering something; perhaps he was reciting some sutra? But what he said was actually, ‘*Huashan* Seven Swords … *Huangshan* aristocratic family … Huangfu Gao … *Shi Guanyin* …’
Nobody quite understood what he was saying. But they saw that his face gradually brightened.

Princess Pipa could not help giving him a light push. She asked, “Do you know where *Shi Guanyin* is?”
Chu Liuxiang finally opened his eyes. The divine light in his eyes flared out, but he was laughing. “*Shi Guanyin*? Who is *Shi Guanyin*?” he said.
Princess Pipa was taken aback. Blurting out laughing, she said, “Whatever you are thinking, it made you stupid, you even forgot about *Shi Guanyin*.”
Chu Liuxiang laughed heartily and said, “If there is *Shi Guanyin* then there is no *Shi Guanyin*; if there is no *Shi Guanyin* then there is *Shi Guanyin* … if I never remember something, how could I forget that something?”
Princess Pipa was startled; she laughed again and said, “What are you talking about? I don’t understand.”

Chu Liuxiang said, “Of course you don’t understand, this is Buddhist allegory.”

“What Buddhist allegory?” Princess Pipa asked.

Chu Liuxiang shook his head and said, “Mysteries of heaven must not be revealed. Buddha said: must not tell, must not tell.”

Princess Pipa laughed and said, “What game are you playing? Do you want to be a monk all of a sudden?”

Chu Liuxiang said, “I am precisely thinking of a Buddhist monk right now.”

“Who?” Princess Pipa asked.

Chu Liuxiang smiled, but did not say anything.

Princess Pipa looked at Hu Tiehua, she laughed and said, “You are right; sometimes this man can be very detestable.”

Chu Liuxiang suddenly said, “Where is the Star of Happiness now?”

Hu Tiehua replied, “I originally gave it to her, but then she gave it back to me.”

Chu Liuxiang said, “If you really find out the secret of this Star of Happiness, then what?”

Hu Tiehua replied, “Since I already promised *Wangfei*, naturally I must tell her.”
“Very good!” Chu Liuxiang said, “Let’s go find her now!”

Princess Pipa said, “But … but what about *Shi Guanyin*?”
Chu Liuxiang chuckled, “*Shi Guanyin*? Who is *Shi Guanyin*?”
Princess Pipa was so angry that her stomach nearly burst; but she could not help laughing. Biting her lip, she said, “What the hell are you thinking?”

Chu Liuxiang smiled and said, “You come with me, you’ll understand.”

Liu Yanfei coughed; he stammered, “*Zaixia*, brothers, have not been back to Mount Hua for more than ten years. Now that Chu *Xiang Shuai* needs to deal with something else, *Zaixia*, brothers, want to … want to take our leave.”
Chu Liuxiang’s expression suddenly turned heavy. He said, “Two gentlemen must not leave now.”

“Could it be that *Xiang Shuai* have another instruction for us?” Liu Yanfei asked.

Chu Liuxiang muttered to himself irresolutely for half a day; suddenly he chuckled and said, “Gentlemen can come with me, and then you’ll understand.”

Liu Yanfei also muttered to himself irresolutely for half a day; finally he said, “*Zaixia* only ask Chu *Xiang Shuai* to promise one thing.”
“What instruction does Liu *Xiong* have for me?” Chu Liuxiang asked.
Liu Yanfei sighed and said, “*Zaixia* have no problem, but there are some things that my Huangfu *Dage* does not want to tell, he does not even want to mention it …”
Chu Liuxiang smiled and said, “But if I do ask, you guys will have no choice but to tell me, is that right?”

Smiling wryly, Liu Yanfei said, “Exactly so. Therefore, *Zaixia* only ask Chu *Xiang Shuai* …”
Chu Liuxiang said, “You want me not to even ask, am I right?”

Liu Yanfei hung his head low, he stammered, “If *Xiang Shuai* is willing to promise, *Zaixia* will be really grateful.”
Chu Liuxiang said with a laugh, “But what did I ask?”

“You haven’t asked anything,” Liu Yanfei replied.

“Now, I haven’t asked anything, but later, can I ask?” Chu Liuxiang said.

Liu Yanfei was silent for half a day. He finally sighed and said, “That’s right, since *Xiang Shuai* did not ask now, later, you won’t ask even more.”
Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “It’s good that you understand.”

Liu Yanfei suddenly said, “But these things, *Xiang Shuai* should have asked, why didn’t you ask?”
Chu Liuxiang replied indifferently, “Just because what I should have asked, I already know the answer.”

Princess Pipa really could not bear it any longer; she spoke loudly, “What is it that you should have asked? What is it that already know? Please, I beg you, don’t play dumb and confused, all right?”

Before Chu Liuxiang answered, suddenly they heard the sound of camel’s bell in the distance.

The intermittent ringing of the bell was brought by the wind; it sounded so desolate, so monotonous, but in Chu Liuxiang and the others’ ears, there was simply no sound in the world more sweet-sounding, more pleasant to hear – than this.

Hu Tiehua, Liu Yanfei, and the others’ spirit was shaken. Even Princess Pipa forgot to pursue what those ‘dumb and confused’ things were. She closed her eyes, and quietly listened for half a day. A hint of smile appeared on the corner of her mouth, she leisurely said, “Do you know what that sound is?”

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “In the desert, I can be considered like a country bumpkin who had never seen a city, but I surely know that sound … that is camel’s bell, right?”

But Princess Pipa shook her head and said, “That’s not the sound of camel’s bell.”

Hu Tiehua was stunned. “If not camel’s bell, then what is it?” he asked.

Princess Pipa laughed and said, “In my ears, that is the practically the sound of water being poured into a cup, the sound of meat roasting on the fire …”

Princess Pipa was right. In the desert, this monotonous camel’s bell frequently representing fresh water, food, and warmth.

Because the pastoral people of the desert were mostly magnanimous, generous, and hospitable. And their tents, although simple and crude, were full of warm friendships.

They would never turn down any hungry traveler.

But this time, Princess Pipa seemed to be wrong.

By the time they rushed over, the camel caravan had stopped. Several dozens of camels had formed a circle, some people even started to erect their tents.

But everywhere, there was no busy voices, there was no happy laughter either. Several men with dagger-axes were patrolling outside the perimeter of the camp. Seeing someone was coming, they did not show the slightest welcome. On the contrary, bows were pulled taut, sabers left their scabbards; their solemn faces all showed cautious expression.

Chapter 57 – The Heart of a Woman

Ji Bingyan halted his steps far away, and spoke heavily, “We’d better not come over.”

“Why?” Princess Pipa asked.

Ji Bingyan replied, “Looking at the situation, these people are definitely not ordinary shepherds.”

Frowning, Hu Tiehua said, “That’s right; these people look like a team of disciplined, strict and impartial troops. Could it be that they are the patrolling troops sent out by the Qiuci rebel ministers?”

“They are not Qiuci people,” Princess Pipa said.

“How can you be sure?” Hu Tiehua asked.

Princess Pipa laughed and said, “In this vast desert, there are at least a dozen different tribes. In your eyes, these people might look more or less the same, but in just one glance I am able to tell their differences.”

“In your opinion,” Chu Liuxiang asked, “Who are these people?”

Princess Pipa chuckled and said, “Even if they are robbers, we don’t need to be afraid of them, am I right?”

“That’s right,” Hu Tiehua immediately echoed, “We now just want to ask them to buy a few pots of water, a few camels; if they are being unreasonable, refusing to sell to us, we simply grab what we need and be done with it.”

Laughing coldly, Ji Bingyan said, “You make it sound so easy.”

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “It is so easy, isn’t it?”

Ji Bingyan said, “Have you looked at the way they are holding the saber? Their posture when they are walking? Did you see that in just a short period of time they managed to setup the camp and put the guards in place, properly and in perfect order, and that the camels and horses are not frightened?”

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “I am not blind, how could I not see?”

Ji Bingyan said, “Since you have seen it, you ought to know that these people of the other side are all veterans of a hundred battles, warriors who have undergone a thousand hammers and a hundred refinements, absolutely not comparable to ordinary roving bandits of the wilderness. On our side, we only have eight people; furthermore, three are seriously injured and thus incapacitated, at least we have to spare two people to protect them …”

He stared at Hu Tiehua, and spoke heavily, “Therefore, from our side, only three can really fight. With three people’s strength, we want to seize camels from

among their several hundred warriors, veterans of a hundred battles, what do you think our chance of success is?"

Rubbing his nose, Hu Tiehua said, "Although the chance is not high, at least we have fifty- or sixty-percent."

Ji Bingyan sternly said, "Only fifty- or sixty-percent, and you want to take this risk?"

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, "There are things with only ten- or twenty-percent chance that I have tried, yet nobody was ever able to remove my head."

Ji Bingyan coldly said, "That's just because your luck was not bad, but this is not the time for us to take our chances."

Chu Liuxiang sighed. "That's right," he said, "Right now our strength is very limited, while the things that we need to do are not a few, we must not have anybody sustaining any injury. As long as there is one point of danger in this matter, we should not do it."

Ji Bingyan said, "In normal times, even if you want to use your head to strike a rock one-on-one to see which one is harder, nobody will care. But now, my life is very useful; if for the sake of a few camels, several pots of wine, you want to stake your life, even if you think it's not a big deal, I still think that this is not worth it."

"Besides," Chu Liuxiang added, "Even if you and I can be lucky, these people must be dissatisfied and unwilling to let go. We already have enough adversaries right now, if you add this group of people, it is really a bit unbearable."

Smiling wryly, Hu Tiehua said, "From what you said, whatever the case, these people must not be offended, am I right?"

"Exactly," Ji Bingyan replied.

Rolling his eyes, Hu Tiehua said, “But what if they are coming to offend us?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Chu Liuxiang already caught a glimpse of five or six people coming toward them. Inwardly he could not help sighing, but on his face he was still smiling, as he said word-by-word, “Even if they are coming to offend us, we only have to endure.”

There were actually five men coming their way, all wrapped in very thick wind blanket, wearing blue turban on their heads; tempered by the wind and the frost and the scorching sun, their swarthy complexion was coarser than sandstone, but their eyes were as sharp as an eagle’s. Their muscles were bulging, they were gripping the hilt of their sabers with both hands, as steady and sturdy as a rock.

Although their clothes were oversized, their movement was very light and quick, and vigorous. As Chu Liuxiang was looking at them, they were already in front of him.

The one at the front of the group had a full dark greenish black beard on his face, his pair of deep eyes emitted some kind of will-o’-the-wisp-like gloomy bluish-green colored light, he swept everybody with his gaze, and then stopped without blinking at all on Chu Liuxiang’s face. Even if there were eight hundred men wearing the same outfit, without needing a second glance he already recognized which one was the leader.

With a smile on his face, Chu Liuxiang raised his hands in salute and said, “*Qiguata*.”
He blabbered a string of sentences, which was actually the common greetings when herdsmen in the desert meet each other, just some usual greeting paying one’s respect and saying hello. He had practiced for quite a long time, and was confident that he was able to utter these greetings fluently.

Who would have thought that this man appeared not able to make sense of even a single word of what he was saying. He only stared at Chu Liuxiang for half a

day, and suddenly said, “Where did gentlemen come from? Where are you heading?”

On the contrary, he was speaking standard official language [orig. *guanhua*, bureaucratic language/Mandarin].
Chu Liuxiang could only smile wryly and said, “*Zaixia* [plural] came from Zhangjiakou [prefecture level city in Hebei], coming here to do some small business; who would have thought due to unfamiliarity with the area, not only camels and horses are lost, we also suffered injury, therefore …”
He spoke nonstop, but the man only looked at him indifferently; he neither interrupted nor refuted. But Chu Liuxiang himself was unable to continue.

He himself also felt that what he said was really hard to believe.

There were eight of them, men and women, some were ugly some were handsome, but no matter who, as soon as he saw them, it would be hard to believe that these people were here to do business.

Finally Chu Liuxiang sighed and said, “To be quite honest, *Zaixia* are the Central Plains’ Wulin people. This time going out of the Pass; originally was to look for three friends, who would have thought that a new branch grows out of a knot, we encountered some trouble.”
This time he was telling the truth, but these men were still staring coldly at him, as if they did not believe even one word.

The greenish-black-bearded man swept his gaze over their faces again and said in heavy voice, “What kind of trouble did you encounter?”

Chu Liuxiang said, “This matter, start explaining and it’s a long story; moreover, it does not have anything to do with gentlemen.”

The greenish-black-bearded man spoke sternly, “How do you know it has nothing to do with us? From here going north-south or east-west for several thousand *li*, inside and outside, no matter where, no matter what happened, it might be related to us.

“Oh …” Chu Liuxiang said, “But I wonder who gentlemen are? Are you …”

The greenish-black-bearded man shouted, “Now it’s time for me to ask you, not you asking me.”

Chu Liuxiang already found out that this person was very difficult to deal with; he could not help starting to rub his nose. This was his chronic problem; Hu Tiehua was even infected by him.

The greenish-black-bearded man suddenly pointed to Yidian Hong and Qu Wurong; he spoke sternly, “These two were injured not too long ago; who injured them?”

Hu Tiehua already lost his cool long ago; he shouted, “His hand was cut by me by accident.”

The greenish-black-bearded man laughed coldly; he said, “*Gexia*’s two eyes are still intact, how could you cut off a friend’s hand by accident? This kind of excuse, I am afraid even a three-year-old kid will find it hard to believe.”
Hu Tiehua angrily said, “Do I care if you believe me or not? As long as I am telling the truth, you are free not to believe.”

The greenish-black-bearded man sternly said, “Your own remarks, before and after, are inconsistent; how could you win the trust of other people?”

He suddenly waved his hand and shouted, “Men, search them!”

Amidst his shout, the four men behind him were already flashing out.

Hu Tiehua was so angry that his face turned blue; he threw his head back and howled with laughter, saying, “You want to search me? Nobody has ever searched me in my life!”

Chu Liuxiang suddenly grabbed his hand tightly and said with a smile, “There is always the first time for everything.”

“Can you bear the way he spoke?” Hu Tiehua spoke in cracked voice.

Chu Liuxiang only smiled; he did not need to say anything.

Following his gaze, Hu Tiehua looked around, only to discover that when they were speaking, several dozens men were already surrounding them. Hu Tiehua suddenly also laughed and said, “If Chu Liuxiang can bear it, why can’t Hu Tiehua do it?”

Ji Bingyan also laughed; he said with a smile, “The kid finally grows up to become an adult; this is indeed worthy of celebration.”

Three men patted their clothes; unexpectedly they laughed together and said, “Come and search then!”

Chu Liuxiang added, “Not only *Zaixia* has nothing on me, even my purse can be considered as empty as having just been washed. After gentlemen search me, I am sure you will be very disappointed.”
Who would have thought that the four men who had just been walking over now unexpectedly halted their steps? The greenish-black-bearded man’s raised hand had never gone down either.

Chu Liuxiang was just feeling a little bit strange, the greenish-black-bearded man suddenly said, “*Gexia*’s purse is really as empty as having just been washed? Could it be that not even a single black pearl is in it?”
As soon as he said that, Chu Liuxiang’s eyes lit up.

Hu Tiehua only heard the two characters ‘pearl’ [*zhen zhu*], he suddenly remembered that he still had the ‘Star of Happiness’ in his purse. Immediately he put down his hands and spoke loudly, “What exactly are you searching for? What the hell are you up to?”
The greenish-black-bearded man laughed aloud and said, “Even if *Xiaoren* has guts as big as the sky, I would not dare to hit Chu *Xiang Shuai*’s head.”

Hu Tiehua was stunned. “You recognize him?” he said, “Is his reputation really this big?”

The greenish-black-bearded man did not answer, but he knelt down to salute, saying, “Not knowing is not guilty, but I hope Chu *Xiang Shuai* will forgive *Xiaoren* for being rude.”
Chu Liuxiang hurriedly helped him up, while his mouth asked, “Your are *Hei Zhenzhu*’s …”
The greenish-black-bearded man said, “If *Xiao Wangye* [young king] could see that Chu *Xiang Shuai* is safe and sound, I don’t know how happy he is.”
Hearing that this man was the Black Pearl’s subordinate, everybody could not help but was amazed and delighted at the same time; they searched by wearing out their iron shoes without finding it, unexpectedly they found it without spending any effort at all.

They heard the greenish-black-bearded man sighed before continuing, “It’s a pity that Chu *Xiang Shuai* is here, but *Xiao Wangye* had entered the Pass.”
“Entering the Pass?” Chu Liuxiang blurted out, “When did he enter the Pass?”

The greenish-black-bearded man replied, “Because *Xiao Wangye* was afraid that Chu *Xiang Shuai* might be in danger, many days ago, he went into the Pass to check for information about Chu *Xiang Shuai*.”
Chu Liuxiang also could not help showing confused look on his face. “He is afraid I am in danger?” he said, “He is checking for information about me?”

The greenish-black-bearded man said, “*Xiao Wangye* saw that Pearl Colt coming back with empty saddle, he decided that *Xiang Shuai* must be in danger; he simply could not wait any moment, and immediately left urgently.”
He suddenly laughed mysteriously and said, “*Xiao Wangye* is showing deep concern over Chu *Xiang Shuai*, could it be that you, *Xiang Shuai* did not know it?”
Hearing his explanation earlier, Chu Liuxiang was stunned on the spot; he simply did not pay attention to the meaning behind what he said. After pondering for half a day, he sighed and said with a wry smile, “That horse is indeed a divine colt, how could ordinary people be able to control it? I should

have thought that it might throw off the bridle and run away, coming back to look for its old master."

Hu Tiehua could not help asking, "We have so many people but failed to find him, yet his horse found him first instead?"

The greenish-black-bearded man said, "In the desert, who does not know that that Pearl Colt is *Xiao Wangye*'s mount? Whoever finds it will definitely send it back to *Xiao Wangye*."
He suddenly chuckled and said, "Although the number of bad guys and bandits in the desert is not a few, but within thousands of *li*, who would dare to have ideas about *Xiao Wangye*'s beloved horse? Even that mystical, unfathomable *Shi Guanyin* would not dare to provoke us with no reason."
At the mention of the Stone *Guanyin*, everybody's countenance changed. But the greenish-black-bearded man smiled and continued, "Gentlemen may not know it, in addition to us, these former subordinates of *Lao Wangye* [old king], I don't know how many people in the desert are willing to die for *Xiao Wangye*. Although *Shi Guanyin*'s martial art is formidable, but if she offends *Xiao Wangye*, no matter what she wants to do here in the future, I am afraid it will be very difficult to accomplish."
Chu Liuxiang could not help heaving a deep sigh. He said, "It seems that the name 'King of the Desert', these four characters [*sha mo zhi wang*] is not empty."
Hu Tiehua suddenly said, "Based on what you said, if we rode that Pearl Colt, wouldn't we see your *Xiao Wangye* early on?"
The greenish-black-bearded man sighed and said, "If gentlemen rode that Pearl Colt, *Xiao Wangye* could not possibly be anxious. He knew Chu *Xiang Shuai* cherishes this colt so much; hence he decided that if *Xiang Shuai* is not in danger, you could not possibly let it come back with empty saddle."
Glowering at Ji Bingyan, Hu Tiehua spoke unhurriedly, "This is called a clever person may become the victim of his own ingenuity [idiom]; trying to be smart but becoming clumsy instead. From this, it can be seen that sometimes adults do things that are not as smart as children's."

Ji Bingyan's face did not show any emotion at all; he only stared coldly at the greenish-black-bearded man, and spoke as coldly, "Listening to your

explanation, your *Xiao Wangye* is actually very concerned about Chu Liuxiang?"
On his face, the greenish-black-bearded man also showed some kind of mysterious smile. He said, "Indeed very concerned."

Ji Bingyan sternly said, "Then why did he kidnap Chu Liuxiang's close relatives? What for?"

Unexpectedly the greenish-black-bearded man was stunned, "Kidnapping Chu *Xiang Shuai*'s relatives? How could there be such thing? I am afraid *Gexia* misunderstood."
His expression serious, it seemed that unexpectedly it was not a pretense at all.

Turning pale, Chu Liuxiang said, "Could it be that Rong'er and the others really did not come here?"

Muttering to himself irresolutely, the greenish-black-bearded man said, "Rong'er …? *Xiang Shuai* means one Su *Guniang*, one Li *Guniang*, one …"
He had not finished speaking, Chu Liuxiang already urgently said, "It's them all right. Have you seen them? Where are they now?"

The greenish-black-bearded man replied, "Su *Guniang* and the others, naturally they went with *Xiao Wangye* to enter the Pass together."
"They … they are all right?" Chu Liuxiang asked.

The greenish-black-bearded man laughed and said, "These three *Guniang* are all smart, vivacious, and beautiful. Furthermore, they always have a smile on their faces, as if they never knew any distress on the world, so that others would also forget any anxieties in their hearts."
His eyes suddenly turned to Ji Bingyan and he said, "But how could *Gexia* say that they were kidnapped by *Xiao Wangye*?"
By this time Ji Bingyan was a bit confused himself; unable to restrain his emotions, he also rubbed his nose, "Are you saying they weren't?" he said.

The greenish-black-bearded man smiled and said, "Naturally they weren't. The three of them are not only *Xiao Wangye*'s honored guests and esteemed

visitors, they are practically very close with each other; the four of them are even inseparable in sleep. I don't know how else I can explain it to you."
As soon as he said that, everybody was stunned. Chu Liuxiang, Ji Bingyan, and Hu Tiehua looked at each other in dismay; they could not say even a word.

After half a day, Hu Tiehua finally sounded him out, asking, "Did you say they sleep together?"

The greenish-black-bearded man laughed and said, "Practically they live on the same carriage, lying in the same bed."

Hu Tiehua sighed. He looked at Chu Liuxiang, smiled wryly and said, "It looks like this *Xiao Wangye*'s ability is indeed not small."
Chu Liuxiang only felt that his mouth turned a bit bitter; he did not know what to say.

Suddenly they heard Princess Pipa asked, "Your *Xiao Wangye*, is he a man? Or a woman?"
The greenish-black-bearded man appeared to be stunned; laughing involuntarily, he said, "Naturally she is a woman. It's just that *Lao Wangye* did not have *Shaoye* [young master of the house], therefore, since she was little he dressed her like a boy, plus he told *Xiaoren* [plural] to address her as *Xiao Wangye* … Could it be that *Xiang Shuai* did not know it?" [Translator's note: this is hard to carryover in English. Chinese sentences sometimes do not have the subject, and in the original, the pronoun being used above was mostly generic/gender-neutral 'he'.]
Chu Liuxiang could only desperately rub his nose. Hu Tiehua could not help roaring in laughter. Only Princess Pipa's countenance turned extremely unsightly. She stared at Chu Liuxiang and said, "It seems that there are really not a few people are concerned about you."

Outside the tent, the cold wind was like a blade, but inside the tent, it was as warm as the springtime. On top of that, there was the aroma of the roasted meat and goat's milk wine. Hu Tiehua practically forgot all his worries. Only Chu

Liuxiang did not look to be too happy; he only felt that there were simply a lot more questions than answer.

Ji Bingyan was staring at him for half a day. Finally he could not help asking, “What exactly is going on here? Have you figured it out now?”

Smiling wryly, Chu Liuxiang said, “Still not quite understand.”

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “You’d better repeat this matter from beginning to end in details, let us figure it out for you.”

Chu Liuxiang sighed. He said, “This matter began when I asked *Hei Zhenzhu* to notify Rong’er, to tell her to go back quickly, only because that at that time I might meet the disaster of being killed at any moment, so I really did not have energy left to take care of her.”
Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “Apparently this *Hei Zhenzhu* not only brought your words back, but also personally escorted Rong’er back. The two of them chatting along the way, they have become friends.”
Chu Liuxiang sighed and said, “Looking at the situation, I am afraid that that is indeed the case.”

Hu Tiehua said, “But how could this *Hei Zhenzhu* persuade Rong’er and the others to come with her outside the Pass? And why did she do that? Could it be just to make you anxious?”
Knitting his brows, Chu Liuxiang said, “That is precisely the point that I am not able to figure out. Rong’er and the others are usually very well-behaved.”

Princess Pipa suddenly laughed coldly and said, “Although you are usually always on the run, but they are always at home waiting for you. Therefore, you always assume that they ought to be at home waiting for you, am I right?”

Chu Liuxiang sighed, “They practically has nowhere to go,” he replied.

“How do you know that they have nowhere to go?” Princess Pipa asked, “Even if they are your watchdog, every now and then they would sometimes go out for a ride …” She threw her ‘not impressed’ face [orig. curling her lips; 2012

Olympic gymnast McKayla Maroney came to my mind] at him and said with a cold laugh, “If I were Rong’er, and knew that you are so not worried about me, I might think of a way to make you worry for once. I waited for you several dozens times, several hundreds times, I should let you wait for me once.”

‘Clap!’ Hu Tiehua slapped his palm and spoke loudly, “That is so right. The heart of a woman, in the end only women can understand. If you let a woman know that you absolutely do not have any worry about her, she might think of a way to torture you. Even if she has unswerving devotion toward you, she would not be willing to let you have that kind of thought about her.”

Princess Pipa coldly said, “This is only because women know that men are contemptible individuals. When a man knew that a woman has unswerving devotion toward him, he would feel that this girl is not interesting, and immediately will go find someone else.”

Hu Tiehua roared in laughter and said, “Although this remark in unavoidably too harsh, but it is not completely without any logic behind it.”

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “In that case, are you saying that they came with *Hei Zhenzhu* out of the Pass this time, is to make me anxious about them?”
Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “Even if at the beginning they did not have this thought, but with *Hei Zhenzhu* feeding the fire on the side, they might be persuaded to do so.”
“But why did *Hei Zhenzhu* persuade them in the first place?” Chu Liuxiang asked.
Princess Pipa again scowled at her and said with a cold laugh, “You still don’t understand this logic.”

Princess Pipa turned her head to look away from him; she spoke coldly, “When a man’s mouth says he doesn’t understand, in his heart he must understand it very well.”

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “But I really don’t understand.”

Princess Pipa said, “Although she [sic; not sure if it refers to Su Rongrong or Chu Liuxiang] did not know that *Hei Zhenzhu* is a woman, but *Hei Zhenzhu* knew that he is a man, right?”
Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “There is no doubt about this; except for female orangutan, no woman would imagine that he has that many shortcomings on him.”

‘Pfft!’ Princess Pipa could not help giggling, but she immediately returned to her wooden face and said with a cold laugh, “Such a handsome man like him, such a confident and at ease man like him, just how many are they in the world? *Hei Zhenzhu*’s fragrant heart, perhaps it has already been peeled out by him like peeling a chicken egg long ago, but our passionate and romantic playboy here clearly has turned into a slow-witted man, unexpectedly he does not understand anything.”

Chapter 58 – Restoration of Past Regime

Hu Tiehua continued to laugh and said, “For a girl, not only this is contempt, practically it could be called come kind of insult; thereupon, in her rage, that *Zhenzhu Guniang* [Miss Pearl] wanted to give this playboy a bit of lesson, is that right?”
Princess Pipa said, “Plus that *Zhenzhu Guniang* was afraid that once they parted, she would never see this playboy anymore. So by doing this, there is no need to worry that he would not be obediently coming to look for her.”
Hu Tiehua clapped his hands and laughed aloud; he said, “Interesting, interesting, it is simply extremely interesting. Chu *Gongzi*, don’t you think this is interesting?”
Chu Liuxiang spoke with a straight face, “If suddenly your tongue broke and fell off, it would be even more interesting.”

But Ji Bingyan sighed and said, “After all, a child is a child, he will never grow up. Grownups have a load on their mind, he will never understand.”

Princess Pipa laughed coldly and said, “Whatever loads on your grownup’s mind, say it out, let us hear it!”

Knitting his brows, Chu Liuxiang said, “We originally thought that the rebellion in Qiuci was masterminded by *Hei Zhenzhu* in secret; because he knew my relationship with Yidian Hong, hence he sent Yidian Hong to come here.”
Ji Bingyan said, “Now we know that *Hei Zhenzhu* has nothing to do with this matter whatsoever; therefore, the secret mastermind must be *Shi Guanyin*. But how did *Shi Guanyin* …”
Princess Pipa did not wait for him to finish, she interrupted him, “That’s the load on your grownup gentlemen’s mind? In my opinion, this matter is practically too simple; even a three-year old will be able to guess it.”

Chu Liuxiang and Ji Bingyan were waiting for her to continue. She went on, “*Hei Zhenzhu* invited Chu Liuxiang’s three … three close relatives to come here, perhaps all her subordinates are aware of it. Even more, *Shi Guanyin* has numerous eyes and ears; naturally this matter entered her ears quickly. Therefore, she used a tiny little trick to let Chu Liuxiang think those three *Guniang* were in her grab. This way, our Passionate Prince[1] would not dare to act blindly without thinking?”
Ji Bingyan cast Chu Liuxiang a glance; smiling wryly, he said, “I never thought there are so many very complicated things in this matter, yet in a child’s mind, everything become so simple.”

Princess Pipa paid no attention to him; she simply continued, “But she is still afraid that Chu Liuxiang did not believe, so she intentionally had Yidian Hong coming here. You guys, these deceitful-in-many-ways grownup gentlemen think it through from different angles, you decided that only *Hei Zhenzhu*, one person, knew the relationship between Chu Liuxiang and Yidian Hong; therefore, you also decided that *Hei Zhenzhu* was the secret mastermind behind this, so it is only natural that Su *Guniang* and the others must be in their hands; thereupon you guys obediently fall into their trap.”
Noticing that Chu Liuxiang and Ji Bingyan were listening to her with blank expression on their faces, she could not help laughing proudly of herself; she said, “Don’t you see, isn’t this matter very simple? It’s just that you people’s

own brains are too complicated, always like to indulge in flights of fancy, such a plainly a very simple matter, you overthink it to make it complicated."

Smiling wryly, Chu Liuxiang said, "So, according to you, there must be someone else who knew the relationship between Yidian Hong and me, so he could exploit Yidian Hong to make me take the bait; is that right?"

"Now you finally understand," Princess Pipa said.

Knitting his brows, Chu Liuxiang said, "But the people who knew my relationship with Yidian Hong, except for *Hei Zhenzhu*, everybody else is dead!"
Laughing coldly, Princess Pipa said, "Meeting Chu *Xiang Shuai*, perhaps even dead people might come back to life."
She made that remark intentionally; originally it was to anger Chu Liuxiang, but when Chu Liuxiang heard it, it was as if he was suddenly hit by an arrow; his entire body jumped up.

Right this moment, suddenly they heard a burst of rapid hoof beats. In the desert, the ground was soft, so that by the time they heard the hoof beats, the speeding horse was already near them, and suddenly stopped.

Hu Tiehua's eye lit up; greatly delighted, he said, "Could it be that *Hei Zhenzhu* is back?"
Before he finished speaking, Chu Liuxiang and the others already scrambled out of the tent. Only to see there were indeed three horses outside, the saddles were untied, their body was covered all over with windblown sand.

Although all three of these horses were one-in-a-thousand fine colts, this moment two of them already collapsed from exhaustion, their mouths were foaming, they nearly died from being forced beyond their strength.

Normally, desert warriors regarded this kind of good horse more important than life itself, yet this moment unexpectedly no one came over to take care of these three horses. Everybody was crowding outside the first tent in the east, their

expression looked extremely excited. Apparently the three men who had just arrived on the horses were swarmed and brought into the tent.

Chu Liuxiang and Hu Tiehua were about to rush over to look, someone already saw them and hurriedly came over to meet them. Bowing, he said with apologetic smile, "*Xiaoren* already settled *Gongzi*'s four friends separately, this moment they are all resting. Due to another distant visitor's arrival, *Jiangjun* [general] is unable to accompany *Gongzi* drinking wine, we are asking for *Gongzi*'s forgiveness."
What he meant by 'four friends' were the injured Qu Wurong, Yidian Hong, and Liu Yanfei, the two martial brothers. As for the 'General', it must be the greenish-black-bearded man.

Hu Tiehua could not help asking, "Turns out you have a guest from afar; but I wonder who they are?"

The man smiled apologetically and said, "I am afraid *Gongzi* would not know them."
"Oh!" Hu Tiehua responded.

The man laughed again and said, "Actually, speaking about them, we can't consider them guests at all; rather, they are *Xiaoren*'s [plural] employers."
"Employers?" Hu Tiehua echoed.

The man sighed. He said, "Since *Lao Wangye* passed away, practically even living has become a problem for *Xiaoren* [plural]; therefore, we have to find small jobs here and there to survive, and to maintain this situation."
Hu Tiehua could not refrain his curiosity again; laughing, he said, "But I wonder what they are hiring you to do?"

The man smiled apologetically and said, "What we are doing is more or less similar to what your Central Plains' armed escorts are doing. This time it is also another not-worth-mentioning small thing. Furthermore, the first two days have been accomplished."

Hu Tiehua wanted to ask further, Chu Liuxiang already saw this man was showing signs of reluctance and embarrassment, thereupon he immediately pulled Hu Tiehua away and said with a laugh, “Since that’s the case, *Xiongdi* [brother] needs to quickly take care of your guests; we can take care of ourselves.”
Returning to their tent, Hu Tiehua was still constantly muttering to himself, “We are their *Xiao Wangye*’s good friends, yet they regard these three people as more important than we are. Who are these three men anyway?”
Chu Liuxiang chuckled and said, “Who those people are, what does it have to do with us?”

Although his mouth said so, in his heart he also felt very strange.

No matter where, divine spirited horses like the ones outside were not many, yet these three definitely did not cherish the horses at all, unexpectedly they did not have any scruple in exhausting the horses to their death.

What urgent matter was it that they had to get here in such a hurry?

Also, to hire people like the greenish-black-bearded man, there must be a steep price to pay, plus what they were doing must be extremely important. What exactly were they doing? Why all these secrecy?

Although Chu Liuxiang did not say it out loud, but Ji Bingyan had already guessed what he was thinking. The two looked at each other. Ji Bingyan suddenly said, “I am going to check on Yidian Hong.”

“You’d better be a bit more careful,” Chu Liuxiang spoke heavily.

Just to see Yidian Hong, why did he need to be more careful?

Hu Tiehua’s eyes were flashing, he said, “I want to see him too.”

“You don’t need to bother,” Ji Bingyan said, “Why don’t you stay here and drink wine?”

Hu Tiehua suddenly roared in laughter and said, “You guys don’t have to conceal it from me. I have been friends with the two of you for twenty, thirty years; seeing your sneaky appearance like this, do you think I cannot guess what ghostly trick you are playing?”

Chu Liuxiang cast a glance toward Ji Bingyan. Smiling wryly, he said, “Grownups’ other things can fool a child, but if you want to conceal from them that you are going out to play, they will find out. And then they will make such a commotion that you will have no choice but to take them out too.”

Pursing up her lips, Princess Pipa laughed and said, “I did not expect that you haven’t been a *Papa*, yet you already have experience dealing with children.” Right this moment, they suddenly heard another burst of hoof beats.

This time the hoof beats were thunderous; the incoming people must be over five hundred riders. Evidently, because they discovered that there were people ahead, the sound of hoof beats was slightly halted, but then immediately it rose up again, as they were dividing themselves into left and right, two wings, to become an outflanking momentum, to surround the greenish-black-bearded man’s group in the middle.

Ji Bingyan spoke heavily, “Could it be that these people are chasing those three men earlier?”

“That’s right,” Chu Liuxiang replied, “They did not hesitate to exhaust those famous horses to death, turns out it was to escape the pursuing troops.”

Without waiting for them to finish their discussion, Hu Tiehua already rushed out, only to see the warriors under the greenish-black-bearded man already had their bows taut, their sabers out of the scabbards, as they stood in tight formation. All around them the yellow dust was filling the whole sky, the sound of hoof beats was gradually stopping.

Stamping his feet, Hu Tiehua said, “There is a fight, why didn’t that greenish-black beard come to look for us? Could it be that he looks down upon us?”

Ji Bingyan coldly said, “How did he know that you like to meddle in other people’s business this much?”

Suddenly, a rider rushed over; reining his horse in front of the formation, he called out loudly, “Your honorable army is the warriors from which country? Have you seen three horses escaping to this place?”

From this side, a man also immediately shouted back, “You guys are the warriors from which country? Why do you put on a formation in front of our army?”

The other man shouted, “Our side is Qiuci State Army, under *Da Zongguan* [big chief manager], Min *Jiangjun*’s [General Min] command. The escapees are the major criminal *Guowang Bixia* [His Majesty king of a country]. If your honorable army hand them over, there will be heavy reward, but if you cover it up and not reporting it, very soon when the main forces arrive, we will burn both jade and common stone, if you want to regret, it will be too late.”
Listening to this point, Princess Pipa spoke in shrill voice, “Not good, could it be that the one they are chasing is my *Diedie* [daddy]?”
She immediately ran toward the tent, and called out loudly, “*Diedie* … *Fu Wang* [father king] … is it you?”
From inside the tent a man slipped out; indeed it was His Majesty the King of Qiuci. While admittedly that when they suddenly saw him, Chu Liuxiang and the others were surprised and delighted at the same time, when the King of Qiuci saw them, he was even more pleased beyond his expectations.

Clapping his hands and laughing heartily, he said, “I never thought that everybody would be here. Very good! This is indeed very good.”

Princess Pipa threw herself into her daddy’s arms; she said with a laugh, “But *Diedie*, how could you come here alone?”

The King of Qiuci laughed and said, “There’s no harm in you and I, father and daughter, have a chat back home later; now …”

His gaze turned toward Chu Liuxiang, he said, “*Xiao Wang* [little king] was about to go to their formation to reply; I wonder if
three *Zhuangshi* [hero/warrior] would be willing to escort *Xiao Wang*?”
Smiling, Chu Liuxiang bowed and said, “*Zaixia* [plural] solemnly waiting to be sent.”
The King of Qiuci laughed heartily and said, “Great! That is really great!”

Chu Liuxiang saw that this King of Qiuci, who previously only knew how to indulge in wine and women, who seemed to be extremely cowardly and incompetence, this moment unexpectedly appeared to have his spirit trembling with excitement [idiom: lively and full of enthusiasm], his face was glowing with ruddiness, as if he was suddenly changed into a different person. Although inevitably he felt strange in his heart, he knew that this moment was not a good time to investigate this matter.

The three of them, plus the greenish-black beard, and left and right guards of the King of Qiuci, on five horses slowly walked out. The warrior in front of the troops in formation, which were showing off their military strength and were constantly yelling and shouting – was immediately shocked; he could not utter even one word.

Staring at him, the King of Qiuci spoke heavily, “Do you still recognize this king?”

The warrior was actually his former subordinate. Now that he suddenly saw his former master, inevitably he was startled and ashamed at the same time. His face turned beet-red, he stammered, “*Wangye* already abandon our country for a long time, *Xiaoren* …”
The King of Qiuci smiled and said, “Although you have abandoned this king, but this king has never abandoned you.”

The warrior's face was turning even redder; hanging his head low, he said, "*Xiaoren* in the capacity of a sergeant, only know how to obey military orders. If there is any offense, certainly it is not *Xiaoren*'s intention."
"Very well," the King of Qiuci said, "I understand your difficulty. No need for you to answer, go call Min Hongkui and Hong Xuehan to talk to me!"

"Yes," the warrior replied.

He pulled the rein and rode away. Half a day later, they saw several horses galloping over. The ones at the front were precisely General Min, Hong *Xianggong*, and Wu Juxuan, three men.
When Wu Juxuan suddenly saw Chu Liuxiang in here, his countenance immediately changed. He had never expected that Chu Liuxiang would escape from the Stone *Guanyin*'s claws.
But Chu Liuxiang looked at him and smiled; the two obviously had so many things they needed to talk about, but in front of the two battle formations was definitely not the place for them to talk.

The King of Qiuci's very good-natured face suddenly became dignified and grave; he spoke in heavy voice, "Min Hongkui, Hong Xuehan, this king has never treated you meagerly, but why did the two of you want to rebel against the emperor? How could you listen to the flattery of traitor minister? Everybody has to be punished."

General Min's dark face seemed to be turning red as well. Hong *Xianggong*'s face, however, did not show any emotion. Throwing his head back, he laughed aloud and said, "The position of the King really is not bestowed by the Heaven, only virtue can put you there. We are just executing the Will of Heaven. If you are willing to obediently come back with us, remembering the sentiment in the past, not only we are not going to harm your life, we will definitely put good words on your behalf in *Wangye*'s presence, to bestow you a place where you could pass the remainder of your life in peace."
The King of Qiuci angrily said, "The sky will not have two suns, a country cannot have two rulers; other than this king, who dares to call himself king?"

Hong *Xianggong* laughed and said, “That’s right; the sky will not have two suns, a country cannot have two rulers. Now that the new king has ascended the throne, you have not bowed before him, wouldn’t it be extremely unwise?”
The King of Qiuci suddenly laughed aloud and said, “New king? Do you know where your new king is now?”

Hong *Xianggong*’s countenance finally changed; but instantly he laughed and said, “Naturally at the Imperial Palace, quietly waiting for the good news, waiting for us to escort you back.”
The King of Qiuci laughed heartily and said, “Look at this first, what is it?”

He took a sandalwood case from the greenish-black-bearded man’s hands and threw it hard.

Hong *Xianggong* caught it, opened it and took a look; his countenance immediately turned ugly. His hands trembled, he could not hold the wooden case anymore, ‘Bang!’ it fell to the ground.
A human head immediately rolled out of the box. The greenish-black-bearded man leaped off his horse, rushed several steps forward, and using a long saber he picked up the head and lifted it high.

The King of Qiuci shouted, “The traitor An Deshan who stole the country has already been executed two days ago, his head is here. Those who are implicated by the traitor in the past, if you surrender now, your guilt will be reduced three grades down, I will be lenient toward you.”

As soon as the shout was out, all the three armies immediately roared in clamor.

Wu Juxuan suddenly shouted, “This is his frightening words to scare people [idiom], to confuse the troops’ heart, we must not fall into his evil scheme.”

Rolling his eyes, Hong *Xianggong* also immediately shouted, “That’s right; he had people rebelling and friends deserting [idiom: to find oneself utterly isolated], he cannot even run to save his life, how could he have the power to do this kind of big thing?”

The King of Qiuci laughed aloud and said, “You think this king is solely preoccupied with running for my life? Let me tell you, this king has already mobilized five-way army in secret; three days ago the restoration of the country has been completed.”

General Min said, “Five-way army, fart! It’s simply a fart.”

The greenish-black-bearded man leaped back onto his horse again and raised his voice, shouting, “Five-way army, four are hired from the neighboring countries on the west, and the other one is precisely my, the *Qing Huzi*’s [Greenish-Black Beard] brothers. Could it be that gentlemen still do not believe?”
It may be assumed that this greenish-black-bearded man already had a resounding reputation in the desert; among General Min’s men, not a few had heard about him, also a lot of them could already see that the head was not a fake. Thereupon they were thrown into commotion again; their hearts were shaken even more.

General Min sternly said, “Where’s the Iron-armored Army? Quickly arrest this muddleheaded king away!”

Although his military order was strict, this moment unexpectedly no one was listening to him, except for several personal guards who were dead-loyal to him. Raising their sabers high, they yelled and charged forward.

Hu Tiehua roared in laughter and said, “Looks like our business is finally here.”

Amidst his laughter, he urged his horse to charge forward as well. Stretching out his arms, two men were already taken under his ribs, two other men were shocked, and were knocked off of their horses by the two men under his ribs.

The greenish-black-bearded man also raised his saber and charged forward. His left hand was holding the head of the rebel king, the saber light in his right hand was like snow. Two riders moved forward to intercept him, his long saber flashed, two heads were rolling down to the ground.

General Min was still shouting orders. Seeing the turn of events was not too encouraging, Hong *Xianggong* wanted to slip away; suddenly he heard someone spoke coldly, “Where is *Gexia* going?”
Hong *Xianggong* turned around with great alarm, Ji Bingyan, nobody knew since when, was already in front of his horse, staring coldly at him.
Hong *Xianggong* hissed, “*Zhuangshi* please let me off first, I will reward you with ten thousand gold.”
Ji Bingyan coldly said, “My wealth is already too much, I don’t even know how to spend it; you want to give me ten thousand gold reward, wouldn’t it add to my headache?”

Hong *Xianggong* laughed and said, “If *Zhuangshi* dislike the amount being too little, how about a hundred thousand gold?”
While his mouth was talking, suddenly he pulled a dagger with gilded hilt and stabbed backhandedly.

Laughing coldly, Ji Bingyan said, “You want to use your mouth to fight, it is still all right, but if you think of using your hand to fight, it is still far too inferior.”

Before he even finished speaking, his hand had already snatched the dagger away, pulling Hong *Xianggong*’s entire body off his saddle. Swinging his hand, he shouted loudly, “Catch!”
Unexpectedly Hong *Xianggong*’s entire body was thrown away by him toward the greenish-black-bearded man’s brothers, who caught him right away. Four horses carried him between them, and brought him into the tent.
On the other side, General Min was, after all, a military man; he pulled the saber hanging on his waist, and was thinking of staking his life in this battle. Seeing Hu Tiehua coming over with his horse, he shouted loudly and hacked his saber down.

Without even looking, Hu Tiehua snatched the saber away and sent a backhand slap, and struck General Min on the face. Gold stars were dancing in General Min’s eyes, he fainted right away.

The King of Qiuci raised his voice, “This king has recovered his place, abandon your saber and you will live, rebel and you will be beheaded.”

Immediately a series of ‘clatter, crash’ was heard, several hundred sabers were thrown in the ground.

It should be noted that the warriors under General Min’s command were all veterans of a hundred battles, to have them abandoning their sabers and surrendering was not an easy thing at all. However, these men were the King of Qiuci’s former subordinates. Although they belonged to the rebel forces, but they did so because they were forced by military orders. Now that they saw the old king has returned to power, and their general has been captured, they were like a snake without a head; how could they be willing to continue staking their lives?

The chaos gradually subsided. Hu Tiehua suddenly shouted, “Where’s the Old Stinky Bug? How could he disappear?”

In the quiet desert, suddenly two clumps of yellow cloud rolled up to the sky. Two horses, one behind the other, were running desperately. The one escaping in the front was, unexpectedly, Wu Juxuan. The one chasing behind was, naturally, Chu Liuxiang.

Turned out when Wu Juxuan saw that the situation had turned from bad to worse, he wanted to take advantage of the confusion to run away. How would he know that Chu Liuxiang was already paying close attention to him? His each and every move could not escape Chu Liuxiang’s eyes.

This moment the two men beat their horses to run at the top of their strength. But Chu Liuxiang was not prepared for this race; the horse he was riding on was just a random horse given to him by somebody just now, not a choice horse at all, while Wu Juxuan’s horse was a famous good colt.

In the beginning, by virtue of excellent horsemanship, Chu Liuxiang was still able to keep up head and tail. But afterwards, the distance between the two

horses was growing. Chu Liuxiang suddenly let out a long whistle and leaped off his horse.

Unexpectedly he was going to use his walking-alone-in-the-world [i.e. outstanding] lightness skill to compete against the speeding horse.

His figure flew like a shooting star. Unexpectedly Wu Juxuan's famous good colt was unable to match Chu Liuxiang's two legs. In just a short moment, he already managed to close the distance.

Wu Juxuan beat his horse even more urgently. "Chu Liuxiang," he thundered, "You and I have no grievance, no enmity; why are you pushing me too far?"

Chu Liuxiang did not respond. He knew that Wu Juxuan wanted him to open his mouth, simply because as soon as he opened his mouth, it would be hard to prevent his true *qi* from dispersing, his *shenfa* would also be unavoidably slowing down.

Wu Juxuan's ears heard the rustling noise of the sleeves behind him was getting closer and closer, the sweats on his head had been pouring like rain. Suddenly he also leaped up from the saddle and made a somersault high in the air, unexpectedly he flitted across Chu Liuxiang, to run away in the opposite direction.

He calculated that currently Chu Liuxiang was rushing forward with all his strength, certainly he would not be able to stop his own momentum, and thus by the time Chu Liuxiang turned around and gave chase again, he would have been long gone.

Who would have thought that the level of Chu Liuxiang's *qinggong* was unexpectedly far above his imagination? He had not run too far, already he heard the sound of rustling sleeves behind him again.

The strong wind hitting them on the face was as sharp as blade; the two men were heading directly into the wind.

Wu Juxuan suddenly swung his arm. ‘Pop!’ a purple smoke exploded on the ground, and was immediately blown by the wind, rolling directly toward Chu Liuxiang’s face.

By this time, Hu Tiehua already knew that Chu Liuxiang was chasing after Wu Juxuan. He also knew that the ‘secret shady business’ of the greenish-black-bearded man was to wipe out the rebel ministers on behalf of the King of Qiuci.

He already found out pretty much about anything, but he still did not know why Chu Liuxiang has not returned yet.

The King of Qiuci already had a celebratory banquet prepared, and he was constantly urging his guests to drink.

Noticing that Hu Tiehua appeared to be preoccupied, he said with a laugh, “Why are you worried about your honorable friend? Under the heavens, who could possibly strike him?”

Hu Tiehua sighed. He said, “That is precisely why *Zaixia* is wondering; no matter who he is going after, it ought to be as easy as stretching a hand and grab it. But now, he has been gone for a long time.”
The King of Qiuci laughed and said, “This king can guarantee you one thing: he will definitely not have any problem. You should just relax and drink some wine.”

[1] Passionate Prince; orig. *duoqing gongzi*, young master with lots of affection. I just think that ‘passionate prince’ sounds nicer, albeit not the most accurate translation. The same words are used in Hou Xibai’s title – see my note in *Da Tang Shuang Long Zhuan*, Book 5 Chapter 9.

Chapter 59 – The Feast to Celebrate Heroic Deed

Hu Tiehua cast Princess Pipa a glance, suddenly he whispered to Ji Bingyan, "Could it be that this kid is afraid to be entangled by the Passionate Princess [orig. princess with lots of passion/affection, see previous note, but in this case, it is a real 'princess'], unexpectedly he slipped out secretly?"

Knitting his brows, Ji Bingyan replied, "You think everybody is just like you?"

"Humph!" Hu Tiehua replied, "It's not necessarily so, this kid can do anything. I say we'd better go look for him first!"

Ji Bingyan's confidence was slightly shaken as well; he whispered back, "Let's slip out separately; we'll meet outside."

"All right," Hu Tiehua said, "Let's do it that way."

He suddenly remembered that the 'Star of Happiness' was still in his possession. Since the King of Qiuci considered this object to be very precious, how could he take it away? Besides, he promised that beautiful Queen that he would ask about the secret behind it anyway! Thereupon he took the 'Star of Happiness' out and presented it up; he said with a laugh,
"Fortunately *Zaixia* did not bring disgrace to the king's order by taking this treasure back. *Wangye*, please accept."
Who would have thought that the King of Qiuci unexpectedly laughed? He said, "*Zhuangshi* has rendered great merit, *Xiao Wang* has no hope of paying it back, so I give this gem to you; just consider it a souvenir!"
Unexpectedly he seemed to have forgotten how many lives this 'Star of Happiness' had sacrificed, how much did it cost to bring it back, unexpectedly he gave it to Hu Tiehua so casually.

Hu Tiehua was so shocked that he was speechless. It was only half a day later that he forced a laughter and said, "If *Wangye* feel that I have some meritorious service, just give me a few pots of good wine for me to drink and that should be enough. This 'Star of Happiness' I really do not dare to accept it."
"Why?" the King of Qiuci asked.

Rubbing his nose, Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “I am a poor kid, if I have such a precious thing on me, do you think I will still be able to sleep?”

The King of Qiuci smiled and said, “Two or three days ago, indeed no one could estimate its value, and this king would definitely not give it to you. But now, its value had suddenly been reduced. Such precious stone, this king does not know how many I have in my treasury. Just don’t worry and accept it.”

As soon as he said that, even Ji Bingyan and Princess Pipa were stunned.

Hu Tiehua’s eyes grew big, he stammered, “Isn’t this gem related to some great secret?”

The King of Qiuci laughed and said, “That was nothing more than a rumor that this king deliberately manufactured, to let other people think that this gem carried some great secret. Only by relying on this would this king have the hope of restoring my country, because while their attention was completely focused on this gem, this king had already, in secret, used the treasure left by the previous king to hire the five-way army, the gods did not know, the ghosts did not perceive, to accomplish the great undertaking of restoring the nation.”

Stroking his beard, he laughed heartily and said, “This is called repairing the plank road by day while secretly crossing the Wei River at Chencang [idiom, referring to the stratagem used by Liu Bang in 206BC against Xiang Yu of Chu: feigning one thing while doing another], the threatening-the-east-and-striking-to-the-west stratagems.”

Ji Bingyan and Hu Tiehua looked at each other in dismay. They were both amazed and admired him. They originally thought that this king, who loved wine and women, was nothing more than front-ranking romantic Son of Heaven after Shu Tang [can’t find reference on this]; only now did they know that the depth of his shrewd mind was unexpectedly not inferior to Emperor Han Wu. He deliberately indulged himself in wine and women, indulged himself in sound and color, naturally it was only a tactic to confuse people’s eyes and ears.

Hu Tiehua finally sighed. Smiling wryly, he said, “No wonder Chu Liuxiang always felt it strange that since the Star of Happiness was holding the secret related to the kingship of Qiuci nation, why did he send it under armed escorts of the Central Plains’ escort agency from inside the Pass to the outside? If this moment he heard *Wangye*’s explanation, he must be full of admiration to *Wangye*.”
But Princess Pipa pursed her lips; feigning anger coquettishly, she said, “But *Diedie*, why did you keep me inside the drum as well? Could it be that as the father you distrust even your daughter?”
The King of Qiuci laughed and said, “It’s not that I distrust you, darling daughter, it’s just that the tighter I kept this secret, the more the others would be more suspicious in a hundred and one ways. One more day I did not reveal the secret, one more day my life would not be in danger. Those people who are bent to find out the secret would also protect me in the dark.”

Princess Pipa sighed and said, “It seems that being a king’s daughter is not necessarily a fortunate thing. No wonder a certain princess from the previous dynasty, at the death’s door she covered her face and cried loudly, saying, ‘I hope for from life to life, from age to age, never to be born in a monarch’s family’.”

The King of Qiuci could not help sighing as well. “That’s right,” he said, “If one wants to be a good monarch, then he may not be able to be a good father.”

This remark was indeed a wise saying. It should be noted that a monarch rules all the people, with ten thousand affairs in a day, how could he have the time to be a parent?

Therefore, three-*chi* grass hall, each produces filial son. The monarch’s family often produce a lot of unworthy younger generation. [This is literal translation, must be some kind of sayings.]
Ji Bingyan suddenly laughed coldly and said, “*Wangye* indeed has great skill and strategy, which no one can match. Only I feel sorry for those several muddleheaded armed escorts who lost their lives for the sake of several *taels* of silver without knowing anything.”

The King of Qiuci's expression also became extremely grave; he spoke indifferently, "Military affairs and politics of a country, these are dreadful things to begin with. A general rendering meritorious deed, still his dried-up bones fill the mountain, much less the monarch of a country? It has been like this since ancient times, inevitable and tragic. Even the founding emperors of the Tang and the Song dynasties could not avoid these things, why did *Xiansheng* single out this king to receive the blame?"
Ji Bingyan was silent for half a day. Hanging his head low, he said, "Momentarily *Zaixia* had a slip of the tongue; I wish for *Wangye*'s forgiveness."
Hu Tiehua stretched out his neck, he poured a large bowl of wine entirely down his throat. Throwing his head back, he laughed aloud and said, "Therefore, may I offer a bit of advice to everybody, drinking the wine in the cup is better, don't ask about the past. Since ancient times, a lot of emperors and kings are lonely, how could it match me, a poor kid taking things less seriously and so free?"

Suddenly someone laughed and responded, "Well said, 'drinking the wine in the cup is better, don't ask about the past'. But when the cunning rabbit is dead, the hunting dog will be cooked; when the birds are gone, the bow will be stored away. Could it be that you have never heard this saying?"

A burst of fragrance floated inside, intoxicating everybody, in the tent suddenly appeared a picturesque absolute beauty. Under the lantern light, it was like a celestial fairy descending upon the earth.

No one would have imagined that this fairy materializing under the lantern light was unexpectedly the confined-on-the-sickbed-all-year-long, the too-weak-to-stand-up-to-the-wind Queen of Qiuci.

They saw her face was still covered in light muslin, which made her beautiful countenance even more like a Chinese peony in the fog, a peach blossom in the mist; her beauty simply took the breath away.

The King of Qiuci was pleasantly surprised; unexpectedly he seemed to forget that his tender wife was sick, how could she have such magical *shenfa* like this? Hurriedly leaving his seat, he said, "How did you get here?"

The Queen of Qiuci laughed and said, “I am here; are you not happy?”

The King of Qiuci said, “But … but your body is weak, how could you withstand so much wind and cold?”

Ji Bingyan suddenly laughed coldly and said, “Forget about trivial cold wind and icy dew, even saber wind and arrows rain, *Wangfei* could not possibly take it seriously; am I right?”
The Queen of Qiuci laughed and said, “That’s right.”

Ji Bingyan’s eyes flickered, he said, “The birds are over, the bow is put away, the hound is boiled once the rabbit is caught. Could it be that *Wangfei* is also thinking of getting rid of us?”
The King of Qiuci laughed aloud and said, “This king absolutely does not have this intention, gentlemen do not need to worry.”

But the Queen coldly said, “Although you do not have that intention, I do.”

The King of Qiuci was stunned. “You …” he said.

The Queen slowly lifted up her veil, revealing a pair of limpid autumn waters [traditional description of girl’s beautiful eyes] divine eyes, as she looked at the King of Qiuci and said, “Do you recognize me?”

The King of Qiuci laughed and said, “How could I not recognize you?”

The Queen suddenly reached out her delicate lily-white hand again to touch her face; a thin, cicada-wing-like light yellow mask immediately fell off her face like a snake shedding its skin.

Under the lantern light, her face changed fantastically.

The King of Qiuci used to think that his beloved queen was a matchless stunning beauty in the world, who could have thought that the face appeared in

front of his face at the moment was ten million times more beautiful than his wife? He could not help blurting out in alarm, “Who are you?”

The ‘Queen’ replied indifferently, “You don’t recognize me, do you?”

But Hu Tiehua suddenly jumped up and shouted, “But I recognize you, you are …”

The Queen’s gaze turned to his face, she spoke word-by-word, “You recognize me? Who am I?”

Hu Tiehua actually found out that surprisingly this woman was the ‘new bride’ who had spent a passionate evening with him in the past; he also finally realized why whenever he saw this ‘Queen’ before, his heart was always like a frisky monkey, his mind like cantering horse [idiom], he indulged in fantasy [another idiom]. Yet this moment, her pair of beautiful fluid glances unexpectedly suddenly became as sharp as an eagle’s, as vicious as a wolf’s, as callous as a blade.

Hu Tiehua suddenly shuddered. His mouth could not even say a single word.

The ‘Queen’ smiled sweetly and said, “I know you don’t recognize me either. In fact, there is no one in the world who recognize me; because as soon as someone recognizes me, there is no way for him to keep on living.”

The originally warm tent suddenly became as if it was plunged into the ice. Everybody’s hands and feet became icy-cold; so cold that they were shivering.

It was only this moment that everybody had guessed who she was.

‘*Shi Guanyin*! You are *Shi Guanyin*!’
Yet unexpectedly no one dared to utter these words.

The King of Qiuci fell back into his seat. Grieved, he said, “I don’t care who you are, but my *Wangfei* … did you kill her?”

The Stone *Guanyin* spoke softly, “You do not need to feel bad, although she died, but I have not died; could it be that I still can’t compare with her? Could it be that you are dissatisfied?”
“You?” the King of Qiuci blurted out.

The Stone *Guanyin* laughed and said, “I already took her place; naturally I can take her place forever.”
The King of Qiuci looked at her exceptional graceful bearing; he was dumbfounded again.

Ji Bingyan suddenly laughed coldly and said, “That’s right. I also knew that she will take her place forever.”

“You … you know?” the King of Qiuci stammered.

Ji Bingyan said, “*Wangye* has no son, only a daughter.
If *Wangye* and *Gongzhu* met any mishap, while a country cannot without a ruler even for a day, naturally there will be a new king. Everybody was fighting for this throne; I don’t know how much effort, how much suffering they had to go through. But she, as easy as blowing off dust, would then stretch her hand to grab it. Only I feel sorry for Hong Xuehan, An Deshan, those people; they became her puppet for nothing, even in their death they became confused ghosts.”
All along the Stone *Guanyin* has been staring coldly at him; this moment she suddenly said, “I never thought that unexpectedly you are able to correctly guess my intention; I have been underestimating you.”
“Are you going to kill me?” the King of Qiuci’s voice cracked.

The Stone *Guanyin* smiled and said, “A monarch has a monarch way to die, I must not break the rule. As long as you drink the cup of wine before you, afterwards, there will be nothing that can make you worry.”
The King of Qiuci said, “You … Could it be that you put poison in the wine?”

The Stone *Guanyin* replied indifferently, “Although I did not put much, it is enough for you, father and daughter, two persons.”

The greenish-black-bearded man was also drinking in this tent, all along he had not made any noise, only waiting for the opportunity. Seeing the Stone *Guanyin* did not pay any attention to him, he quietly slipped out.
Who would have thought that the Stone *Guanyin* unexpectedly really seemed to have a thousand hands and a thousand eyes? Any person, any movement, nothing could escape her eyes. Without even looking back, she coldly said, "Are you going out to find help?"
The greenish-black-bearded man was startled. "That's right," he spoke sternly, "Don't you forget that I have eight hundred brothers under my command, all are veterans of a hundred battles, all good men who absolutely are not afraid of death. Only by relying on your one person's strength, you want to kill us all, I am afraid it won't be easy. As long as we have one person alive, you can forget about your crafty scheme succeeding. I advise you to give up on your idea!"

The Stone *Guanyin* suddenly said, "Well said. Zha Muge's former subordinates are indeed valiant heroes who are unafraid of death. Only too bad unavoidably your feast to celebrate heroic deed is being held a bit too early; your brothers are now so drunk that they don't know the ways of the world anymore."
The greenish-black-bearded man 's countenance changed, he said, "Did you put poison in their wine as well? Unexpectedly no one saw you?"

The Stone *Guanyin* smiled and said, "Our side have just put poison in front of you, did any one of you see it?"
Letting out a wild roar, the greenish-black-bearded man brandished his saber and pounced right up.

Although his martial art skill could not be compared with first-class Wulin martial art master, but he was fully deserving, without any reservations [idiom] the four-word title 'veteran of a hundred battles' [*shen jing bai zhan*]. As the saber chop out, evidently there was nothing fancy about it, and there was no follow-up move either, but it carried his entire heart, mind, and strength – to chop the opponent's head.
Because he knew that to fight the Stone *Guanyin*, he was really far too inferior. If this saber chop could not succeed, it was practically useless to continue the fight. He had resolved to stake his own life all on one throw; if he failed, then he would die for a good cause.

This valiant man, who lived on the saber's head and enemy's blood all year long, loved to do everything in a straightforward and delightful way. If he must die then he would die; he would definitely not wade in mud and water [idiom: doing sloppy job]. Therefore, once this saber was chopping, although the style was not pleasant to the eyes, it carried some kind of terrifying formidable power, it was indeed ferocious, making people's heart alarmed, trembling in fear [idiom].

When the saber in his hand flew up, Princess Pipa also flew up.

She had not said anything, because she was ready to make her move early on. This moment her figure flashed, a silver light flickered from her hand as a dagger suddenly appeared.

They saw silvery light flew up like the starry rain filling the sky. As soon as she made her move, she sent three strokes in succession, stabbing the three major acupoints on the Stone *Guanyin*'s back.
Her move was precisely the opposite of the greenish-black-bearded man's; it was abundantly agile, although the strength was lacking. Furthermore, each stroke carried a follow-up change, so that one stroke failed, she could immediately change her style.

Strictly speaking, although this kind of style was extremely fancy and pleasant to watch, but against a real martial master, it did not have any real use.

However, right now she and the greenish-black-bearded man were facing the same enemy; although the two's martial arts were not the same, plus they did not have prior experience in fighting together, but this moment as they made their move, there was some kind of tacit understanding between the two. Therefore, albeit unintentional, the two's styles, one hard the other soft, unexpectedly they were able to work together just right.

They saw the silver rain filling the air, across a streak of blue-green rainbow light, one in front, the other behind, were pressing down on the Stone *Guanyin*. But the Stone *Guanyin* remained fixed on the spot without moving.

Right this flint-spark instant, when the greenish-black-bearded man and Princess Pipa's heart was bursting with ecstasy, suddenly they heard a thunderbolt-like shout. And amid the shout, Hu Tiehua was rushing over.

His entire body was like a bent arrow; it started later but it arrived sooner. When the greenish-black-bearded man made his move, he had not made any movement, but before the greenish-black-bearded man's saber chopped down, he was already by the greenish-black-bearded man's side. His left hand made a fist and punched out, 'Bang!' the greenish-black-bearded man was hit and flew out, his right hand bent and snapped, like a light catching a shadow, Princess Pipa's wrist was caught and pinched by him, her arm and her body went numb.

The King of Qiuci blurted out in shock, "Hu *Zhuangshi*, how could you rebel?"
"Are you mad?" Princess Pipa bellowed.

Yet Hu Tiehua did not answer; he dragged Princess Pipa straight seven, eight steps backward, before halting his steps. The Stone *Guanyin* was still standing there with a smile on her face.
Since Princess Pipa's hand still could not move, she used her other hand to backhandedly slap Hu Tiehua on the face. Who would have thought that she just stretched out her hand, it was immediately grasped firmly by him?

The greenish-black-bearded man suffered the heaviest setback. Only this moment did he catch his breath, and also bellowed, "Aren't you *Xiao Wangye*'s friend? Why did you hit me?"
Hu Tiehua sighed. Smiling wryly, he said, "I really did not mean to hit you, I don't want to hurt you even more. But just now it was really an emergency, I did not have time to hold back, hence momentarily I lost control."

Stamping her feet, Princess Pipa said, "But why did you make your move against us? Could it be that you are her accomplice? Perhaps you saw incorrect turn of events, you want to face the wind and turn the rudder, and cast your lot on her side."

Since she could not move her hands, she used her leg to kick Hu Tiehua. While kicking, she rained curses on him, “You are a beast, I never thought that you are such a despicable, shameless, nasty person.”

The Stone *Guanyin* suddenly laughed and said, “You saved them, but you received their scolding instead. Why bother being meddlesome?”
Princess Pipa sternly said, “The one he saved was you, not me. If he was not being meddlesome, do you think you are still alive now?”

The Stone *Guanyin* said, “You think that relying on those two moves, you can hurt me?”
“Why can’t I hurt you?” Princess Pipa asked.

Her face still could not help revealing a proud look; she continued loudly, “Just now it could be said that our move was without any flaw. Your entire body, from top to bottom, have been shrouded under our style, practically you could not even dodge.”

The Stone *Guanyin* sighed. She said, “You are really just a child who don’t know how high is the sky, how thick is the earth. Why don’t you think: if your move just now was really perfect, how could Hu Tiehua only need to raise his hands and he immediately had you under control?”
Princess Pipa was stunned. She really did not have anything to say.

The Stone *Guanyin* calmly said, “To tell you the truth, if your saber just now really chopped down, the two of you would fall together. You think your style was like seamless heavenly clothes, but there were at least seven or eight holes in it.”
Her long sleeve suddenly flew up, like a mountain peak coming out of the cloud, rising upward and moved around. In the blink of an eye it already changed seven, eight different postures, while her mouth spoke indifferently, “Look, if I used this move against you just now, do you think you could still alive?”

Princess Pipa looked with blank expression on her face; she only felt that Stone *Guanyin*’s move, no matter from which direction, she was absolutely

unable to parry. If the Stone *Guanyin* wanted to take her life, it would really be easier than feeling in her pocket and taking something out. After just one glance, already her countenance became deathly grey, while cold sweats dripped down her head.
The Stone *Guanyin* smiled and said, “Now, it’s time for you to know the real invulnerable style. Not only you can’t execute it, it could be said that you practically have never seen it.”
Her eyes suddenly turned toward Hu Tiehua, her countenance sank, she spoke coldly, “You saved them; it may be assumed that you are fighting me, right?”

Hu Tiehua was rooted on the spot, as if he did not hear her at all. Actually, he was also petrified by the move that the Stone *Guanyin* demonstrated just now. The move appeared to be like a dancing courtesan with magnificent style that was unmatched it her generation, who was dancing lightly and gracefully in the most pleasant mood, following the most beautiful music.

No matter who, anybody who saw such a wonderful dancer’s posture and movement would be bewitched, his heart would feel happy. And then, when you are in your most pleasant mood, she would simply take your life.

Hu Tiehua racked his brains, thinking back and forth, unexpectedly he was unable to think of any martial art that could defeat this move. If the Stone *Guanyin* used this move to attack him, perhaps he would have to fall down.
He no longer needed to see if the Stone *Guanyin* still had some other exquisite style, just because when martial art masters were facing each other, one move was already enough.
He saw that although Ji Bingyan’s expression was still completely calm, but beads of sweats were seeping out of the tip of his nose; obviously he was unable to break the Stone *Guanyin*’s move either.
Half a day later, finally Hu Tiehua could not help asking, “The one you just demonstrated, what martial art was that?”

“There is no harm in me telling you,” the Stone *Guanyin* replied, “That move is called ‘should not be exposed to men’.”

Hu Tiehua was stunned, "'Should not be exposed to men'? What kind of martial art is that?"

The Stone *Guanyin* laughed and said, "This can't be considered any formidable martial art. But no matter who, as long as he is a man, coming across this move he will lose his life; therefore, men absolutely must not see it."
Frowning, Hu Tiehua said, "Which school's or which sect's is this martial art?"

The Stone *Guanyin* said, "All over the world, which school or which sect would be able to create such style? Take the two currently most prestigious in the world big school and sects; *Shaolin Pai*'s martial arts are too dense and too clumsy, like a big bowl of simmer-fried streaky pork. Although it is very satisfying, but it's nothing more than for letting the peddlers and carriers to gorge themselves. Those who really understand gourmet food will never like such greasy stuff."

Chapter 60 – Something That Must Be Done

She chuckled, and then said, "*Wudang Pai*'s martial art is too light, just like a plate of green vegetables and tofu that someone forgot to add salt; although the color is not bad, but after taking a bit, it can no longer attract anybody's appetite. Isn't that right?"
Unexpectedly she reduced the martial arts of *Shaolin* and *Wudang*, two big schools and sects, which were considered to be as weighty as Mount Tai, as brilliant as the Big Dipper [idiom: a giant among men] of the Wulin under the heavens – to nothing. Her remark was indeed unusually haughty.
But the analogy she was using was indeed too clever; Hu Tiehua thought about *Shaolin*, *Wudang*'s martial arts, and then he thought about what she said, he nearly could not help laughing out loud.
He heard the Stone *Guanyin* said, "Although their martial arts are tough, yet they had to give them pretty names, like 'Power Splitting the Mountain', or 'Vanquishing Dragons and Tigers', while actually, based on they way they execute those styles, it ought to be called 'Splitting Firewood', or 'vanquishing cats, subduing dogs'. But the name that I use, although it is not pleasant to hear

at all, it is genuine goods at fair prices. I call it ‘should not be exposed to men’, so definitely no man can see it.”
Hu Tiehua sighed; he said, “If that’s so, then you created this move yourself?”

The Stone *Guanyin* said, “To create such move, not only I had to dip into the martial arts of all schools and all sects in the world, I also have to have deep understanding of men’s weak points. A move like this, other than me, who could possibly create it?”
Hu Tiehua was silent for half a day. Smiling wryly, he said, “That’s right! You really have deep understanding on men.”

“And now,” the Stone *Guanyin* said, “Do you guys still want to fight with me?”
As if agreed by chance, Hu Tiehua and Ji Bingyan sighed at the same time and said, “We don’t dare.”

As these three words, ‘we don’t dare’ [*bu gan liao*] came out, the King of Qiuci was immediately ashen-faced. The dagger inside Princess Pipa’s hand also fell off.
Who would have thought that right this moment, Hu Tiehua and Ji Bingyan’s shadows shot like arrows. Unexpectedly there was already a tacit understanding between the two men; not only they spoke at the same time, the timing of their movement had no-early-no-late either.

The two men’s move was inferior to the greenish-black-bearded man and Princess Pipa’s move. When the greenish-black-bearded man and Princess Pipa made their move, they saw greenish-black light and silver rain, the momentum appeared to be extremely strong. But this moment Hu Tiehua and Ji Bingyan made their move, nobody saw anything.

But they saw in the midst of flashing shadows, the two men already launched three moves. As for how they made their moves, what style they were using, practically nobody was able to see clearly.

But at least other people could see that in these three moves, their shadows were moving around. After these three moves, not even their shadows were distinguishable.

They only saw the wind filling the entire room, the wine and dishes on the table were clinking and rattling, Princess Pipa, the King of Qiuci, and the greenish-black-bearded man's clothes and sleeves were rustling and fluttering in the wind. The King of Qiuci's countenance turned pale, as if he might faint any moment.

Princess Pipa hurriedly came over to help him up, but her own hands were shaking.

The greenish-black-bearded man grabbed the hilt of his saber tightly. Although he could not see anything, he was still staring hard; so hard that even his eyeballs were about to pop out of his eye sockets.

In all his life, he did not know how many times he had fought desperate battles with anybody; he did not know how many saber-scars he had on his body. Even when others' saber was chopping down on him, he was not afraid.

Now, however, he was more nervous than when he was fighting a desperate battle himself.

The space inside the tent naturally could not be too big, plus the *shenfa* of the three people fighting was very fast, yet the three combatants were only spinning around on a small area; they did not even touch the table.
Princess Pipa and the greenish-black-bearded man could not help sighing in their hearts; only now did they realize that compared to these people, their martial art skill was really far too inferior.

If it were they who fought, this moment not only the tables would have been knocked over, perhaps even all four sides of the tent would have been punctured seventeen, eighteen large holes.

All of a sudden, the wind stopped.

The three people's shadows also stopped abruptly.

Both of Hu Tiehua's fists were tightly clenched, his face was terrifyingly red. But Ji Bingyan's face was turning even paler; both men were staring at the Stone *Guanyin* without blinking.
A hint of indifferent smile was hanging out of the Stone *Guanyin*'s mouth. She still appeared to be so beautiful and serene, even the strand of hair on her temples was not messy at all.
She looked as if she had just finished taking a bath in a hot spring, put on some makeup, and was ready to go out to see the guest. She did not look like a woman who had just fought a desperate, stake-it-all battle.

The three were standing on the spot, without moving, without speaking anything either. Princess Pipa and the others did not know why they suddenly stopped; even more, they did not know who won, who lost? Hu Tiehua and the others stood still, the King of Qiuci, Princess Pipa and greenish-black-bearded man were afraid to move even more, even their heartbeat seemed to be stopping.

Half a day later, they saw a wisp of blood. Out of the corner of Hu Tiehua's mouth, blood was trickling out.

Although his body was still standing upright as straight as a spear, Princess Pipa felt her legs had turned into jelly; she could no longer stand, just because this moment she had seen who had lost.

This defeat was truly a crushing defeat, with no chance of recovery. Not only henceforth the lives of the six of them [I counted only five?] could not be guaranteed, the millions of Qiuci people would also be reduced to be under bloody hands.

They heard the Stone *Guanyin* took a long sigh and spoke leisurely, "You two were fully aware that you are not my match at all, why did you still want to humiliate yourselves?"

Clenching his teeth, Hu Tiehua sternly said, “For a real man, there are something that must not be done, but there are some things that must be done. Some things he knew he must not do, yet he simply has to do it.”

It should be noted that although the two-character ‘wuxia’ are always linked together, but there is a big difference between the two. To accomplish the ‘*wu*’ [martial arts] parts is not difficult at all; as long as the two upper arms have some strength, have a couple of skills, then that’s it. But the ‘*xia*’ [hero/chivalry] part is absolutely not easy.
Although these eight characters ‘some things must not be done, some things must be done’ [*you suo bu wei, you suo bi wei*] are simple, without extremely staunch determination, maximum courage, it is absolutely impossible to accomplish.
When one knows that by using one’s martial art skill [wu] one can show off by killing someone else with naked blade, then there is practically not much different between than person and a beast; how could one fit to speak about this chivalry [xia] thing?

Ji Bingyan suddenly said, “Just now you had two chances to take our lives, why didn’t you do it?”

Laughing indifferently, the Stone *Guanyin* said, “There has been nearly twenty years that I have not met anybody who dared to fight with me, and now with great difficulty I met you; how could I be willing to kill you that easily?”
As if agreeing by chance, Hu Tiehua and Ji Bingyan sighed inwardly; they both thought, “Why haven’t Chu Liuxiang come back? If he’s here to help us, with the combined power of the three of us, even if *Shi Guanyin*’s martial art is really number one in the world, without any rival since ancient times, she would be defeated in our hands.”
These words only revolved inside Ji Bingyan’s mind, but Hu Tiehua said it out loud.

He could not help heaving a deep sigh, and said, “Too bad Chu Liuxiang is not here; otherwise …”

Unexpectedly the Stone *Guanyin* also heaved a deep sigh and said, “Really too bad. I have long heard that Chu *Xiang Shuai*’s martial art, although ordinarily it does not seem to be too amazing, but the stronger the opponent he met, the more he would be able to display his formidable power. Unexpectedly I do not have any opportunity to fight with him; indeed this is the regret of a lifetime!”
Laughing coldly, Hu Tiehua said, “No need for you to feel bad; sooner or later he will come looking for you to decide who’s superior and who’s inferior.”

The Stone *Guanyin* said, “I am afraid there won’t be such an opportunity, you don’t need to wait for him either.”
Hu Tiehua laughed loudly and said, “You think that he went away this time, he will never come back? You think that relying on that kid Wu Juxuan, you can put him to death?”

The Stone *Guanyin* slowly said, “If there is only one person on earth who could put Chu Liuxiang to death, then that person will be Wu Juxuan; just because he had conducted a thorough study on Chu Liuxiang, from head to foot, from the inside to the outside. There is no one on earth understands Chu Liuxiang’s martial arts and weak points better than he …”
She laughed indifferently before continuing, “Just think, if I think that Chu Liuxiang still have any hope of coming back alive, how could I waste my time with you here, playing around with you guys?”

Wiping the sweats from his head, Hu Tiehua suddenly laughed aloud and said, “There has never been anybody on earth who can really understand Chu Liuxiang; even he and I have been friends for twenty, thirty years, yet I am unable to understand him, let alone Wu Juxuan.”

The Stone *Guanyin* coldly said, “Naturally you do not understand him, just because between you and him, there is no such hatred; you practically do not need to understand him. If you understood someone too well, you would not make friends with him instead. Moreover, let me tell you this: the person who understand you the most in the world is definitely not your friend, he must be your enemy, because only your enemy will be willing to work hard to research your weak points.”

Although Hu Tiehua never stopped wiping his sweats, but he did not seem to be able to wipe the sweats dry. The sweat running down his face already washed the trace of blood on the corner of his mouth so that it was lighter than rouge. "What hatred does that man surnamed Wu have against Chu Liuxiang?" he rattled.

But the Stone *Guanyin* no longer paid any attention to him. She turned around and walked over to the King of Qiuci; holding a golden cup with both hands, the smile on her face seemed to be even more touching. Using the most gentle and soft voice, and a smile across her face, she said, "I advise the lord to take in a cup of wine; this will take you to the shady underworld where a lot of old friends are. Min Hongkui, Hong Xuehan, and An Deshan are all over there waiting for you, I am sure you won't be lonely."
The night in the desert was particularly long, and it came particularly early.

Now, although it was not even *xu* hour yet [7-9pm], the sky was very dark. Looking in the deep twilight, this dense purple smoke appeared to be like blood. Chu Liuxiang's countenance changed; but in the blink of an eye he laughed aloud and said, "Former skill is being used again; wouldn't it be unwise? By the bank of Daming Lake, you have used it to escape once. Could it be that this time you want to escape again? Could it be that I do not have any way to deal with you?"

Amidst his laughter, his figure was rising upward along with the smoke.

He had indeed found the solution to break this secret escaping skill of '*ren shu*' [method/technique of restraining oneself – see Book 1 Chapter 7 for more info]; as long as he could rise above the purple smoke, no matter which direction the opponent was going to run away, he could forget about escaping from his sight. Although the purple smoke dissipated fairly quickly, but during this short period of his question, it has not spread too wide yet. When Chu Liuxiang's body flew up, he saw outside the about three-*zhang* perimeter of the purple smoke, yellow sand was rolling, yet unexpectedly he did not see Wu Juxuan's shadow. But from inside the thick purple fog, his laughter rang.
Chu Liuxiang's strength seemed to suddenly disappear; his flying-bird like figure unexpectedly dropped down like a rock, and heavily landed on the

ground. Only to hear Wu Juxuan's hearty laughter, "Former skill is being used again, it is indeed unwise," he said, "But insignificant *Zaixia* is not that stupid yet, especially in front of the extremely brilliant Chu *Xiang Shuai*, how could I use the same method twice?"
The strong breeze whistled past. Although the smoke was thick, it could not withstand the storm of the desert. In an instant, it had already dispersed by the wind. Amidst the faintly discernible fog, Wu Juxuan's silhouette materialized slowly.

Chu Liuxiang sighed; he said, "That's right; because last time your smoke was not poisonous, hence this time I did not guard against it. I really did not think that this time you unexpectedly used the nibbling-the-bones-melting-the-soul knockout fragrance inside the smoke."

Wu Juxuan smiled and said, "Naturally you would never think about it, only because when one is already very familiar with something, he can't possibly pay as much attention as before. This is precisely the weakness of human heart …"

He chuckled again, and then went on, "Everybody has weakness. Your weakness is that your self-confidence is too strong, and your heart is too soft, therefore, you are defeated in my hands. If that day you gave me a blade, how could I go back to live today?"

Smiling wryly, Chu Liuxiang said, "I also know my weakness, which is I really considered you too heavy! Therefore, although I know that there are some shameless cowards in the world, who, in order to escape, do not have any scruple in feigning his own death, but I really never thought that the distinguished and accomplished, confident and at ease, the matchless talent 'Wonder Monk' Wu Hua could also do such thing."

'Wu Juxuan' laughed and said, "I know that in your heart you feel very bad, because the crisscrossing-the-world-unrivalled Chu *Xiang Shuai* is failed and wiped over the floor today. To repay the kindness that you have shown me in the olden days, I must let you curse me to your heart's delight today, to vent out your resentment. No matter what you are cursing me, I will listen with

respectful attention. Before you finish scolding, I definitely will not make my move."
While speaking, he removed his hat, and extremely carefully he also peeled off his hair. Along with the hair, there was also a sheet of very thin human skin mask. And so the divined-style, handsome and bright Wonder Monk Wu Hua once again appeared in Chu Liuxiang's presence.

Chu Liuxiang just looked at him quietly, he did not say a single word.

Wu Hua proudly laughed and said, "Although cannot be compared with Chu *Xiang Shuai*'s million-incarnation, looks like my disguising skill is not too bad, is it?"
Chu Liuxiang replied indifferently, "You are still far too inferior!"

Wu Hua said, "If it was far too inferior, how come I could conceal it from you?"

Chu Liuxiang said, "You did not conceal it from me at all; I knew early on that Wu Juxuan was a disguise, it's just that momentarily I did not think it was you, that's all."

Wu Hua also sighed and said, "I thought you would never suspect me, just because I really spent not a few painstaking effort. I had Yidian Hong come over, it was so that you would think that *Hei Zhenzhu* was the mastermind behind this. This way, not only you would refrain from shooting at the rat for fear of breaking the vases, you would also not dare to act blindly without thinking. Moreover, it would also make you feel that the more you think about it, the more complicated it was, so that unwittingly you would walk into the side path diverging from the main road, and would never find a clue."
Chu Liuxiang said, "Your method was really not bad. I did walk into the side path diverging from the main road, and nearly missed the clues. Until I found out that Shi Tuo is unexpectedly one of the former Seven Swords of *Huashan*, and then I remembered that *Shi Guanyin* was originally
Li *Guniang* of *Huangshan* Family."
And now Wu Hua countenance sank. It sank so low that no smile would ever appear again.

Chu Liuxiang said, “In the old days, *Huashan Jian Pai* and *Huangshan* Family fought a decisive battle, from the *Huangshan* Family, only one Li *Guniang* managed to escape. In mortal danger, she escaped alive, but she was unable to establish a foothold in the Central Plains, thereupon she crossed the eastern sea to *Fusang* [mythical island of ancient literature, often interpreted as Japan].”

“Over there, she met the *Tianfeng Shisi Lang*, who was devotedly in love with her; she even gave birth to two boys for him. But after she learned a mysterious martial art, she abandoned them, returned to the Central Earth, killed *Huashan Qi Jian* to avenge the *Huangshan* Family blood debt, which was as deep as the ocean.”

“And then, this Li *Guniang* mysteriously disappeared. No one in Jianghu knew her whereabouts. At that time, although there was female demon-head *Shi Guanyin*, whose track secretive, whose martial art skill unparalleled – suddenly appeared in Wulin, but no one ever thought about linking the loyal and dependable, lonely and bitter Li *Guniang* with this female demon.”

“Originally this secret could not possibly be uncovered; too bad Li *Guniang* left one person of the Seven Swords of *Huashan* alive …”

Speaking to this point, Chu Liuxiang chuckled, before continuing, “This is perhaps because he was too unyielding; no matter how severe the torture he received, he simply refused to grovel under Li *Guniang*’s skirt. Plus whenever Li *Guniang* took a fancy to someone, she wanted to take possession of that person, no matter what. Therefore, all along she did not kill him, yet she never thought that he would escape.”

Wu Hua’s face already looked like it was covered in a layer of cold frost. “Go on,” he coldly said.

Chu Liuxiang said, “But with only this one clue, I was still unable to uncover *Shi Guanyin*’s secret. Too bad that twenty years later, the world clearly has a meddlesome Chu Liuxiang, and Chu Liuxiang clearly got along well with Li *Guniang*’s two boys. Furthermore, it was unfortunate that from friends, they became enemies. Unexpectedly, this Wulin secret that has been gradually forgotten was resurrected again. Naturally Li *Guniang* would never imagined these things would happen.”

“Go on,” Wu Hua said.

Chu Liuxiang said, “Although Chu Liuxiang knew the story of *Tianfeng Shisi Lang*, father and sons’ story, he has not thought that they were related to *Shi Guanyin*. These two different clues seemed to be completely unrelated to each other, until the *Huashan* disciple, who has been missing for a long time, suddenly reappeared, and revealed *Shi Guanyin*’s secret. Only then did these two threads of clues come together.”
He fixed his gaze on Wu Hua, and then smiled and said, “After these two clues came together, how could there be anything that I still don’t understand?”

Wu Hua was silent for half a day. He spoke slowly, “That’s right. You already knew that *Shi Guanyin* is my, Wu Hua’s mother, hence you recalled that after Wu Hua suffered a crushing defeat in the Central Plains, he went out of the Pass to seek shelter from his mother. Wu Hua’s conspiracy to dominate the Central Plains was destroyed by you, he failed and wiped over the floor. His only choice was to go out of the Pass to plan another large scale endeavor.”
Suddenly his eyes were flashing with brilliant rays, the corner of his mouth also revealed a smile; he said, “But how did Wu Hua know that *Shi Guanyin* was his mother? This matter, perhaps even Wu Hua himself did not know;
Chu *Xiang Shuai* should also be unable to guess it?”
Who would have thought that Chu Liuxiang did not even need to think, he immediately replied, “This is because of Ren *Furen* [Madame Ren] Qiu Lingsu.”
Frowning, Wu Hua said, “Qiu Lingsu? What does she have to do with this matter?”

Chu Liuxiang said, “*Shi Guanyin* cannot endure any woman who is more beautiful than she is; therefore, she destroyed Qiu Lingsu’s face, to make Qiu Lingsu’s life not any better than death, to make her suffer throughout her life.”
“Who would have thought that Ren *Bangzhu* [gang leader] was unexpectedly deeply attached to Qiu Lingsu; not only he did not change because her appearance was destroyed, he even married her and took her as his wife. *Shi Guanyin* wanted to destroy her, yet plainly Ren *Bangzhu* wanted to rescue her. Naturally *Shi Guanyin* could not bear it, naturally she would not let him off.”
“Who would have thought that *Tianfeng Shisi Lang* was unexpectedly one step ahead of her; he found Ren Ci first, and by the time she discovered that *Tianfeng Shisi Lang* already entrusted her child to Ren Ci, she immediately dispelled her idea of killing Ren Ci, because she already thought

about a better way than killing him. Not only she wanted him dead, she also wanted to destroy his root."
Speaking to this point, Chu Liuxiang could not help heaving a deep sigh before continuing, "Other women would not be able to wait that long, but in order to destroy one person, unexpectedly she did not hesitate to wait more than a dozen years, waiting until her two children are growing up, before she went to look for them."

Wu Hua also could not help heaving a deep sigh; he said, "These matters, how could you think about them?"

Chu Liuxiang replied, "Just think, if it were not she telling NanGong Ling, telling him that Ren Ci was not his benefactor at all, but the personal enemy who killed his father, how could NanGong Ling be that heartless toward Ren Ci? After you entered *Shaolin* Temple, already you are very intelligent, but that that time NanGong Ling was still a kid. Even if his innate tendency was cold and unkind, but Ren Ci raised him to adulthood, to some extent he ought to receive some good influence; how could he do such a malicious thing? I have long felt very strange about this matter, from beginning to end I could not figure out the reason behind it."
"But now you have figured it out, haven't you?" Wu Hua asked.

Chu Liuxiang replied, "Now naturally I have figured it out, just because she told the two of you your lives experience; therefore, you knew that you were brothers, therefore, you also started to detest your benefactors. So when you did what you did, not only because you wanted to dominate Wulin, but also because you wanted revenge."

Wu Hua heaved a deep, deep sigh. He spoke unhurriedly, "You are indeed an intelligent person, only too bad you are a bit too intelligent."

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, "I have heard that sentence many times."

Wu Hua coldly said, "But this time, it is your last time."

Chu Liuxiang eyes were flashing, he spoke in heavy voice, “Now I was hit by your drugged incense, I don’t even have any power to fight back; are you really going to make your move against someone who does not have the slightest bit of strength to resist?

Wu Hua laughed; he said, “I originally could not bear to kill you either, but I learned something from you.”

“What is it?” Chu Liuxiang asked.

Wu Hua replied word-by-word, “That one person’s heart cannot be too soft; otherwise he would die under someone else’s hands. It is precisely because your heart is too soft that today you will die under my hands.”

Heaving a deep sigh, Chu Liuxiang sadly said, “Wu Hua, oh Wu Hua, I really misjudged you; all along I have misjudged you.”

Only to hear ‘Qiang!’ a long saber suddenly appeared in Wu Hua’s hand. The saber light was like snow. Wu Hua’s eyes were fixed on the bright-as-snow long blade, he spoke slowly, “Do you remember that ‘*Yingfeng Yi Dao Zhan*’ [One Saber Chop in The Wind – see Book 1, Chapter 17]?”
Smiling wryly, Chu Liuxiang responded, “How can I forget?”

Wu Hua said, “When this saber kills, there will absolutely be no pain, you won’t feel the blade chopping down on you. I can guarantee that there is absolutely no death on earth more delightful than this …”

He sighed, and then went on, “This is the last thing that I can do for you. There’s no harm in you considering it as my way of repaying you.”

Then, the bright-as-snow blade, fast like lightning, chopped down on Chu Liuxiang.

There was not a single living human being in the valley. Even those pitiful men, who might never do anything else but sweeping the ground, *Huamei Niao* [the thrush] did not let them get away either.

Now, although all the dead bodies have been covered with cloth by Chu Liuxiang and the others, the valley was still full of sickening smell of the reek of blood.

Only the Stone *Guanyin*'s exquisite and elegant secret room was still as beautiful and warm as before. Under the illumination of the faint lantern light, the intoxicating sweet smelling fragrant was still pervading the air.
Now, the Stone *Guanyin* has returned here. It seemed like she was also still as serene and beautiful as before, as if no matter what happened, nothing could change her the slightest.
A piece of sky-blue-green cloth was hanging in the corner. Pulling the cloth down, a sparkling and translucent, huge mirror appeared. The frame was studded full with jadeite and precious stones.

But even these priceless jewels could not take away the splendor of the mirror. In itself, the mirror was like carrying some kind of mysterious magic power.

Anybody who came to this mirror would nearly be unable to bear not to worship it.

The Stone *Guanyin* was standing in front of this mirror. No one knew how long she has been standing there. She was staring blankly at her own reflection in the mirror. A lovely blush gradually appeared on her pale face.
And then, she suddenly took off every single piece of clothing from her body. As a result, her perfect, practically without any blemish body also appeared in the mirror.

The lantern light cast its gentle and soft light on her naked body. Her skin was glossy like satin. Her white-jade like breasts were standing proudly in the warm and dry air of the desert. On her pair of perfectly round and slender legs, the lines were gentle; so gentle that they were like the spring breeze in *Jiangnan* [general area south of Changjiang (Yangtze) River].
The Stone *Guanyin* was standing bolt upright, staring blankly at her own reflection, the lust in her eyes were even stronger than a lecherous man's; she was unwilling to miss even the most secretive place.

At last she sighed with satisfaction and spoke unhurriedly, “A woman of my age can still keep her figure so well, other than me, I am afraid there can’t possibly be the second person in the world!”

The Stone *Guanyin* in the mirror was smiling too, as if it was saying, “There will never be the second person in the world.”
The Stone *Guanyin* sat down in a spacious and comfortable chair directly in front of the mirror. It seemed that even though she was a bit tired, but her expression looked very happy.

Chapter 61 – The Fair Sex Skeleton

She sighed contentedly and muttered to herself, “I am tired, I really am tired; do you know how much I have done today?

The Stone *Guanyin* in the mirror also looked very pleased, as if it was saying, “What you have done, it must be very extraordinary.”
The Stone *Guanyin* laughed and said, “Although that King of Qiuci is not as muddleheaded as I thought, but I still killed him; I also killed that daughter of his who thought she was very beautiful. The poison in the wine must already showed its effectiveness by now.”
“As for that Ji Bingyan and Hu Tiehua, I originally did not want to kill them too quickly; who would have thought that unexpectedly they grabbed the first cup of poisonous wine and drank it down.”

She sighed again, and then went on, “I also know that men like Hu Tiehua, they would rather die than receive humiliation from others, but I did not expect Ji Bingyan would do the same. This is really too bad, isn’t it?”

The person in the mirror also sighed, as if it was feeling very sorry too.

The Stone *Guanyin* was silent for half a day. And then her face broke into beautiful smile, she said, “But in any case, at long last my plan is accomplished; that thinking-too-much-of-himself *Laotouzi* [old man; often used

deprecatingly] killed An Deshan and the others, it fits my intention well, I would have killed them sooner or later anyway."
The person in the mirror was smiling as well, as if to say, "That's right; it does not matter who died, you can't possible care about it; on earth, there is practically no one that you really care about.

The Stone *Guanyin* giggled and said, "They killed all my people in the valley, thinking that it would be difficult for me to bear; they never thought that I already felt long ago that they are annoying. And now, I am about to change the situation; I am going to Qiuci to see what it feels like to be a *Taihou* [Empress Dowager]. If these people did not die, they would be nuisance to me. I really should be grateful to them instead."
The person in the mirror also laughed aloud, as if it was saying, "They should have known, you can't possibly be reluctant to part with anybody, with anything."

The Stone *Guanyin* laughed and said, "Only you, my heart's desire, only you know, only you understand me. When I am grieving, only you keep me company in my suffering. When I am happy, also only you keep me company in my joy."
Her smile became indescribably tender; her pair of delicate and beautiful hands, gently and softly, as well as slowly, moved along her own body. Her usually cold and detached eyes also started to turn red-hot. As if talking in her sleep, she muttered, "On earth, it is also only you who can satisfy me. Those men … all those men simply disgust me."

The person in the mirror also gently and softly caressed and stroked itself.

The Stone *Guanyin* looked at 'her' hand on her breasts, on her leg … lightly rubbing, gently moving. She looked at 'her' hand moving more urgently, it was moving faster.
Her eyes were burning like blazing fire, her throat emitted a series of intermittent moan, her beautiful naked body also started to convulse, to buckle. Moaning, she said, "You are really good, really good … no man on earth can compare with you, no man can ever compare with you …"

It was this moment that from outside the pearl curtain came the sound of sighing.

Although the sound was very light, it was like a crack of the whip, a whip lashing over and over on the Stone *Guanyin*'s naked body. The blush on her face faded immediately, her shudder and moan also immediately stopped. Her pair of curled legs also gradually relaxed and straightened out.
But her body was still sitting, unmoving, inside the chair. All of a sudden the burning desire turned into blazing rage. She clenched her fists tightly. It was only after this fury gradually passed that she sighed and said, "The person outside, is it Chu *Xiang Shuai*?"
Behind the curtain, someone also sighed and said, "Precisely *Zaixia*."
Laughing indifferently, the Stone *Guanyin* said, "Since you are already here, why don't you come in?"
Chu Liuxiang indeed walked in. His eyes were fixed on the Stone *Guanyin* in the mirror. The Stone *Guanyin* also fixed her eyes on his reflection in the mirror.
After a long, long time, Chu Liuxiang finally sighed and said, "I know that for as long as you live, you have been searching; you wanted to look for someone you could fall in love with. At first I was hoping that you would find him. But now I know that you will never find him."

"Oh?" the Stone *Guanyin* replied.
Chu Liuxiang spoke word-by-word, "Because you already fell in love with yourself. The one you love is only yourself. Therefore, you can't possibly care about anybody else, not even your husband or your kids."

The Stone *Guanyin* suddenly sprang up from her chair and bellowed, "You … why did you spy on my secret?"
This woman, who was eternally so graceful, her speech and laughter were forever so tender, now unexpectedly suddenly became a shrew, became a beast. Her beautiful and clear eyes emitted vicious light as she stared at Chu Liuxiang, as she walked step-by-step forward toward him, as if she was going to swallow Chu Liuxiang whole, skin, bones and all.

Chu Liuxiang could not help tensing up; he retreated step-by-step backward.

Who would have thought that the Stone *Guanyin* suddenly halted her steps? Her face also immediately revealed a tender and moving smile; she looked at Chu Liuxiang and spoke softly, "You should forgive my losing self-control; I did not mean to be like this. You should also know that when someone has his secret uncovered, it would be hard to avoid flying into rage out of humiliation, right?"
Chu Liuxiang was stunned for half a day. Smiling wryly, he said, "I did not have any intention to spy on your secret either; I should hope that you will forgive me."

The Stone *Guanyin* smiled and said, "You could make that remark, I really am very happy, simply because …"
She sat back down, and continued in soft voice, "Whether it is you who want to kill me, or it is me who want to kill you, we ought to leave good impression on each other. Even at the time of your death, I do not wish you to see me as a vicious and evil malicious woman. Therefore, even if you want to kill me, you should at least sit down and chat with me."

She suddenly became gentle and beautiful and polite hostess. Toward a request from such a hostess, no one could refuse.

Chu Liuxiang could only sit down, smiled and said, "You have something to ask me?"

"That's right," the Stone *Guanyin* replied, "Naturally you also have some things you want to ask me. But because you are a gentleman who is always gentle and soft, as well as courteous toward women, you will let me ask you first."
She smiled sweetly, and then said, "So, I will ask you: did you see Wu Hua?"

Chu Liuxiang chuckled; he said, "I did. He was really good to me; he insisted on finding a way to repay me."

She seemed to be a bit baffled, “Repay you?” she blurted out, “How did he want to repay you?”

Chu Liuxiang smiled and said, “He wanted to use ‘*Yingfeng Yi Dao Zhan*’ technique, to chop my head with one saber strike.”
The Stone *Guanyin* giggled and said, “That kind of repaying method is indeed very special; it is also very interesting.”
“That’s right,” Chu Liuxiang said, “Indeed very interesting. It’s a pity that *Zaixia*’s head is really not too many; therefore, I had to tactfully refuse politely.”
The Stone *Guanyin* gasped, she said, “In that case, wouldn’t he be very disappointed?”
Chu Liuxiang asked, “*Furen*, aren’t you disappointed as well?”
The Stone *Guanyin* rolled her fluid glance on him, she chuckled and said, “I am not too disappointed, just a bit confused, that’s all.”
“Confused?” Chu Liuxiang asked.

The Stone *Guanyin* pointed at a green-jade bottle on the small table by the mirror. She slowly said, “Do you see that bottle? The content is that bottle is some kind of colorless, odorless, snowflake-like knockout drops. It also has a very beautiful name, which is ‘Eye Charmer’, just because when it hit the victim, it is as easy as young women throwing amorous glances; furthermore, the victim will feel light and airy, no longer able to exert the least bit of strength.”
“Did Wu Hua *Xiong* use it to deal with *Zaixia*?” Chu Liuxiang asked.
“That’s right,” the Stone *Guanyin* replied, “This kind of drug has always been effective, but why was it useless against you?”
Rubbing his nose, Chu Liuxiang smiled and said, “In all my life, *Zaixia* has had not a few knockout drugs being thrown at me, but never had fallen victim to any.”
It seemed that the Stone *Guanyin* was a bit amazed; she could not help asking, “Why?”
Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “Did *Furen* notice that *Zaixia* often rub my nose?”
The Stone *Guanyin* spoke sweetly, “The way you rub your nose looks very adorable, I believe there were many girls who are fascinated by your action; but what does it have to do with the knockout drug?”

Chu Liuxiang replied, “Only because *Zaixia* rubbing my nose is not to act adorably at all; rather, *Zaixia*’s nose has always been faulty. It is said that the paranasal sinuses grew somewhat differently from other people. Therefore, no matter how, it could not be cured, so much so that even the most famous *Shen Yi* [Divine Doctor] of *Jiangnan*, the ‘*Jinzhen Du Wei*’ [lit. golden (acupuncture) needles crossing (or passing through) danger] Ye Tianzhi said that this nose of mine is beyond any medicine can save …”

He sighed, and then continued, “When one cannot breathe through the nose, he will feel dizzy and light-headed all day long; indeed it is more unbearable than any illness. Therefore, *Zaixia* swore an oath to master one kind of special inner power method. This kind of power has no special benefit; but after mastering it, the skin pores can breathe. After a long time, it became a habit. The nose then became a superfluous, useless feature. It’s just that I feel that without a nose I would look too unsightly, hence I did not cut it off.”

This time, listening to this, the Stone *Guanyin* was really stumped for words. After half a day, she could not help smiling wryly and said, “Since your nose is useless, naturally there is no knockout incense on earth that can affect you. Your skin pores can breathe, you practically do not need to take a breath, naturally your *qinggong* is much stronger than anybody else’s. No wonder some people say that a blind person’s heart is especially keen; it looks like some things on earth, often times one can indeed profit from a disaster.”

Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “Now I have revealed a secret to *Furen* that no one had ever known. Does *Furen* have any other question you want to ask me?”

The Stone *Guanyin* was silent for half a day. She said, “In that case, where’s Wu Hua? Did you use the way he was using to repay you to repay him back?”

Without waiting for Chu Liuxiang’s answer, she chuckled and said, “Naturally you did not. Everybody in Jianghu knows, Chu *Xiang Shuai*’s pair of hands has never been stained by the reek of blood; isn’t that right?”

Chu Liuxiang’s expression suddenly turned solemn; he said, “Precisely so. Human life is bestowed by the Heaven, nobody has the authority to take anybody else’s life. Naturally Wu Hua *Xiong* is not dead. This moment he is in the vicinity. Would *Furen* like to see him?”

The Stone *Guanyin* stared at his nose; she said, “If I want to see him, naturally there are conditions, right?”

“There are no special conditions at all,” Chu Liuxiang replied, “It’s just that *Zaixia* also wants to see some people; that’s all.”

The Stone *Guanyin* said, “Are they happen to be Hu Tiehua, Ji Bingyan, and the King of Qiuci, father and daughter?”
Chu Liuxiang said, “Also Liu Yanfei, two brothers, Qu Wurong *Guniang*, and Yidian Hong.”
The Stone *Guanyin* said, “Qu Wurong and Yidian Hong’s fate is not bad; when I left, they were already gone. They even left a letter for you. Although I know that I shouldn’t read other people’s letter, but I still could not help taking a look.”
Holding his temper in check, Chu Liuxiang said, “And after reading, naturally you tore it up?”

The Stone *Guanyin* said, “But the content of the letter, I still remember.”
She chuckled, and then went on, “The letter was naturally written by Qu Wurong. She said, although they are already handicapped, they do not want to ask for your protection at all. Later on, if they have the opportunity, they wish to protect you.”

Chu Liuxiang knew that it must be what Ji Bingyan had said that had inadvertently hurt their feelings; he could not help sighing, but he could not help smiling either as he said, “These two are equally stubborn, equally haughty. They can be together, it is indeed pearls-joined-walls-fit-together; certainly we need to congratulate them and be happy for them. *Furen* ought to be happy for Qu *Guniang*.”
The Stone *Guanyin* said, “As for Liu Yanfei, two brothers that you are talking about, I practically did not see them at all. Presumably they have left.”
Secretly heaving a sigh of relief, Chu Liuxiang said, “But what about Hu Tiehua and the others?”

The Stone *Guanyin* spoke indifferently, “They are still in the vicinity, but I am afraid you are a step too late.”
The blood was drained from Chu Liuxiang’s face, he said, “They … are you saying they are already …”

Apparently the muscle in his throat suddenly tightened that his voice could not even come out.

The Stone *Guanyin* unhurriedly said, “I usually don’t like to use poison too much, because I still have so many different ways to kill people, which are a lot simpler than using poison. Therefore, speaking strictly about using poison, I really can’t compare with Qiu Lingsu. If you had come one step earlier, perhaps you could still save their lives. But now … but now no one can do anything about it.”
She was sketching it in light shades, but Chu Liuxiang’s heart was like it was just strung up and suddenly hurled down. Chu Liuxiang was scared out of his wits, hot blood was rushing up into his head.

But he also knew that in front of this kind of opponent, he absolutely must not be impulsive. Once he acted on impulse, he would immediately die. He only did his utmost to hold back.

It was indeed not easy. His fists were clenched tight, the fingernails dug into his flesh. He clenched his teeth so hard that the teeth in his mouth were nearly crushed. This was precisely the biggest defeat in Chu Liuxiang’s life, the biggest blow!

Even if he killed the Stone *Guanyin*, it would still be difficult to avoid eternal regret for the rest of his life.
Besides, he did not even the slightest confidence that he could overcome the Stone *Guanyin*.
The lantern light was still so gentle and soft.

Under this kind of lantern light, even an ordinary woman could be seductive and arousing, to say nothing of a stunning beauty like the Stone *Guanyin*, to say nothing of her body did not have even a strand of light muslin on it.
Stark naked, she displayed her body in front of Chu Liuxiang’s eyes in full glory, as if she was afraid that he would miss some things that he should not miss; therefore, she also changed her posture from time to time.

But Chu Liuxiang was only staring blankly; unexpectedly he did not seem to see anything.

Finally the Stone *Guanyin* sighed lightly and said, “I know that right now you must be thinking about avenging them. But I advise you to dismiss this idea, only because although your martial art is good, but I can, within a hundred moves – take your life away. Do you believe it?”
“I believe you,” Chu Liuxiang replied.

“But I don’t want you to die at all,” the Stone *Guanyin* said, “As long as you don’t force me, I will never want to kill you. Now, I really do not have anybody close to me. If you are willing, not only I could support you to the Qiuci throne at any moment, I could also let you …”
Her hands moved gently along her naked body, replacing words with silent action. It was indeed a lot more arousing than any words. Beauty, honor and glory, power, wealth … any one of these was enough to be an irresistible temptation for men, much less all four added together.

The Stone *Guanyin* said, “If you agree, you will obtain a lifelong of pleasure. If you don’t agree, death will be your only share. Could it be that these choices are not easy to make? Could it be that it is difficult for you to make up your mind?”
Chu Liuxiang suddenly laughed. He said, “I originally really wanted to agree. Too bad you are really too old. Even if you are very good in making a display of seductive feelings, but as soon as I remember that your son is more or less of the same age as me, it is enough to turn me off.”

To a woman whose beauty was already past her prime, who did everything she could to retrieve her youthfulness, all the most vicious words in the world added together would not be as hurtful as this remark.

This sentence like a nail hammer, heavily striking at the Stone *Guanyin*’s hurting foot. She strived to maintain her graceful good looks, her moving smile, but all of a sudden everything disappeared without any trace. Her whole body started to shake, she hissed, “You really want me to kill you?”
“That’s right,” Chu Liuxiang replied indifferently, “I would rather die than sleeping with you, this *Laotaipo* [old woman (often used contemptuously, counterpart of *Laotouzi*)]. You’d better wear some clothes; naked, you make me even more sick.”

He was afraid the Stone *Guanyin* would not be provoked, so every remark he made was more malicious than the previous one, because he knew that only by making the Stone *Guanyin* mad like crazy would he have a sliver of chance of success.
Indeed his objective was achieved.

The Stone *Guanyin* was so angry that even her breasts turned red. Although she was fully aware that Chu Liuxiang was deliberately trying to anger her, but she was unable to control herself.
When Chu Liuxiang was speaking the last sentence, she was still sitting in the chair, trembling; but when Chu Liuxiang finished speaking the last ten characters, she already sprang up from the chair, fast as lightning she launched seven different moves.

A person only has two hands, but this instant, it was as if she grew five more hands. These seven moves unexpectedly appeared to be launched at the same time.

In this instant, Chu Liuxiang's throat, pair or eyes, chest, lower abdomen, all vital parts on a human body, were shrouded within the wind from the Stone *Guanyin*'s palms.
Chu Liuxiang had met not a few Wulin martial art masters, whose movement was extremely fast. Some people were able to catch a teacup falling from the table before the cup reached the floor, the cup was brimming with tea, yet unexpectedly not a single drop of tea was spilled. Some people were able to catch a housefly with a pair of chopsticks, or use a fishbone to nail the tail of a clear slug.

But compared to the Stone *Guanyin*'s movement, these people were practically as slow as old women weaving some patterns. Chu Liuxiang simply could not think of anybody who, in the blink of an eye, could launch seven moves at the same time; and among these seven moves, there did not seem to be a single empty move.
Chu Liuxiang rolled his eyes; he might as well not evading, not flashing away.
Suddenly he shouted loudly, "Hold on!"

Such a fierce and severe offensive style, actually it was absolutely impossible to withdraw, but Chu Liuxiang had calculated accurately that the Stone *Guanyin* would definitely be able to hold back; furthermore, that she would definitely withdraw.

Indeed the Stone *Guanyin*, just by a hair's breadth from striking, she miraculously disappeared. It was as if the Stone *Guanyin* had not made any move at all. Staring at Chu Liuxiang, she said, "What else do you have to say? Could it be that you are changing your mind?"

The back of Chu Liuxiang's clothes was drenched in cold sweats. At this point the stake was really too high. If the Stone *Guanyin* was unwilling to listen to what he had to say, he would definitely lose his life.

But now, although by mere luck he won this hand, but his heart was nearly jumping out of his chest cavity. It's just that he was born as a natural gambler; although in his heart he was terribly nervous, his face would never show it. Instead, he looked at the Stone *Guanyin*, chuckled, and then spoke indifferently, "Even if you want to make your move, shouldn't you wear something first? If you must know, right now your appearance is like a cooked shrimp, your whole body is all red."

Even if the Stone *Guanyin* really wanted to get dressed, it was already too late. Chu Liuxiang practically did not wait for his words to finish, he already made his move.

Everybody in Jianghu knew that when the Fragrant Commander Xiang was making his move, it would be shocking. Just like when the fastest sword in the Central Plains, Yidian Hong was fighting against him, every seven-move attack, he retaliated with ten moves.

However, this time, only after he scrambled to launch three moves that the Stone *Guanyin* started to make her move. By the time he finished launching the tenth move, the Stone *Guanyin* unexpectedly also returned ten moves to him. He heard the Stone *Guanyin* laughed coldly and said, "No wonder people say that you are full of devilish tricks and cunning stratagems. Looking at you now, indeed you are not bad. But you need not be pleased with yourself. You could deceive me once, can you deceive me the second time?"

By the time these words were finished, Chu Liuxiang's whole body has already fallen into her control. She launched ten-move attack, unexpectedly Chu Liuxiang could not even return with seven moves.

It was only now that he was convinced that the Stone *Guanyin*'s martial art was indeed unmatched by anybody. In the whole world, no matter which school, which sect, which individual's martial art, Chu Liuxiang, more or less, knew some. But the Stone *Guanyin*'s martial art practically did not look like anything on earth. In the whole world, when anybody made his move, Chu Liuxiang would, more or less, be able to see the rise and fall or the terrain, to see the change and direction – somewhat.
But the Stone *Guanyin*'s move was like the antelope's hanging antlers; there was no trace to find.
Out of the strongest martial artists in the world today, Chu Liuxiang knew at least four or five. Some people said that Shaolin South Branch *Zhang Men* [abbot/head master] Tianfeng *Dashi* was the number one martial art master in the world. Some said that it was Kunlun *Zongzhu* [head of a clan/school] Leiting [(sound of) thunder] *Shangren*'s [lit. upper person, a title for Buddhist monk] martial art skill that was unequalled under the heavens. Still some said that the swordsmanship of the mysterious knight-errant '*Xueyi Ren*' [lit. bloody garment man] was much more powerful than anyone. Naturally there were also people who said that the reason '*Xueyi Ren*' could crisscross the world unchallenged was merely because he had not met *Xiang Shuai*.
But Chu Liuxiang knew that if these so-called number one Wulin martial art master in the world fight against the Stone *Guanyin*, no one would be able to withstand three hundred moves.
Chu Liuxiang also knew that fifty more moves, he himself would definitely die.

This moment the Stone *Guanyin*'s movement was slowing down.
If someone else's movement was as slow as hers, in just one glance Chu Liuxiang would know which part of him she was going to attack, and would be able to easily evade it.

But although the Stone *Guanyin*'s move was slow, others would still be unable to see the target of her attack. Unexpectedly the slower her move was, the more dangerous it was. The slower her move was, the more terrifying it was.

Only because after launching a move, even if she already used nine-tenth of her strength, she could still make changes, plus the remaining one-tenth of her strength was still enough to be fatal.

After she launched an attack, unexpectedly Chu Liuxiang did not seem to dare to parry, he did not dare to evade. Only because after he parried or evaded, his strength would be exhausted, and then if at that time the Stone *Guanyin*'s style changed again, he would not be able to dodge anymore.
A fight like this, naturally it was unbearably strenuous. Not even in his dreams would Chu Liuxiang think that he would ever be in such a difficult situation.

Laughing coldly, the Stone *Guanyin* said, "Chu Liuxiang, do you think you can parry twenty more moves?"
Chu Liuxiang sighed. "I can't," he replied.

The Stone *Guanyin* said, "Do you think there's anybody who can save you now?"
Heaving a long sigh, Chu Liuxiang replied, "No one."

Now, the Stone *Guanyin* could put him to death at any moment. Even if those seven headmasters, great swordsmen all came here, they would not be able to save him.
Even if someone could, in an instant, assemble troops and horses from each prefecture, each way, from all over the world – in here, to tread on the Stone *Guanyin* until she became mincemeat, she would still be able to kill Chu Liuxiang first, Chu Liuxiang still would not be able to live.

Chapter 62 – Leaving The Great Desert

Naturally Chu Liuxiang had a lot of enemies. Although these people hated Chu Liuxiang to the bones, they were unable to do anything to him; they could only curse him behind his back, saying, "In the future, Chu Liuxiang will surely die

in a woman's hands; in the future his dead body will surely be found on the lower back of a naked woman."

If these people were here now, they would have laughed their teeth off.

He saw that this instant, the Stone *Guanyin*'s naked body seemed to be exceptionally beautiful. Her reflection in the mirror was also glowing. Her face also revealed a touching smile, as she said, "You should know that each time I killed a formidable opponent, I would feel a lot younger. It's just that I feel it's a pity killing you."
Finished speaking, she sent out her last palm strike.

She saw that Chu Liuxiang no longer have the strength to parry.

Who would have thought that Chu Liuxiang's body suddenly shrank, while he sent out a backhand palm strike?

This palm unexpectedly did not strike the Stone *Guanyin* at all; rather, it struck the mirror. If this palm was striking the Stone *Guanyin*, he knew that he would not be able to strike her. But the mirror could not move.
Only to hear 'Crash! Bang!' the mirror was smashed to pieces by his palm power.

The Stone *Guanyin* in the mirror was also shattered.
If it were directed to other people, this move was really useless. But the Stone *Guanyin* was really too beautiful, as well as too strong. For the last many years, she has already entrusted her spirit on this mirror; she already fell in love with herself.
But she no longer knew whether the one she loved was the illusory figure in the mirror, or the one with flesh and blood.

The person in the mirror and she had become one entity. Real or imaginary, even she herself could not tell the difference.

'Crash! Bang!'

The person in the mirror was shattered, the Stone *Guanyin* outside the mirror also seemed to have been hit by a heavy blow. Her whole body was stunned. When martial art masters fight against each other, how could she allow herself to be baffled?

In this instant, fast as lightning, Chu Liuxiang sealed five of her acupoints.

Unexpectedly the unequaled Stone *Guanyin* fell down.
But even after she fell down, she still could not believe that it was real. She was practically unable to believe that Chu Liuxiang would be able to knock her down.

In shock, she looked at Chu Liuxiang. Her eyes were brimming with doubts.

But Chu Liuxiang was closing his eyes, while taking a few long breaths. Only then was he able to calm his wildly throbbing heart down. He wanted to wipe the sweats off his face, but then he realized that his clothes and hands were drenched with sweats as well.

The Stone *Guanyin* stared at him wide-eyed. "You … you knocked me down?" he voice cracked.
Finally Chu Liuxiang laughed. "That's right," he said, "I defeated you. I often can defeat some people whose martial art skill is stronger than mine; sometimes even I cannot believe it myself."

The Stone *Guanyin*'s eyes showed pained expression. It looked like she still wanted to say something, her mouth moved a few times, but not even one word came out.
Heaving a deep sigh, Chu Liuxiang said, "You killed my best friend; I really want to kill you, but I can't do that. Now I only want to …"

His voice suddenly stopped, but all the hair on his body was standing on its end.

In this instant, the Stone *Guanyin*'s beautiful body, like it was magic, suddenly withered. Her flesh and blood suddenly seemed to twitch.

The most beautiful body on earth, unexpectedly in just a short period of time became like a dried skeleton.

No one could kill the Stone *Guanyin*. She killed herself.
The sky gradually brightened, but the earth was becoming even colder.

In his heart, Chu Liuxiang only felt an unspeakable grief, unspeakable melancholy. He kept asking himself, "Did I win? Did I really win?"

The distance between a beauty and dried up bones was no more than a thread; how much worse would the distance between victory and defeat then?

Even though he knocked down the invincible Stone *Guanyin*, even if he received news that Su Rongrong and the others were safe and sound, but he lost Hu Tiehua and Ji Bingyan. How could he remedy for this regret?
This regret could never be remedied.

Chu Liuxiang nearly forgot when was the last time he shed some tears, but now the tears had already moistened his sleeves. But he must wipe the tears dry; he must keep on living.

To stay alive is not only a person's right, but it is also a person's responsibility. No one has the right to kill someone else. No one has the right to kill himself either.

Sticking out his chest, Chu Liuxiang moved forward in large strides. Ahead there was a cave on the mountain. Wu Hua had his acupoint sealed by him, and was hidden inside that cave. Whatever the case, he was going to take Wu Hua back into the Central Plains to receive punishment according to the law. This was also his responsibility. Murderer was punishable by death, no one could escape the law.

But no one could take Wu Hua away, because a long arrow has already pierced through his throat, and blood was dripping down his chest. There was also a piece of bluish green piece of paper, "Chu *Xiang Shuai* unwilling to kill, *Huamei Niao* must do it for him."

Chu Liuxiang was stunned. Who was this *Huamei Niao* [the Thrush]? Did he do it out of benevolence? Or was it out of evil intention?
What exactly was his purpose?

Right this moment, there was a gust of wine, an arrow was whizzing in the air.

Chu Liuxiang turned sideways to evade, he pinched the arrow's tail feathers with two fingers, and saw that actually the arrowhead has been broken; obviously the person releasing the arrow did not want to take Chu Liuxiang's life at all.

But there was a long piece of dark green string tied onto the arrow's tail feathers; it was so long that he could not even see its end. Could it be that the Thrush was at the other end of the string, waiting for Chu Liuxiang?

No matter what kind of trick this terrifying person was playing, Chu Liuxiang decided to get to the bottom of it. Without even giving it any consideration, his shadow already flew along the long string.

At the other end of the long string, there were indeed people waiting for Chu Liuxiang. Not only one person, but four. When they saw Chu Liuxiang, they jumped up at the same time.

But when Chu Liuxiang saw them, he was shocked speechless. These four were unexpectedly the King of Qiuci, father and daughter, and Hu Tiehua and Ji Bingyan. Could it be that he was dreaming?

But Hu Tiehua already pinched his shoulder. He pinched it so hard that Chu Liuxiang was hurt really bad.

Smiling wryly, Chu Liuxiang said, "This is not a dream. People who are dreaming cannot feel pain. But if this is not a dream, how could dead people come back to live?"

Hu Tiehua laughed aloud and said, “Recently the nether world is already full. *Yan Wangye* [Yama, King of Hell] is at a loss, he had no choice but drive us, four lonely soul, wild ghosts – back to the land of the living.”
Chu Liuxiang laughed and said, “No wonder recently the dead people who came back to live are unusually many.”

Ji Bingyan’s expression appeared to be a bit tense; he said, “How did you know that we were being poisoned? Could it be that you have seen *Shi Guanyin*?”
“Mmm,” Chu Liuxiang replied.

Hu Tiehua also tensed up. “Where is she?” he asked.

Chu Liuxiang sighed. “She died!” he replied.

Together, Hu Tiehua, Ji Bingyan, the King of Qiuci, and Princess Pipa, all four people were stunned. After half a day, they also heaved a sigh a relief together.

Blinking, Hu Tiehua sid, “But it can’t possibly be you who killed her, can it?”

Chu Liuxiang sighed and said, “Could it be that you never heard that some people always have poison hidden in their teeth, and when necessary, they would bite the outer shell of the poison to break it …”

Without waiting for him to finish, Hu Tiehua scrambled in, “Are you saying she killed herself? Why would she want to kill herself?”

Chu Liuxiang said, “Just because other than death, she already had no other way to go.”

Hu Tiehua stared at him, his eyeballs grew so big that they nearly popped out; it was as if he had never seen Chu Liuxiang before.

Princess Pipa snatched the opportunity to say, “Could it be that you defeated her?”

Chu Liuxiang chuckled; he said, “You guys must be baffled, aren’t you?”

Actually, these people were more than baffled; they practically a bit did not believe it.

Finally Hu Tiehua exhaled slowly. Shaking his head, he said, “It’s over! It’s over! The one surnamed Ji, tell me, how are we going to mingle anymore? The two of us added together, we are still no match for *Shi Guanyin*; yet this kid effortlessly defeated her.”
Smiling wryly, Chu Liuxiang said, “Effortless? You think it was effortless? To tell you the truth, she and I fought a hard battle for more than two hundred moves, practically not a single move posed any threat to her.”

Hu Tiehua said, “Since your share was only taking a beating, how could you defeat her then?”

Chu Liuxiang had not responded, Princess Pipa already laughed tenderly and said, “Naturally he has a way. I already knew that he must have a way. When martial art masters vie against one another, not only they fight in power, but also in wits. Even if his martial art skill is inferior to *Shi Guanyin*, but in the battle of the mind, who on earth could possibly match him?”
While speaking, she could not help coming over to pull Chu Liuxiang’s hand, as if she no longer wanted to let him go.

Immediately the King of Qiuci coughed repeatedly; smiling apologetically, he said, “This time this king is really lucky to have three *Zhuangshi*’s ability. I wonder if three *Zhuangshi* would be willing to come to Qiuci for a visit …”
Laughing tenderly, Princess Pipa interrupted him, “Of course they are going. Whoever is thinking of not going, I will definitely disagree.”

Hu Tiehua and Ji Bingyan did not say anything, they both looked at Chu Liuxiang.

Chu Liuxiang could not help coughing as well. Smiling apologetically, he said, “*Zaixia* [plural] also want to tour your distinguished country’s scenery; it’s just that …”

Princess Pipa's countenance changed, she laughed and said, "It's just what?"

Chu Liuxiang rubbed his nose; he desperately signaled Hu Tiehua and Ji Bingyan with his eyes, asking them to say something. But Hu Tiehua and Ji Bingyan clearly did not see it.

Chu Liuxiang could only sigh; smiling wryly, he said, "It's just that *Zaixia* [plural] have some other things we need to attend. This time we are letting down *Wangye*'s good intention."
Princess Pipa suddenly relaxed her grip, her face already had no trace of blood, her fingertips were constantly shaking. Step-by-step she retreated, but her eyes were still staring at Chu Liuxiang. She spoke with trembling voice, "You don't want to go? You really don't want to go?"

Chu Liuxiang could only smile wryly. But the King of Qiuci has hurriedly pulled his daughter's hand, and said with a sigh,
"Three *Zhuangshi* unexpectedly are unwilling do to us the honor, this king is indeed very disappointed; but it may be assumed that *Zhuangshi* must have very important matter, we must not force them."
Princess Pipa lowered her head and muttered, "That's right, we must not force them. Actually, I should have known that you guys would never go."

Suddenly she raised her head again and said with a laugh, "I don't blame you at all, simply because I can't possibly go with you either. We are basically coming from two different worlds. To be able to meet by chance, I … I'm already very happy."

Very early in the morning, the wind was as cold as blade. Chu Liuxiang, Ji Bingyan and Hu Tiehua, three men, were standing woodenly in the cold wind. Nobody knew how long they had been standing like that.

Finally Hu Tiehua could not help heaving a deep, deep sigh. "Unexpectedly she left," he muttered, "Surprisingly, she did not cry. This is really not easy. I have never admired any woman, but now I really admire her a little."

Chu Liuxiang sadly said, “She was right. She and I are indeed from two different worlds. Even if we are forced to be together, it would only increase each other’s pain. It’s better to part company like this, at least we still have sweet memory of each other.”

Smiling bitterly, Hu Tiehua said, “No matter what, she is not only lovely, but also smart. This kind of girl, how come I never meet any?”

Ji Bingyan coldly said, “Even if you did, your wine breath would definitely drive her away.”

Hu Tiehua laughed. Chu Liuxiang also could not stop himself from laughing. Changing the subject, he said, “*Shi Guanyin* said that you guys already drank her poisonous wine. Presumably it was not a lie?”
Ji Bingyan spoke indifferently, “Xiao Hu grabbed that cup of poisonous wine and drank half of it, but he also left the other half for me. I could only drink it down, because since we already got to that point, other than death, there was really no better way.”

Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “I originally thought that he was someone who attach utmost importance to life; who would have thought that he …”

It was as if his throat was suddenly choked, the next words unexpectedly could not get out, his eyes also became moist, as he patted Ji Bingyan’s shoulder forcefully and muttered, “In short, in the end, I did not make friends with you in vain. At that time, although *Shi Guanyin* was definitely going to kill me, but she definitely would not kill you.”
“But how come the two of you did not die?” Chu Liuxiang asked.

Hu Tiehua replied, “Because just as I was about to die, suddenly someone stuffed a pill in my mouth, also spoke gently in my ear, ‘Remember, *Huamei Niao* not only can kill people, I can also save people’.”
Emotionally moved, Chu Liuxiang said, “It was him who saved you? Did you see what he looks like?”

Hu Tiehua said, “At that time I was losing my consciousness; I did not see anything.”

Chu Liuxiang asked Ji Bingyan, but Ji Bingyan also shook his head.

Chu Liuxiang pondered for half a day. He sighed and said, “This *Huamei Niao*, what kind of person is he? Why did he do that? Could it be that it was a deliberate attempt to show kindness to me? Could it be …”
Hu Tiehua laughed and said, “Maybe he has a girl he wanted to marry to you. Maybe ‘he’ himself is a woman, who was somehow fascinated by you …”

Without waiting for Chu Liuxiang to respond, he went on, “But in any case, we must find him anyway, right?”

Chu Liuxiang looked at a clump of white cloud on the horizon far away. He spoke slowly, “We do not need to look for her [sic], because he [sic] will definitely come to look for us.”

(End of Book 2)