奇女子
写秋瑾惊心动魄
说智慧千转百折



一代军师

第一部

随波逐流◎著

人民文学出版社



The Grandmaster Strategist

Associated Names

Yīdài jūnshī

一代军师

Description

This is an alternate world. Decades after the fall of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, the world is still in chaos, although there is hope for reunification.

Of poor background, Jiang Zhe, styled Suiyun, has finally, after ten years of hard work, passed the imperial examinations and become a scholar within the Hanlin Academy. Unwittingly, he becomes involved in the succession dispute of the Great Yong Dynasty. He faces conspiracies and machinations, and countless battles of strength and wits. Intending to avoid court politics, he ultimately has no choice but to become involved. With no alternative, Jiang Zhe can only follow the crowd, joining the chaotic political turmoil. In this sinister world, he uses his intelligence and knowledge to provide for himself and his companions

a stable environment to survive.

Note from the Translator: Hi all, I've decided to take up this translation project. The webnovel is completed with a total of 224 chapters, 1.548 million characters. It is the eleventh most recommended webnovel on Qidian with 5.77 million recommendations and has been published in book form by People's Literature Publishing House.

There will be a minimum of three chapters per week (Monday, Wednesday, Friday - 7 PM EST, usually), with additional sponsored chapters released during weekends. I have opened up the queue and will be accepting donations. For each donation of $100, there will be an additional chapter released each week. Each sponsored chapter is set at $100 because of the anachronistic language, the frequent poems, and the length of each chapter (roughly 4.5-5k words translated, 2-3 times longer than most other web novels).

Genre

Action, Drama, Historical, Martial Arts, Romance, Tragedy, Wuxia

Author(s)

随波逐流 (Follow the Crowd)

Translator : http://gravitytales.com/novel/the-grandmaster-strategist



Volume 1: Southern Chu Zhuangyuan

The Grandmaster Strategist - Prologue

Prologue

“It really is a good painting, mist-covered water extending into the distance, a single lonely boat within … extraordinary technique,” I calmly said, nodding my head in admiration. After all, due to my status, I could not excessively lose my self-control. If I was disproportionately joyous with my praise, then I would have to take care of some matters for this person, no? With my status, there were some things that could be taken care of requiring only the slightest effort. There were some things that would be better to look on without doing anything.1 Although His Imperial Majesty was presently quite wise, one had to remember that he was already over seventy. I had heard that he was planning on passing the throne to the Imperial Grandson. If he were to become muddled and suspicious of subjects like myself, there was no way for me to have an appropriate conclusion to my career. When Liu Zhen, the middle-aged man who presented me with the gift, saw my expression, a look of anxiety flashed across his eyes. Cautiously, he said, “My Lord Elderly Duke, this nephew’s father is old and muddled. He should not have recklessly authored that book. I beseech My Lord Duke to say a few good words on behalf of my father in consideration that you two were class colleagues2 and were subjects together.”

“Is that so? What book has Brother Wenju authored? Quickly let me take a look. I am extremely fond of Brother Wenju’s written works.” My interest was piqued. That year, I had passed the imperial examination with his old man, Liu Kui, Liu Wenju. I was first, he was second. But to tell the truth, I had always admired his writings. He was careful with his writing and his histories were complete and accurate. If it weren’t for his pigheaded stubbornness, refusing to serve a second master, he would have easily been the court historian. Earlier, I had heard that he had penned the Southern Chu3 Dynastic Records . I had high expectations… but lately there had been no news of this work. Liu Zhen’s face revealed an awkward expression. From within his bosom, he removed a cloth bundle and passed it to me. When I opened the bundle, there was a book with a faded cover titled Southern Chu Dynastic Records . With excitement, I opened

the book, completely forgetting that there was an outsider in the room. After I had rapidly read a few lines, a wry smile appeared on my face. Brother Wenju really did not leave any sentiment or face for me. Lazily setting down the book, I spoke in an unrestrained voice, “Worthy nephew, go home for now. I must consider the full details of this matter. You must know that this venerable one has not been involved in politics for a long time.”

After seeing Liu Zhen off, I called out in a loud voice, “Xiaoshunzi! Xiaoshunzi!” Following my cries, an elderly gentleman entered from outside. He looked as if he was over forty years old. His appearance was delicate, his face pale and whiskerless. This person was my trusted aide who had followed me for over fifty years, Li Shun. He was once a eunuch in the Southern Chu Palace. He had superb martial arts skills. Supposedly, he had already reached the level of a grandmaster. For what reason was it supposed? Of course it was because I did not know any martial arts. But seeing that he was over sixty and yet looked middle-aged, it must be true. Before, there were those who did not believe that such a skilled martial artist like Li Shun would loyally serve a weak and harmless4 scholar and had attempted to bribe him. I won’t speak of how miserable their ends were so that no one will lose their appetite after hearing it. With a wry smile, I said, “Liu Kui is a remnant subject of Southern Chu. It hardly matters if he says something unduly excessive. Why do the ranking officials in the court even care about this?”

Li Shun smiled and replied, “Your Grace must have forgotten. Next year, the Imperial Grandson will succeed to the throne. The Crown Princess is your eldest daughter. Under these circumstances, everyone wants to curry favor with you. Only Liu Kui of all people remains so stubborn, insisting on placing your venerable self’s biography among other Southern Chu officials. Even if you weren’t bothered by it, the dignity of the Crown Princess and the Imperial Grandson must be upheld.”

“That’s true!” I suddenly saw the light. Forget that within this history, Liu Kui had written that I was “treacherously sinister, a profound schemer.” Everyone knew that he wasn’t someone particularly sensitive to politics. If it weren’t for Xiaoshunzi’s advice and my efforts to put my safety above all else, I fear I would have been eliminated long ago. Thinking of this, I indifferently replied, “Go speak

with Roulan and tell her that Liu Kui is one of the last remnant subjects of Southern Chu. There is no point in making matters difficult for him. There are some things that even if he didn't say, others would say. Although the Biography of Jiang Suiyun that he wrote about me is caustic and acerbic, it conforms to fact. Him writing my biography prevents others from writing without basis. Moreover, this matter won't involve the Imperial Grandson. Tell the Crown Princess there is no need to be so meddlesome." Xiaoshunzi respectfully withdrew.

In high spirits, I opened the Biography of Jiang Suiyun and began to read it. Although my life was still incomplete,5 it wouldn't matter if I took an advanced look.

In the sixteenth year of Xiande,6 the fourth year of the sixty-year cycle, the King recovered from a slight illness. As autumn approached, the King ordered a special imperial examination to celebrate his recovery. Jiangnan's scholars were delighted, traveling in large groups to the capital. On the fifteenth day of the eighth month, the results were announced. Coming in first was Jiang Zhe of Jiaxing. At that point, Suiyun was not yet famous. Many asked: who was this person?

Jiang Zhe, styled Suiyun,7 was born in the fourth year of Tongyuan,8 the forty-fifth year of the sixty-year cycle. His father was Jiang Mu, styled Hanqiu.9 As a youngster, Hanqiu's family was poor. However, he was refined, distinguished, and accomplished. An aristocratic family with a long friendship with Hanqiu's family married their beloved daughter to him. With the world in chaos, Hanqiu could not forge a path for himself, refusing to take up an official post, passing his days teaching his son. Towards the end of the eighth year of Xiande, an epidemic swept through Jiaxing. Hanqiu's wife passed. Not long afterwards, Hanqiu broke off relations with his in-laws over a trifling matter. Even though he was sick, he traveled afar with his son. Arriving at Jiangxia,10 Hanqiu became extremely ill. Suiyun sought treatment for his father. By chance, he met the Medical Sage, Sang Chen. Doting upon Suiyun's encyclopedic knowledge, Sang Chen taught him everything. Not long afterwards, Hanqiu gradually recovered and Sang Chen crossed the Yangtze River and went north. Taking care of his father, Suiyun remained in Jiangxia. In the eleventh year of Xiande, the fifty-ninth year of the

sixty-year cycle, Hanqiu passed, leaving behind the twelve volumes of the Distant Purity Collection . This work was refined and fresh, much beloved by later generations.

After Hanqiu died, Suiyun was too poor to bury him. At this time, Jiangxia was garrisoned by Lu Xin, the Marquis Who Suppresses Distant Lands. The marquis sought a teacher for his son. Suiyun went to interview for the position. Seeing he was so young, the marquis intentionally made things difficult, ordering Suiyun to showcase his talent. From Suiyun's brush flowed a thousand words. Shortly, he penned the Autumn River Rhapsody , containing the verses, "Soon the moon rose above the eastern mountain, hovering between the Dipper and Cowherd. The river stretched white, sparkling as if with dew, its glimmering water merging with the sky. We let our craft drift over the boundless expanse of water, feeling as free as if we were riding the wind bound for some unknown destination, as light as if we had left the human world and become winged immortals."11 With this verse, Marquis Lu was startled, standing to thank Suiyun. He ordered his heir to come out to formally become a student and seek instruction.…

—Southern Chu Dynastic Records , Biography of Jiang Suiyun

Footnotes :

袖手旁观, xiushoupangguan – idiom, lit. to watch with folded arms, to look on without lifting a finger
同年, tongnian – someone who passed the imperial examination in the same year; in Chinese officialdom, the most important relationships that one possessed were with one's teacher and with colleagues who passed the imperial examination in the same year
南楚 – Southern Chu, a kingdom (king)
手无缚鸡之力, shouwufujizhili – idiom, lit. without the strength to truss a chicken; weak and harmless
盖棺论定, gaiguanlunding – idiom, lit. don't pass judgment on a person's life until the lid is on the coffin; an incomplete life cannot be judged
显德, xiande – lit. manifesting virtue
随云, suiyun – lit. following the clouds
同原, tongyuan – lit. same origins
寒秋, hanqiu – lit. cold autumn

江夏, Jiangxia – Modern-day Wuhan

This is from a rhapsody penned by famed Song Dynasty poet, Su Shi, Su Dongpo, entitled “First Red Cliffs Rhapsody.” This rhapsody was written while Su Dongpo was traveling on a boat and arrived before the Red Cliffs, the location of a famous battle of the Three Kingdoms period.

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 1: A Destitute Scholar

Volume 1, Chapter 1: A Destitute Scholar

In the sixteenth year of Xiande, Suiyun left Jiangxia for Jianye[1] to take the imperial examinations.

—*Southern Chu Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Jiang Suiyun*

In the sixteenth year of Southern Chu's Xiande era, the world remained under turmoil, though the situation had become clear. The majority of the territory south of the Yangtze River was occupied by Southern Chu, while the land north of the river was controlled by the Great Yong Dynasty.[2] The city of Jiangxia was the strategic lynchpin of Southern Chu's defenses against Great Yong. The residence of the garrison commander, the Marquis Who Suppresses Distant Lands, Lu Xin, was the center of these defenses and was heavily guarded at all times.

Although my position as the marquis's family tutor was not low, I still had to obey military directives, and remained inside the study to avoid getting caught in any trouble. While flipping through the pages of a book, I calculated the time remaining until lunch.

As a ranking military commander, Marquis Lu had no choice but to leave his family in the capital of Jianye to serve as hostages. Only the marquis's fifteen-year-old son, Lu Can, was allowed by the imperial court to accompany his father as a personal guard. Although Lu Can was my student, as the son of a military family, he was also naturally educated in warfare. Today, the marquis had called a military conference and had brought Lu Can along to listen and learn. I had no recourse but to remain in the study waiting for him to return, having agreed to eat together once the conference ended. Even though it was noon, none of those attending the conference had eaten yet. If I, a lowly family tutor, ate beforehand, Lu Can would likely kick up a storm and use the opportunity to plot against me. It was better to wait for him.

Thinking of this point, I touched my stomach and sighed helplessly. How could a father and son differ so much? Whereas Lu Xin was generous and magnanimous, Lu Can fussed over minor matters. The last time Lu Can was punished by the marquis, he caught me snickering. The next day, Lu Can tricked me into a brothel under the pretext of relaxation and completion of the traditional three year mourning period for my father. If I had not fled at the first opportunity, I would have lost my virginity.

Bored, I flipped through the book, while allowing my imagination to run wild. Although the marquis's study was not bad, I had pored over all of the books over the last three years. Unfortunately, since the family was a military one, the study only contained easily obtainable books. I guessed that they probably had the bookstore bring them a copy of everything. Why else could they possess almanacs and yet have no books of value?

I was counting the time by the size of the shadows when Lu Can's attendant, Lu Zhong, arrived to inform me of the conclusion of the conference. Lu Xin had invited his subordinates to a feast. As Lu Can was allowed to join in, I did not have to wait for him. I gladly agreed. Not caring that the food had gotten cold, I swiftly began devouring my lunch.

Just as I was enjoying my meal, a commotion broke out in the nearby hall. I did not pay much attention in the beginning, but the noise got louder and louder. Suddenly, I heard a voice shout out, "Capture the assassin, capture the assassin!" My heart skipped a beat. Oh crap, the assassin was undoubtedly targeting the marquis. The marquis was currently my patron; he mustn't be killed. Knowing that I did not have the ability to protect the marquis, I decided it was best to remain hidden. However, my heart remained apprehensive, and I grabbed an elaborately crafted crossbow from the bookshelf. This crossbow was engineered by Southern Chu's Ministry of Works[3] and not only possessed a range of a hundred paces, but also could shoot up to five bolts in succession. Originally a gift to Lu Can from the marquis, Lu Can did not like to use the crossbow, deeming the weapon not straightforward enough and gifting it to me instead. As I did not know any martial arts, I could not use a bow and arrow. This crossbow was definitely my favorite.

Loading the bolts, I opened the window slightly. The study was not far from the nearby hall. Outside, swords and spears filled the courtyard. A large group of soldiers in red surrounded two men in servant attire. Before long, Marquis Lu arrived with his subordinates, a bloodstained piece of cloth wrapped around his right arm, his face pale white. The marquis's personal guard, Lu Ping, was nowhere to be seen. Lu Can supported the marquis from the left, looking enraged. From the situation, I deduced that two assassins disguised as servants attending to the feast had attempted to accomplish their mission. It was likely that Lu Ping had performed his duty and had sacrificed himself.

I was focusing on the scene when the two assassins exchanged facial expressions. Suddenly, they took out two black beads and threw them on the ground, engulfing the space with white smoke. Just then, I noticed the murderous expression on the face of a deputy general standing close to Marquis Lu. A dagger slid out from his sleeve into his hand. Recognizing the situation, I yelled out, “Your Lordship, be careful!” At the same time that I shouted the warning, I fired the crossbow. A scream followed. After the smoke had dissipated, everyone saw that the two assassins remained surrounded. The deputy general was collapsed on the floor half a step behind the marquis. A bolt had pierced his heart. Clutched tightly in his hand was a dagger with a blue colored edge (poison). Even a blind man could tell what the deputy general had been planning.

The two assassins could not hope to escape the encirclement. Under the gaze of the marquis, they fought to the death. After ordering his subordinates to deal with the corpses, he brought me to White Tiger Hall.

Giving me a complicated look, he spoke, “Thank you, Suiyun, for saving my[4] life.”

I replied modestly. “You are blessed for your virtues, and thus escaped harm. I[5] merely caught it by chance.”

“How did Suiyun know that that man would attempt to assassinate me[4] ?” Marquis Lu suspiciously asked. This was something he could not understand.

How? Of course, because I saw it. But I could not say this. This was my secret defense mechanism. My six senses were sharper than normal people. To put it simply, I could hear the leaves falling within a hundred paces; I could see vivid details several *li* [6] away; I could identify any taste with just a small sample; I could track a person eight to ten *li* with my sense of smell. Sometimes, I wondered if I was even human. I also knew that these acute senses could produce jealousy and hatred in others. You wouldn't want anyone listening to your private conversations. In order to protect myself, I had never let anyone know about my acute senses aside from my deceased father.

Therefore, I lied. "It was a coincidence. I grabbed the crossbow in order to protect myself. When I saw the two assassins release the smoke, I realized that something was off. Regardless of their ability, there was no way that the assassins could escape. Releasing the smoke was undoubtedly to give someone else the opportunity to perform the assassination. I judged that there was another assassin near Your Lordship and cried out in panic. I realized that there was no one behind my lord at the time, giving the assassin an opportunity to complete his mission, so I fired the crossbow. Luckily Your Lordship was blessed with virtue, and I was able to kill the assassin."

Though skeptical, the marquis nodded his head and allowed me to leave. Later, I learned that the assassins were dispatched by Great Yong. Bribing the deputy general, they wanted to assassinate the marquis. With the marquis dead, Jiangxia would have been leaderless. They would have seized the opportunity to attack. Who could guess that this perfectly planned assassination would fail? The Yong army could only retreat.

Witnessing my cleverness, Lu Xin sought for me to remain and serve as one of his advisors. After thinking it over, I declined. Jiangxia was only a river away from Yong controlled territory. Battles were frequent. If they unluckily lost a battle, what was I going to do? Furthermore, if Great Yong learned that I was the one to save the marquis, I would be killed by assassins. What could I do then? Of course, I could not give these reasons. Instead, I spoke of my father's regret in failing to attain scholarly honors[7]

and of my decision to sit for the imperial examinations. Using such a high-sounding and dignified[8] reason, no one could hinder my decision. Therefore, Lu Xin not only dispatched people to my home prefecture of Jiaxing to obtain qualification to take the exam, but also gave me travel expenses to head to Jianye two months in advance. For my safety, he even allowed me to travel with the supply personnel. With no alternative, I could only follow them eastward. On the way, I pretended to catch a cold. Stating that I wanted to rest and recuperate for two days, and with ample time still remaining, I took the opportunity to regain my freedom.

I was not stupid. In the ninth year of Xiande, Southern Chu submitted to Great Yong, removing the title of "emperor" and using the title of "king," instead. There were currently rumors that the king wished to restore his imperial prerogatives. This decision would certainly antagonize Great Yong and spark war. Although I did not wish to go to war, I did understand much of the art of war. Great Yong's army was strong, while Southern Chu from the king to his officials drowned themselves in alcohol and fantasies.[9] The generals and officers feared death. Even the famed general, Marquis Lu, had numerous subordinates who were cowards. Several times, the furious Marquis Lu wanted to execute these individuals, but could not do so due to the influence of their families and clans, and could only continue to allow them to serve. Taking the imperial examination at this time? *Pfft* , I did not want to serve as a minister of a subjugated state.

Sitting on the deck of a boat with my arms around my legs, I comfortably enjoyed the cool evening river breeze. Aboard this type of mid-sized boat, the lower decks were filled with cargo, while the upper decks were partitioned into passenger cabins. It was certainly more comfortable than the specialized passenger boats, though more expensive. But with several hundred taels[10] in my pocket, easily more than enough, I allowed myself to be extravagant for once. Gazing at the clear bright moon and the starry sky, I suddenly had a poetic inspiration and recited:

"The grass by the shore gently sways in the breeze,The mast of the boat stands tall and alone at night.Stars fall to the fields that spread far and wide,The moon rises from the great river's flow.Have my literary works not

made any mark?A court official should retire when old and sick.What is a man without purpose and responsibility?A gull between heaven and earth."[11]

As I finished reciting the poem, I heard clapping and applause from behind me. Turning my head to look, I saw a young man standing there. Despite the dim light of the moon, I could see clearly with my heightened sight that he was a handsome and majestic young man. Even though he was wearing casual attire, his aura was not ordinary. I could not help but feel that he was more majestic than Marquis Lu. Moreover, he had an astonishing charisma that made one feel as if he was being cleansed by a spring breeze. It made me feel ashamed about myself. He possessed a normal physique that could be blown over by wind, with delicate handsome features. No matter how I looked, he seemed to be no more than a fragile scholar. This was a time of warfare and disorder. What most attracted girls were handsome young masters[12] who were adept with both brush and sword. Even a barely literate warrior was more attractive compared to me as long as he looked slightly refined. How did I know? Of course, because the maids in the marquis's mansion never gave me a second look.

I stood up and apologized, "My apologies for interrupting your rest."

The young man shook his head and said, "Don't say that. I would have missed young master's great poem. Is this young master's work?

While delighted at heart, I responded humbly, "This clumsy work is unrefined.[13] I have embarrassed myself before your distinguished self."

The young man observed me for a long time before speaking, "Your literary talent is exceptional for one so young. You have my respect. My name is Li Tianxiang, a merchant from the Kingdom of Shu.[14] I have come to Jianye on business. May I inquire as to young master's name and reason for coming to Jianye?"

Even though the man spoke with a Shu accent, it sounded a bit off. Though what did other people's business matter to me? Therefore, I replied politely, "My[5] name is Jiang Zhe, styled Suiyun. I am traveling to Jianye for the imperial examination."

With a smile, Li Tianxiang said, “With young master’s peerless talent, the imperial examination will surely be easy for you.”

I awkwardly smiled. If not for a lie, I did not even want to sit for the imperial examination. But I had ways to avoid passing the examination without complaints from anyone.

Seeing my discomfort, Li Tianxiang changed the subject. With a sigh, he spoke, “This time coming from Shu, I saw the tense situation in the Central Plains[15] and almost got caught in a battle at Jiangxia. These days, doing business is becoming harder and harder. A while back, the King of Southern Chu issued an edict increasing tariffs. Fortunately, the King of Shu dispatched an envoy to Southern Chu to negotiate. Otherwise, our cargo boats would lose money.”

Casually, I replied, “The King of Shu does not have to worry. The fate of Southern Chu and Shu are closely linked.[16] As long as this relationship is made clear, His Highness will definitely lower the tariffs, and maybe even offer trade incentives.”

“Why is that?” asked Li Tianxiang with a smile, “I do not understand.”

Rarely encountering anyone who would ask my opinion, I replied proudly, “We have to start with the current situation of the world. Currently Southern Chu and Great Yong are in a north-south stalemate. However, that’s only on the surface. Be it military strength or popular sentiment, Southern Chu cannot compare to Great Yong. Therefore, Southern Chu can only defend and has no means of attack. Hard tactics cannot last long as soldiers and the country weakens. At the same time, soft tactics will often harm one’s bottom line. Everyone knows that the kingdom is going to fall if this continues. That is why His Highness sued for peace and reduced his title, seeking respite from the conflict. However, the situation has changed. Sichuan[17] under Shu’s governance has well prepared forces.[18] Even though Shu’s geographic constraints limits control to a small part of the world, but compared to Southern Chu, Shu is in a position of strength. An alliance between Shu and Great Yong alliance would see Great Yong attack across the Yangtze, while the Shu forces can descend down from the upper reaches of the Yangtze. Southern Chu will surely perish. If Shu strictly adheres to its

borders, Southern Chu can ally with Northern Han[19] north of Great Yong. Once the Yong army marches south, Southern Chu can rely upon the natural barrier of the Yangtze River, while the Northern Han army marches on Great Yong. Within three months, the Yong army will withdraw."

Li Tianxiang's face became respectful. It was some time before he responded. "If this is the case, will the world never to be unified? This will only cause us, the common people, suffering."

Comfortingly, I said, "What I said is merely the most ideal situation. Currently, Southern Chu's ruler and ministers have become arrogant, relying on the natural barrier of the Yangtze River, while in reality, danger lurks.[20] As long as Great Yong has a sensible and wise minister, they have the possibility of unifying the world."

With curiosity, Li Tianxiang asked, "Did young master earlier not say that Great Yong will find it difficult to unify the world? Why now state that they have the possibility?"

After organizing my thoughts, I said, "Although Great Yong is surrounded by danger, they have numerous advantages. With a wise emperor and capable officials, alongside an army of a million men, as long as they choose the right strategies, Great Yong will unify the world in twenty years. Under the current conditions, Sichuan is of utmost importance. Sichuan is easily defended and difficult to attack. If Great Yong were to conquer the world, they must first come to an understanding with Northern Han, calming their rear, and then sow discord between Southern Chu and Shu."

Unconvinced, Li Tianxiang asked, "Coming to an understanding with Northern Han isn't difficult, but how is it possible to sow discord in the relationship between Southern Chu and Shu when their fates are so intertwined?"

"How difficult can it be? Recently, I have heard the Southern Chu court is seeking to revive the title of emperor. If Great Yong pretends to have its hands tied and unwilling to start a war, the ruler and officials of Southern Chu will be bewitched. Once Great Yong dispatches spies south, bribing Southern Chu officials to revive the empire, then the relationship between

Southern Chu and Shu will become estranged. When the time comes, even Northern Han will be wary of Southern Chu. At that time, Great Yong only has to acknowledge Southern Chu's emperor, dividing the world with the Yangtze River as the border and allying with Southern Chu to attack Shu. With the limited foresight of Southern Chu's ruler and officials, they will be easily tricked. Even though Sichuan is difficult to attack, Shu is incapable of fending off the might of both Southern Chu and Great Yong. When the time comes, Shu will absolutely detest Southern Chu. As long as it uses the proper strategies, Great Yong will obtain the majority of Sichuan. At that point, Great Yong needs to simply attack from two fronts to conquer Southern Chu. Then, all Great Yong needs to do is prepare its armies[21] for the final push to eliminate Northern Han. At this point, why should Great Yong worry about not unifying the world?"

Li Tianxiang excitedly responded, "It looks like once Sichuan and Southern Chu ally, Great Yong will be unable to do anything. It's a good thing that Brother Jiang is not a citizen of Great Yong. If you were to be employed by Great Yong, then my Kingdom of Shu will be placed in a precarious situation."

Lazily, I stated, "By no means will I go to Great Yong. I hear that they value military accomplishments more than anything. A fragile scholar like myself will find it difficult there. Once a few years have passed and I have saved up enough money, I will buy some land in the countryside and marry a virtuous wife. That's the pleasure of life."

Li Tianxiang laughed, "Then I pray that sire's[22] wish comes true. However, I am curious. According to your plan, Great Yong shouldn't need twenty years."

A bit sleepily, I replied, "Originally, it shouldn't take so long. If Great Yong invades Southern Chu, the conquest should only take five to six years. However, I have heard that the Emperor of Great Yong is old. Although the Crown Prince, Li An, is the heir apparent to the throne, his military accomplishments and prestige pale in comparison to the second prince, the Prince of Yong, Li Zhi. At the time of its founding, the Yong Emperor, Li Yuan, acknowledged his second son's accomplishments and enfeoffed him as the

Prince of Yong, using the same character as the empire. However, when it came to choosing the heir apparent, Li Yuan followed the time-honored principle of anointing the eldest son of the first wife as heir apparent. This decision will inevitably lead to the turmoil of a succession crisis. Great Yong may even split in two. I only said twenty years on the presumption that the turmoil does not spread too much."

Lowering his head slightly to think, Li Tianxiang took some time before exclaiming, "You're right!"

I did not understand the meaning of his words and was too lazy to think deeper about it. Bidding farewell, I returned to my cabin. The next day, when I heard that Li Tianxiang had disembarked in advance, I found it extremely strange.

My original plans were not bad, but who knew that Heaven's Will was unpredictable. The day I arrived at Jianye, I became a pauper.

Thinking back on those days, it was the first time that I had come to Jianye and I was dumbfounded by the splendor and magnificence of the capital city. After finding an inn, I left to tour the city. At the Confucian Temple[23] on the banks of the Yonghuai River, I met my lucky star, although at the time, I believed that I had met the bane of my existence.

As I was walking along the streets, I witnessed a crowd gathered. Curious, I stepped forward and found a young boy selling himself into servitude in order to pay for his father's funeral expenses. It reminded me of my own father's passing when I had no money on hand. If I had not gotten the opportunity to work for the marquis, I would probably have ended up selling myself as well. Impulsively, I took out a hundred taels of silver and gave it to the young boy.

Looking grateful, he respectfully asked, "Young master, once I bury my father, I will go serve you at once. Where does young master currently reside?"

I smiled awkwardly, noticing the looks of jealousy from the crowd. Having already broken the rule of showing money in public, I was not going to tell anyone where I lived. Without replying, I left in hurry. In order to swiftly

return to my inn, I kept my head low. Passing by an alley, I felt someone approach me from behind. As I was about to turn around, a hard object pressed against my waist. I obediently entered the alley. Afterwards, I was swiftly hit on the back of the head. By the time I woke up, I was lying on the ground without any money left.

Scowling miserably, I returned to the inn, grateful that I had earlier deposited ten taels of silver. This amount of money was enough to last me a month. What should I do? What should I do? Tossing and turning all night, I realized that the only solution was to take the imperial examination seriously to obtain the scholarly honors and become an official with salary and residence provided by the state. Southern Chu probably would not fall so fast. As soon as I had saved up enough money, I would resign. By that time, surely no one would bother someone with no official position.

Note :

A style name or a courtesy name is a name bestowed upon reaching adulthood (traditionally during the coming of age ceremony at the age of 20) in addition to one's given name. A man's peers would call him by his style rather than his given name, as a sign of respect. The only people who have the right to call him by his given name are his elders and superiors, though they may also use his style name in order to show affection, respect, or simply refinement and courtesy on their own part. One may not be addressed by his style by his father or grandfather. For more information, refer to this article .

Footnotes :

建业 – Modern-day Nanjing
大雍 – Great Yong, an empire (emperor)
工部 – the Ministry of Works, one of the six ministries in Chinese bureaucracy, is in charge of government construction projects, hiring of artisans and laborers for temporary service, manufacturing government equipment (including weaponry), maintenance of roads and canals, standardization of weights and measurements, and the gathering of resources from the countryside
本侯 – this marquis

晚生 – lit. this youngster, I (self-deprecatory, in front of elders)
里 – a li is about 500 meter
功名 – lit. scholarly honor; meant the titles awarded to individuals who passed stages of the imperial examination
冠冕堂皇, guanmiantanghuang – idiom, high-sounding, dignified, pompous
醉生梦死, zuishengmengsi – idiom, lit. as if drunk or entranced; in a drunken stupor
A tael of silver weighs about 40 grams.
This is a poem entitled “Nocturnal Reflections While Travelling” (旅夜书怀) by renowned Tang Dynasty poet, Du Fu. He is called the Poet-Historian or the Poet-Sage by Chinese critics and is compared to Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Shakespeare, Milton, Burns, Wordsworth, amongst others.
公子 – honorific for young gentleman
不登大雅之堂 – idiom, lit. that a work (art, poem, etc.) is not fit for an elegant hall; meaning that the work is coarse, unrefined, and not presentable
蜀国, shuguo – Kingdom of Shu (king)
中原, zhongyuan – the Central Plains, refers to the cradle of Chinese civilization along the lower reaches of the Yellow River
唇齿相依 – idiom, lit. as close as lips and teeth; closely related, interdependent
蜀中 – an ancient name for Sichuan
兵精粮足 – idiom, lit. elite soldiers, ample provisions; well prepared forces / prepared for war
北汉 – Northern Han
危机隐伏 – idiom, lit. danger lurks on every side
养精蓄锐 – idiom, lit. to preserve and nurture one’s spirit; honing one’s strength for the big push
阁下 – polite way of referring to someone else
夫子庙, fuzi miao – lit. Temple of the Master; refers to a temple dedicated to the worship of Confucius (or Kong Fuzi, lit. Master Kong) and other philosophers of Confucianism

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 2: Attaining Top Marks in the Imperial Examination

Volume 1, Chapter 2: Attaining Top Marks in the Imperial Examination

In the sixth month of the sixteenth year of Xiande, Suiyun arrived in Jianye. In the eighth month, he attained the top marks in the imperial examination, becoming the *zhuangyuan* .[1] At the celebratory feast, a Yong envoy arrived to propose a marriage alliance.

In the twelfth month, Princess Changle[2] of Great Yong arrived in Southern Chu. In the first month of the new year,[3] Princess Changle was wed to Southern Chu's Crown Prince, Zhao Jia. Princess Changle was appointed as Crown Princess.

Princess Changle, fifteen years old, was the daughter of Imperial Consort Zhangsun, favored concubine of Emperor Gaozu[4] of Yong. As Princess Changle's birth coincided with Gaozu's ascension to the throne, she was much favored by the Emperor and was granted the title of Princess Changle.

—*Southern Chu Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Jiang Suiyun*

After leaving the examination[5] grounds, I stretched my tired body. These last several days had worn me out. The individual examination room was narrow and small. As I did not have money for bribes, by the third day, the entire room had been engulfed by the smell of the chamber pot. If my father and I had not previously wandered far from home, and lived through some difficult times, I probably would not have been able to eat anything while in that room.

Even though I was frugal with my money, I had not a single coin left in my possession. There was still half a month before the results were announced. What should I do until then? Perhaps I should sell calligraphy and paintings, or help others write letters.

Returning to the inn, I calculated that my deposit would run out the next day. Gathering the four treasures of the study,[6] I decided to set up shop

before the Confucian Temple. After talking with the owner of a teahouse and promising to help him write two letters, I was allowed to set up a stall in front of his store. Unfortunately, business wasn't too great. Those who came asking for help writing letters were all mostly illiterate and did not care about the calligrapher's skill. After waiting for a long while without any customers and growing increasingly anxious, a young housewife in an azure[7] dress walked over. Judging by her attire, I could tell that she was a widow. But she seemed to be only eighteen or nineteen years old. What a pity.

Timidly, she said, "Sir,[8] I [9] wish to file a complaint for a lawsuit." [10]

Picking up the brush, I questioned, "What kind of lawsuit? Who are you suing?"

Blushing, she replied, "My[9] husband was unfortunate and passed away. I[9] wish to remarry, but my father-in-law will not permit it."[11]

After asking for some details, I wrote a few lines:

Wed at seventeen, widowed at eighteen, in-laws are able-bodied, in a position that invites suspicion,[12] should I wed or not?

Baffled at the words that I had written, she asked, "Sir, just these words … aren't they too few?"

Proudly, I replied, "Rest assured, as long as you file the complaint, I promise you that the authorities will agree to your wish to remarry."

She gave me ten copper coins as payment. I looked at the coins gratefully and thought to myself, *Here is today's dinner. I have to work harder* . Afterwards, once again, there was no more business.

Before two hours[13] had passed, the widow returned delighted, thanking me as soon as she saw me. "Sir, thank you for writing the complaint. Once the *daren* [14] saw my lawsuit, he approved my wish."

Of course he did , I thought. The current Imperial Capital Magistrate[15] of Jianye placed a high value on ethics and morality. A widow remarrying would only cause her to lose her chastity. However, if she had an affair, then it would become a big problem. After the young widow left, my business became much better. By nightfall, I had earned enough money to pay for

three more days of living expenses. Of course, I did not dare to write too many complaints for lawsuits. If someone wished to file a lawsuit, I would try to think of ways to dissuade them from doing so. Simply put, writing too many petitions for lawsuits would harm my reputation.

After several days, I had earned enough money to able to stay in Jianye until the results were released. Closing the stall, I spent my days in the teahouse listening to other people converse. A pot of tea was enough to last me the whole day. Although I had closed the stall, if people were to look for me, I would continue to write letters for them. I had to pass the time anyway.

After a few days, I had the urge to use what I had learned from the *Book of Changes* [16] to help predict other people's fates. Quite honestly, my predictions weren't all that accurate. But with the help of my observations aided by my keen senses, I swiftly became an oracle. Of course, I only wanted to earn enough money to use, so I limited my fortunes to three per day with one additional fortune told for free. Strangely, this swiftly piqued the interests of others and the money swiftly came rushing in. To protect my reputation, I changed my attire and even changed my appearance by adding some medicine to make my face look more yellow.

On one particular day, noon was swiftly approaching. I had already told three fortunes and decided to close up shop once I had told the free fortune. A young man rushed over in a hurry and asked, "Sir, I am a merchant. A few days ago, a fellow townsman brought word that my wife was about to give birth. But she was unwell. I rushed back, but have not yet returned home. I don't why, but my heart is very uneasy. Would you[17] please divine whether labor will go well and the gender of the baby?"

Fiddling around with the divination tools, I calculated for some time before responding, "No problem, minor risks but overall safe. It may be risky for your sick wife, but as you both have performed good deeds, the labor should go well. You will have children of both genders. Brother[18] is really fortunate."

How did I know this? I actually did not. This was not something that one could predict, but surely I couldn't say something unpleasant to hear and

agitate him half to death. However, his face looked honest and considerate and his body looked healthy. From the tone of his voice, he had a good relationship with his wife. There shouldn't be any problem having additional children. As for the health of his wife, I put it down to his absence. Without the husband present, of course a wife about to give birth would become unhappy. Once the husband returned, his wife would undoubtedly be happy and would give birth without any problems. I did not clarify whether the child would be a boy or a girl, allowing me to prevaricate when the time came. Just as the young man was about to happily pay, I informed him that this fortune was free. As he was thanking me, a middle-aged man ran over and happily said, "Third brother,[19] you've returned! Sister-in-law[20] has given birth to twins of mixed genders![21] Come quickly, come quickly!"

The young man froze for a moment when he heard the news before suddenly running off. I took a deep breath. As I reveled in my good luck, I noticed the looks of admiration on the faces of others, and quickly became embarrassed.

A man dressed in gray seated by the entrance stood and walked before me. Calmly, he asked, "Sir, please predict my fortune."

I raised my head and regarded him. He seemed to be about twenty-seven years old. He possessed a tall and vigorous body, and had a calm look on his handsome features. Behind him followed a middle-aged man dressed in azure[7] and an attendant dressed in black. Hesitating, I responded, "I[22] have already completed my divinations for today. This …"

The gray-clothed man replied, "I know it would be difficult for Sir, but I am leaving the capital tomorrow, thus would like for Sir to help, however reluctant you may be."

I looked at the three individuals. I could see from the commanding expression on the gray-clothed man's face that he was probably someone used to giving commands and being obeyed. Although the green-clothed man seemed somewhat disdainful, there was also a look of hope on his features. As for the attendant, there was a menacing look on his face. It seemed that I could not afford to offend them. After calculating the days and realizing that the results of the imperial examination would be released the

day after tomorrow, I replied, “Fine,[23] it’s almost time for me[22] to close up shop for good. This divination will be my last before I retire.”

The gray-clothed man seemed surprised, thinking that I was retiring because of his actions. Puzzled, he could only ask, “I am about to embark upon a journey and would like to know whether it will be ominous or auspicious.”

After using the divination tools for some time, I answered, “The abysmal, water, six at the top. Bound with cords and ropes, shut in between thorn-hedged prison walls, for three years one does not find the way, misfortune.[24] I am afraid that sire’s[25] journey will be difficult with every step.” After concluding, I stole a look at his facial expressions and thought, *People like you are usually confident; for you to waver with indecision, then the situation you face must be troublesome* .

His expression dull, he asked, “May I ask: what is the difficulty?”

How could I know? Thinking, I concluded that the man must be a soldier from his demeanor. Of the two others, they must be an advisor and a personal guard, respectively. The gray-clothed man must be someone of influence. Was there something big happening in Southern Chu? Regardless, I only needed to be a bit ambiguous to respond. Thinking of this ambiguity, I replied, “In-fighting within, strong enemies without, things will be difficult. As long as sire is careful and prudent, there may be a way.”

Although I was ambiguous, my words directly catered to the gray-clothed man’s mental and psychological state. Heaving a sigh, he turned and left. The green-clothed middle-aged man took out a banknote and left it on the table. When I took a look at the banknote when they had gone far away, I discovered that it was worth a thousand taels of silver. I almost yelled with surprise. Swiftly shoving the banknote into my clothes, I quickly closed up shop and left.

After a few more days passed, the results of the imperial examination were released on the fifteenth day of the eighth month. I was a bit hesitant. If it was a few days earlier, I hoped for nothing more than to have a great result. But now, with a pocketful of money, I was a bit regretful of my earlier

decision to take part in the examinations. As a result, I did not go to see the results. Instead, I stayed in my room, looking over the drafts of my poems. Soon afterwards, I heard firecrackers go off outside. A shop assistant and the owner of the inn excitedly pushed the door open and entered. In a loud voice, they proclaimed, “Congratulations lord![26] Lord has come first amongst the three candidates of the imperial examinations, becoming the *zhuangyuan* ! It is this small shop’s great fortune to be able to cater to you![27] Would the lord *zhuangyuan* please write a few characters for this humble shop?”

Somewhat confused, I looked out the window, not knowing my future prospects. Then I thought I might not necessarily chance upon the fall of Southern Chu. Furthermore, I had heard that Hanlin Academy’s Library possessed over a million books and was the world’s largest library, and I once again became happy. I had also heard that last year, the King of Southern Chu had issued an edict to collect books and calligraphy from all over the world in order to build the Palace of Sublime Culture.[28] I probably would have the chance to participate.

That night, around 5 PM, I brought my number plate to the examination grounds. The area outside of the entrance was filled with the new *jinshi* ,[29] all of whom were dressed with new clothes and were in high spirits. When I arrived at the entrance, I realized that everyone was looking at me. A few even seemed to be jealous. Just as I was finding it strange, a scholar with a square face and big ears approached, inquiring, “Is this brother[30] here to participate in the Qionglin Feast[31] for new *jinshi* ?”

Nodding my head, I replied, “Yes, exactly. Pardon me, may I ask if there are any problems?”

After hearing my words, the scholar revealed a look of respect before responding, “Turns out that the new *zhuangyuan* has arrived. Please excuse my lack of manners. I[22] am Liu Kui, this examination’s second ranked *bangyan* .”

Originally, seventy-nine new *jinshi* had gathered at the entrance before I had arrived, waiting only for me, the *zhuangyuan* . I finally realized why everyone seemed to have strange looks in their eyes. All the other new *jinshi* approached me to extend their greetings. Just as I was finding it difficult to

handle everyone coming forward, the bell tolled three times. A ranking official leading a number of examiners exited the grounds, checking our number plates one by one. We were organized by rank with the *zhuangyuan* at the head, and led towards the palace. Behind me to the left and right were the *bangyan* and *tanhua* , respectively, with the rest of the seventy-plus new *jinshi* behind them. As we walked through the streets towards the imperial city, the route was lined with the common people who cheered our progress. We entered the imperial city via the Chaoyang Gate.[32] As the major gate to enter the inner city, typically only the Emperor was permitted to use this gate. The only other individuals who were permitted to use this gate were the new *jinshi* on their way to the Qionglin Feast. After entering the palace grounds, I noticed that other than the rock gardens and flora, I could hear the sounds of women giggling. Presumably, the court ladies were peeking at us.

Reaching the Qionglin Garden, we were led to our assigned seats by the eunuchs of the Palace Directorate of Ceremonies.[33] As we were seated, a eunuch announced in a high-pitched voice, “His Majesty arrives!” I saw an old man dressed in dragon robes followed by a group of court ladies enter the garden. With everyone else, I prostrated myself on the ground, earnestly shouting, “Long live the King!”[34]

The king weakly and without strength replied, “All[35] arise.”

After we all stood, the feast was considered to have begun. After we had all carefully adhered to every step of etiquette and ceremony, we could relax and taste the imperial meal. It was so delicious. If I could, I would definitely bring the cooks in the imperial kitchen home. As we all had the chance to eat and drink,[36] everyone had become somewhat relaxed.

King Zhao Sheng placed down his chopsticks and spoke to the chief examiner. “*Aiqing* Shi, please introduce this examination’s top three to Us.”[37]

The chief examiner stood and saluted the king. “This vassal[38] obeys Your Majesty’s command.”[39] Then pointing at me, he said, “Reporting to Your Majesty, he is this examination’s first-tier, first-ranked *zhuangyuan* , Jiang Zhe of Jiaxing.”

I hurriedly left my seat and prostrated myself, saying, “This vassal, Jiang Zhe, greets Your Majesty.”

With a smile, Zhao Sheng replied, “Good, good. Definitely a young man with excellent abilities. Your responses to the prompts were not bad, especially your poem, *Recollections Under the Moon* . We have ordered it to be restructured into a song. We will soon let everyone hear it.”

The chief examiner then pointed at the *bangyan* and *tanhua* , introducing them. “Reporting to Your Majesty, these are the second-ranked *bangyan* , Liu Kui of Jiangning,[40] and third-ranked *tanhua* Fu Yulun of Huaiyang.”[41]

Zhao Sheng praised each one by one before allowing us to return to our seats. Once we were seated, Zhao Sheng raised his hand and a group of women floated out from behind. Some played the flute, others the zither,[42] and lastly some began to dance. After a while, one of women slowly began to sing:

“When will the moon be clear and bright?With a cup of wine in my hand, I ask the clear sky.In the heavens on this night,I wonder what season it would be.I’d like to ride the wind to fly home.Yet I fear the crystal and jade mansionsAre much too high and cold for me.Dancing with my moonlit shadow,It does not seem like the human world.The moon rounds the red mansion,Stoops to silk-pad doors,Shines upon the sleepless,Bearing no grudge,Why does the moon tend to be full when people are apart?People experience sorrow, joy, separation and reunion,The moon may be dim or bright, round or crescent shaped,This imperfection has been going on since the beginning of time.May we all be blessed with longevity,Though thousands of miles apart, we are still able to share the beauty of the moon together.”[43]

This was the poem that I had composed during the examination. Everyone in the gardens immersed themselves in the beautiful feelings engendered.

Just then, a eunuch entered and reported, “Reporting to Your Majesty, the Prime Minister requests an audience.”

Zhao Sheng slowly replied, “What is it? We are enjoying the Qionglin Feast. If there are any other matters of state, let him handle it.”

“The Prime Minister said it was urgent,” replied the eunuch.

Zhao Sheng helplessly nodded and said, “Fine, let him enter.”

Soon, an elderly man dressed in the robes of an *yipin* [44] official hurriedly entered. When he saw Zhao Sheng, he prostrated himself. “Congratulations to Your Majesty. Great Yong has dispatched an envoy to express the Yong Emperor’s decree, expressing a wish to foster a marriage alliance.”

Although he had a look of happiness on his features, Zhao Sheng asked disbelievingly, “Is this true?”

The elderly official answered, “It is true—the Yong Emperor has a beloved daughter who has reached marriageable age[45] and is willing to marry her to the Crown Prince to serve as Crown Princess. From this point onwards, the two states will be allied and will forever be at peace.”

Zhao Sheng happily said, “Today has witnessed two blessings for my Southern Chu. First, Southern Chu has acquired talented individuals capable of serving as pillars of the state. Second is this alliance with Great Yong. Come, quickly summon the Yong envoy for an audience.”

After he finished speaking, Zhao Sheng quickly left. My life’s only Qionglin Feast thus finished with a whimper.[46] However, the faces of everyone who had heard the good news were filled with joy. I had some doubt. Why did Great Yong suddenly want to form a marriage alliance with Southern Chu? Was this similar to the plans that I had previously envisioned? *It couldn’t be possible* , I thought as I shook my head.

The court was busy preparing for the marriage alliance in the subsequent several months. Following the regulations, I entered Hanlin Academy, happily casting myself into the library. I heard faint whispers about the great beauty of the Yong Emperor’s daughter, the Princess Changle, and her favor before the Emperor. But I thought to myself, how beautiful could a young girl of fifteen be?

After a few months of preparations and concluding the six traditional pre-wedding rites,[47] the wedding between Princess Changle and the Crown Prince of Southern Chu was held on the New Year. As the new *zhuangyuan* , I had the fortune of the attending the wedding. As the ceremony concluded

and the crown prince and princess accepted the customary deferential greetings from the gathered court officials, I finally had the opportunity to see Princess Changle's features. She was graceful, elegant, and stunning. Although a bit young and immature, she was truly beautiful. In comparison, the crown prince standing beside her, although already over twenty, was eclipsed. Of course, everyone lied that the pair were an "ideal couple matched by heaven."[48] Hoping that the Yong Emperor could not have been so heartless as to use his daughter as a pawn in a fake marriage alliance, I sincerely prayed that Southern Chu and Great Yong would not go to war and that relations remain harmonious, allowing me to live a few decades in peace.

As I was sincerely praying, the musicians began to sing and play my work as a newly minted Hanlin academician, *Sapphire Jade Plate* :

"Flowers bursting into bloom in the sky,Then scatter down as star-like rain.The scent of precious horses and ornate carriages fill the road,Notes from a phoenix flute hover in the air,The moon, like a jade wine cup, hangs in the sky,Fish and dragon lanterns dance in the breeze all night.Beautiful women wear ornaments of all kinds on their heads,They converse cheerfully and laugh heartily, leaving their secret fragrance behind.In the crowd for a thousand times, I failed to find my love,When suddenly turning back by chance,I find her standing alone in far end of the street in the waning light."[49]

As the court ladies began to dance, I raised my head and watched as Princess Changle turned her face slightly away. A lone tear slid down her cheek. My heart froze. This young woman must now spend the rest of her life far away from home, never to see her family again. That was if all things went well. If this marriage were fake—even though I hoped it was real, I was not certain—, then this young woman would meet a cruel end.

At this moment, I noticed the crown prince lower his head and whisper into the princess's ear. Although they were far away and the hall was filled with noise, I could faintly make out the crown prince informing the princess that this *Sapphire Jade Plate: Night of the Lantern Festival* was the work of the imperial examination's *zhuangyuan* , Jiang Zhe. Following the crown

prince's gaze, she turned her head and looked upon me, smiling faintly. Her smile was like the flowers blossoming in the spring and my heart could not help but tremble. Quickly lowering my head, there was an odd feeling in my heart, but I didn't know why.

Note :

In China, there are multiple ways of saluting. In *jianghu* and common usage, a typical salute involves making a fist with the right hand, while either using the left hand to wrap around the right fist or the right fist is held against the open left palm . Females switch this around. It's also switched around to denote the start of an argument or fight. In polite society, salutes were made holding the two palms forward together, the fingers overlapping somewhat .

Footnotes :

状元, zhuangyuan – the title of the individual who comes first in the imperial examinations; those who came in the top three of the were known as the yijia (**一甲**) or first tier and were titled as the zhuangyuan (**状元**), bangyan (**榜眼**), and tanhua (**探花**), respectively

长乐, changle – everlasting happiness

戊辰元月, wuchen yuanyue – first month of the fifth year of the sixty year cycle

高祖, gaozu –lit. Supreme Ancestor; typically a title used to honor the founding emperor of a dynasty

会试, huishi – the national level (and sometimes the final stage) of the imperial examinations; the *huishi* lasted three days with the examinees locked in solitary rooms

文房四宝, wenfang sibao – lit. four treasures of the study; refers to the brush, ink, paper, and ink stone used in Chinese calligraphy

青, qing – black, blue, or green colored

先生, xiansheng – sir, mister, teacher

奴家, nujia – I, my; lit. your servant, a form of humble self-reference for a female

In dynastic China, literacy was not very high. As a result, scholars would frequently help others write documents, including helping them write out a

complaint for a lawsuit. Without such a document, it was very difficult for a lawsuit to be filed with the authorities

In traditional Chinese culture and the legal system dating back to the beginning of Chinese civilization, once a woman was married to someone, she became a part of that family. If the husband died, the wife would have to remain a widow throughout her life. If she wished to remarry, she would have to have the agreement of her in-laws before she can do so. Without permission, such a marriage would not only be deemed illegal, but the widow would be punished severely.

瓜田李下, gu tian xiao li– idiom, originates from a longer idiom 瓜田不納履, 李下不正冠／瓜田不纳履, 李下不正冠, lit. being caught with one's hand in the cookie jar; a position that invites suspicion, in suspicious circumstances or surroundings

时辰, shichen – equivalent to two hours

大人, daren – a title used to refer to one's superiors

京兆尹, jingzhaoyin – the prefectural magistrate assigned to the capital region; China was divided into prefectures (zhoufu, 州府), including the imperial capital, each with a prefectural magistrate (zhifu, 知府) assigned; the capital region (for Southern Chu, Jianye) was known as the 京兆 (jingzhao)

易经, yijing – the *Book* or *Classic of Changes* ; also Romanized in the West as the *I Ching* ; the oldest Chinese classic and an ancient divination text that uses cleromancy (using random numbers) to determine divine intent

您, nin – polite form of you

老兄, laoxiong – an informal way of addressing male counterparts

老三, laosan – informal way of referring someone who is ranked number three; third brother

弟妹, dimei – younger brother's wife

龙凤胎, longfengtai – lit. dragon and phoenix twins; the dragon was considered to be male, while the phoenix female

在下, zaixia – a humble way of saying I, me

也罢, yeba – never mind, fine (indicating acceptance or resignation)

坎卦上六, 系用徽纆, 置于丛棘, 三岁不得, 凶 – this divination comes from the *Book of Changes* and is very bad and means, "A man who in the

extremity of danger has lost the right of way and irremediably entangled in his sins has no prospects of escape. He is like a criminal who sits shackled behind thorn-entangled walls."

阁下, gexia – your distinguished self, sire

老爷, laoye – lord, master; a humble way of addressing someone

蓬荜生辉, pengbishenghui – idiom, lit. your presence brings light (honor) to my humble dwelling

崇文殿, chongwen dian – Palace of Sublime Culture/Literature

进士, jinshi – title for those who successfully passed the highest level of the imperial examinations

兄台, xiongtai – polite way of addressing someone (male)

琼林宴, qionglin yan – lit. Jade Forest Feast; first begun by the Song Dynasty, this feast was given by the Emperor to honor the new jinshi; the feast was placed at the Qionglin Garden (qionglin yuan, 琼林苑)

朝阳门, chaoyang men – lit. Facing the Sun Gate

司礼监, silijian – lit. Directorate of Ceremonies; one of the and the foremost ranking directorates of the imperial court assigned to handle ceremonial matters including ascension to the throne, the death of the emperor, and the feast of the new jinshi

国主万岁万岁万万岁, guozhu wansui wansui wanwansui – lit. Long live the King; may His Majesty live ten thousand years

众卿, zhongqing – 众 means all, while 卿 are often a high ranking official that is worthy of being addressed with this honorific used by emperor; sometimes the emperor may refer to them as 爱卿 (aiqing)

酒过三巡, 菜过五味, jiuguosanxun, caiguowuwei – lit. having drank and eaten our fill

孤, gu – the royal we; term used by kings and princes

臣, chen – subject or vassal

臣遵旨, chen zunzhi – lit. this vassal obeys your majesty's command

江宁, Jiangning – a historical prefecture that is today a district of Nanjing

淮阳, Huaiyang – a prefecture centered around the area that is modern-day Yangzhou and Huai'an

琴, qin – the zither

This is the majority of a poem by Su Shi, aka Su Dongpo, a Tang Dynasty poet

famed alongside Du Fu. The poem's original name is 水调歌头, 丙辰中秋 (shuidiao getou, bingchen zhongqiu).

一品, yipin – lit. first-ranked; in China, civil and military official hierarchy were divided into nine ranks (first to nine, with first being highest)

年方及笈, nianfengjiji – has reached marriageable age, has become an adult; in ancient China, girls reached adulthood at the age of fifteen

虎头蛇尾, hutou shewei – idiom, tiger's head, snake's tail; start strong, finish weak

The six traditional pre-wedding rites include 纳采 (nacai, the formal proposal), 文明 (wenming, giving the 生成八字, shengchengbazi (the eight-character birth data used for astrological purposes) of the groom), 纳吉 (naji, placement of the eight-character astrological data upon the ancestral altar to confirm compatibility, 纳征 (nazheng, sending of the betrothal gifts to the bride and the return gifts to the groom), 请期 (qingqi, selection of an auspicious wedding date), and lastly 亲迎 (qinying, the wedding ceremony)

郎才女貌, 天作之合, langcainümao, tianzuozhihe – lit. talented man and beautiful woman, a match made in heaven

This is a poem by Song Dynasty poet, Xin Qiji. The name has not been changed. *Baidu* , China's premier search engine, takes its name from a line in the poem: "In the crowd for a thousand times, I failed to find my love, *When suddenly turning back by chance* I find her standing alone in far end of the street in the waning light." (众里寻他千百度，蓦然回首，那人却在灯火阑珊处。)

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 3: Hanlin Academic

Volume 1, Chapter 3: Hanlin Academic

In the ninth month of the sixteenth year of Xiande, Jiang Zhe enters Hanlin Academy.[1] Due to ranking first in the imperial examinations, he becomes a Hanlin Academy Junior Compiler,[2] rated seventh-ranked.[3]

In the first month of the seventeenth year of Xiande, due to his erudition and reputation, Jiang Zhe was appointed to help establish the Palace of Sublime Culture. Over a period of three years, Jiang Zhe was appreciated for his skill, his research and analytical ability, for often enduring sleepless nights and forgetting to eat, diligence and hard work.[4] Not much later, he is promoted to the rank of Hanlin Academy Senior Compiler,[5] rated lower sixth-ranked.[6]

—*Southern Chu Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Jiang Suiyun*

What a blessing! Stretching, I raised the sole extant copy of a poetry anthology. These days, I spent my time in the library of Hanlin Academy. This was definitely the world's greatest library with many books that I had not yet read. I had read many books before and with my photographic memory, I only needed to read a book once to memorize its contents. I could even write out from rote memory complete essays. But no matter my abilities, there was no way for me to read the million-plus books. I found and used the library register to identify books that I had not read, to read one by one. I was going to be staying at Hanlin Academy for at least three to five years, and should be able to read most of the books that I had not had the chance to read before. Of course, I paid the most attention to those books indicated as the sole extant copies, as most of these works were masterpieces.

On this day, I was searching in the stacks for something to read when I noticed a book with a yellow silk cover. From the exquisite cover, I presumed that it must be some masterpiece. When I opened the cover, I nearly fainted from shock. On the first page were eight words dripping with

blood: “to train this godly art, first castrate oneself.”[7] I quickly closed the book and looked at the cover, seeing that it was called the *Sunflower Manual* .[8] As I still wanted to marry and have children, I quickly threw the book aside.

On the side, I noticed a copy of Zhuangzi’s *Essentials for Nourishing Life* [9] dating back to the Han Dynasty. Picking it up, I flipped through the pages. Although the contents were the characters on the pages were the same as I remembered, there were many notes and comments written wherever there were empty spaces. I liked to read other people’s annotations, as they embodied the hard work of scholars. Seeing that no one was around, I readily pulled over a nearby footstool and sat down. Leaving the stacks to find a proper seat would be a waste of time. I became engrossed. The annotations were likely written by a Daoist priest who was also a doctor, and contained the secrets to nourishing one’s life: what one could eat and drink, when to rise and to sleep, how to meditate before bed, how to exercise one’s *qi* , and sexual techniques. This was definitely my favorite. Don’t laugh at me! My greatest wish was to live comfortably without ailments and disasters, to wed a gentle and virtuous wife, and to have several cute children. Sexual techniques were definitely important. Don’t all those licentious individuals frequently live short lives? They did not know how to control themselves and did not know how to give their bodies proper nourishment. Just as I was becoming happy, I suddenly realized that I did not know if these annotations were correct. What was I to do? Thinking back and forth, I ultimately decided to find out myself. In the following month, I searched the entire library for texts on how to maintain one’s good health; some directly conflicted, while others matched. But who am I? A genius! I finally organized a set of methods that I began to use to properly maintain my health.

First, when I woke up and opened my eyes, I would sit calmly, meditating and exercising my *qi* . Then, I exercised my body. Though I did not know any kung fu, I did know the basic exercises known as the "Five Animals Play."[10] Afterwards, I would eat a light breakfast without grease or strong flavors before heading off. If there was nothing at noon, I would return home to eat a nutritious lunch as late as possible. I would then take an afternoon nap.

After waking up, I would do as I pleased. If there were any feasts or events at night, I would try to eat and drink as little as possible, and when home would drink some medicinal alcohol to cleanse my digestive system. After meditating for an hour, I would then go to bed. I had to sit, sleep, and walk in a particular fashion that wasn't too particularly noticeable. Even though my current rank was low, I was busy enough that I could not constantly maintain this lifestyle, I tried my best to adhere. As for martial arts, I had no intention of training. Doesn't the saying go, "Good swimmers are more liable to drown"? If I knew martial arts, I would likely be dragged into some unimaginable scenario and possibly even die at a young age. It's not like I wanted to live forever, just living to the age of seventy was enough for me.

I continued for two months and discovered a noticeable improvement in my body's health. Previously, I had some small ailments and maladies, but they all disappeared. My mind became clearer, and I felt that I had more energy while reading and writing.

This day, I had just left the stacks to eat lunch. Unfortunately, I wasn't wealthy enough to hire a cook and had to make my own food. As I was considering my lunch options, I ran into a class colleague,[11] Liu Kui. As he walked over smiling happily, he said, "Brother[12] Jiang, how about it? Let's go to the Bright Moon Pavilion together."

"Go to the Bright Moon Pavilion to do what?" I asked with curiosity.

Surprised, Liu Kui replied, "What? You don't know? We're going to attend Princess Changle's zither gathering."

"Zither gathering, Princess Changle?" I responded, even more confused.

"Yes," he stated, "No one in Jianye does not know that ever since Princess Changle came to our state to be wed, she has missed her homeland. In order to divert herself from her loneliness, she has organized this zither gathering. I have heard that she wishes to witness for herself the demeanor of Southern Chu's scholars. I have also heard that Great Yong's famed zither fairy, Liang Wan, was part of her dowry. Liang Wan was purportedly a student of the musical sage, Wu Youzi, and is extremely refined. If she wasn't a good friend of Princess Changle, she would not have come to Southern

Chu. In addition, I've heard that Liang Wan has come to Southern Chu to search for a husband. Almost all the eligible scholarly bachelors want to take this opportunity."

Dumbfounded, I ventured, "But isn't Liang Wan part of her dowry?"

"That's nothing more than an excuse," said someone off to the side. "I've heard that the Princess has already spoken to the Crown Prince. Liang Wan is her good sister and must be wed to a gifted scholar of similar demeanor as the first wife."

Turning my head, I realized that it was the *tanhua* , Fu Yulun. Seeing that he had already changed into luxurious informal wear with a jade flute at his waist, I could tell that he was definitely interested in Liang Wan. Remembering that he hailed from an influential family in Huaiyang, he definitely looked the part. I laughed in my heart. If Liang Wan was really so beautiful and talented, the crown prince would surely be interested. Of course, he must give face to Princess Changle. But once he ascended the throne and was permitted a harem, he could easily pick Liang Wan as a concubine. Right now though, he had to be circumspect, because of Princess Changle's unusual status.

I originally was disinterested. I was aware of my own shortcomings. Although my features weren't too bad, they were nothing to brag about. Although I was talented, talent without a sponsor meant that I had no way of ascending the ranks quickly. These years, with the world in turmoil, those generals able to command armies and battle were much more prestigious than us scholars. As Southern Chu emphasized scholars, its national strength wasn't particularly strong and could not even compare to Sichuan's Kingdom of Shu. If our navy wasn't so strong, Great Yong would likely have already crossed the Yangtze. In summary, I, Jiang Zhe, was unworthy of attention and had no strong backing to protect me. Don't even say that Liang Wan will take a fancy towards me, as even if she did, I would not dare marry her. But I couldn't not go, as it meant not giving face to the crown prince and Princess Changle. I decided to go just this once. And although I was skilled with the four arts,[13] I was not necessarily the best. I could listen to the zither. I could play some *weiqi* (go), but would most likely lose. My

calligraphy was decent, but could not compare to those master calligraphers. As for painting, though I knew how to paint, I was better at appreciating. I had a maternal uncle who was a famed court painter. Countless treasures, works of calligraphy, and paintings passed through his hands. In the past, I spent some time under his tutelage and having read many books, I would likely have entered the court in a similar capacity if my father had not taken me away.

While indulging in these flights of fancy, I replied aimlessly to their words. We soon arrived at the Bright Moon Pavilion. The pavilion was originally the secondary manor of a high-ranking official and adjacent to the official residence of the crown prince, built a few years ago. Afterwards, the crown prince decided he might as well purchase the manor. As the manor was small, but exquisite, it was connected to the official residence. It was said that upon arrival, Princess Changle fell in love with the manor and was allowed to use it as her place of relaxation. For Liang Wan to hold her zither gathering here was quite appropriate.

After passing through a dark side entrance, I carefully considered the small garden before me. Before me was a clear green pond, a dozen plum trees, and a small but refined two-story building. It was definitely the realm of immortals. No wonder it was beloved by Princess Changle. Thinking to myself as I walked, I considered the size of the building and wondered how many people it could hold. After I skirted the pond, I noticed that there was an open area before the building. The area was probably previously used for flora, but now had been cleared and a canopy erected. A thick layer of straw covered the canopy, and inside, braziers were placed on all sides. One could smell the fragrant scent of wine. There were several rows of fur-coated seats. Although Southern Chu's winters weren't particularly cold, a light dusting of snow had fallen earlier in the day and the air outside was cool. It was comfortably warm within the greenhouse. There were a few dozen young, refined gentlemen dressed in various colors. While drinking fragrant wines, they appreciated the beauty of the fallen snow and the plum trees. Truly this was part of the wonderful life of being in the south. Walking closer, I could hear the discussion. Princess Changle's zither gathering wasn't just open to anyone. Besides the young newly enfeoffed individuals,

the only others were the younger generation of influential families. All of them had some talent or they otherwise would not have come out of fear of embarrassing themselves. As a result, the number of attendees was lower than we expected. Although I regretted my attendance, I was dissatisfied by the reception. Picking a seat in the corner, I sat down and poured myself a cup of warmed wine, prepared to steal quite a bit of respite.

It wasn't long before the door of the small building opened and twelve beautiful and refined ladies dressed in court attire exited and lowered the beaded curtains. The *ding dong* sound of jewelry could be heard and an alluring scent wafted out. One of the court ladies bent and gestured towards the interior before turning and speaking, "Her Highness, the Princess, commands: Lady Liang will remain in the building and play the zither. Regardless of poems or essays, or the four arts, as long as someone can gain Lady Liang's favor, she will come out to greet one and all."

Everyone sat steadily in their seats, waiting with baited breath. Not long afterwards, the sound of the zither could be heard. It began softly, weakly, forcing everyone to listen closely. Slowly, the sound of the zither seemed to slowly hover in the air, almost like a butterfly meandering as it flapped its wings. The music slowly repeated seeming like an endless rhyme, reminding one and all of scenes of high mountains and flowing streams. The sounds were fresh and smooth, giving birth to a soul-stirring feeling. Up to this point, I almost yawned with boredom. I had expected that a zither master from Great Yong must be amazing, but in the end, was only so-so. This kind of ability with the zither was not uncommon in Southern Chu. Just then, the music slowly lowered in volume, giving one the feeling of sleepiness. Suddenly, almost like the shattering of a silver vase, as if the cavalry charged forth, the sounds transformed and became like the sounds of an army of tens of thousands running unhindered across the lands. After this explosion, the music became resoundingly deep, as the killing intent was buried, and replaced by sorrow. A truly wonderful imagery of a battlefield filled with soldiers. I listened attentively. This was definitely worthy of being considered a great master of the zither. The sound of the zither slowly diminished, as calm was restored, signaling the end of the battle and the beginning of song and dance, allowing one to become intoxicated by the

carefree and relaxed sounds.[14]

When the piece finished, applause thundered. Afterwards, everyone produced their proud works to gain Liang Wan's favor. However, her standards were very high and refused to come out. Afterwards, some of those with some brains turned their attention to me. A young master of an influential family half begged, half commanded, "I have long heard of the literary brilliance[15] of the new *zhuangyuan* , Jiang Zhe, who shook the world with the poem, *Recollections Under the Moon* . Would Brother Jiang compose a poem and prevent Southern Chu's scholars from losing face?"

I was speechless. These folks insinuated that if I failed to produce a worthy poem, then I would have harmed our country's reputation. Fine…. This young man was the only son of the prime minister. I could not afford to offend him. Having listened to the music, I was already itching to compose a piece. Not bothering with brush or paper, I recited:

"Affectionately whispering, a young boy and girl speak, in fondness or ire they call each other 'dear.'Abruptly it changes to the heroic, brave warriors charging across the battlefield.Floating clouds of willow fluff without stamens, across the broad sky and vast earth accordingly fly and flutter.The raucous cries of hundreds of birds in a flock, suddenly seeing a solitary phoenix.It scrambles upwards inching until it no longer can go up, losing control it abruptly falls a thousand fathoms or more.Oh, ever since I've had two ears, I've never known how to listen to strings or zithers.But since I've heard Mistress Liang play, I've had to rise from my seat in respect to one side.I wave my arm in order to stop him, soaking my robes tears gush down.Wan, ah! You are really capable, but don't cause the emotional turmoil of the music to go straight to my belly."[16]

After a moment's silence, all cheered. A few even rushed to ask for brush and paper to put to write down my words. Amidst this chaotic scene, the beaded curtains flew apart and from the building exited a woman clad in yellow with a green cloak draped around her shoulders. This woman was about twenty years of age. She was taller than the women of Southern Chu, and possessed an hourglass figure. Although she was wearing many layers due to the weather, her hidden beauty elicited everyone's desires. I gazed at

her face. Although she did not wear any makeup, her skin was as pale as that of snow. Coupled with a pair of carefully trimmed and painted eyebrows, and bright eyes that seemed as clear as an icy spring, she was definitely a gorgeous beauty.

Liang Wan's gaze fell upon me. Smiling slightly, she paid her respects, "This must be the brilliant scholar of Southern Chu, this examination's *zhuangyuan* . This servant[17] likes your poetic verses greatly."

Although I was a bit dazzled, I understood what was going on and hastily returned, "That this humble work can receive my lady's[18] praise is Suiyun's blessing. In reality, the gifted scholars of Southern Chu number like the clouds. It is only that my[19] creativity is a bit more responsive compared to others. If my lady is interested in the gifted scholars of Southern Chu, then there is no harm in conversing with everyone."

Liang Wan's beautiful eyes moved around, considering everyone. And so, everyone felt like they had been given a reprieve, hurriedly rushing forward and surrounding her. I didn't say much afterwards. Soon, after seeing that Liang Wan had already begun to converse with everyone in a congenial manner, I slowly and subtly left. Just as I was about to leave through the side door, I felt something and turned. I saw that a window was open. From within I espied a pair of crystal clear eyes were watching me. I pushed the door open and left. Who was that? I didn't know why, but I could be feel that those eyes belonged to Princess Changle.

I later heard that Princess Changle had gifted the Bright Moon Pavilion to Liang Wan to serve as her residence. Liang Wan possessed a cheerful temperament. As long as a visitor could produce a worthy verse or song, or any of the four arts, she would greet them personally. As a result, many young men who admired her sought to see her. Although there were many who lusted after her, the presence of Princess Changle prevented anyone from using force. And with the rise in Liang Wan's reputation and name, not many dared to offend her. Afterwards, even King Zhao Sheng adopted Liang Wan as his daughter. Although she did not enter into the royal family register, everyone called her Princess Mingyue,[20] and her fame spread far and wide.

As a lowly Hanlin Academic, I wasn't going to look for trouble. Though I received several invitations from Liang Wan, I rejected them all using all kinds of excuses. If anyone were to ask, I would respond that the books possessed their own beauties. Even though everyone laughed at my pedantry, they were happy to have one less competitor. In order to prevent anything excessive, I enthusiastically engrossed myself in the books at Hanlin Academy. I was therefore able to not only keep myself entertained, but also avoid the others' attentions. This led to an event that filled me with joy.[21] In the first month of the seventeenth year of Xiande, I was allowed to, by royal decree, help establish the Palace of Sublime Culture. I quickly became a major force due to my photographic memory, ability to serve as an appreciator of antiques, and my wide knowledge. Not only was I very effective at organizing the book collection, works of calligraphy, and paintings, I also was young and strong. If they did not use me, who were they to use? This was the happiest period of my life. The Palace of Sublime Culture took three years from the issuance of the decree to the completion of the construction. I took part in its entirety, enjoying every moment.[22]

Of course, while I indulged in the sea of books, something happened that I faintly believed would. Conflict arose between Southern Chu and the Kingdom of Shu, and became increasingly intense. I had no way of being involved and really was disinterested in the entire matter.

Other than this, Princess Changle became pregnant, but unfortunately suffered a miscarriage. It was said that she was too young and wasn't accustomed to living in Southern Chu. Afterwards, she moved out of the crown prince's official residence to a royal residence located at Lake Mochou at the western outskirts of Jianye. The crown prince did not join her and, in fact, wasn't even lonely. The ladies-in-waiting, who came as part of Princess Changle's dowry, were all beauties from Great Yong and skilled in the bedroom. They swiftly became the crown prince's favored concubines. The face of the person who told me of these details was filled with envy at the crown prince's luck with women. I could only bitterly laugh. In my view, Princess Changle only moved to the royal residence on the outskirts of the city because she did not like the crown prince. As a princess of Great Yong, she was a peerless beauty of blue-blooded nobility.[23] Having been used as a

tool in a marriage alliance with Southern Chu, she was in no mood to fawn over such a mediocre crown prince. Taking a negative view, did Great Yong deliberately provide so many great beauties as part of the dowry to seduce the crown prince and prevent the princess from suffering?

Footnotes :

Hanlin Academy (翰林院) was an academic and administrative institution founded originally in the Tang Dynasty. Membership in the academy was confined to an elite group of scholars, often individuals who placed high within the imperial examinations. These scholars performed secretarial and literary tasks for the court, including drafting documents and the interpretation of Chinese classics. Membership in this exclusive institution often led to higher positions in government.

翰林院编修, hanlinyuan bianxiu – Hanlin Academy Junior Compiler, a lower-ranked academic

七品, qipin – seventh-ranked

手不释卷, shubushijuan – idiom, lit. always with a book in hand

翰林院修撰, hanlinyuan xiuzhuan – Hanlin Academy Senior Compiler

从六品, cong liupin – lower sixth-ranked

欲练神功，挥刀自宫, yulian shengong, huidao zigong – lit. in order to train this godly martial art, you must castrate oneself

葵花宝典, kuihua baodian – lit. Sunflower Treasured Book; the *Sunflower Manual* is a reference to *Smiling, Proud Wanderer* (笑傲江湖, xiao ao jianghu), a wuxia novel by Jinyong. The manual was created by a eunuch and is used by one of the deuteragonists, Dongfang Bubai

养生主, yangshengzhu – lit. Essentials for Nourishing Life, is the third chapter within the philosophical text known as *Zhuangzi* by Zhuang Zhou (aka Zhuangzi); the text utilizes stories, such as whimsical allegories, to illustrate how to live a full life.

五禽戏, wuqinxi – lit. five animal play; a set of qigong exercises developed during the Han Dynasty that mimics the movements of five different animals – tiger, deer, bear, monkey, and crane.

同年, tongnian – someone who passed the imperial examination in the same year; in Chinese officialdom, the most important relationships that one possessed were with one's teacher and with colleagues who passed the

imperial examination in the same year
年兄, nianxiong – lit. older brother; in this case, Liu Kui is politely referring to a **同年**
琴棋书**画**, qinqishuhua – lit. zither, weiqi (go), calligraphy, and painting; these four arts were the main academic and artistic accomplishments required of an ancient Chinese scholar-gentleman
心旷**神怡**, xinkuangshenyi – idiom, lit. heart untroubled, spirit pleased
才华**横溢**, caihuahengyi – idiom, lit. brimming with talent (especially literary); brilliant
This is a poem, originally entitled *Listening to Reverend Ying Play the Qin* (**听**颖师弹**琴**, **琴** means lute) is by the Tang Dynasty poet, Han Yu (韩**愈**) who has been described as having comparable stature to Dante, Shakespeare, or Goethe. The author of this web novel changed the subject of Reverend Ying to Mistress Liang.
妾身, qieshen – lit. your servant (deprecatory self-reference for women)
小姐, xiaojie – lit. young lady (typically used in a respectful manner)
The text here says **江某**, jiangmou; Jiang Zhe uses this as a self-deprecatory way of referring to himself
明月公主, mingyue gongzhu – Princess Bright Moon; taking her name from the Bright Moon Pavilion
欣喜若狂, xinxiruokuang – idiom, lit. to be wild with joy
乐**此不疲**, lecibuqi – idiom, lit. to enjoy and never tire of it
金枝玉叶, jinzhiyuye – idiom, lit. golden branch, jade leaves; fig. blue-blooded nobility, particularly those who are imperial kinsmen or peerless beauties

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 4: Appreciating Art, Overturning Injustice

Volume 1, Chapter 4: Appreciating Art, Overturning Injustice

In the third month of the eighteenth year of Xiande or the sixth year of the sixty-year cycle, I had reached the age of twenty-two. After I had ranked first in the imperial examinations and become the *zhuangyuan* , there were many people who came to my home to play matchmaker. I declined them all, using the excuse that I was still young and wished to continue to study in order to better serve the government. Thereafter, fewer and fewer people came. Many of those with discerning eyes soon realized that even though I was a young *zhuangyuan* , there was little chance for me to rise in rank meteorically.[1] In addition, I buried myself in books, almost as if I was obsessed. This kind of person did not meet the requirements set forth by the influential families. As a result, I was able to experience a rarely occurring peace and quiet.

This day, as usual, I came to Hanlin Academy to prepare for work. I saw a huge crowd gathered in the main hall. I was surprised. To wit, even though I was a Hanlin Academic, there was still a hierarchy in Hanlin Academy. Because I was the *zhuangyuan* , I was able to jump over a number of ranks (including Bachelor[2] and Examining Editor[3] directly to a *zhengqipin* [4] rated position as a Junior Compiler). Above me were several positions, including the Senior Compiler, Expositor, Reader, Expositor-in-Waiting,[5] Reader-in-Waiting[6] , and Academy Chancellor[7] . When I looked over, I saw a diverse crowd. Amidst the crowd, at the head was the Academy Chancellor, Xie Xian, while at the back was a Bachelor who had recently passed the imperial examination alongside me in the second tier. I was greatly surprised, especially by the presence of those who were ranked as Expositor-in-Waiting and above who usually spent their time accompanying the king, all of whom were gathered here. Walking forward, I noticed Academic Yin and Academic Tian arguing heatedly. On the table in the middle was an antique painting. Next to the painting was a red piece of paper. On it was written: Green Hills Sage Riverside Painting.[8] Everyone must be arguing over and

trying to determine the provenance of the painting. After the king had decreed the establishment of the Palace of Sublime Culture, many people had donated their antique books, works of calligraphy and paintings, but real masterpieces were difficult to find.

Academic Yin gracefully said, “This painting must be a forgery. The earlier works by the Green Hills Sage have always been of green landscapes with a gorgeous style. His later works were influenced by his beliefs in Buddhism and Daoism, and were primarily of ink landscapes filled with tranquil beauty. Although this painting is an ink landscape, the brushwork is rugged, the clouds and mists are too eye-catching, and the rivers are roiling. Therefore, I do not believe that this is a work by the Green Hills Sage.”

Academic Tian did not show any weakness in his response. “Although what you say makes sense, but look … the paper used for this painting is carefully selected. Although well preserved, we can see that it is a work of the Green Hills Sage's time period—two hundred years ago. We can also see the presence of the seal of the Green Hills Sage. From the postscript, there should not be any problems.”

The other officials were split on both sides, arguing incessantly. Interested in what was happening, I carefully scrutinized the painting for a long time. Only after accessing my memories and using my own experiences did I make my judgment. Everyone saw that I had come. Because I had shown significant skill in appraising antique works and was a newly appointed official, the two arguing academics invariably both turned to me. The Academy Chancellor coughed and spoke, “Suiyun, what is your view?”

Walking to the table, I stood in front of the painting. Opening my mouth, I explained, “First, looking at the characters on the painting. The upper section has the words: ‘Brother Ke Ziyuan’s elegant pastime.’ The bottom section has the words: ‘respectively manufactured on the ninth day of the seventh month of the second year of Yuanyou, the 21st year of the sixty-year cycle.’ The four corners of the painting have signs pointing to the Green Hills Sage. The top left has the *zhuwen* [9] markings of the Ningquan Paint Engraving, the bottom left has the *baiwen* [10] of the Linyuan Hall,[11] the top right has the *baiwen* seal of an expositor of the Gezhang Pavilion,[12] and the

bottom right has the *zhuwen* seal of the Green Hills Sage. These four seals have all appeared on the other works by the Green Hills Sage. Academic Tian is among the best at identifying the origin of seals, and is probably not wrong. From the contextual research, we can safely say that the Green Hills Sage was a famed scholar of the Jin Dynasty who was a *zhengsipin* [13] rated Expositor-in-Waiting of the Gezhang Pavilion. After Western Jin was forced south by encroaching nomadic tribes, the Green Hills Sage was heartbroken and lived in seclusion at the Linyuan Pavilion in Sichuan. It is said that the sage was too poor to be able to rely on himself. Fortunately, he was able to receive financial assistance from the wealthy Sichuan merchant, Ke Ming, to survive through the years of warfare. If you look at the two seal markings from the Ke family, we can conclude that this painting was gifted to Ke Ming."

Taking a breath, I continued, "These seal markings all have historical antecedents. I have read the Green Hills Sage's *Sichuan Chronicles* [14] . In the ninth volume, it states: 'During the autumn equinox, Ziyuan[15] organized a feast, and both host and guest enjoyed a wonderful time. As we bade our farewells, the Ke family asked for one of my unworthy works. To express my thanks, I painted the *Riverside Painting* .' I have also researched the Ke family. Although the family has disappeared into oblivion, I have found mentions in the work of Tao Kai called the *Shu Records* [16] written during the waning years of the Western Jin Dynasty. In the chapter on Shi Chong,[17] it states, 'When Shi Chong was young, he was treated indifferently as a laborer for the Ke family. When he later became wealthy, he conspired with eunuchs and slandered the Ke family as rebels, resulting in their complete extermination.'[18] If you look at the bottom left, you can see that there is also Shi Chong's Golden Valley Garden Treasure Depository seal. After Shi Chong, along with his family, was exterminated, most of his prized possessions ended up in the imperial court. On the middle left is the seal markings of the Prince of Changling.[19] The Prince of Changling was a member of the imperial clan of the waning years of the Western Jin Dynasty and was much favored by Emperor Yuan of Jin.[20] Emperor Yuan was the one who seized all of Shi Chong's possessions. It is highly likely that this painting ended up in the hands of the Prince of Changling. If we consider all of these facts, especially

with such a provenance, I believe that this painting is real."

The majority listening nodded their heads. Only Academic Yin was unable to accept these facts and inquired, "If everything you said is true, then how do you explain the painting style?"

Smiling, I replied, "This is only my personal view. If there is something wrong, I hope that everyone can point it out. Before fleeing south, the style of the Green Hills Sage's works was bright, cheerful, and intense. Therefore, he liked to paint green landscapes. But in the years before he traveled south, his painting style slowly became increasingly tranquil. He used ink as the basis before using green color on top. It's highly likely that he was already painting ink landscapes. Of the years he spent in Sichuan, very little of the Green Hills Sage's works have been handed down. It wasn't until Eastern Jin was established did he focus on ink landscape paintings. But, at the beginning, he preferred to use dense ink to embellish and had a straight and rigid calligraphy style. From this we can see that his time spent in Sichuan was a period of transition for his painting style. This also explains why so few works exist from this time period. Immature works would frequently be destroyed by their creator. I have read of the Green Hills Sage's penchant for doing so in the seventh volume of his *Sichuan Chronicles* ."

Listening up to this point, everyone had accepted my judgment, the look in their eyes becoming fervently respectful. After all, someone with my extensive knowledge was quite rare.

After this incident, I was given additional work, most important of which was to enter the palace and go to the book repository to organize the official imperial documents. As we had prepared to build the Palace of Sublime Culture, an individual proposed that someone organize the histories of Southern Chu using the official imperial documents to be able to educate the younger generation of the imperial family and aristocracy. Southern Chu had been founded for sixty years and experienced the reigns of two sovereigns, Zhao She, the founding Emperor Wu, and the current monarch, Zhao Sheng. Although I did not think there was much use, the rest of Hanlin Academy all agreed and petitioned the king, delighting Zhao Sheng. Unfortunately, organizing the official imperial documents was a particularly

troublesome task. Although I was a relatively new official, I was skilled. Academy Chancellor Xie Xian decided to give the responsibility to the Reader-in-Waiting, Xia Song and assigned me to assist. Xia Song was already over sixty and was preparing to retire. As a result, I was the one actually with the responsibility, while Xia Song only worked for a few days before requesting a leave of absence and returning home to rest. The most troublesome aspect of his job was the need to enter the Palace Library and work in the book repository where all of the documents were stored. And, I could not enter freely and needed to be accompanied by the eunuchs assigned to these storehouses. As a result, I began to work less than a hundred *zhang* [21] from the king. This was must be the true meaning of being very close and yet as far as the ends of the earth.

The eunuch supervising these storehouses was surnamed Wang. His hair was already white. To sit every day for twelve to fourteen hours was detrimental to his health. During the first day, I said, "Eunuch[22] Wang, we will probably have to spend up to half a month here. You don't have to be polite. Just find a low-ranking eunuch to come help. If I need your assistance, I will come find you every few days."[23] Eunuch Wang was already getting up in years and had an idle position. Although the book repository was very close to the Imperial Library, the eunuchs of the Bureau of Ceremonies were all young and vigorous with the favor of the king. Eunuch Wang could not even get close to the king. As he was in no position to vie for the King's favor, no one would bother to find trouble for him. So, he didn't have to worry even if he wasn't conscientious. Therefore, he dispatched a young eunuch, called Xiaoshunzi,[24] with less than a year's experience, to help me. This young eunuch's intelligence and few years of schooling was very rare amongst eunuchs. Not everyone could have the education offered to those in the Bureau of Ceremonies.

When I saw Xiaoshunzi, I froze. If I remembered correctly, this was the young boy I had met upon arriving in Jianye who was selling himself to bury his father. How did he now become a eunuch? As there was probably something sad, it was not appropriate for me to ask him. Since he didn't recognize me, I pretended that he was a stranger. This young eunuch was not bad, not only ably organizing the four treasures of the study, but also

quickly finding the petition or imperial document that I needed. We worked together harmoniously. A job that should have taken twenty days would probably only take twelve or thirteen at the most.

At noon on the third day, after lunch, as I was drinking a light tea and preparing to take a brief respite, Eunuch Wang suddenly burst in assisted by two young eunuchs, yelling, “Xiaoshunzi, Xiaoshunzi, where did this young blasted servant go?” Curious, I looked at him, wondering what was going on.

Seeing me, a smiling expression appeared on Eunuch Wang’s face, “Jiang *zhuangyuan* , you’re here too?”

Rubbish. If I weren't here, where would I be? I wasn’t allowed to return home to take my afternoon nap. While I was thinking this, I said, “Eunuch, what’s happened? Has something happened to rile you up so?”

Angrily, Eunuch Wang spat out, “The little bastard Xiaoshunzi’s hands aren’t clean; he has stolen my beloved snuff bottle awarded to this old servant[25] by the previous emperor.”

Opening his eyes wide, Xiaoshunzi kneeled on the ground, and said, “There is no such thing, this servant[26] does not have the gall nor the bravery to steal something bestowed by the emperor.” Having been castrated more than a year ago, before the age when children begin to physically mature, his voice was high-pitched. Now panicked, his voice became even more jarring.

Clearly his throat, a young eunuch helping Eunuch Wang said, “How dare you talk back? Do you think we don’t know? You were originally a criminal found guilty of robbery. When Steward[27] Wang lost something, I immediately thought of you. And as expected, when we searched your room, we found the snuff bottle.”

His face green with fear, Xiaoshunzi prostrated himself and replied, “This servant didn’t do it, this servant didn’t do it. Someone is definitely trying to frame me.”

Eunuch Wang furious replied, “Are you saying that I framed you or Xiaofuzi[28] framed you?”

Sweating with fear, Xiaoshunzi prostrated himself next to me, begging me,

“Jiang *daren* , you are someone educated. Please help me explain to the Head Eunuch. These last several days, this servant has been helping by the *daren* ’s side. How do I have the time to steal anything?”

I was originally watching the scene unfold before me in high spirits, having already seen what was going on. I noticed that although Xiaofuzi was a good actor, I could see that his breathing was agitated and his heart pounding, and had already concluded that he was deliberately framing Xiaoshunzi. But Xiaoshunzi’s background was not clean, so I did not have any way of explaining the situation. I did not want to become involved in any palace disputes so I gave him a gave a brief and indifferent look and didn’t say anything. Xiaoshunzi quickly became agitated. Seeing that I didn’t say anything, Eunuch Wang ordered, “Have him bound and sent to the discipline room. The sentence for the crime of stealing something in the Royal Palace is death. Have him beaten to death.”

Suddenly remembering the scene that I witnessed where Xiaoshunzi had tried to sell himself to bury his father, my heart softened. Since this wasn’t something major and he was innocent, I quickly thought up a plan. I impartially said, “Eunuch Wang, seeing this servant cry so hard, maybe he is innocent?”

Hesitating somewhat, Eunuch Wang responded, “We did find the snuff bottle hidden in his room.”

With a smile, I asked, “He has been following me the last few days. When was the Eunuch’s snuff bottle lost?”

Thinking, Eunuch Wang answered, “I used it last night. It disappeared around noon.”

Deliberately furrowing my brows, I stated, “This is definitely difficult to determine. How about this? I[29] am well versed in the *Book of Changes* , and am able to determine a man’s fate and identify injustices. Please allow me to perform a divination.”

As a eunuch who had lived a life filled with bumps, Eunuch Wang was quite superstitious. His eyes lighting up, he exclaimed, “*Daren* can divine fate? Excellent! Please help this old servant perform the calculations.”

Waving my hand, I replied, “Such a small divination does not require calculations. How about this, since we are trying to detect injustice. Those suffering injustice have an upright state of mind. I have a method. Have the accused Xiaoshunzi and the accuser Xiaofuzi each take this medicinal pellet that I have concocted. After I’ve beseeched the Heavens, if they are innocent, then they will be unharmed. If they are guilty, then they will suffer stomach pain.” As I finished speaking, I retrieved a small jade bottle from within my robes. Shaking out two small pellets, I handed them to the two young eunuchs.

Smiling, Eunuch Wang said, “Excellent, let this old servant witness the abilities of the *zhuangyuan* . You two, quickly swallow the pellets.”

Without any hesitation, Xiaoshunzi swallowed the pellet. Xiaofuzi hesitated briefly before pretending to swallow the pellet. Instead, using a trick, he hid the pellet in his sleeve. *Such good ability* , I thought with a sigh. Then I pretended to beseech the Heavens. After about the time it takes for a stick of incense to burn,[30] Xiaoshunzi’s face swiftly turned white. Gasping in pain, he fell to the ground clutching his stomach. Nothing happened to Xiaofuzi. Gleefully, he said, “As expected, you were the thief. The lord *zhuangyuan* ’s prayers have come true.”

Hesitating, Eunuch Wang looked at me. Just as he was about to give the order, I smiled faintly and said, “Although I do have some ability, I have no way to request the divine to punish you. I concocted this pellet to cleanse one’s stomach. Yesterday, I had heard that due to Eunuch Wang’s age, he suffers from indigestion. This kind of medicine is perfect for the elderly to use with lotus seed soup. If a young man with vigorous blood flow were to take this medicine, he would suffer from acute stomach pains. Xiaofuzi, where did you hide your pellet?”

Frightened, Xiaofuzi backed away, only to see Eunuch Wang step in front of him with a single, big stride. Eunuch Wang caught hold of Xiaofuzi’s wrist and twisted. In pain, Xiaofuzi could do nothing as Eunuch Wang easily found the pellet in Xiaofuzi’s sleeve. After Eunuch Wang released his grip, Xiaofuzi fell to the floor, frightened out of his wits. Indifferently, Eunuch Wang said, “Xiaoshunzi, quickly go to my room. There is a bowl of lotus seed soup on

the table being cooled."

Nodding his head, Xiaoshunzi rushed out. After a while, he returned, a look of relaxation on his features. Smiling such that he was almost squinting, Eunuch Wang said, "Thank you, my lord *zhuangyuan* for thinking of this old servant." Saying so while he bade his farewell, he quickly took the bottle of medicine from my hands and departed. Not long afterwards, two middle-aged eunuchs came and took Xiaofuzi away.

Thankful, Xiaoshunzi prostrated himself before me, saying, "Benefactor has now saved me twice. Even if Xiaoshunzi were to work tirelessly, there is no way that I can repay this kindness."

My eyes widening, it took some time before I could respond. "You still remember me?"

Blushing, Xiaoshunzi replied, "Actually, this servant immediately recognized my lord *zhuangyuan* . I would forever remember the time *daren* so generously helped me.

A bit curious, I asked, "Then why didn't you say so earlier?"

He hesitated for a long time before answering, "This servant … this servant was lying when I earlier tried to sell myself in order to bury my father."

As my eyes widened, Xiaoshunzi continued, "This servant originally hailed from a scholarly family. When my father died, my uncle stole the inheritance and secretly sold me into a theatrical troupe. This servant thus began to wander all over the world. I could not take the troupe's insults and fled with a few brothers. Without any livelihood, we could only beg, steal, and cheat. Last time meeting *daren* , I was working with an old beggar. He played my father, while I played the filial son. *Daren* generously helped. Two of our co-conspirators, blinded by greed, secretly followed *daren* …."

Reaching this point, Xiaoshunzi became even more embarrassed. I instantly realized who had knocked me unconscious. Still a bit confused, I asked, "You had so much money, enough to live. How did you … how did you…." I couldn't finish the question.

Smiling, Xiaoshunzi replied, "It may have been retribution. We were purported to be bandits by others and were captured by government

soldiers. As we had tried to rob an imperial family member and had committed numerous offenses, we were sentenced to death. As we were still young, the judge on the case gave us the chance of entering the palace as a slave. My comrades were unyielding and were sent to the execution grounds. I was afraid, and thus entered the palace."

Sighing, I said, "You weren't afraid, you were brave. Although life is filled with bitterness, we still persistently try to stay alive. For you to live and to make light when speaking on this subject—to me that is brave. Those who take death lightly, are only running away from their responsibilities."

Suddenly, Xiaoshunzi kneeled again, tightly clutching my legs. I was in so much pain that I peed myself.

Thereafter, that young man did his utmost to attend to me. I later learned that Eunuch Wang was a powerful martial artist and had taken Xiaoshunzi under his tutelage. Prompted by a sudden impulse and admiring his fortitude, I smuggled in a handwritten copy of the *Sunflower Manual* . Xiaoshunzi did not say anything, but in a serious manner, accepted my gift.

Half a month later, I left the palace carrying the organized official imperial documents. More importantly, I gained a friend who would come visit me in the dead of night.

Footnotes :

飞黄腾达, feihuangtengda – idiom, lit. the divine stead Feihuang gallops; to achieve meteoric success in one's career
庶吉士, shujishi – a position within Hanlin Academy that does not necessarily have an official rank rating and is assigned to help monitor one of the six ministries of Chinese government; it typically is granted to those placed highly in the imperial examinations
检讨, jiantao – examining editor
正七品, zheng qipin – upper seventh ranked
侍讲学士, shijiang xueshi – expositor-in-waiting
侍读学士, shidu xueshi – reader-in-waiting
掌院学士, zhangyuan xueshi – academy chancellor, the official who heads Hanlin Academy

青山居士临江图, qingshan jushi linjiang tu – a 居士 is a Buddhist layman who has not become a monk
朱文, zhuwen – a seal that uses red characters
白文, baiwen – a seal that uses white characters
临渊堂, linyuan tang – lit. Facing Profound Hall
奎章阁, gezhang ge – was historically the royal academy of the Yuan Dynasty and of the Korean Joseon Dynasty; being portrayed in the story as also the royal academy of the Jin Dynasty
正四品, zheng sipin – upper fourth-ranked
蜀中纪事, shuzhong jishi – lit. Shuzhong Chronicles; Shuzhong refers to Sichuan
Refers to Ke Ming (柯明), styled Ziyuan (子远)
蜀志, shuzhi – lit. Shu Records; refers to Sichuan
石崇, Shi Chong – a Jin Dynasty official; the sixth son of Western Jin's Minister of the Masses, Shi Bao
灭九族, mie jiuzu – the nine familial exterminations refers to a punishment where the crimes of the individual becomes, by association, the crimes of the family, resulting in the complete execution of the criminal themselves; the criminal's living parents, grandparents, children, grandchildren, siblings and siblings-in-law, uncles and aunts and their spouses, spouse, and spouse's parents
长陵王, changling wang – lit. Prince of Changling
晋元帝, jin yuandi – Emperor Yuan of Jin, Sima Rui was the last Emperor of Western Jin and the first Emperor of Eastern Jin; in the face of encroaching nomadic tribes in the north, he was forced to move his court south of the Huai River
丈, zhang – about ten Chinese feet (3.3 meters)
公公, gonggong – a respectful way of calling eunuchs
隔三差五, gesanchawu – idiom, every few days
小顺子, xiaoshunzi – lit. little follower
老奴, laonu – lit. this old servant; used by elderly slaves, servants, and eunuchs to refer to themselves
奴才, nucai – lit. this servant; used by slaves, servants, and eunuchs to refer to themselves; also is used by their owners

管事, guanshi – steward; often used to refer to a supervisory eunuch; in this case Eunuch Wang is a supervisor of the book storehouses
小福子, xiaofuzi – lit. little fortune
下官, xiaguan – lit. this lower-ranking official; used by officials as a deferential way of referring to themselves when talking with higher-ranking officials; while eunuch ranks are not rated according to the system, this term was used to be polite
A stick of incense took about 10-15 minutes to burn; faster during the winter, slower during the summer

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 5: Battle Over the Heir Apparent

Volume 1, Chapter 5: Battle over the Heir Apparent

In the third month of the nineteenth year of Xiande, the seventh year of the sixty-year cycle, Zhao Sheng passed and was posthumously honored as King Ling of Chu.[1] Crown Prince Zhao Jia ascends to the throne, decreeing that the era name remain Xiande and raising Princess Changle as his Queen. Great Yong dispatched an envoy to extend their congratulations, gifting a thousand good horses, and countless gold and silk.

With the matter of succession determined, the entire court began to consider who would become the heir apparent. The Minister Who Remonstrates and Advises,[2] Luo Wenshu, advised that the King's third son, Zhao Long, be named as heir apparent.

The former King had named Princess Changle as the Crown Princess. As the Crown Princess was childless, she dispatched the ladies who were part of her dowry to attend to the Crown Prince. The Crown Prince loved the beauties of Yong and favored them greatly, siring three sons and four daughters. Anxious, King Ling named the daughter of Prime Minister Shang Weijun as the Crown Prince's second wife. After fourteen months, she gave birth to Zhao Long. After Zhao Jia ascended to the throne, Lady Shang was named as Noble Consort.[3] Lady Shang was from a prestigious family, and was a woman of virtue. Government officials, according to the traditions of the time (Lady Shang's social status reflected upon her son),[4] petitioned for her son to be named heir apparent.

When the Queen heard this, she furiously said, "Although We[5] have no son, how do you know that We will never have any? And even if We have none, I have brought numerous ladies as part of my dowry, all daughters of prestigious families in Yong, who have given birth to two sons. Their social status is equal to that of Lady Shang. If an heir apparent is named, it must be the eldest son."

—*Southern Chu Dynastic Records* , *Biography of King Yang of Chu* [6]

In the nineteenth year of Xiande, the king passed away. As this was the king, this was a significant event. Prior to the king's death, we members of Hanlin Academy had completed the bibliography detailing all of the works to be collected in the Palace of Sublime Culture and submitted for His Majesty's perusal. While he was not able to witness the completion of the palace, the king should have died without any regrets.

Without any controversy, Crown Prince Zhao Jia ascended to the throne, followed by setting a new era name and issuing a nationwide amnesty. Hanlin Academy became awfully[7] busy. There were also some important matters that we lowly ranked officials could not freely discuss, but still worried about—matters such as the appointing of the queen and heir apparent. There was no dissension about the choice for the queen. Although Princess Changle had long lived in the secondary royal residence on the outskirts of the city to heal and had not conscientiously performed her duties, as Southern Chu was a vassal of Great Yong and Princess Changle was the Crown Princess, she ultimately successfully took control of the harem. But the matter of appointing the heir apparent was a thorny issue. Princess Changle had no son. Although she was only nineteen years old, she had long been ill after suffering the miscarriage. Many were skeptical that she would be able to become pregnant and give birth to a son. Without an heir apparent, the state would not be peaceful. Therefore, the officials all wished that a crown prince be named. Zhao Jia had four sons and seven daughters. As Princess Changle had dispatched the court ladies from her dowry to attend to the Crown Prince Zhao Jia, most of his children were born of ladies from Yong. This raised the disapproval of the influential and powerful figures within the royal court. Thankfully, two years earlier, the former king had married the Prime Minister's daughter, Shang Zhilan, to the crown prince as his second wife. Although Zhao Jia especially favored the ladies of Yong, Consort Shang still became pregnant and gave birth to third son, Zhao Long. In the eyes of the ranking court officials, if it was a child of Princess Changle, then the child was naturally worthy of respect and honor, but the children of the ladies from Yong were not sufficiently pure. Therefore, they all requested that Zhao Long be named heir apparent.

Even though King Zhao Jia was extremely lecherous, he was still an

intelligent individual. He naturally understood that the ranking officials were correct on this matter. Though he did not particularly like Lady Shang, he still named her a noble consort. He also agreed to name Zhao Long as heir apparent. But Princess Changle became furious, quarreling with the king. She returned alone back to the secondary royal residence on the outskirts of the capital. This put the king in a tough spot.[8] Although he and Princess Changle were more frequently separated than together, the princess was virtuous, allowing the court ladies from her dowry to attend to him. In addition, Princess Changle would frequently even select additional beauties to enter the harem. Therefore, he was extremely respectful, and perhaps even a bit fearful, towards her. In addition, that the endorsements towards Lady Shang being predicated upon her status as a native-born daughter could not brought to the surface. With no options, Zhao Jia temporarily halted plans to name an heir apparent. He hinted to the court officials that unless they were able to convince the queen, an heir apparent could not be named.

This was extremely difficult for the court officials to do. After being married to Southern Chu, Princess Changle had spent significant time at the secondary royal residence on the outskirts of the capital. Even if the court officials had the will to curry favor with her, there was no way to do so. As for the court ladies close to the Princess, almost all of them were now concubines much favored by the king. As their sons had no chance to become the heir apparent, they already resented the meddling of the court officials and were unlikely to make any attempt to convince the princess. Ultimately, everyone's eyes fell on one person—Liang Wan.

Liang Wan was not only a close friend of the princess, but also the adopted daughter of the former king. As she was unable to find a worthy husband, she maintained good relations with all of the outstanding civil and military talents in Southern Chu. Reasonably speaking, she was the perfect lobbyist, but she refused. As a result, the usually tranquil Bright Moon Pavilion saw heavy traffic.[9]

Under these circumstances, I once again came to the Bright Moon Pavilion. I originally did not want to come, but I had received an invitation from Liang

Wan. Though I had no intentions towards her, delusional visions were hard to avoid. Furthermore, to directly reject her invitation would be discourteous.

I entered the pavilion and skirted the green pond. Pear trees were planted in front of the building. As it was the fourth month, the pear trees had blossomed. The petals were like the clouds and snow. Breathing in deeply, one could sense a delicate fragrance that gladdened the heart and refreshed the mind.[10] Towards the female attendant guiding me, I inquired, "Young lady, for what purpose has Lady Liang requested my presence?"

The attendant wittily dodged the question. "You will have to ask my lady. I am only a lowly serving girl and wouldn't know. This servant dares not accept *daren* 's courtesy."

I solemnly stated, "It is commonly said that the prime minister's servants have a rank equal to that of a *qipin* [11] rated official. Lady Liang is the former King's adopted daughter and is a good friend of the Queen. Her power and influence probably even surpasses that of the Prime Minister. If we speak thus, then your rank is at least of *liupin* .[12] This lowly official's[13] rank is merely rated at lower *liupin* ,[14] thus I have to be courteous."

After staring blankly for a moment, the female attendant giggled. In a low voice, she said, "This servant has heard my lady tell the Prime Minister that the only person who can convince the Queen is *daren* ."

I stared blankly. When did I, a mere Hanlin Academy Senior Compiler, become able to convince a stately princess of Great Yong, the current Queen of Southern Chu? Half-believing the attendant's words, I entered the building. I immediately caught sight of the presence of the prime minister and Hanlin Academy Chancellor in the seats of honor, accompanied on the side by Liang Wan. I almost turned and ran, but realized that was not possible. Respectfully, I performed a greeting and said, "This lowly official greets the Prime Minister and the Academy Chancellor."

Prime Minister Shang Weijun nodded his head and said, "Good, good. I have heard Xie *daren* say that you are hardworking and will soon be promoted, definitely a pillar of the state. Lady Liang, the person you asked

for has come. Madame has said before that Academic Jiang can convince the Queen. How is this possible?"

I immediately turned to regard Liang Wan. We had no grudges past or present. Why would she conspire to entrap me? Under the gaze of her three guests, Liang Wan took a sip of a cup of fragrant tea before replying, "Speaking from the heart, your servant[15] hails from Great Yong. Everyone understands the real reason behind all the discussion regarding naming an heir apparent. How can the Queen not understand? She has angrily left the royal palace and is now currently full of grievances. This servant has been favored by the Princess and is treated as a sister by her. If I were to convince her to accept the wishes of the King and the officials, would that not chill her heart? When the time comes, even if the Princess were to yield ground, there is no way that she would agree. Therefore, I, Liang Wan, definitely cannot go to convince her. But this servant has received the former King's favor and is extremely grateful. I cannot, in good conscience, allow him to be unable to rest peacefully in the beyond. I must therefore intercede with all of my ability. Thinking matters over, I remembered that ever since the Princess arrived in Southern Chu, she has loved poetic verse. She would read them daily without rest. She regrets being unable to meet the poetic masters of the past as they have long since passed. But today, there is a comparable master of the verse in Southern Chu's *zhuangyuan* , Jiang Zhe. Not only are Jiang Zhe's poems heartrendingly beautiful, but both she and he and are in Southern Chu. She constantly wishes to meet him, but cannot due to the necessary separation between sovereign and vassal, and separation of the genders. She considers this to be one of her life's regrets. This servant believes that if Jiang Zhe is granted an audience with the Queen to fulfill her long-cherished wish, and Jiang Zhe lobbies the Queen, she may be moved to agree."

I almost fainted. Am I an idiot? I am but a lowly *zhuangyuan* . In the eyes of the queen, I am but a lowly courtier. How can I influence her? I urgently turned to look at the prime minister, hoping that he would stop this nonsensical thinking. But my hopes were dashed. The old bastard, Shang Weijun, had a look of deep contemplation on his features, while the Academy Chancellor nodded his head. As a result, I did not even have the

chance to refuse before I was hauled aboard the carriage by Liang Wan to travel to the secondary royal residence.

On the way, I turned to face Liang Wan and asked, “Lady Liang, has this lowly official ever offended you?”

With a smile on her face, Liang Wan shook her head. “Never.”

“Then has this lowly official ever offended Great Yong?”

With a look of disdain in her eyes, Liang Wan answered, “Never.”

Suddenly I angrily questioned, “Since I am not a foe who has murdered your father nor a frivolous lover, why are you trying to cause my death?”[16]

Liang Wan became alarmed before revealing a flower-like smile and murmured, “My lord *zhuangyuan* has become angry.”

My serenity restored, I coldly continued, “Being unable to complete the task is a small matter; I fear that I will implicate Lady Liang.” Humph*, if I am going to die, I will pull you down with me* .

Her eyebrows twitching, Liang Wan sweetly spoke. “My lord *zhuangyuan* has misunderstood this servant. This servant’s plan will succeed.”

I didn’t say anything further to her. I felt that there was no need to continue contesting what was a done deal. The previous angry reaction was merely mimicking the attitude of an ordinary person. In any case, even if I failed my mission, no one could accuse me of dereliction of duty. At most, I would be promoted at a slower pace. Seeing that I did not speak further, Liang Wan became more respectful. Her reaction made me vigilant. Although I had not seen her in several years, I was well aware of her comings and goings. From her behavior, it was highly likely that she was a spy from Great Yong. Otherwise, how could she not have found a husband in the last three years? Seeing her able to easily use money and power[17] to her advantage, like a fish in water,[18] she definitely was not an ordinary woman. Speaking ill, Liang Wan’s behavior was similar to that of a courtesan; the only differences being her customers were all ranking officials or gifted scholars, she had firm backing, and she didn’t sell her body.

Liang Wan did not know that I was silently cursing her and began to chat

with me. After more than four hours, the carriage finally arrived at Lake Mochou's secondary royal residence. We successfully entered the residence after being searched by the royal guards. Without reporting ahead, Liang Wan pulled me along as she walked inside. The maids on either side probably knew that Liang Wan could not be revoked. Other than hurriedly entering to report to the princess, they allowed us to continue unimpeded.

Entering the chambers, I saw Princess Changle dressed in a purple gown. She was reclined on a couch, reading a book. Seeing Liang Wan, she raised her head and remarked, "Elder sister Wan'er[19] has come." Suddenly seeing me, her face blushed furiously. "Who dares enter Our resting chambers without permission?"

Releasing my arm, Liang Wan stepped forward and replied, "Princess, this servant has brought the one you wish to meet the most here. Why are you upset?"

Staring blankly, Princess Changle thought of a person and wondered, "Is it Jiang Zhe, Jiang Suiyun?"

Turning her head, Liang Wan uttered, "Jiang Zhe, quickly come and properly greet the Princess."

I had frozen in place when I entered the chambers. I had last seen Princess Changle during her wedding. She was dressed in all red, in the style of a princess of Great Yong. Although she was only sixteen, she seemed poised and luxurious. Today, she was wearing unadorned clothes and did not have any jewelry or makeup on. She looked delicate and elegant, lovely beyond description. Compared to the day of her wedding, after experiencing numerous hardships, she had acquired a mature charm. My heart beat rapidly. I did not know why, but suddenly I had a wicked though. If I were able to hug her, how wonderful would that be?

Just as I was allowing my imagination to run wild, Liang Wan's words jolted me out of my reverie and reminded me. I hurriedly stepped forward and greeted the queen, "This vassal, Hanlin Academy Senior Compiler, Jiang Zhe, greets Your Majesty. Long live the Queen!"[20]

Princess Changle revealed a look filled with both worry and joy. It was

some time before she replied, “Please rise, Jiang *daren* . We like Jiang *daren* ’s verses very much. Since We are meeting today, We would like your help. We hope that this will not be refused.”

I affirmed tranquilly, “I dare not refuse.”

Princess Changle noticed my cold indifference. Looking at me faintly, she continued, “These are the verses that we have copied and recited on a daily basis. Does Jiang *daren* know which verse we like the most?” As she spoke, she handed a book to Liang Wan who passed it to me.

I took a look after accepting the book. It was definitely a handwritten copy of verses, each of the small characters extremely beautiful and graceful. On the first page of the book was the poem the *Patterned Zither* .[21]

Mere chance that the patterned lute has fifty strings.String and fret, one by one, recall the blossoming years.Zhuangzi dreams at sunrise that a butterfly lost its way,Wangdi bequeathing his spring passion to the nightjar.The moon is full on the vast sea, a tear on the pearl.On Blue Mountain the sun warms, smoke issues from the jade.Did it wait this mood, to mature with hindsight?In a trance from the beginning, then as now.

These verses that I recited were from a poem that I had written at the age of fifteen upon the passing of my father. At the time, my father was dying. He gazed unceasingly at a painting of my mother, sometimes muttering, sometimes laughing lightly, but mostly there was faint sadness. Faint, because he was about to see my mother. As a result, there was happiness in his sorrow. For this reason, I did not force my father to drink the bitter medicine. Since there was no way to prevent my father from dying, there was no point for me to force him to continue to endure seemingly endless suffering. I remember one night, kneeling before my father’s deathbed, promising that I would be able to take care of myself. With a gratified look, my father stopped breathing. The expression on his face was peaceful. I could not help but begin to cry heavily. It wasn’t until today that I finally realized how painful it was to lose my father.

Seeing my tears, Princess Changle could not sit still. Raising her head, she gave Liang Wan a look. Acknowledging the look, Liang Wan turned to me and

offered a handkerchief.

Wiping away the tears, I smiled weakly and spoke, “I have ridiculed myself before Your Majesty. This poem was written by this vassal when my father passed away. In life, my parents were extremely affectionate. When my mother passed, my father found it difficult to accept. On his deathbed, his mood became calm, for he knew that he was going to see my mother. I did not realize that the princess would have a copy here.”

Softly, Princess Changle replied, “When We celebrated reaching adulthood, someone brought this poem to Us from Southern Chu. At the time, We did not know who Jiang Zhe was. When We later came to Southern Chu, I heard and liked the *Recollections Under the Moon* very much. From the Crown Prince, I learned that it was a masterpiece by the *zhuangyuan* , Jiang Zhe. From that point on, We have had elder sister Wan’er help me collect *zhuangyuan* ’s poems. Over these years living deep within the royal palace, I have read *zhuangyuan* ’s poems to relieve my melancholy.”

Kneeling, I said, “For this vassal’s poems to receive Your Majesty’s appreciation is this vassal’s fortune.”

Seeing that I had calmed down, she asked, “We like this poem, the *Patterned Zither* , very much. But We do not understand the line: ‘on Blue Mountain the sun warms, smoke issues from the jade.’ Does jade from the blue mountain emit smoke when exposed to sunlight?”

With a smile on my face, I answered, “This line originates in a saying by the late Tang Dynasty poet, Sikong Tu, who said, ‘Dai Shulun once said that the scene presented by a poet is like the smoke which issues from fine jade when the sun is warm on Blue Mountain; it can be seen from a distance but not from up close.’”

In a flash, Princess Changle understood, declaring, “So that is why. We understand. We wonder if the *zhuangyuan* has any new poetry to share?”

After thinking it over, I responded, “This vassal has been busy in recent days with official business and have not composed any worthy verses. If Your Majesty does not mind, please allow this vassal to record a verse that I playfully composed.”

Extremely happy, Princess Changle called for an attendant to grind the inkstick against the inkstone. On a nearby table, I used the four treasures of the study to write out the topic of the poem: “Moving in the spring to Willow Manor to listen to the warblers.” I continued by writing down the poem verse by verse:

The return of spring brings heaven harmony between rain and smoke,Countless strips drag through the ground.Several days under shady trees to restore one’s delicate color,For a time, a yellow bird occupies a tall tree branch.Flying to come along the journey through the clear skies,Hearing and doubting the news of the red snow song.Rising in spirals, the wind blows open the jade curtains,Hand in hand the golden shuttles pass on the branches.From morning, the sounds of sunset seem opportune,From the many northern hangings and southern shadows.A few strands vaguely bewilder the Han gardens,One sound as if to recollect Qin beauty.But to hold appeal and leisurely listen to each other,Not allowing those rough and unrestrained to cross on horseback.Pampered and smooth like pearls, born with a base tongue,Soft constantly as thread bound eyebrow nest.Under the concentrated lights one quickly sees the truth of receiving life,The speech of the young chick is overwhelmed as if facing death.To consider shadows but to suspect the intermittent sounds of the voice,To hear sounds and yet to recognize the whirling shadows.By what means are we to entertain the appearance of a general today,To fall down before the greatest respect to forward gold flat baskets.[22]

Walking forward, Princess Changle recited the verses in a low voice. After some time, she said, “The gifted scholars of Southern Chu are really extraordinary. We have read it and the articulation is excellent.”

Seeing that Princess Changle was tired, I bid her farewell. “The Queen must be tired. This vassal dares not stay and wishes to bid my farewell. May the Queen please take care of herself.”

Smiling lightly, Princess Changle replied, “Thank you. Liang Wan, please escort the *daren* out.”

Answering in the affirmative, Liang Wan came over and led me out. After we had gone far, she suddenly stopped, interrogating, “Jiang *daren* , did you

forget something?”

Freezing momentarily, I suddenly remembered that I was to lobby the queen over the issue of the heir apparent. Thinking it over, I indifferently judged, “Why has Lady Liang spoken in such a manner? Whether I lobbied or not is of no importance.”

Angrily, she retorted, “What? Do you vassals of Southern Chu think the Princess can be bullied?”

Seeing through the bewilderment in her eyes, but making no effort to conceal anything, I maintained, “Surely Lady Liang must understand. The issue over naming an heir apparent has already been decided. The Queen understands this fact. To so readily agree would be to harm the prestige of Great Yong.”

Her complexion heavy, she demanded, “What are you bullshitting about?”

Thinking it over, rather than allowing her to think that I was easily manipulated, it was better for her to realize that I was difficult to deal with, forcing her to remain at a respectful distance[23] and preventing her from harming me in the future. Therefore, using a barely discernible voice, I mentioned, “For the Princess of Great Yong to be wed to Southern Chu was originally not something she did willingly. Therefore, the Queen cares little about winning the favor of the King. The Yong Emperor sent so many beautiful women as part of the dowry for the sole purpose of confusing the King and preventing the Queen from having to deal with a husband she does not like. As for Lady Liang, being able to easily employ money and power to further your goals, you are the perfect person to command Great Yong’s spies in Southern Chu. My ladyship is in a unique and subtle position, and is able to act with impunity. If the Princess were to handle this matter, it would be difficult for her to prevent others from finding out. To Great Yong, the Princess has already fulfilled her duties by being wed to Southern Chu.”

Although Liang Wan made an effort to remain cool at any cost, her face paled and her eyes emitted disdain.

Hurriedly, I continued, “This lowly official is no more than a member of Hanlin Academy. I have never shown and am disinclined to show an interest

in these matters of state. But for my ladyship to involve me is not an intelligent decision. If something were to happen to this lowly official, it would be hard to prevent people from harboring suspicions regarding my ladyship's motives."

Freezing momentarily, her face gradually regained its color, and she sweetly suggested, "The Queen loves *daren* 's poems. From now on, once in a while, this servant[15] will send someone to *daren* 's home to fetch your latest works. Surely, *daren* would be unlikely to refuse."

Calmly, I remarked, "This lowly official comes from a poor background and does not have an official residence. I merely rent a house near Hanlin Academy. Under ordinary circumstances, if my ladyship were to send someone to my home, they would be unable to find this lowly official. If my ladyship does not mind, this lowly official would be willing to send my new verses to the Bright Moon Pavilion to pass along to the Queen."

Liang Wan regarded me with admiringly before she agreed. "Okay. This servant still has to return to lobby the Queen. The carriage has been prepared. They will take *daren* to the Prime Minister's residence to report on the mission."

I respectfully thanked her before boarding the carriage and departing.

Late at night, I returned without incident to the city. Arriving at the prime minister's residence, I told the extremely worried Shang Weijun the truth about what had transpired, "This lowly official was granted an audience with the Queen. Her Majesty does indeed like this lowly official's poetry very much, asking many questions regarding poetic verse. This lowly official's tongue is clumsy and did not know how to lobby the Queen. The Queen later became tired and this lowly official could only depart. Afterwards, Lady Liang told this lowly official that she knew that I could not say anything. Her Majesty wished for this lowly official to alleviate the Queen's melancholy and improve her mindset to lobby her further. The Queen is highly principled and understood long ago that only one person can be named the heir apparent. Annoyed, Her Majesty could not easily change her mind. Taking advantage of her cheerful mood, Lady Liang should be able to convince Her Majesty to change her mind. But Lady Liang also said that the

King must personally go to bring the Queen in order for Her Majesty to be able to back off."

Filled with happiness, Shang Weijun disclosed, "Good, good. Academic Jiang is definitely a pillar of the state. I have already discussed matters with Academy Chancellor Xie. You have performed meritorious deeds in the establishment of the Palace of Sublime Culture. In a few days, you will be rewarded. Alright, go home and rest."

Fatigued, I returned home. Seeing that a single light, I knew immediately that Xiaoshunzi had come to see me. Tired, I entered my bedroom and collapsed onto the bed, asking him, "How do you have free time today? If I remember correctly, you shouldn't be free for another two days."

Xiaoshunzi smiled lightly and walked over. Pulling me up, he helped me undress and revealed, "I was originally supposed to be on duty today, but I overheard Prime Minister Shang tell the King that you had gone to the royal residence on the outskirts of the city, so I changed shifts with someone else. You must be tired from the trip. When I saw you enter the Prime Minister's residence, I knew there was no danger, so I came over to prepare the bath. Once you have bathed, the midnight meal should be ready."

With my eyes half closed, he dragged me to the kitchen. Inside was a barrel bathtub seventy percent filled with water. On the stove was some food being heated. In a low voice, I inquired, "Did you follow me into the royal residence?"

Helping me into the barrel, he related lightly, "My martial arts aren't that good. The royal residence and the Prime Minister's residence both have tight security."

Yawning, I spoke, "Under my pillow there is a sword manual. I don't know if it is useful, but you should go take a look."

Indifferently, Xiaoshunzi responded, "I have already taken a look. Although the sword techniques aren't bad, they are useless for me as they require rigid, yang-principled inner *qi* . As a eunuch, my inner *qi* is yin-principled."

Almost asleep, I muttered, somewhat in a daze, "I understand. I will go back and search. The more powerful your martial arts, the safer I become."

Although Xiaoshunzi said something in response, I did not hear anything.

Half a month later, the queen returned to the main royal palace inside Jianye, and the king held the ceremony naming the heir apparent. The hundreds of officials all were rewarded. I was promoted to become a Reader-in-Waiting rated as a *cong wupin* .[24]

Footnotes :

楚灵王, chu lingwang – King Ling of Chu; **灵**, ling means spirited; thus the Spirited King of Chu
谏议**大夫**, jianyi dafu – the Minister Who Remonstrates and Advises is an official who served as an imperial censor with the duty of protesting wrongful actions of the government and of the sovereigns
贵**妃**, guifei – the third highest rank in the harem
子以母贵, ziyimugui – lit. son's position is based off his mother's social status
哀家, aijia – royal we used by women
楚炀**王**, chu yangwang – lit. the Slothful King of Chu
不亦乐**乎**, buyilehu – idiom, a quote from Confucius, lit. isn't that a joy; extremely, awful in a sarcastic manner
焦头烂额, jiaotoulan'e – idiom, lit. badly burned about the head (from trying to put out a fire); fig. hard-pressed, under pressure
车**水**马龙, cheshuimalong – idiom, lit. endless stream of horses and carriages; heavy traffic
沁人心脾, qinrenxinpi – idiom, lit. to penetrate deeply into the heart; to gladden the heart, to refresh the mind
七品, qipin – seventh-ranked
六品, liupin – sixth-ranked
下官, xiaguan – lit. this lower-ranked official; used by officials as a deferential way of referring to themselves when talking with higher-ranking officials
从六品, cong liupin – lower sixth-ranked
妾身, qieshen – lit. your servant (deprecatory self-reference for women)
Jiang Zhe is basically saying that since we have no grudges or grievances, why are you trying to harm me?

长袖善舞, changxiushanwu – idiom, lit. long sleeves help one dance beautifully; money and power will help you in any occupation
如鱼得水, ruyudeshui – idiom, lit. like a fish back in water; glad to be back in one's proper surroundings
婉儿, wan'er – an affectionate way of calling Liang Wan by her given name
王后千岁千千岁, wanghou qiansui qianqiansui – lit. long live the Queen; may the Queen live a thousand years
锦瑟, jinse – this is a poem by the late Tang Dynasty poet, Li Shangyin. This poem was originally untitled, but ultimately took its title from the first two characters of the poem; the 瑟 (se) is a type of zither with 25-50 strings
This topic and poem comes from an early Qing Dynasty book entitled 平山冷燕, pingshanlengyan
敬而远之, jing'eryuanzhi – idiom, lit. to show respect from a distance; to remain at a respectful distance
从五品, congwupin – lower fifth-ranked

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 6: Yong Envoy, the Prince of Qi

Volume 1, Chapter 6: Yong Envoy, the Prince of Qi

During the sixteenth year of Xiande, the fourth year of the sixty year cycle, Prince De, Zhao Jue, was given a secret edict to travel to Hengjiang and prepare to raid Moling. Before he could complete his mission, the secret was discovered by Great Yong. A Yong envoy suddenly arrived in Southern Chu with the offer of the Princess Changle for a marriage alliance. Confused, King Ling of Chu accepted and ordered a cessation of hostilities.

On his deathbed, Zhao Sheng called the Crown Prince to his bedside and gave an order: “Our eternal regret is failing to protect Our ancestor’s foundation and becoming a vassal of Yong. If you have even a little bit of filial piety, you will do your utmost to restore our empire.” The Crown Prince swore to the heavens. King Ling passed away.

In the fifth month of the nineteenth year of Xiande, the seventh year of the sixty year cycle, the Prince of Qi arrived in Southern Chu to pay his respects and mourn the passing of King Ling. Secretly meeting with the King, the Prince of Qi offered heavy inducements and expressed an interest in attacking the Kingdom of Shu, misleading the King. The Yong envoy later colluded with the Southern Chu court officials and proceeded to raise the matter of invading Shu. Southern Chu was later destroyed due to this mistake, although none understood the coming disaster; none understood the stakes involved. Later, eunuchs heard the King sobbing to the Queen, “If We are to restore our empire, We would name thee Empress and would be willing to acknowledge Great Yong as Our parent. Today, the Prince of Qi has promised me the title of Emperor. I hope that you would inform your father that Southern Chu will never turn Our back upon Yong.” This matter was leaked.

The Prince of Qi was the sixth son of Emperor Gaozu of Yong and elder half-brother of Princess Changle. When little, he was naughty and mischievous. Later, seeing that the Prince of Yong’s achievements were

unrivaled, he became aware and said, “I will surpass him.” He later became famous throughout the world for his martial merits.

—*Southern Chu Dynastic Records* , *Biography of King Yang of Chu*

In the fifth month of the nineteenth year of Xiande, Great Yong dispatched an envoy to pay its respects at the passing of Southern Chu’s King. I heard that the primary envoy was the sixth son of the Yong Emperor, the Prince of Qi, Li Xian. He was spoiled from youth, becoming extremely naughty and mischievous. He spent his days on falconry and hunting, and detested learning. In the seventy years since the collapse of Eastern Jin, the Central Plains had been torn asunder. Li Yuan’s father, Li Shang took the opportunity to rise and declared himself the King of Yong. After dozens of years of war, he declared the foundation of the state of Yong. When Li Shang passed away, Li Yuan succeeded the throne. He was fond of the sensual pleasures, uneager to make any progress. That he changed was because of his second son, Li Zhi.

From a young age, the Prince of Yong, Li Zhi, was known for his virtues. Twenty years ago, during the royal feast celebrating the beginning of spring, the nine-year old Li Zhi wore mourning robes, remonstrating forthrightly that Li Yuan was too conservative. Using vehement language, Li Zhi charged Li Yuan with failing to fulfill Li Shang’s final wishes, shaming Li Yuan. Not long afterward, Li Yuan declared himself Emperor and the era name was changed to Wuwei.[1] The state focused all its efforts on training the army and encouraging agriculture. In the third year of Wuwei, Li Yuan began to fulfill his new ambitions. Right before the army departed, Li Yuan used dripping blood as a sacrifice to heaven and earth, vowing to never cease warring until the Central Plains were conquered.

At the time, Li Zhi was only twelve years old, but accompanied his father on the campaign. Although he was a member of the imperial family, Li Zhi endured the same conditions as the common soldier and learned from the ranking military officers how to lead an army into battle. Although he was young, he was brave and heroic, constantly leading from the front and charging in to destroy formations. It is said that on one occasion when the encampment was raided by the enemy, Li Zhi was leading his personal

guards out of the encirclement and protecting the Yong Emperor. After they had escaped, some soldiers were heard to yell, “Don’t leave us behind, Your Majesty!”[2] Dripping with sweat, Li Zhi spun his horse around and charged back into to the encampment alone. Moved to tears, the soldiers began to fight to the death, forcing the enemy to withdraw. When the Yong Emperor returned to camp, although Li Zhi had been badly wounded, he still personally came out to welcome his father. Shedding tears, the Yong Emperor praised, “This is my family’s thousand *li* colt.”[3]

Li Zhi was not only courageous on the battlefield, but also extremely resourceful. After only a few years, he had become a general. In the ninth year of Wuwei, he defeated the greatest power in the Central Plains, the King of Xia, Yang Laosheng. Li Zhi played a major role in helping Great Yong consolidate its position. As a result, he was enfeoffed as the Prince of Yong. When Li Zhi returned home to the Yong capital of Chang’an[4] at the head of his army, commoners lined the streets and all of officialdom came to welcome him. At the time, Li Zhi had yet to reach adulthood. To receive such glory and honor was something seldom seen in the annals of history. Later, in the tenth year of Wuwei, the ninth year of Southern Chu’s Xiande, Southern Chu vassalized itself. Great Yong became the hegemon of the Central Plains.

When Li Xian saw Li Zhi’s glory, he felt a sense of loss, declaring to his attendants, “I will surpass him.” At the time, Li Xian was sixteen years old. Thereafter, he changed his bad habits, studying hard and diligently training his martial arts. Two years later, after his personal request, he joined the army garrisoning the northern frontier. In the subsequent ten years, Li Xian participated in numerous bloody battles on the northern frontier with Northern Han. Although he could not compare to Li Zhi’s brilliance and martial prowess, Li Xian was still a dauntless and fierce general. In the last several years, Great Yong had tightly guarded its northern frontier, resulting in no conflicts in the north. Thus, Li Xian was able to return to Chang’an. He was close to the Crown Prince, Li An. While in Chang’an, he was the head of the aristocratic youths, constantly getting into trouble. If he wasn’t leading friends to visit brothels,[5] he would be spending his days on falconry or hunting. His actions caused a great pandemonium[6] in Chang’an.

As he was a beloved son of the Yong Emperor and had numerous military accomplishments, no one dared to cause trouble for him.

I read over this information seriously. After I had successfully "lobbied" the queen, I began to accompany the king on a daily basis as a Reader-in-Waiting. Although I was said to accompany the king, in reality, my job was to offer advice for the king to consider. With the Prince of Qi coming to Southern Chu as an envoy, the royal court was a complete mess. Seeing the intelligence report on the Prince of Qi, I realized that the number of Southern Chu's spies in Great Yong was also quite numerous. Although the Prince of Qi was here to mourn the passing of the former king, we all knew that things weren't so simple, as Great Yong had no need to send such an important personage. In my view, it was probably because the Prince of Qi had caused too big a ruckus in Chang'an and had been sent out by the Yong Emperor to lie low until the fuss had died down. I read in the intelligence report that just a month earlier, the Prince of Qi had forcibly taken a woman from an ordinary family as a concubine and had been impeached by the imperial censors. Although the Yong Emperor favored this son, he was still obligated to punish these kinds of actions. That the Prince of Qi was only fined a year's salary clearly showed that he was being shielded from punishment. To be sent out under these circumstances could mean that he was being told to lay low until the controversy had died down. But all the other *daren* did not agree with this assessment, believing that for the Prince of Qi to be sent out as an envoy meant that there was something major needed to be discussed.

Currently, however, the circumstances seemed to support their views. After observing the proper mourning rites, the Prince of Qi requested a private audience with the king. The two were currently holed up in the Imperial Study. As I was on duty accompanying the king in the Imperial Study, I waited just outside. It wasn't that I was deliberately eavesdropping, but rather, my hearing was too good and I was able to hear the majority of their conversation.

When he entered the study, Li Xian immediately got to the point and proclaimed, "Great Yong wishes to ally with Southern Chu to conquer the

Kingdom of Shu together. What are the King's views?"

Zhao Jia froze for some time before responding, "The Kingdom of Shu and Southern Chu have long shared amicable relations, why would We attack them without reason?"

Smiling, Li Xian replied, "Relations between states are dependent upon benefits. Although Sichuan has long been friendly with Southern Chu and sees frequent trade between the two states, Southern Chu is reliant upon Sichuan for its weapons and horses. I have heard that the Kingdom of Shu has charged your esteemed state[7] a hefty price. A few years ago, when your esteemed state purchased some horses from Northern Han, you tried to transport them through Sichuan, but were blocked. If the former King had not dispatched persons to bribe Shu officials, more likely than not, those horses would not have been acquired. In addition, your esteemed state has been forced to agree to cease directly importing horses from Northern Han, and is instead required to use Shu as an intermediary. Have these things not occurred?"

There was no sound within, but I could imagine that the king's face was purple. I had heard of this incident and was curious why the Kingdom of Shu was so shortsighted as to incur the hatred of Southern Chu.

I heard Li Xian continue, "My Great Yong and Southern Chu are not only lord and vassal, but also in-laws. My sister, Princess Changle, is the beloved daughter of my Imperial Father, and is also now the Queen of Southern Chu. Our two states share the same interests.[8] The Kingdom of Shu is only reliant upon its advantageous geography that is easily defended and difficult to attack, refusing to be a vassal of Great Yong and treating the friendly Southern Chu so arrogantly. Looking at the trade between our nations, over the last few years, the tariffs levied on trade between Great Yong and Southern Chu has far surpassed that of trade with Shu. In the eyes of this Prince,[9] the Kingdom of Shu is in decline[10] and is struggling at death's door.[11] If our two states were to join together and attack Shu, my Imperial Father would be willing to equally split Shu territories and divide the world along the Yangtze, forever ceasing conflict."

Zhao Jia's breathing became increasingly agitated and it took some time

before he was able to respond. “To send troops into war, one must not be incautious, especially since the Kingdom of Shu is easily defended and difficult to attack. If we were to attack for a long time without success, it would be a waste of manpower and resources.”

Li Xian seemed to hesitate for a moment before divulging, “Before this Prince departed, my Imperial Father secretly told me that conquering the Kingdom of Shu would stabilize Great Yong’s frontiers and allow me to rest. If Your Majesty is willing to assist Great Yong, after everything is settled, my Imperial Father is willing to tacitly accept Your Majesty's restoration of the title of Emperor.”

Listening to this point, my heart howled with anguish. In the last several years, the court had long talked about restoring the title of emperor. I had even heard from Xiaoshunzi that the previous king, on his deathbed, had exhorted the current king to restore the empire. This kind of incentive was too enticing.

Sure enough, the king hesitatingly stated, “This matter is difficult for Us[12] to decide at this time. How about this: We will solicit the opinion of Our subjects.”

Satisfied, Li Xian affirmed, “Then many thanks to Your Majesty for this audience. This Prince will now bid my farewell.”

Zhao Jia hurriedly suggested, “The Queen and the Prince of Qi are siblings who have not met in years. She urgently desires a meeting. When will the Prince of Qi be free?”

Smiling brightly, Li Xian replied, “This Prince has long wished to meet our younger sister, but had been constrained by my responsibilities, and had to first deal with my duties before handling private matters. We will immediately go meet the Queen.”

Happily, Zhao Jia voiced, “Why say request a meeting? We invite the Prince of Qi to go see the Queen together.” As he was speaking, I could hear the sounds of footsteps approaching. These two in-laws walked towards the entrance. I had long become discouraged. It looked like the king was going to attack the Kingdom of Shu.

I decided to carefully observe this bossy and domineering Prince of Qi, to see what kind of person had forced Southern Chu to join Great Yong. Li Xian followed the king out. The twenty-six-year-old Li Xian possessed a handsome and heroic appearance. As he had spent extended periods in the military, his posture was erect like a mountain or a tree. He emitted the murderous aura of someone who had experienced the highs and lows of life.[13] As this was a formal audience, he was wearing the formal wear of a prince of Great Yong—golden-colored silk robes embroidered with a coiled dragon. In these clothes, he seemed especially impressive and commanding. I shivered. This Prince of Qi must surely be vicious and merciless.

As the Prince of Qi walked past me, he suddenly turned to look at me. I saw an icy cold light in his eyes. I quickly lowered my head and avoided his gaze. Although I had seen this kind of murderous look before, there was no reason to let him believe that I was unafraid. He seemed to pay attention to what I was doing. Had he received a report from Liang Wan? Great Yong was definitely powerful. A single Prince of Qi was so impressive. I wondered what kind of bearing the Emperor possessed.

That Li Xian noticed this young man was for one particular reason. He possessed a bestial instinct. While he was secretly conversing with Zhao Jia in the Imperial Study, he did not know why, but he felt apprehensive, as if someone was eavesdropping. But he also knew that there was no one within twenty *zhang* .[14] For someone to be able to eavesdrop from beyond twenty *zhang* , then he must possess excellent martial arts. He knew that this kind of person did not exist in Southern Chu. Walking out the door, he paid particular attention to the officials and eunuchs waiting outside. He noticed that although there were a number of skilled martial artists, who were definitely Southern Chu's top fighters, their positions would have prevented them from being able to hear anything. And though the several officials accompanying the king were far closer, clearly none of them knew martial arts. When Li Xian regarded Jiang Zhe and believed he wasn't the eavesdropper, he was still startled. Although this young official was not too old, he possessed a poised bearing and had a calm expression. Li Xian knew the power of his own martial bearing. Once in Great Yong, an official had caused offense. Just as Li Xian's temper erupted, that official fainted from

fright. All the other officials, civil or military, were all uneasy when greeting him. Even the crown prince was careful in his presence. *Other than that person* , Li Xian thought, *since reaching adulthood, this is the first time I've seen someone so calm in my presence* . Thinking of this, his gaze couldn't help but become more threatening. Although that young official seemed to admit defeat by lowering his head and avoiding his gaze, Li Xian did not know why, but felt that the young official did not fear him.

Coming to this conclusion, Li Xian stopped and questioned, "What is your name?"

I observed Li Xian using my peripheral vision. Hearing his words and seeing his shoes stop right in front of me, I could only raise my head. I shot a glance at the king, using my eyes to ask for instructions. Smiling, the king said, "This is our Southern Chu's most gifted scholar, the *zhuangyuan* of the imperial examination of the sixteenth year of Xiande, Jiang Zhe. The Queen likes his poetry the most."

Suddenly understanding, Li Xin said, "So you are Jiang Zhe. Your poems are wonderful.

'The southeast is topographically favored,With transport easy and unhampered,Qiantang[15] has flourished in the three Wu[16] areas since antiquity.

Over the exquisitely adorned bridges the mist enshrouded willows flutter,Flapping in the wind are numerous verdant portieresUndulant are the tens of thousands of household residences.

Cloud-scraping treetops line the banks and shores.Winds hurling up heaps of snowdrifts in the air,The natural river gully extends endlessly.

Markets strewn with jewelry and ornaments,Making a parade of their silk and brocade every household vie to show off their luxurious splendor.

The three folded West Lake with her numerous enchanting mountain ranges and sierras.Teeming with fascinating scented autumn osmanthus flowers,And whiffs of lotus spreading miles afar.

On fine days, flute music everywhere makes the day seem much brighter,Songs from water caltrop pickers through the night make a delight

of the vesper,The fishermen with hoar hair and the teenage lotus seed girl pickers all chime in to paint this picture with virility and glamor.

Here comes the intoxicated magistrate,Flaunting his official standard by a thousand escorting riders,Joining everybody with the fantastic music and scenery to savor.

Hoping to bring back to the court how ravishing Hangzhou is when one day he has an audience with the Emperor.'

"This poem, *Gazing Out Upon the Tide* ,[17] that you have written makes one yearn for the beautiful scenery of Jiangnan.[18] This Prince has come as an envoy and hopes to bear witness to the scenery of Southern Chu."

I stole a glance at the king's gratified expression before modestly remarking, "This humble work is fortunate to acquire the Prince's appreciation." Li Xian looked at me deeply before departing with the king. My back was soaked with cold sweat, because that look was filled with a baffling madness that seemed to contain fiery enthusiasm. I suddenly wondered whether aside from loving beautiful woman, if the Prince of Qi also liked men. I shivered and determined to stay as far away as possible.

Who could know that the heavens cared little about a person's desires? The next day, I received a royal edict commanding me to accompany the Prince of Qi during the time that he was in Southern Chu. *Oh my god, the heavens are heartless* , I hissed, gazing upward toward the heavens. I decided to ask Xiaoshunzi if he had the time to protect me. Hatefully, Xiaoshunzi coldly communicated, "I'm very busy. In any case, the Prince of Qi is handsome; you should just accompany him. Maybe the Prince of Qi will bring you back to Great Yong to live comfortably." I nearly fainted from anger and made a firm resolution to protect myself to prevent the Prince of Qi from making such a horrifying thought a reality.

When I arrived at the official posthouse,[19] I saw the Prince of Qi wearing light-colored robes. In the somewhat cold spring wind, the Prince of Qi was sitting in the courtyard laughing uproariously. At his side sat a beautiful young man in a dress that was as white as snow, gazing upon him affectionately. I almost turned and ran away. Thinking it over, I realized that

this young man was more beautiful than even some of the greatest beauties. With a relatively average appearance, I, a mere Hanlin Academic should not have any problems. Therefore, I respectfully walked forward in greeting, informing the Prince that I had been dispatched by the King to lead him around the city.

The Prince of Qi's bright eyes considered me for some time, before he declared, "Excellent! I have long heard that Jianye possesses many beauties. Who is the most famous courtesan along the Qinhuai River?"[20]

My brow furrowed and I thought for some time before answering, "This vassal does not know. Your Imperial Highness, please allow this vassal to go and find out. I will definitely find out."

His eyes filled with laughter, the Prince of Qi said, "Never mind. If you were to go to find out, pretty soon all of Jianye will know. Everyone will say that I only know to frequent brothels.[21] If my Imperial Father were to find out, I would probably be reprimanded. Let us depart; accompany me tonight to take a look. We must definitely find the best courtesan."

I was overjoyed, thinking, *Everything would be alright as long as you go find women. Being engrossed in such base desires will only serve to bury you; I couldn't care less if you decided to amuse yourself to an untimely death. I will definitely find the best brothel* . Thinking this, I decided to ask the official supervising the posthouse. He would definitely know.

As dusk approached, I had already found the opportunity to learn everything there was to know about the Qinhuai River. If the Prince of Qi hadn't wanted to travel incognito and prohibited attendants, I would have asked the official supervising the posthouse to bring us there. However, the prince did not introduce the white-robed young man, only saying that he was surnamed Qin and telling me to call him *gongzi* Qin. But no matter how I looked at the white-robed young man, he seemed to like a sheathed treasure sword, and could not be completely concealed.

This was completely different from Xiaoshunzi who seemed dispirited and downcast almost like a withered radish. I nearly believed that his martial arts were declining, but I did not think that this was possible. He seemed to

become increasingly unpredictable. When I returned home the day before yesterday, I found him waiting in my home, saying that he was not on duty that morning and had gone to Wuxi, almost eighty *li* , to amuse himself. He had brought some local cuisine such as soup dumplings and duck blood soup to serve as a midnight meal. I froze when I found that both were still warm. Although there was a container keeping the food warm, they could only have been bought no more than two hours earlier. Thinking of this, I got angry again. The little bastard knew that the danger I was in and refused to protect me. *The next time I cook, I definitely won't leave a share for him* .

I already had learned that Jianye's best brothels were the Beautiful Scenery Pavilion, the Xiaoxiang Courtyard,[22] the Red Harmony Pavilion, and the Floating Fragrance Pleasure Boat. The Beautiful Scenery Pavilion was known for its sexual prowess, Xiaoxiang Courtyard for its song and dance; the Red Harmony Pavilion was a combination casino-restaurant-brothel; and lastly the Floating Fragrance Pleasure Boat was led by Qinhuai River's number one courtesan, Liu Piaoxiang.[23] As the Prince of Qi often frequented brothels and, as an imperial family member would not visit someplace too vulgar, he would definitely want to meet Liu Piaoxiang. Full of joy and expectation, the Prince of Qi declared, "Excellent! This Prince most definitely wishes to bear witness to Jianye's top courtesan's elegance." I was pissed off beyond belief. He was definitely messing with me. Otherwise, he would not have had me ask around.

Although the official charged with supervising the posthouse knew that it was the Prince of Qi who wished to go to the pleasure boat, he still looked at me with a dubious expression. Hell, I was still a virgin!

Footnotes :

武威, wuwei – martial prestige
殿下, dianxia – Your Majesty; used to refer to princes
吾家千里驹, wujiaqianliju – horses were beloved for their ability to travel great distances without rest; the Yong Emperor is using this term to praise his son's abilities
长**安**, Chang'an – lit. everlasting peace; was the capital of China for hundreds of years; modern-day Xi'an

走马章台, zoumazhangtai – idiom, lit. to go to the brothel on horseback; to visit prostitutes
鸡犬不宁, jiquanbuning – idiom, lit. not even the chickens and dogs are left undisturbed; causing a great commotion or causing pandemonium
贵国, guiguo – your esteemed state
休戚相关, xiuqixiangguan – idiom, lit. to share the same interests; to be closely related; to be in the same boat
本王, benwang – this prince, referring to oneself in the third person
日暮西山, rimuxishan – idiom, lit. the sun sets over western hills; fig. time of decline; the end of an era
苟延残喘, gouyancanchuan – idiom, lit. to struggle while at death's door
孤, gu – royal we used by kings and princes
千锤百炼, qianchubailian – idiom, lit. after hard work and numerous revisions; having experienced the vicissitudes (ups and downs) of life
丈, zhang – measure of length, ten Chinese feet (3.3 meters)
钱塘, Qiantang – refers to Hangzhou
三吴, sanwu – lit. three Wu; was used by the Eastern Jin Dynasty to refer to its most important territory around the area that is the southern bank of the Yangtze River Delta
This is a poem by Song Dynasty poet, Liu Yong. Entitled *Gazing Out Upon the Tide, Southeast Advantageous Position* (望海潮·东南形胜, wanghaichao dongnanxingsheng)
江南, Jiangnan – lit. south of the river; refers to the geographic area south of the lower reaches of the Yangtze River (southeastern China)
驿馆, yiguan – in the capital, the posthouse served to house visiting dignitaries; outside the capital, the posthouse served as a relay station akin to the Pony Express and as an officially run inn used by those traveling on government business
秦淮河, Qinhuai River – a river that runs through Jianye (modern-day Nanjing) and is famous for its many brothels and its courtesans/prostitutes
寻花问柳, xunhuawenliu – idiom, lit. to enjoy the beautiful spring scenery; fig. to frequent brothels; to sow one's wild oats
潇湘, xiaoxiang – another name for the Xiaojiang River in Hunan Province
飘香, piaoxiang – floating fragrance; Liu Piaoxiang shares her given name

with her pleasure boat

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 7: The Floating Fragrance Pleasure Boat

Volume 1, Chapter 7: The Floating Fragrance Pleasure Boat

I accompanied the Prince of Qi as we walked along the street. In high spirits, he gazed about at the scenery. Although I wasn't particularly familiar with the area, I could still serve as a tour guide. In order to get to the Qinhuai River, we must pass through the bustling splendor of the Qinhuai Avenue. The avenue was brightly lit on both sides with the doors of each brothel and wine shop open. Each had procurers flanking their entrances with beauties standing in the doorway using all kinds of seductive language to entice customers. Everyone in our party had handsome appearances, especially the Prince of Qi, who had an extraordinary bearing. We could be especially favored customers. As a result, a number of procurers and prostitutes came forward and tried to entice us within. I noticed then that there were a dozen or so men dressed in ordinary clothes, intentionally or unintentionally, surrounding and following us. They kept away all of those attempting to get close and seemed to be protecting the three of us. The dozen or so men seemed to be ordinary, but were all tall and sturdy. Through their thin clothes, one could see their toned muscles. The way that they walked seemed to leave no traces on the ground. I figured that these individuals must be the Prince of Qi's personal guards. Go figure … how could a dignified royal prince out traveling not have any guards protecting him? Since he had guards with him, I did not have to worry about my safety. I relaxed. The scenery that had previously left me embarrassed no longer made me nervous.

We didn't walk far before we arrived at the banks of the Qinhuai River. At the intersection with the particularly wide river, there were a dozen or so boats moored. Amongst them was a boat that was especially large. Although this boat was lit with bright lights, no music or sounds of drinking and games could be heard unlike the other pleasure boats. At the banks of the river were a number of launches. To a seductive woman manning one of them, I yelled, "Boatwoman, take us to the Floating Fragrance Pleasure

Boat."

Smiling, the boatwoman raised her head and replied, "The gentlemen have arrived late, as the pleasure boat may already be full tonight. Can the gentleman not see that the pleasure boat is hanging up its lanterns? It's preparing to weigh anchor."

Sullenly, the Prince of Qi glared at me, while I calmly stated, "We have already made a reservation. Thank you, boatwoman, for your advice." Hearing my words, the Prince of Qi eased up. The three of us boarded the launch. The dozen or so guards also boarded their vessels. After zigzagging through the maze of boats, we soon arrived at the pleasure boat.

After we had boarded the boat, a beautiful woman, gorgeously and provocatively dressed, welcomed us enthusiastically. She first smiled without saying anything before greeting us, "*Aiyah* ![1] If it isn't the lord *zhuangyuan* ! When this servant first heard that the lord *zhuangyuan* had reserved a cabin, I assumed it was an imposter. Who doesn't know that Jiang *daren* does not like this kind of place filled with temptations?"

Prying my eyes away from her ample bosom, I laughed. "Madam must surely be joking. I am but a mere lowly Hanlin scholar. I normally would not have the financial resources to visit the Floating Fragrance Pleasure Boat. Today, I am accompanying a distinguished guest here to bear witness to Lady Piaoxiang. Madam must take good care of him."

The madam had long since caught sight of Li Xian. Having seen many customers come and go, she immediately knew that Li Xian was a seldom-seen wealthy customer. Promptly beaming with joy,[2] the madam began to act submissively to ingratiate herself.[3] She walked before the Prince of Qi and bowed. "This honored guest has come from afar, while this madam is late with my welcomes. I hope that this honored guest will forgive me, this …" She glanced at me.

Understanding, I immediately introduced the pair, "This is young master Li and this is young master Qin."

In a tender voice, she purred, "Please come in, honored guests. Lady Piaoxiang's mood today is excellent. If you are lucky, you may have the

fortune of gaining the lady's favor."

The three of us were led by the madam into a spacious and elegant cabin. The guards were led to nearby cabins, leaving us to be accompanied by the female attendants. The cabin was refined and elegant, brightly lit by lanterns. Beside the window was a large round table. The majority of the space was empty, leaving room for song and dance to please the guests. On the right side of the cabin was a small doorway covered by a bead curtain. One could just discern that it was a bedroom. It looked like this was a top class cabin. Eight beautiful attendants lined the doorway. When we entered the cabin, they helped us remove our cloaks and outer garments. The three of us sat down before the table with our backs to the window. Like butterflies swarming around flowers, the attendants soon began to flow in and out, setting a wide array of tea, snacks, and alcohol. The three most beautiful attendants sat down by our sides. Originally, the madam had planned that we be attended to by two beauties each, so that we could hold one in each arm. The beautiful young master Qin refused the attentions of the beauties and sat down beside the Prince of Qi. The madam was experienced and knowledgeable, so did not exhibit any unusual attitudes. My heart trembled. This couldn't be real, right? That young master Qin must be a catamite.[4] I had only suspected this fact earlier, but seeing what had happened, I immediately felt my entire body tremble loathingly. Young master Qin noticed my abnormal behavior and glanced at me coldly, his eyes filled with murderous intent. Only when he turned his head away did I heave a sigh of relief, making a firm resolution to acquire a few powerful martial artists to accompany me by my side. As a palace eunuch, Xiaoshunzi wasn't free to do as he pleased. But where was I going to find loyal guards? If they were really so strong, it was unlikely that they would listen to orders from a mere lowly Hanlin Academic.

Accompanied by the female attendants, we slowly sipped the wine, waiting for the arrival of Lady Piaoxiang. The attendants were uneasy. Who could blame them? As a frequent customer of brothels, the Prince of Qi would constantly leer and fondle the female attendant by his side. Young master Qin on the other hand was frigid, completely ignoring the attendant by his side and would frequently look ferociously at the attendant beside the

Prince of Qi. I was warm and observed polite etiquette, but maintained a respectful distance, leaving the beauty at a loss.[5] During this awkward moment, the cabin door opened and a beautiful woman leisurely entered. The woman had no makeup on, but her beautiful face was like the most gorgeous of sceneries. Her crystal-like skin was delicate, but had a faint reddish blush, as if she had just taken a warm bath. Her black hair, flowing like a waterfall, seemed to reflect the light. Her eyes could easily distinguish between right and wrong, seemingly as bright as the brightest star in the night sky. She wore a comfortable gown. Among the women of Southern Chu, she was slim and graceful. If one were to consider her appearance and temperament, although she was beautiful, her type of beauty was commonly seen. What was rare was that she possessed a natural charm.

This woman supplely entered the cabin, sitting before the three of us. Her beautiful eyes regarding us, she articulated, “This is the first time that the three honored guests have come to see Piaoxiang, but I have come late and have made the three guests wait.” Her voice penetrated deep into the spirit and bone, eliciting a feeling of overwhelming joy. The face of young master Qin and I both reddened. Even the Prince of Qi’s face showed a strange expression. The young woman’s eyes paused briefly upon the Prince of Qi as she continued. “Piaoxiang has heard that the Prince of Qi is a hero that is rarely seen, and is a towering figure, appreciative of beauty.[6] Why are you so shy today?” Although I wasn’t surprised that Piaoxiang was able to ascertain Li Xian’s identity, I did want to see how he would react.

Surprised at first, Li Xian smiled without restraint and responded, “Oh! You are definitely an intelligent young woman. Have you met this Prince before?”

When Piaoxiang saw that Li Xian made no attempt to hide his identity, there was a look of approval in her eyes, answering, “Although Your Imperial Highness is dressed in the garb of Southern Chu, you don’t seem to like wearing silk. On your feet, you are wearing a pair of brocade boots favored by the elites of Great Yong. In addition, Your Imperial Highness possesses a particular grace and imposing demeanor. Recently, this servant has heard that Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, has come to Jianye. I

would be surprised if Your Imperial Highness were not to come visit. As for this Academic Jiang, he is rarefied company. If he were not here accompanying Your Imperial Highness, then Piaoxiang would probably never have the opportunity to meet him."

Hearing her words, I blushed. I had once received an invitation from Piaoxiang, inviting me to visit the Floating Fragrance Pleasure Boat. But as I had no money, I had declined the invitation. Originally young master Qin seemed to gaze upon the Prince of Qi with resentment, but now he looked at me with a faint smile, glad that I had previously rejected Piaoxiang's invitation. I hurriedly claimed, "Lady Liu is joking. This lowly official does not have financial resources. How could I have the qualifications to visit here?"

Piaoxiang stood and leisurely approached me. Sitting down on at my side, she grasped my arm and said, "Really now … Don't tell me that the lord *zhuangyuan* believes that we women of the pleasure quarters have not even a shred of true feelings? Can Piaoxiang not love the *zhuangyuan* 's talent and give one's heart?"

I almost laughed. If Piaoxiang did not love money, then it was unlikely that she was the number one courtesan in Jianye. I knew that many of Jianye's dignitaries were Piaoxiang's guests of honor. But I had also heard that Piaoxiang was an unusual woman. If you were not wealthy, you could not hope to attain her. At the same time, however, even if you were wealthy or powerful, you still may not be able to attain her. The king's uncle, the Prince of Han,[7] Zhao Delong, was once a guest of the Floating Fragrant Pleasure Boat. He had attempted to stay the night. None knew that Piaoxiang disliked him. Regardless of how Zhao Delong attempted to ingratiate himself, she refused to allow him to stay. Finally, Zhao Delong attempted to use his power and influence, but lo and behold, Piaoxiang would rather die than submit. As he could not use force, Zhao Delong could only leave. He later tried to make things difficult for Liu Piaoxiang, but was unable to do so because of her many distinguished guests. Later, people asked her why she refused to attend to the Prince of Han. Even though he was over fifty, he was still handsome and had energy beyond that of an ordinary person. Liu

Piaoxiang coldly laughed and uttered, “Although this servant is no more than a lowly courtesan, I understand the meaning of loyalty, piety, benevolence, and righteousness. That Zhao Delong once led an army into battle, but due to his cowardice, lost the battle. His subordinates fought bitterly in order to protect his life. But he repaid such kindness with malice,[8] impeaching his subordinates for disobeying orders and adversely affecting the operation. Those subordinates were executed by beheading. Who in Southern Chu does not know about this incident? It is only because of his status and power that no one dares denounce him. This servant, though only a lowly courtesan, still despises that kind of cowardly villain.” After these words were spread far and wide, everyone despised the Prince of Han and looked upon Piaoxiang favorably. Soon afterwards, the Prince of Han became depressed and died. As a result of this incident, Liu Piaoxiang’s name became renowned throughout the world. From this, she became Jianye’s number one courtesan. In reality, it wasn’t that no other courtesan was superior to her, it was that no one could compare to her straightforward and chivalrous temperament.

When I had heard of this tale, I admired her deeply. But because of financial barriers, I did not dare go see her. If I knew that she would not have taken my money, I would have gone long ago. Seeing my intoxicated manner, young master Qin gave me a despising look. That icy gaze immediately snapped me out of my reverie, forcing me to remember that I was here accompanying the Prince of Qi. I extricated my arm and respectfully stated, “Thank you, Piaoxiang, for your appreciation.”

Liu Piaoxiang looked at me angrily before standing in a huff and moving to sit beside the Prince of Qi. That kind of angry and yet still beautiful expression left the three of us dumbfounded. Afterwards, Liu Piaoxiang did not give me a second look, proceeding to converse freely with the Prince of Qi, and occasionally with young master Qin as well. Her methods were brilliant, seemingly cordial and familiar, and yet not excessively wanton. Even the normally aloof young master Qin had a slight smile on his face.

Liu Piaoxiang was definitely a peerlessly beautiful woman. After drinking a few cups of wine, she stood and called out. From outside, a woman in green

entered carrying all kinds of musical instruments and started playing. Amidst the music, Piaoxiang began to dance. That kind of passionate dance, as if she was igniting her life force, left me completely intoxicated. When I carefully regarded her face, I could tell that she had completely invested everything into the dance. I really was moved. When she stopped, I saw her look at me. As our eyes met, I could see a hint of elation in her gaze. She walked over and sat down lazily next to the Prince of Qi. That kind of languid beauty made me want to immediately take her to bed.

At this point, the madam entered the cabin. With a smile on her face, she murmured, “It is getting late. Would Jiang *daren* and Qin *daren* please come to the neighboring cabins to rest? If you see any female attendants you like, don’t hesitate to invite them.”

I soured a bit. I hurriedly stood and bade my farewell, requesting that the Prince of Qi rest well. Freezing momentarily, young master Qin suddenly stood and left. I hurriedly followed him out.

After sending away the attendants, I laid down on a bed with my clothes on in a comfortable and yet not large cabin. My imagination ran wild, filled with the beautiful image of Liu Piaoxiang. Listening to the babbling sounds of water outside my window, I slowly began to fall asleep. Just as I was half-asleep, I suddenly felt someone’s hands removing my clothes. I felt fearful, thinking that I was being ambushed by the Prince of Qi. I hurriedly opened my eyes. Just as I was about to yell, I noticed an exquisite[9] face before me. It was Liu Piaoxiang. My entire body softened and I could no longer shout. Seeing that I was awake, Liu Piaoxiang smiled sweetly. With delicate movements, she removed her clothes, revealing her elegant and delicate jade body. Slowly, I extended my hands, holding her in my arms. Still somewhat hesitant, I stammered, “The Prince of Qi.”

Liu Piaoxiang giggled and replied, “You didn’t know? That young master Qin is a woman. Before I could even undress, she couldn’t wait and rushed inside. I quickly left the room to the two of them. My great *zhuangyuan* , what are you waiting for?”

Although I had learned sexual techniques, I had never touched a woman in my life and did not know what to do. Understanding, Liu Piaoxiang in turn

held me, helping me undress. I felt my body intertwine with the soft and warm body of a woman. I lost myself, reveling completely in passionate lovemaking.

As I fell asleep tired, Liu Piaoxiang rested for a moment before sitting up. Wrapping her clothes around her, she summoned two female attendants to the cabin. With delicate touches, the two attendants helped me wash and change. I did wake up for a brief moment, but I was too sleepy to move even half a finger. When I finally woke up, I was lying upon the cleaned bed and wearing black pajamas. I gazed upon the deeply sleeping figure of Liu Piaoxiang beside me. My face suddenly reddened and I couldn't say a single word. Opening her eyes, Liu Piaoxiang laughed lightly and wondered, "Is my lord *zhuangyuan* unhappy to lose your virginity to this courtesan?"

My face and ears red, I proposed, "Will you marry me?"

At first, Liu Piaoxiang seemed to laugh at me in ridicule before suddenly realizing that I was being serious. She sighed. "No we can't."

"What? Does it require money? How much? I will figure out a way," I anxiously pleaded.

Liu Piaoxiang's pursed her lips and smiled. "It's not that. I long ago earned enough money to buy my freedom."

Dejected, I asked, "Then, you refuse to marry me because I'm unworthy?"

Surprised, Liu Piaoxiang answered, "You are a Hanlin Academic. Even if I become your concubine, it will harm your career. You really want me to marry you?"

Indifferently, I explained, "That's not important. If need be, I can resign from my position. I'm not particularly interested in being an official. I have accrued some savings over the last several years and can purchase a few hundred *mu* [10] of farmland. It's just, I'm afraid that you wouldn't be used to that kind of poor, but upright lifestyle."

Revealing a smile that I could not even describe with words, she responded, "I know you are being sincere and don't have even a hint of hesitation. I have seen countless numbers of people. I originally hoped to return to a normal life, but when I had earned enough money to regain my

freedom, I suddenly realized that there was no one I could marry. I loathe to even glance at the face of those dissolute lechers. If it was someone honest, I would dislike him for being dull and boring. Though there are several who I admire wholeheartedly, if I were to marry them, once I become old, they would abandon me. I can't help but be frightened. Oh, meeting you today and seeing how you sincerely appreciated my dance, I knew that you understood that I have dedicated myself to my craft. That is why I personally came to accompany you. I am fortunate that you are a gentleman who treats me sincerely. However, it won't do. I, Piaoxiang, am frivolous and cannot play the traditional roles of a wife.[11] I am like the swallow of Jiangnan, in love with the bustle of the city, in love with my freedom, and do not wish another cage to trap myself. Lover Jiang,[12] it may be possible that I will experience countless more men, but you must remember that you are the one most beloved in my heart. You must not avoid Piaoxiang out of dislike, and come see me from time to time."

My heart throbbed with pain. I could hear from her words that she was speaking sincerely without any intention to fool me. There was no man capable of keeping this kind of unusual woman forever. Holding her delicate hands, I replied, "Piaoxiang is famous in the capital. Though Jiang Zhe is but a lowly official, if I were to come frequently, it would cause an uproar. When we part today, though it may not be an eternal parting, it will be difficult for us to meet again. Piaoxiang, Piaoxiang, the way we have forgotten ourselves in these rivers and lakes far surpasses anything else. If we are to meet again in the future, I only hope that you won't treat me like a stranger."

Liu Piaoxiang's delicate body shook. She understood the meaning behind this young man's words. He would not secretly meet with her. If they were not to be husband and wife, then he would not come back to find her. But she was satisfied. In this world of hypocritical shows of affection, she had found genuine love.

When I walked out of the cabin and saw the satisfied Prince of Qi and the blushing young master Qin, I respectfully said, "Your Imperial Highness, we should return to the posthouse to rest."

Smiling, the Prince of Qi looked upon me and asked, "How about it? Were

you successful last night?”

I felt apprehensive. Did he know that I was with Piaoxiang? I smiled indifferently, deliberately acting mysteriously. The Prince of Qi looked at me suspiciously. It looked like I had enjoyed myself last night. The same probably was true for his personal guards. After we stepped on dry land, I could not help but look back. The Floating Fragrance Pleasure Boat was extremely peaceful. Buried there was my first love.

After escorting the Prince of Qi back, I quickly returned home. On the table, I saw a note. On it was written, “You let loose last night, but were unaware that others were watching you like a tiger stalks its prey. One cannot fully comprehend the intentions of the Prince of Qi. I took care of the one he had sent to observe you.” My hand trembled. Xiaoshunzi was truly loyal. But I did not know how I had acquired sufficient virtue for him to treat me so well.

At the same time, within the posthouse, the Prince of Qi had a heavy look on his face. Below the dais stood an embarrassed guard. The Prince of Qi coldly interrogated, “You said you were not watching Jiang Zhe? Why is this?”

His entire face panic-stricken, the guard replied, “Your Highness, I beg your forgiveness. This vassal was originally following orders and was keeping an eye on Jiang Zhe from the cabin across the hall. I don’t know why, but I suddenly fell asleep.”

The Prince of Qi’s expression became even grimmer, but he did not blame the guard, allowing him to depart.

Sitting beside him, young master Qin faintly said, “I’ve already investigated. He was hit in his pressure points. To be able to hit his pressure points in such a small enclosed space without being detected … that person’s martial arts are greater than mine.”

Unconvinced, the Prince of Qi said, “But I can see that Jiang Zhe does not know any martial arts. Has he attained the realm of ‘Returning to the Natural State’?”[13]

Her brow furrowing, young master Qin thought for some time before

responding, “In the world today, there are only three people who have attained such a realm of cultivation—my master, the True Compassion Elder of the Shaolin Temple, and the Devil Sect’s sovereign, Jing Wuji. That Jiang Zhe is so young. I do not believe that he has reached such a stage.”

Looking pensive, the Prince of Qi stated, “Second elder brother and Liang Wan both told me to keep an eye on this Jiang Zhe. I originally disapproved.[14] But from what we’ve witnessed, I feel that this person is unfathomable.[15] What happened last night made it even more difficult to come to any conclusions. The elites of Southern Chu definitely cannot be underestimated. It is fortunate that he is biding his time[16] and seemingly will not become one of our obstacles.”

Lowering her head, young master Qin uttered, “If you feel that he is trouble, I can help you.”

Shaking his head, Li Xian replied, “How can we lightly kill this kind of person? In addition, we may not necessarily succeed.” As he spoke, in his eyes there flashed a dazzling light.

Footnotes :

哎呀, aiya - interjection of wonder, shock or admiration
眉开眼笑, meikaiyanxiao – idiom, lit. brows raised in delight eyes laughing; beaming with joy, all smiles
曲意逢迎, quyifengying – acting submissively in order to ingratiate oneself
娈童, luantong – catamite (boy used as a homosexual partner)
手足无措, shouzuwucuo – idiom, lit. at a loss to know what to do; bewildered
怜香惜玉, lianxiangxiyu – idiom, to have tender, protective feelings for the fairer sex; to be appreciative of beauty
韩, Han – note, different character from Northern Han (**北**汉)
恩将仇报, enjiangchoubao – idiom, lit. to bite the hand that feeds one; to repay kindness with malice
如花似玉, ruhuasiyu – idiom, lit. delicate as flower, refined as precious jade; exquisite
亩, mu – Chinese land measurement equal to one fifteenth of a hectare
相夫教子, xiangfujiaozi – idiom, lit. to assist one’s husband and educate the

children; basically the traditional roles of the wife

郎, lang – gentleman, young man, husband; Liu Piaoxiang is basically addressing Jiang Zhe as her lover

反璞归真, fanpuguizhen – to return to one's true self; to regain the natural state

不以为然, buyiweiran – idiom, lit. not to accept as correct; to object, disapprove, take exception to

深不可测, shenbukece – idiom, lit. deep and immeasurable; unfathomable depths, incomprehensible, enigmatic and impossible to predict

韬光养晦, taoguangyanghui – idiom, lit. to conceal one's strengths and bide one's time; to hide one's light under a bushel

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 8: Duel of Words at Bright Moon Pavilion

Volume 1, Chapter 8: Duel of Words at Bright Moon Pavilion

In the seventh month of the nineteenth year of Xiande, the Prince of De, Zhao Jue, returned to Jianye. The King questioned him regarding the invasion of Shu. At the time, Prime Minister Shang Weijun wholeheartedly supported the invasion, and was joined in agreement by the entire court. Using all his power, the Prince of De opposed the invasion, causing the King to hesitate. On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, Liang Wan, the adopted daughter of King Ling, held a banquet at the Bright Moon Pavilion, inviting the Prince of De to attend. Also in attendance was Prime Minister Shang Weijun; the Prince of Qi, Li Xin, of Great Yong; and the Prince of Qi's adviser, Qin Zheng. Jiang Zhe was also invited. Later generations reading this will wonder why Jiang Zhe would attend the banquet given his lowly rank and the important matters of state being discussed. Some would say that he was already disloyal and duplicitous. Considering the available evidence, this is not the case.

After the banquet, the Prince of De angrily departed. Jiang Zhe chased down the Prince of De and spoke several words, leaving the Prince silent. During the later court assembly, the Prince of De held his peace. Some will say that the Prince ceasing to oppose the invasion was the fault of Jiang Zhe, who bears the heaviest blame for this terrible blunder. But when the Prince's colleagues and subordinates learned what Jiang Zhe said, they all understood his predicament.

—*Southern Chu Dynastic Records* , *Biography of King Yang of Chu*

The Prince of De, Zhao Jue, returned. The chaos surrounding the debate around the invasion of Shu seemed to calm. When Zhao Jue returned, he immediately went to pay his respects to the former king. When the former King had passed, Zhao Jue was garrisoning the border and could not return to mourn. The court's political situation had calmed. As Zhao Jue was a major military commander, the debate over the invasion of Shu must listen

to his opinion, and thus he was recalled back to the capital. After he had sorrowfully paid his respects, Zhao Jue was granted an audience with the king. Before the king, Zhao Jue did not mince his words,[1] forcibly arguing against the invasion. Zhao Jue was extremely influential in the royal court. As a result, many stopped discussing the invasion, although even more individuals came one by one to visit him and exhort him to change his mind, especially Shang Weijun and a number of the court's luminaries. However, the Prince of De would not agree.

On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, the Princess Mingyue, Liang Wan, invited the Prince of De to a banquet. She simultaneously invited the Prince of Qi, Li Xian, and Prime Minister Shang Weijun. Everyone understood her intent. In reality, I was disinterested in the affairs of these individuals of power and prestige who held state authority, so why must I attend? I did not know whether to cry or laugh as I looked at the Prince of Qi. Just as I said I was a lowly official, arguing that I did not have the qualifications to attend, the Prince of Qi's face did not change, as he declared, "It's only a banquet organized by Lady Liang. You were sent by your King to receive me. You naturally must participate."

Although I had the heart to decline, in the face of murderous intent emitted by the Prince of Qi, I could only agree to attend. Who said that you cannot bend before martial power? Let them try and stand before these personal guards who had survived numerous battlefields.

The Prince of Qi was second to arrive. This banquet was being held at the Bright Moon Pavilion. It was the middle of summer and the heat was intolerable. All of the building's windows were open wide. On all sides were buckets filled with ice, helping to cool the building. Liang Wan was wearing a light yellow dress and was seated in the host's position. Shang Weijun was wearing silk robes and was seated on the left in the second seat. After him sat a black-clothed Confucian scholar. He was likely Shang Weijun's adviser, Nian Yuan. When Shang Weijun saw the Prince of Qi arrive, the Prime Minister strode forward to welcome the Prince with a smile from ear to ear. Seeing my presence, his brow furrowed. I hurriedly took the opportunity to say, "This lowly official was ordered by royal edict to accompany His

Highness, the Prince of Qi. Since *daren* is here, please allow this lowly official to withdraw."

Shang Weijun revealed a satisfied smile, praising my discretion. I believed that I had succeeded in my scheme and was getting ready to depart when the Prince of Qi grabbed my arm and with a terrible smile, said, "Don't go. Shang *daren* , Academic Jiang is an official dispatched by your king, a Reader-in-Waiting, and also a gifted scholar and distinguished personage of Southern Chu. How about we let him listen?"

Shang Weijun's brows furrowed, but ultimately could not afford to offend the Prince of Qi. He gave me a look of warning, reminding me to not say anything.

The Prince of Qi was seated at the first position on the right side with young master Qin seated below him, followed by me. I could not sit on the left side as I was only allowed to stay because of the persistence of the Prince of Qi. We did not wait long before we heard clear and bright laughter from outside the door. A large and handsome man dressed in the garb of a prince entered. As King Ling had departed for less than a year, he still wore white garb that denoted he was in mourning.[2] This man was the Prince of De, Zhao Jue. Behind him followed a middle-aged Confucian scholar dressed in green and a black-garbed warrior carrying a sword. When I saw Zhao Jue, I almost yelled out in surprise. He was the man in gray that I had made a divination for prior to passing the imperial examinations. If he was the Prince of De, then that year, he was proceeding to garrison the frontier at Hengjiang and was preparing to raid Moling. No wonder I divined misfortune. Thinking back to that day, the words I told him—"in-fighting within, strong enemies without"—coincided with reality. This Prince of De was the younger brother of King Ling and was a prominent military official. To think that I once divined his fate. I wondered if he remembered me?

Zhao Jue carefully swept past everyone in the room one by one. That he paused as he considered me did not mean that he did not have any memories of me, but rather he was suspicious of my identity. He sat down in the first position on the left. The warrior sat down protectively behind him, while his adviser took the last position on the left. As I had left a seat

between young master Qin and myself, I was directly across from the adviser. As our eyes met, I smiled ingratiatingly, while his perceptive gaze considered me inquiringly.

After Zhao Jue was seated, female attendants delivered tea and snacks before retreating from the room. Standing, Liang Wan said, “This servant was entrusted by the Prince of Qi and Prime Minister Shang to invite the Prince of De to attend this banquet. Although this servant should, by all rights, not involve herself in matters of state, all of these *daren* require someone to wait upon them. As a result, this servant can only stay behind. This is a matter of importance for both my Great Yong and for Southern Chu. As this servant was born in Great Yong and has received great favor from the former King, I vow to keep everything discussed here a secret.”

Smiling slightly, Zhao Jue stated, “Lady Liang is the adopted daughter of the former King and can be considered as Zhao Jue’s niece. Zhao Jue, naturally, believes the young lady. May Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, and Prime Minister Shang enlighten me as to the nature of this meeting?”

Li Xian regarded Zhao Jue, smiling as he said, “I have long heard that the Prince of De is the most famous general of Southern Chu, commander-in-chief of the Southern Chu armies. Meeting you today, I can say that you are indeed elegant and lofty with an extraordinary charm. Although I, Li Xian, am an imperial prince, I am but a mere lowly general in the army. If we were to consider our ranks, Li Xian would be beneath Your Highness. How could I dare presume to enlighten Your Highness? But the Prince of De has opposed the discussion of the invasion of Shu. This opposition does not match the famed general moniker. Would the Prince of De explain?”

Indifferently, Zhao Jue clarified, “Although the Kingdom of Shu is at fault for refusing to submit to Great Yong, the King of Shu is a former vassal of Eastern Jin and alongside Great Yong, were equally vassals in the imperial court. There was no such distinction of lord and vassal. Now, I do not understand how Great Yong can use Shu’s refusal to submit as the rationale for an invasion. Even if Great Yong considers this reason to be sufficient, this however, is not enough for Southern Chu. Although we have submitted to

Great Yong, we have never been willing to accept Great Yong's orders."

Smiling, Li Xian countered, "The Prince of De's words are mistaken. My Great Yong's sovereign and vassals are sagacious. That King of Shu's secession and refusal to submit cannot be tolerated. If Shu had submitted to Great Yong, then we Great Yong would not be attacking the Kingdom of Shu. It is said that an emperor's enmity can be avenged even if nine generations had passed. At the time, Shu took advantage of Great Yong's founding to attack Qinchuan,[3] sacking and pillaging as they went. When the former Emperor of my Great Yong heard the news, he cried tears of blood. *If we cannot avenge this enmity, how can we consider ourselves human?* Later on, when Great Yong attacked Southern Chu, Shu once again launched an attack. Although they have shown kindness to Southern Chu, they have inflicted terrible losses upon Great Yong. In the territory that formerly belonged to the state of Qin during the Warring States period, ruins spread for thousands of *li* and the common people could not survive. Afterwards, the Kingdom of Shu even extorted countless treasures, silk, and beauties from Southern Chu. Considering this view, the Kingdom of Shu is a hidden, vicious wolf. Under normal circumstances, it lives in seclusion, but once it espies discord, it will inevitably come out to bite. The Prince of De speaks up for Shu today, but the time will inevitably come when Southern Chu will be swallowed by this kind of friendly state who forgets friendship and only knows its own interests."

Coldly, Zhao Jue riposted, "Although I may lack talent, I understand how without lips, the teeth would feel cold.[4] I'm afraid that once Shu has been destroyed, it will be Southern Chu's turn."

Li Xian was at a loss for words. He of course knew that once Shu was successfully invaded, Southern Chu would be the next target. He just didn't expect for Zhao Jue to be unafraid to offend Great Yong and get straight to the point. As a prince of Great Yong, he could not casually lie. At this point, young master Qin spoke up. "These words are incorrect. The so-called interdependence requires mutual dependence and the sharing of common interests. Nowadays, the Kingdom of Shu repeatedly provokes Southern Chu, treating friends as enemies. The teeth are as sharp as knives, and the

lips are gnawed until they bleed. I do not understand what interdependency the Prince of De speaks of."

Zhao Jue smiled faintly. His adviser set down the folding fan in his hand and answered, "Although Southern Chu and Shu have a few disputes, none of them have been disgraceful humiliations.[5] In the ninth year of Xiande, after Great Yong pacified the Central Plains, you dispatched an army south to the Yangtze. If it were not for the assistance of the Kingdom of Shu attacking Qinchuan, Great Yong would not have called for a ceasefire. Even so, my Southern Chu submitted to Great Yong. This kind of humiliation deserves to be remembered. Although our two countries are on amicable terms, and we have marriage relations with the marriage of Princess Changle and our King, your country, however, continues to train a navy in preparation for southern invasion. I wonder if Your Imperial Highness can explain this."

Smiling, Li Xian returned, "Although our two countries are on amicable terms, your state still possesses numerous individuals such as the Prince here who cannot forget the enmity between our two countries. These individuals are definitely not in the minority. If my country did not train a navy, I fear that your military would have crossed the Yangtze to attack. The Prince of De has long garrisoned the Yangtze; how can you not know this? Furthermore, my country has repeatedly tried to be friendly. My Imperial Sister is the beloved daughter of my Imperial Father. And yet she has come to Southern Chu to be married to your King. The last several years has not only seen frequent contacts from both sides, but also trading and marriage relations unlike the Kingdom of Shu who has chosen to close off its borders and seal the country. My country has long held military discussions and will attack Shu to eliminate this hidden danger.[6] We only ask that Southern Chu assist."

Humorlessly smiling, Zhao Jue asserted, "Preposterous![7] Over the last ten years, my Southern Chu has paid a yearly tribute in money and silk, and yet your country refuses to sell us weapons and horses. Why would you do this if you truly wish to be friendly? Furthermore, although the Queen is a princess of Great Yong, are these not matters of state? Why must we

consider the qualms of a married woman? Duke Wu of the state of Zheng once married his daughter in order to attack the state of Hu.[8] I do not dare to forget this story."

Young master Qin angrily rebutted, "The Prince of De has insulted my country. Enough is enough. After careful consideration, Your Highness's worries are not without merit. Please allow my lowly self to explain. My country's prohibition on the sale of weapons and horses is not directly at your country, but rather because of the hostilities along our northern frontier. With our frontier forces so occupied, how would we dare to sell weapons and horses? Furthermore, your country has long occupied Jiangnan, an area of rivers and lakes. If your country does indeed not wish to attack Great Yong, why would you need horses? Are you going to use them to attack Shu?"

Zhao Jue was at a loss for words. Shang Weijun hurriedly tried to change the subject. "Your Highness and young master Qin have both misspoke. We are not gathered here today for an emotional dispute. Would the two honored personages please not bear any grudges."

Zhao Jue and young master Qin raised their teacups respectfully, both sides sipping, signaling the cessation of the debate.

Taking a breath, young master Qin explained, "My country plans against Shu because of its obstinate refusal to submit. Although we were once allied, they have repeatedly broken the alliance. Most dreadfully, my country does not produce enough salt and we must purchase salt from Sichuan, but the Kingdom of Shu has repeatedly raised the price. Sichuan possesses abundant salt, and yet chooses to use such unscrupulous means to amass wealth. We cannot continue tolerating this situation. If our two countries attack Shu together, we are willing to divide Sichuan, using the river as the border. At that point, Southern Chu's military strength will be greatly increased. While Great Yong still has a menace upon its frontiers, Southern Chu will completely control the entirety of the Yangtze River. By then, what will there be to continue to make you anxious? If Your Highness, even under these circumstances, cannot be reassured and believe that Southern Chu cannot fight against Great Yong, then Your Highness may be better served

surrendering. Does Southern Chu only wish to control a mere Jiangnan with its life and death determined by others?

Although Zhao Jue remained silent, he shook his head. He understood that the combat ability of Southern Chu's soldiers was relatively poor. If they were to attack Shu, the majority of the territory would probably fall into the hands of Great Yong. What equal division of the spoils? By that time, the territory would belong to whoever conquered it. Everyone looked at each other seeing the determined expression on Zhao Jue's face. No matter how glib a tongue, it would not be able to change his intentions. A vexed look could be seen flickering in Li Xian's eyes before he glanced at Liang Wan. Standing, Liang Wan pronounced, "Everyone is tired today. If no one objects, would my honored guests descend downstairs to eat? This servant has prepared pickled plum soup to help alleviate the heat."

Shang Weijun stood and said with a smile, "Lady Liang's banquet must definitely be attended. Please."

Zhao Jue also stood. Looking at young master Qin, he inquired, "May I ask this honored personage's name? What position do you hold in Great Yong?"

Paying her obeisance, young master Qin replied, "This one is Qin Zheng in the service of the Prince of Qi."

With a smile, Zhao Jue said, "Young master Qin's tongue is as sharp as a sword, gaining Zhao Jue's admiration. There are some matters that no matter how eloquently spoken can surpass strength and interests. My Southern Chu has already acknowledged that we do not have the ability to be treated as an equal with Great Yong. If Great Yong were to attack the Kingdom of Shu, my Southern Chu would prepare its troops in order to defend itself."

Seeing Zhao Jue's stubbornness, young master Qin could only smile wryly as she responded, "The Prince of De has made his decision and sticks by it, and will not be swayed by mere words. Qin Zheng was impetuous and begs for forgiveness."

Zhao Jue nodded his head slightly and apologized. "This Prince has many military matters to deal with, thus must depart. Would everyone please

forgive me?" No one thought that Zhao Jue would be so determined and had planned originally to continue lobbying him when he had gotten tipsy and merry. At this moment, they had no alternative but to escort him out.

As everyone was exchanging glances, my mind raced. Rising from my seat, I suggested, "All the *daren* are weary, so please allow this lowly official to escort His Highness out." The Prince of Qi and the others were not in the mood to take other. Shang Weijun agonizingly replied, "That will be fine."

I followed Zhao Jue out. Zhao Jue was somewhat tired. I carefully considered this merely thirty-year old prince. The pressure on him in these last few years must have been acute. In the three years since our last meeting, the hair on his temples had turned slightly white. He continued to exude a firm and indomitable spirit. This was Southern Chu's main pillar. I was not only filled with admiration, but also felt sad for him. His painstaking efforts were not understood by others. I could not understand how he had this kind of courage.

Feeling my gaze, Zhao Jue indifferently asked, "Who are you?"

Respectfully, I answered, "This lowly official is Jiang Zhe, a Hanlin Reader-in-Waiting, tasked with accompanying the king."

Surprised, Zhao Jue questioned, "You are Jiang Zhe? Why were you with the Prince of Qi?"

I hurriedly explained, "This lowly official was ordered by the King to receive the Prince of Qi. Today, the Prince of Qi forced this lowly official to be present. This lowly official had the fortune of hearing Your Highness's teachings, and is truly fortunate."

Although Zhao Jue felt that it was strange, he didn't investigate in-depth. With a pained voice, he spoke, "I have read your poetry; it is very well written.

'Drunk, I contemplate the sword under the lamp,Awakened, bugles ring through the camps.Recalling a scene of soldiers drinking and savoring roasted beef in their widespread camps,With military music played out by various instruments they are entranced,In the autumn cool a grand parade advances.Warriors on coursers speed by, with bows fully drawn, hotly after

their enemies' end,On the twangs of the bows into dismay the enemies sank.I vow to restore His Majesty to sovereignty with my morale greatly enhanced,Earning myself renown and success that never end.Deplorably old I'll be before any achievement attained.'"

He was seemingly intoxicated by the concept of this *Dance of the Cavalry* [9] poem that I had written while I was in Jiangxia. He subconsciously stroked the hair on his temples. After some time, he wondered, "Do you think that we should attack the Kingdom of Shu?"

Seeing that there was no way around, I replied, "Before this lowly official can express his opinion, please allow this lowly official to ask three questions."

Zhao Jue looked at me with amazement before talking. "Ask away."

A look of grief flashed in my eyes as I asked, "First, would Your Highness please tell me who in Southern Chu, from the King to the common people, understands the rapacious designs of Great Yong?"

Zhao Jue stirred after being silent for some time. "There aren't many. Even my trusted subordinates advised me to attack Shu."

"Second," I continued to ask, "Would Your Highness please tell me if Great Yong were to attack Shu and Shu were to request for our help, would our Southern Chu dare to dispatch troops?"

Distressed, Zhao Jue remarked, "We would not dare. Our King would inevitably sit and watch Shu be destroyed."

Even though I understood his pain, I chose to continue to ask my third question, "Third, if Your Highness continues to oppose the invasion of Shu, but the King has already made his decision and chooses to use a different general, does Southern Chu has a more capable general than yourself?"

My three continuous questions were each increasingly penetrating. Zhao Jue felt himself break out in a cold sweat at them, staring fixedly at me.

Lowering my head, I expounded, "Nowadays, our country cannot act autonomously. If Your Highness persists in your opposition, the King will dispatch another to attack Shu. Our country's soldiers and generals are no

match for those of Great Yong or Shu. If we use up too much of our limited resources in attacking Shu, at that time, Great Yong will be able to easily destroy Southern Chu like a hot knife through butter.[10] If Your Highness were willing to lead the troops personally, then we may be able to acquire a portion of Sichuan's critical points to serve as a base. As long as we are able to use Longyou[11] and Guanzhong[12] as a buffer and properly defend the Xiangfan[13] region, Great Yong will be restrained. Southern Chu will receive at least ten years' worth of benefits. As long as Southern Chu is patient and waits for the right opportunity,[14] then we may be able to conquer the world."

At first, Zhao Jue's face revealed a look of sorrow that gradually calmed, before finally being replaced by a look of unwavering determination. He replied, "Jiang *daren* is truly an incomparable minister. If I am to lead the army to attack Shu, would Jiang *daren* be willing to serve as my adviser?"

You must be joking? I didn't want to go to war. Therefore, I indifferently answered, "This lowly official does not understand military matters or strategy, and dares not obey. If Your Highness has any questions, this lowly official will not hide anything and will speak frankly."

Zhao Jue looked at me stunned, unable to understand why I had rejected such a good opportunity. In a heavy voice, he replied, "Everyone bears responsibility with the fate of our country in the balance.[15] Since Jiang *daren* is a vassal of Southern Chu, how can you not spare no effort for our Southern Chu? You should think it over." After finishing, he led his people away.

I resentfully watched Zhao Jue depart. What a fellow to repay kindness with malice. I just advised you, and this is how you repay me? To want me on the battlefield was really complete nonsense. What's to be done? I bitterly began to think of who I could ask to help so that I need not join the army on its campaign.

Footnotes :

直言不讳, zhiyanbuwei – idiom, lit. to speak bluntly; not to mince words
Under traditional Chinese funeral rites, family members of the deceased are

required to observe the proper mourning rites which include avoiding bright colored garb, wearing white garb. Traditionally, the rites were observed for direct family members for up to twenty-seven months (rounded up to three years). As the Prince of De is the younger brother of King Ling, he must observe a minimum of nine months of mourning.

秦川, qinchuan – refers to the region that is now modern-day Shaanxi and Gansu

唇亡齿寒, chunwangchihan – idiom, lit. without the lips, the teeth would feel cold; fig. intimately interdependent

奇耻大辱, qichidaru – idiom, lit. extraordinary shame and humiliation

心腹之患, xinfuzhihuan – idiom, lit. calamity within one's bosom; hidden great danger or trouble

岂有此理, qiyoucili – idiom, lit. how can this be so?; preposterous, ridiculous, absurd

This is an apocryphal story of how Duke Wu of Zheng (郑武公, Martial Duke of Zheng) conquered the state of Hu (胡国) during the Spring and Autumn Period. He first married his daughter to the ruler of Hu. During the wedding celebrations, Duke Wu asked his advisers who he could invade. One of his advisers suggested Hu. Angrily, Duke Wu stated that the two states were brothers and state of Zheng could not invade. The ruler of Hu was happy and later the state of Hu ceased to defend against Zheng. Seizing the opportunity, Zheng invaded and conquered Hu.

This is a poem by Song Dynasty poet Xin Qiji entitled Dance of the Cavalry (破阵子)

势如破竹, shirupozhu – idiom, lit. as easily as breaking bamboo; like a knife through hot butter, irresistible force

陇右, longyou – aka Longxi (陇西) refers to the area that was once part of the Hexi Corridor connecting China proper with the Silk Road

关中, guanzhong – lit. the land within the passes; refers to the territory originally controlled by the state Qin during the Warring States Period

襄樊, Xiangfan – refers to the two neighboring cities of Xiang and Fan that were combined in 1949 to form the city of Xiangyang

卧薪尝胆, woxinchangdan – idiom, lit. to lie on firewood and taste good; to suffer patiently, but firmly resolved on revenge

国家兴亡，匹夫有责，guojiaxingwang, pifuyouze – idiom, everyone bears responsibility for the prosperity of the nation

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 9: Military Retainer

Volume 1, Chapter 9: Military Retainer[1]

In the eighth month of the nineteenth year of Xiande, Southern Chu allied with Great Yong. On behalf of Great Yong, the Prince of Qi swore a sacred oath.[2] The Prince of De, Zhao Jue, was named Chief Commander. Receiving the order, he set off for battle. Before he departed, Zhao Jue appointed Jiang Zhe as a military retainer to serve as a counselor on military matters. Worried that the Prince of De's authority was too great, the king also ordered the court eunuch, Wang Hai, to supervise the army.

—*Southern Chu Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Jiang Suiyun*

Damned Zhao Jue. He truly wanted me to serve in the army. I originally intended to ask others to help, but Zhao Jue now held a high-ranking position[3] as the Chief Commander. I could only hold back my tears as I handed over my duties in Hanlin Academy to another, joining the army that was heading west to invade Shu. However, I was comforted by the news that Xiaoshunzi was also accompanying the army. Just before we departed, the king dispatched Wang Hai, a supervisor within the Bureau of Ceremonies, to supervise and oversee the army. Although the utilization of eunuchs of supervise the army was a sign that Southern Chu would ultimately fall, I was happy as Xiaoshunzi was part of Wang Hai's entourage of eunuchs. I could not but thank the heavens for their blessings. With Xiaoshunzi's protection, I probably wouldn't have to face any dangers. But it was best if I could find some guards to protect me as well. I was prepared to discuss this matter with Xiaoshunzi. After I had identified a few candidates, Xiaoshunzi would then test their abilities. I had no intention of being guarded by useless people.[4]

For this invasion of Shu, Southern Chu's army was split in two. One army would travel up the Yangtze River through the Three Gorges under the command of the Marquis Who Suppresses Distant Lands, Lu Xin. The other army would be personally commanded by the Chief Commander, Zhao Jue,

and travel by land to Ba Prefecture.[5] The two armies would meet up at Luocheng.[5] As a retainer of the Prince of De, I naturally accompanied his army. But I still held a grudge. I stayed hidden in the carriage of the army supervisor, Wang Hai, for the entire journey. Wang Hai was a fellow clansman of the Eunuch Wang who supervised the palace book repositories. He treated me quite well, constantly bringing up how Eunuch Wang had benefited greatly from the medicinal pellets that I had concocted for him. Understanding his intent, I agreed to help Wang Hai concoct one or two types of medicinal pellets for his own personal use. Xiaoshunzi obediently attended to us. Greatly satisfied with Xiaoshunzi, Wang Hai smiled and said, "This little fellow is the lowly servant saved by my lord *zhuangyuan* ? Everything about Xiaoshunzi is good, except for one matter. He is hardworking, eloquent, and literate, but has no will to better himself. Other lowly servants would compete to the bitter end for assignments and would do anything to be able to directly attend to the King. In comparison, this little fellow is willing to forego that kind of comfortable assignment and accompany me[6] to suffer hardships in the army."

I could not help but to regard Xiaoshunzi for a moment, feeling guilty. This little fellow was always thinking of me. Obediently, Xiaoshunzi responded, "Eunuch[7] shouldn't say such things. *Gonggong* and Eunuch Wang are related. Under normal circumstances, when you see this lowly servant, you usually bestow rewards. This time, *gonggong* has received the attention of the King and has been appointed as army supervisor. Once we win and return to the capital, that kind of meritorious service will be rewarded. Concurrently, I will also be rewarded. Otherwise, why would people say that one can find riches and honor in danger?"

Wang Hai smiled widely, almost to the point where his eyes were closed. Just as the three of us were enjoying the conversation, an orderly approached the front of the carriage. He yelled, "Jiang *daren* , the Prince has summoned you to discuss official business."

I had no choice but to exit the carriage. From one of the palace guards accompanying Wang Hai, I took the reins of a horse. After climbing on top, I inexpertly rode forward. My riding ability wasn't all that great and was

learned in a panicked and hurried fashion. With difficulty, I arrived next to the mounted Zhao Jue. Clasping my hands together, I greeted the Prince. “Your Highness, this lowly official has arrived per your summons.”

Seeing the sorry figure that I cut on the horse, Zhao Jue smiled and said, “Jiang *daren* , you should learn how to ride properly. Otherwise, you will find it extremely difficult to follow the army.”

I almost gnashed my teeth. It wasn’t like I wanted to accompany the army. But as I was a subordinate, I could only lower my head and respond respectfully. “This lowly official will do as you bid. Is there anything that this lowly official can do? I await Your Highness’s orders.”

Slowly, Zhao Jue allowed his horse to begin to move forward, indicating that I should follow. Flustered, I urged my horse to follow. After we had proceeded for some distance side by side, Zhao Jue inquired, “Jiang *daren* still holds a grudge against this Prince?”

I faked a smile and replied, “This lowly official dares not. This lowly official is paid by Southern Chu. How dare I refuse the government’s order?”

Smiling wryly, Zhao Jue continued, “It isn’t that this Prince wishes to make things difficult for *daren* . For this campaign against Shu, we must acquire the greatest benefit while paying the lowest cost possible. War is within this Prince’s ability and purview. I will not trouble *daren* . But after we have pacified Shu, we must reach an accord with Great Yong on the division of spoils. If at that point we do not have someone like Jiang *daren* , who understands the reality of our predicament, sagacious and unwavering, we would likely suffer disastrously. Therefore, this Prince could only trouble Jiang *daren* .”

Feeling aggrieved, I thought, *It’s only bandits dividing the spoils. You probably won’t wait until you’ve won to divide them.*

As if reading my thoughts, Zhao Jue continued, “In addition, I have seen sire’s ability and wisdom. Jue also wishes to listen to your teachings and learn. In this time of calamity for our country, I wish that Jiang *daren* will also spend some time thinking about military matters as well, and make contributions to our country.”

Hearing these words, I thought deeply and realized the truth behind his words. As I was already accompanying the army, I might as well take the opportunity to learn about military matters. Coming to this conclusion, I bowed low, signaling that I had accepted his suggestion. Smiling faintly, Zhao Jue gave his horse a whip and sped forward. My own mount seemed to wish to follow and twisted its body in an impatient matter. Scared, I swayed from side and side. Luckily one of Zhao Jue's personal guards helped steady me. Blushing furiously, I thanked him, vowing to learn how to properly ride a horse.

***

Setting down the brush, I massaged my shoulders. I had been handling military matters ever since we had camped. After speaking with Zhao Jue, I began to participate in the handling of these issues. I did not spend much time before I went from a complete novice to someone adept and skilled. I learned how to set up camp, how to organize and structure an army, and how to reward and punish accordingly. Most important was the handling of documents and proper organization of intelligence reports. In comparison to my work at Hanlin Academy, these military matters were just as difficult. Amongst Zhao Jue's retainers was a Confucian scholar hailing from the Heishan named Rong Yuan, who was greatly valued. He would frequently be beside Zhao Jue offering his advice. These assorted tedious matters were handled by the other aides. My participation reduced their workload, especially as I was able to quickly familiarize myself with their system of documentation. Relying upon my photographic memory and keen judgement, I quickly became highly valued, especially when it came to analyzing intelligence reports. They had originally only wanted me to try, not knowing that analysis of a few pieces of broken intelligence[8] was my specialty. I did not have to take any notes and regardless of how tedious the intelligence, I could understand the context just from reading it over once. As a result, those retainers decided to hand all of the intelligence analysis to me, having me organize the reports for Zhao Jue to consider. It was only after this did I become one of the most important aides to Zhao Jue, second only to Rong Yuan.

Looking at the color the sky, I realized that night had fallen long ago. Seeing

as the army still needed to march on tomorrow, I quickly collected the organized intelligence reports, preparing to deliver them to Rong Yuan. Feeling a bit thirsty, I picked up the teapot on the table. It was already empty. I shook my head ruefully. Just then, I heard a slight cough come from outside the tent before Xiaoshunzi entered carrying a food box. In an neutral tone, he said, "Jiang *daren* , Army Supervisor Wang knows that you are busy handling military matters. He has asked me to bring you some midnight foods and also wanted me to thank you for providing him with the medication yesterday."

From the tone of Xiaoshunzi's voice, I knew that there were others outside my tent. Smiling, I replied, "Please extend my thanks to Army Supervisor Wang on my behalf. In reality, the Army Supervisor is too used to living in the palace. These last few days, he has been exhausted and couldn't sleep properly, thus harming his body. The medication I provided should help the Army Supervisor sleep and allow him to quickly regain his energy."

After placing the food box on the table, Xiaoshunzi said, "*Daren* , please eat while the food is still warm."

Shaking my head, I responded, "I need to first deliver some documents. You should first go back and rest. Tomorrow, the army will continue onwards."

Xiaoshunzi pushed a small folded piece of paper into my hand before bowing and departing. Unfolding the paper, I read the words written: "*It is difficult to come and go while within the army. Zhao Jue has numerous skilled martial arts beside him. Rong Yuan seems to be jealous of* daren*. Today, he told Zhao Jue that* daren *is too intimate with the Prince of Qi and likely to be colluding. In order to be safe,* daren *should not be allowed to handle important military matters. Zhao Jue half believed him."*

I smiled distantly. This kind of situation was difficult to avoid. My sudden emergence[9] could not but worry Rong Yuan. However, it didn't matter if his slander was successful. I wasn't particularly interested in being placed in an important position by the Prince of De. I walked out of the tent. Accompanied by a soldier assigned to me, I proceeded to Rong Yuan's tent, delivering the documents. He accepted them, speaking words of

encouragement as if he trusted and appreciated me. It really was a matter of not judging a book by its cover.[10] I sighed in my mind as I left his tent. Outside, the weather was cold.

After half a month of advance, the army arrived at the border of the Kingdom of Shu. Our subsequent sieges were successful. But after ten days, we arrived at Ba Prefecture. Originally, I was suspicious of how weak Shu's defenses were. Later, I learned that Shu did not have enough troops to defend everywhere and could only heavily garrison important areas where there was rugged terrain or mountain passes. As for Ba Prefecture, it was our army's first major barrier. After Ba Prefecture was a difficult and dangerous road with twenty passes,[11] all of them easily defended and difficult to attack. The real war would begin soon.

On the twenty-third day of the eighth month, the Southern Chu army arrived before the city of Ba Prefecture. Riding a docile horse especially chosen by the Prince of De, I considered the high and wide city walls of this prefectural city. On the walls, there was a sea of swords and spears. A countless number of Shu soldiers, all solemn, stood upon the walls. One look and I could tell that they were an elite army. Holding the reins of his horse, the Prince of De stood at the front of the Southern Chu army, calculatedly regarding the city walls. Above, amidst the soldiers stood a general wearing red armor. From what I could see, I concluded that he was about fifty years old. He had a bold appearance, was short of stature, and had a beard that covered his chin and upper lip. That person yelled aloud, "Southern Chu and my Kingdom of Shu are allies! Why have you broken this alliance without reason and come to attack us?"

The Prince of De laughed faintly before replying in raised voice, "The Kingdom of Shu holds a small bit of territory and sets up an independent regime. Today, Great Yong has established its empire in the Central Plains and yet Shu refuses to pay its obeisance. What are your intentions? My Southern Chu is a vassal of Great Yong and has been ordered to attack. First, I am following the Emperor's orders. Second, I have come to avenge the years of Shu's bullying. Listen well, warriors of my Southern Chu! The Kingdom of Shu relies upon its advantageous geography to constantly

mistreat our border citizens. They use trade to unilaterally raise prices in order to plunder money belonging to our people. Today, my Southern Chu has raised this army and come forth to defeat Shu and take revenge!”

After he had finished speaking, he raised his whip. The Southern Chu army cried out in a singular voice and the drums beat like thunder. A unit of a thousand men began to shout and advance. Each soldier carried a sword and shield, protecting the ladders as they charged towards the city walls. Taking advantage of the fact that the archers on the wall could not shoot directly downwards, the Southern Chu soldiers quickly set the ladders against the wall and began to climb. Another twenty to thirty soldiers pushed a battering ram before the city gates and began to ram the gates. After only a few hits, the drums atop the city walls sounded and a wave of tree trunks and rocks began to dropped. The ladders and the ram were destroyed, causing a number of Southern Chu soldiers to fall from a great height, their bodies splattering.

I became nervous when I saw this. But I saw that others—the Prince of De, the generals, and the other retainers—remained tranquil and calm with no sign of nervousness. Soon after, a gong was beaten to signal the retreat and the attacking soldiers gradually returned. I had been watching carefully. The vast majority of the soldiers had not even begun to climb the ladders. As a result, the number of deaths and wounded were far fewer than I had thought. After a while, the Southern Chu army launched a second attack, while the city’s garrison began to repel them.

On this day, the Southern Chu army launched twenty attacks, but all were half-hearted.[12] The garrison was also extremely cautious and did not wastefully use up all of its rocks and tree trunks. As the time approached nightfall, the Southern Chu army launched a ferocious attack that seemed unstoppable.[13] The soldiers fearlessly climbed the ladders and were able to gain a foothold upon the city walls. A bloody battle began upon the city walls, but ultimately the Southern Chu forces were beaten back.

Watching all this unfold, my mind was rattled. Today’s attacks should probably have cost us two to three thousand men. Although our losses weren’t heavy, that kind of dreadful, imposing manner left me disturbed.

That night, I tossed and turned restlessly in bed. The losses from the siege would only grow and become heavier. I had learned that there were many more such city walls that needed to be taken. If each and every city required heavy casualties, then the end result would be extremely miserable.

The next day, the siege was extremely bitter. Just after the sun had arisen, the soldiers had pushed forward several dozen catapults. With one order, they began to fire massive boulders against the city walls. As the Ba Prefecture's city walls were tall and thick, they did not shake. However, crushed and broken rocks began to fly across the city walls, and the shouts of the city guard began to waver. Pulling back my gaze, I watched the massive boulders crush and blow apart countless defenders. I saw the defenders brave the flying boulders to return fire. The catapults on the city wall were extremely powerful. Even though it was difficult to aim, the boulders that they fired destroyed only half of our catapults, but they also inflicted terrible losses upon our soldiers, crushing and flattening many men. The corpses began to pile up. Although the battle between the catapults lasted only about thirty minutes, my hands and feet were already freezing. Blood and flesh filled my eyes. My eyesight was too good, even seeing the gloomy and mournful expressions on the face of the soldiers as they died. Probably as a result of lacking sufficient boulders, the firing speed of the catapults slowed before ultimately stopping. Southern Chu troops pushed forward siege towers and carried ladders as they renewed the attack. Although the siege towers were shorter than the city walls, they were high enough to stop the wall's return fire. Countless arrows flew through the air in beautiful arcs before piercing through flesh and blood. The blood of both sides began to intermingle upon the city wall. As the Southern Chu soldiers attacked, they were met with oil and lime.[14] Just as the hard-pressed Southern Chu soldiers began to fall, a countless numbers of torches appeared on top of the city wall and were thrown down. The area below the city became a sea of fire. Only a small number of nimble and agile soldiers were able to escape, while everyone else was surrounded by flames and burned to death. The scene was appalling.[15] The miserable screams of those caught within was world-shaking.

Seeing this, I really hated that my senses were so acute. I could not endure

it and could only turn my horse and charge towards the back. I found a secluded area and vomited until I tasted bile in my mouth. When I straightened, I caught sight of an armored Xiaoshunzi standing before my horse. He handed me a canteen of water to allow me to rinse my mouth. After my state of mind had calmed, I asked, “Why did you come? Shouldn’t you be accompanying Eunuch Wang?”

In a low voice, Xiaoshunzi replied, “I told the eunuch that I did not want to know what war looked like, so I came to take a look. Eunuch Wang was also worried, so he agreed to my suggestion.”

Regarding the distant battlefield, I responded with lingering fear in my voice, “It’s so frightening. I should leave.”

As I was about to urge my horse along, Xiaoshunzi grasped my horse’s bridle and stopped me. “*Daren* , you mustn’t. Although I am ignorant, I do know that if *daren* were to act so cowardly now, then you would never be able to hold your head high in front of the army’s officers and soldiers. Furthermore, after today, *daren* may still have to go to war. Will you hide every single time?”

I was ashamed after hearing his words. Compared to Xiaoshunzi, my will was far less resolute. Giving him a look of gratitude, I urged my horse back to the frontline. When I returned to Zhao Jue’s side, the officers and retainers accompanying him looked at my pale face with approval. In a favorable tone, Zhao Jue remarked, “Suiyun possesses ample courage. When this Prince first fought on the battlefield, my response could not even compare to yours. Everything will become better once you’ve experienced numerous battles.”

I bowed from my seat upon my mount, asking, “Your Highness, this lowly official does not understand military affairs, but it seems like our siege is not going particularly well?”

Forcing a smile, Zhao Jue agreed. “You’re correct. Ba Prefecture is one of Shu’s most important strategic defenses. Its commander is a good general and its soldiers are brave. The city defenses and supplies are both plentiful. It is difficult to capture. This Prince is deeply concerned. Thankfully, the

subsequent twenty or so cities should be easier."

"Then, in Your Highness's view, how long would it take to capture?" I continued to ask.

After some calculations, Zhao Jue professed, "It will be pretty good if we are able to capture Ba Prefecture within half a month."

I also calculated. Great Yong's advance from Yangping Pass through Dongchuan to attack Jiameng Pass would also require them to attack numerous difficult positions. But Great Yong was well prepared. If our Southern Chu were to seize the advantage, we must use a stratagem. In my mind, I began to go over the information that I had previously read. How could we resolve the immediate problem?

I could not think of anything. I began to go over the information regarding Ba Prefecture one by one. I gazed into the distance, focusing on the, the red-armored general issuing commands on the city wall. Under his commands, the city defenses were watertight. Whenever the Southern Chu troops showed an opening, he would immediately spot it and ruthlessly exploit it.

Hold up a moment … someone who pursues closely and is ruthless … I suddenly remembered some information about the commander of the garrison: Tian Wei, upholds rigorous military discipline, a valiant and good commander, adept at defending cities, able to defend as if he was a mountain, especially adept at raiding and attacking enemy encampments. No wonder the Prince of De set up the defenses of our encampment so strictly and tightly. Our opponent was someone adept at raiding encampments. Slowly, a crafty scheme began to form in my mind. Would it be successful? After thinking it over, I spurred my horse alongside the Prince of De and informed him of my plan in a low voice. At first hesitant, the Prince of De gradually became intrigued. After some time, he smiled slightly and nodded his head before ordering our army to retreat. The bloodiest day of the battle for Ba Prefecture ended.

Footnotes :

幕僚, muliao – are personal retainers who serve as advisers for officials
歃血为盟, shaxueweimeng – idiom, lit. to smear the lips with blood when

taking an oath; to swear a sacred oath
一人之下，万人之上 – lit. refers to someone who holds a position below one person and above everyone else; in this context, refers to someone whose authority and power is just below the King
酒囊饭袋, jiunangfandai – idiom, lit. wine sack, food bag; useless persons only fit for drinking alcohol and eating food
巴州, Bazhou – modern-day Eastern Sichuan and Chongqing
雒城, Luocheng – modern-day Guanghan
公公, *gonggong* – a phrase used to refer to eunuchs
只言片语, zhiyanpianyu – idiom, lit. just a word or two; a few isolated phrases
异军突起, yijuntuqi – idiom, lit. to emerge as a new force to be reckoned with
人不可貌相, renbukemaoxiang – idiom, lit. you can't judge a person by appearance
关, guan – refers to fortresses used to defend strategic locations, typically easily defended and difficult to attack due to natural rugged terrain
浅尝辄止, qianchangzhezhi – idiom, lit. to dabble and stop; to attempt half-heartedly
如火如荼, ruhuorutu – lit. like wildfire; unstoppable
The highly flammable substance, not the fruit
惨不忍睹, canburendu – idiom, lit. spectacle too horrible to endure; tragic sight, appalling scenes of destruction

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 10: A Campaign of a Thousand Li

Volume 1, Chapter 10: A Campaign of a Thousand *Li*

The words that I told the Prince of De were very simple: “Your Highness, this area is filled with towering mountains and precipitous ridges. There surely must be alternative paths that we can use as a detours. Even if we cannot find a detour, we can pretend that we intend to make our way around the pass, luring the enemy out to battle. We do not fear brave and good fighters. We only fear them obstinately defending the city without any intention of sallying forth. Rather than continuing to forcibly besiege the city, it would be better to lure them out. Furthermore, as Tian Wei is such a good commander, he is unlikely to be willing to simply defend the city.”

Although I only gave an idea, the Prince of De, as an experienced commander, immediately thoroughly understood. In addition, it was impossible for us to capture the city today. It was better to return to our encampment to fully discuss the matter.

Of course, in the subsequent conference, I didn’t say anything. I was still unfamiliar with military issues. I was only skilled in intelligence analysis, relying upon the combination of my experience and knowledge. Furthermore, Rong Yuan was already unhappy with me. Continuing to seek the limelight would only serve to fan the flames of his resentment. *It was better to offend a gentleman than to offend someone with a vile character* . I remembered this fact very well. But these retainers were all capable. I made a simple suggestion and they were able to consider all kinds of scenarios before fixing any oversights. They came up with three plans before ultimately coming up with feasible strategy. The more I observed them, the more I respected them. Maybe since my admiration was too obvious, the other retainers seemed to become a bit embarrassed. Even the looks that Rong Yuan gave me became gentler.

The next day, the Prince of De dispatched soldiers in all directions to gather firewood, trying to find an alternate route. He then ordered the half

of the remaining soldiers to remain in their tents to rest, while the rest of the soldiers stood in formation facing Ba Prefecture, neither attacking nor retreating. They would occasionally feign an attack. As soon as the city garrison reacted, they would withdraw. After noon had passed, the resting soldiers would swap with those who were facing Ba Prefecture.

On the third day, the Southern Chu soldiers feigning attacks upon Ba Prefecture began to get busy. If they weren't digging trenches, they were training and drilling to loosen their bones and muscles. In addition, the army's war drums were pushed before the city. The soldiers would pound the war drums and shout every hour.

On the fourth and fifth days, the garrison had become increasingly exhausted and numb. Even though Ba Prefecture was an important strategic city that served as the Kingdom of Shu's gate, the city only had ten thousand defenders because of the friendly relations between Southern Chu and Shu. As a result, there weren't enough troops.

On the sixth day, the Shu forces within the city began to grow uneasy. There was also good news on the search, as our soldiers found a small path that would allow us to detour around Ba Prefecture. At this time, the second part of our plan began. The Southern Chu army began to assemble the troops, preparing the foot soldiers and cavalry as if they were getting ready to launch another assault. The garrison quickly grew nervous and additional men could be seen on the battlements. When night fell, the Southern Chu soldiers quietly began to withdraw. This was discovered by Shu agents. They quickly came to the conclusion that the Southern Chu was preparing to take a detour around Ba Prefecture. To the Shu soldiers, for the Southern Chu to take a detour was equivalent to us cutting our own escape route and supply line. But Tian Wei possessed a fiery, warlike temperament. The only reason he chose to strictly defend was because he didn't have enough troops. Southern Chu had fifty thousand soldiers, and they were the best available. Therefore, the pressure upon Tian Wei was quite heavy. The last several days, he had seen that something was wrong. He had discussed the situation numerous times with his subordinates and all believed that the Southern Chu army would inevitably take a detour around Ba Prefecture.

Some of the generals suggested that if the Southern Chu were to go around Ba Prefecture, they would have to attack them from the rear. If the Southern Chu army were to be destroyed, then the officers and soldiers of Ba Prefecture would be punished. This left a shadow in the hearts of the defenders. Finally, Tian Wei gave the order to attack Southern Chu's supply troops, while the Southern Chu army was still going around Ba Prefecture.

For the fifty thousand Southern Chu taking the side path, their travel speed was quite slow. It didn't take long for Tian Wei to catch up to the Southern Chu army. Twirling the broadsword in his hand, he hollered, "Southern Chu brigands! Where do you think you're going?"

Just as he bellowed, he led five thousand cavalry charging forward into the rear of the Southern Chu army like a sword. The Southern Chu army scattered and ran. Tian Wei ordered his subordinates to burn the supply wagons. In a split second, flames erupted on all sides. Amidst the flames, Tian Wei laughed aloud heartily. He gave the order to continue the attack, intent on completely defeating the Southern Chu army

At this time, the scattering Southern Chu troops revealed a division of white-armored infantry, steadily advancing towards Tian Wei. Tian Wei grew cold, recognizing these troops as the Prince of De's personal guards, normally tasked with protecting the center of the army. For them to appear here—was this a trap? Tian Wei examined his surroundings. The fires burning the supply wagons were already extinguished. Behind the advancing infantry, Tian Wei could see a banner with the character, Zhao, and a dragon embroidered upon it. Tian Wei was both anxious and worried. If this was an ambush, then the only result would be defeat. But he soon had second thoughts. The soldiers before him were the personal guards of the Prince of De. This meant that the Prince of De was likely close by and he had the opportunity to kill the Prince of De. Unable to resist this kind of enticement, Tian Wei gave the order to advance. Although Tian Wei's cavalry held the advantage, Southern Chu's infantry were trained to fight cavalry. The first row kneeled and extended the spears in their hands forward to face the cavalry. Behind them, soldiers notched their bows and fired arrows. Taking advantage of the narrowness of the path, they were

able to block Tian Wei's attack. After fighting for some time, Tian Wei saw that he could not win and ordered a retreat.

The mounted Shu troops were able to quickly extricate themselves and disengage. It didn't take long before they were far away. Tian Wei rejoiced. This was, at the very least, a small victory. Just as they had withdrawn a dozen *li* , they were suddenly attacked by Southern Chu forces from both flanks. Caught in the middle, Tian Wei could only order his troops to run the gauntlet and continue to retreat. Tian Wei was afraid. Over the course of a dozen *li* , they were constantly ambushed by Southern Chu troops. Although there weren't many Southern Chu soldiers, they sniped at the retreating horsemen from within dense forests or behind large boulders. If this wasn't a mountain valley, then it was likely that Tian Wei's several thousand cavalry would have been wiped out. It took more than an hour before Tian Wei finally caught sight of Ba Prefecture. He only had three thousand horsemen remaining. Just as he arrived before the city, Tian Wei saw the fire-red Shu banner float down from the battlements, while the Prince of De's yellow dragon banner was slowly being hoisted. Tian Wei watched as the Shu soldiers on the battlements were chopped down. Within the cold glint of the flashing swords, Tian Wei spotted a person who seemed to be completely out of place. That person, dressed in a set of light robes, seemed to be a young scholar and was directly looking at him with eyes filled with pity. Amidst the blood and flames, his clothes were spotless. He stood atop the ramparts and yet there seemed to be some distance separating him and the other Southern Chu soldiers. He almost seemed to be a battlefield apparition.

Before the siege had concluded, I had climbed the city walls. This time, under my advice, the Southern Chu army had left behind ten thousand men. This was something that I had thought of after the conference while reading the military manuals right before I fell asleep, and was quickly approved by the Prince of De. While we were digging trenches, we had also dug a number of large holes. At the same time we were pretending to take a detour around Ba Prefecture, ten thousand soldiers hid themselves inside the holes. The holes were covered by tarpaulin with soil on top. Enemy agents only noticed that our encampments were empty and did not notice the holes that we

were using to hide soldiers. After Tian Wei had led his cavalry out of the city, we took advantage of the garrison's neglect and immediately launched an attack. The complacent defenders were quickly defeated.

I scaled the battlements in order to witness the conclusion of this battle. As I was originally outside of the city with the other retainers, I feigned worry over the vengeance Tian Wei would wreak with his troops upon those waiting outside. Based on this reason, we entered the city under heavy guard to protect us from any stragglers. I then mounted the battlements on the pretext of observing what was going on outside. Beaming, Xiaoshunzi dispatched two royal guardsmen to follow me. Although these royal guards were assigned to protect Army Supervisor Wang Hai. Wang Hai knew that Xiaoshunzi was a skilled martial artist and was on close terms with me, and so agreed. From what Xiaoshunzi told me, these two guardsmen's martial arts skills were better than average, and could protect me until reinforced by the Southern Chu soldiers

I walked through the sea of blood, careful that no blood stained my clothes. But because of the river of blood at my feet, my shoes became soaked with blood. I was lucky, however. My clothes were unstained. By the time I endured the scents and screams, and mounted the battlements, the last few Shu soldiers were cut down. I looked down from the parapets and caught sight of the returning Shu cavalrymen. The red-armored general stared up at the city blankly. Behind him, smoke and dust roiled, which foretold of my country's forces approach. Suddenly, the red-armored general shouted a command and charged with his cavalry. Then I watched as these horsemen were first surrounded, weakened, and finally defeated. From a distance, I saw the red-armored general use his sword to cut his own throat, cursing as he died.

I shuddered on the inside. War was very different from the easy and light way it was chronicled in the history books. In the eyes of the ten thousand Shu soldiers garrisoning Ba Prefecture, we were a malicious enemy who intended to kill them and steal their cities and land. But what were we supposed to do? At this time, I profoundly despised this war. In order to fulfill the interests of Great Yong and Southern Chu, the Kingdom of Shu

must be annihilated. Using a river of blood to acquire joy for those above … was it really worth it?

Afterwards, I fell ill. The blood and blood-curdling screams left me unable to sleep, unable to eat. During the forced march of the army, my illness grew progressively worse. Later, one evening, I was visited by Xiaoshunzi. He pulled me up and said, “I understand why you fell ill. You should collect your cheap sympathy. Our two sides have become enemies. We are at war. If we were to lose, we would lose our lives and be unable to return home. What traditional virtues,[1] what four social bonds?[2] I only know that I need to stay alive. For you, I need to stay alive. What about you? At the very least, you need to stay alive for me. Remember, you saved my life. If you do not allow me to repay this debt, I definitely will not allow you to die.”

Seemingly in a trance, I looked at the tears that flowed down Xiaoshunzi’s face and replied, “Xiaoshunzi, brother. I know that you treat me as a real brother. But I constantly bully you, and yet you continue to take care of me, continue to protect me. I am about to pass. You should not feel sorrow. You don’t owe me anything.”

Xiaoshunzi slapped me ferociously and reprimanded, “Why do you think I follow you? You have never looked down upon me and have treated me as a person. You are my teacher. You have helped me learn martial arts. Without you, there is no one else that would even glance at me. If you were to die, I would follow you. We will continue to be brothers in the next life, allowing for you to always be there for me.”

My tears flowed freely. That’s right. How could I die? I still have a brother. If I were to die, Xiaoshunzi would be alone. I always knew that Xiaoshunzi continually came to see me because I treated him like a person, someone with flesh and blood. I never considered him as a lowly eunuch or a faceless person. *Humph* ! The Kingdom of Shu was nothing. Your people dying had nothing to do with me. Let alone the Kingdom of Shu, even if Southern Chu were destroyed, it would not matter to me one bit. Over these last few days, while I was gravely ill, other than Xiaoshunzi and the army doctors, I did not see anyone else. Although the Prince of De came to see me twice early on, he soon forgot about me. With difficulty, I pushed myself upright and ordered,

“Bring me two pills from the white porcelain bottle in my bag.” Xiaoshunzi immediately followed my orders. With difficulty, I took two of the pills and said, “I am going to rest for a while. Tomorrow morning, prepare a sumptuous breakfast for me.”

Three days later, during which I was in a coma, I awoke and finally was able to eat the breakfast that Xiaoshunzi had delivered. I walked out of my tent and looked up at the sunny and cloudless sky. I extended my arms and took a deep breath. I told Xiaoshunzi to inform Army Supervisor Wang that I was going to ride in his carriage as I had just recovered.

During the dozen days that I was ill and confined to bed, the Southern Chu advance had proceeded relatively smoothly. Capturing Ba Prefecture was a heavy blow to the confidence of the smaller fortresses along the way. By using the strategy of heavy assaults and soft deception, our army’s progress was faster than anticipated. We did not know how Great Yong was doing on their front as we received no information on the subject. Over the following days, as I had only just recovered, I wasn’t assigned too many duties, frequently using the leisurely free time to write verses. I did not say anything more. Although the Prince of De remorsefully came to check up on me, I refused to forgive him. He originally had treated me as important. But once I fell ill, he was quick to discard me. As a result, I apathetically expressed my thanks. As I was frequently with Army Supervisor Wang, I did not have to worry about the Prince of De making things difficult for me. I was exactly so narrow-minded. What about it?

With this, the Southern Chu army arrived before Luocheng, rendezvousing with the previously arrived navy. Luocheng was the protective defense of the Kingdom of Shu’s capital, Chengdu. Here was gathered an army of fifty thousand Shu soldiers. The famed Shu general, Wei Xian, commanded twenty thousand troops before Luocheng close to the mountains, while Grand General Long Bu commanded Luocheng’s thirty thousand strong garrison. The combined Southern Chu army and navy had quickly attacked Fushui Pass. The garrison had fought bitterly for several days before abandoning the pass and retreating. The combined force encamped at Fushui Pass. The Prince of De knew that the coming battle would be long

and protracted, and only carefully deployed the defensive forces, while ordering the navy to patrol the Fushui River to isolate Luocheng from any reinforcements. As Luocheng's northern gate was against the Fushui and the southern gate against the mountains, the Prince of De used his navy to transport his army to attack Luocheng from the east and west. But in the face of the support by Wei Xian on the outside, Southern Chu could not gain the advantage even after several days of bloody conflict. Seeing the exhaustion of his soldiers, the Prince of De decided to withdraw his troops. Aside from occasional moves by the navy, he rested his troops by the Fushui and prepared to renew the battle. Although we were far from Southern Chu, we could rely upon the waterborne supply line and Sichuan's abundant resources. As a result, we did not lack any supplies. However, the war entered into a stalemate.

On the twenty-seventh day of the eleventh month, we finally received news regarding the Great Yong front.

Great Yong had dispatched the Prince of Yong, Li Zhi, at the head of two hundred thousand troops. As they had bribed the garrison commander of Yangping Pass, they were easily able to capture the pass. The Great Yong fought and continuously won numerous battles, using only two months to capture Nanzheng. Although the eastern Sichuan region[3] was also a part of the Kingdom of Shu, the vast majority of Sichuan's prosperity was located in the western region.[4] As a result, the people of the eastern Sichuan region were resentful. When Li Zhi entered the region, he ensured that his soldiers committed no offenses.[5] He quickly destroyed any remnant Shu forces and also cleared the region of any bandits. After not even three months, the eastern Sichuan region was fully pacified. Afterwards, Li Zhi led his army against Jiameng Pass. If Jiameng Pass were to fall, then there would be nothing standing in the way between the Great Yong army and Chengdu.

Facing enemies on two fronts, the King of Shu, Meng Yun, found himself in an emergency situation where he had insufficient troops to defend everything.[6] Jiameng Pass had ninety thousand troops defending it. He further dispatched twenty thousand troops to defend Luocheng. As a result, Chengdu had no troops. On the twelfth day of the eleventh month, the

twenty thousand reinforcements entered Luocheng under the assistance of Long Bu and Wei Xian.

When the Prince of De saw the report, his face grew dark. Even if Great Yong were to retreat, their control over Yangping Pass ensured that they controlled the Hanzhong region. Whereas if he did not capture Luocheng, then there was no way he could defend against the Shu army. He did not want to retreat to Ba Prefecture, as it would mean giving up all the captured territory. As a result, Southern Chu was even more anxious to attack. But having faced off for several days, there was little to no progress made. How could this not cause him worry? A consolation was that our reinforcements had also arrived, increasing our total strength to ninety thousand men. At minimum we would not be forced to retreat in defeat. Under these circumstances, facing the two-pronged attack by Great Yong and Southern Chu, Shu would ultimately fall. The problem was that Southern Chu may not end up with Chengdu.

For me, these few days passed quite leisurely. Aside from eating my meals, I wandered all over. Of course, in the face of Shu's agents and assassins, I made sure to not stray too far from the encampment. In addition, I could not be too leisurely, otherwise it would catch other's envy. In any case, I wasn't able to do anything to intervene. Taking advantage of my illness, Rong Yuan took over my duties. According to him, I was still lying ill in bed. But I didn't bother to bicker. In any case, it wasn't like we would lose in this coming battle.

Exploiting my free time, I took the opportunity to speak with Xiaoshunzi about finding personal guards. Xiaoshunzi thought for quite some time, finding it extremely difficult. He did not know many skilled martial artists to introduce to me. According to him, all of the skilled martial artists that he had ever fought, he had killed. In addition, these guards must be loyal. This was more difficult. He suggested selecting a eunuch that he could take as a disciple and train to later protect me. I rejected this suggestion. One reason was that this proposal would take too long. Another reason was that eunuchs could not constantly leave the palace. Thinking for some time, Xiaoshunzi suggested, "How about this: after a few years, I will feign my

death and leave the palace to come stay by your side."

I originally had decided to nod my head, but I realized that things would become problematic if Xiaoshunzi were to be recognized. I said in a straightforward manner, "How about this: I am prepared to resign when I return to the capital. Since you don't seem to like living in the palace, we can both leave to travel the world."[7]

Thinking it over, Xiaoshunzi replied happily, "This isn't a bad idea. I have long wanted to travel everywhere. I had long grown sick of Jianye. Where should we go?"

After thinking, I responded, "In any case, the Kingdom of Shu is going to be destroyed. If Great Yong and Southern Chu remain at peace, we can go to Great Yong. Once war erupts between Great Yong and Southern Chu, we can go to Northern Han. If Great Yong goes to war with Northern Han, we can return to Southern Chu. Over the next several decades, there is plenty of time for us to travel everywhere. If, at any point, we become fed up with traveling, we can find someplace to settle down." Xiaoshunzi's face was filled with yearning.

Just as we were planning out our futures, Xiaoshunzi suddenly pounced without warning into the courtyard's shrubbery. His silhouette was like that of a demon, matchlessly agile. From within the shrubbery, a gray silhouette shot out. The two silhouettes merged before separating. Xiaoshunzi retreated several *zhang* before his silhouette turned, flipping through the air, pouncing once again. The other person hastily fought back, but was struck in the chest by Xiaoshunzi and was cast to the ground.

Seeing Xiaoshunzi nod at me, I walked lightly over. This person was a young man of twenty with an ordinary appearance that could easily disappear into a crowd. He was wearing the uniform of a Southern Chu soldier, but I could see that the uniform was not the right size. In addition, I could smell the faint scent of blood. This man was a Shu agent. Under normal circumstances, I should hand him over for two reasons: first, to gain merit; second, as my duty. But I did not want the Prince of De to learn of what I had said earlier. My mind immediately produced a desire to kill. I gave Xiaoshunzi a look. Understanding my look, Xiaoshunzi raised his palm

and was getting ready to strike the man's head.

The man painfully opened his eyes and saw Xiaoshunzi's actions. He rolled with difficulty. Xiaoshunzi laughed harshly, flipping his palm and continuing to strike at the man's head. Seeing the grief and indignation in the man's eyes, I did not know why, but I ordered, "Stay your hand."

Xiaoshunzi's palm had reached the man's head when he heard me call out. He abruptly retracted his palm, retreating to my side. Solemnly, I stated, "Brother, I must kill you. If you have any last wishes, I can fulfill them."

An emotional expression on his face, the man whimpered, "Please release my wife."

I was stunned. When did I steal his wife? I don't seem to have done such a thing.

Footnotes :

仁义道德, renyidaode – idiom, lit. compassion, duty, propriety, and integrity; the traditional virtues (often used in a sarcastic and hypocritical way)
礼仪廉耻, liyilianchi – the four social bonds (**四维**, siwei): sense of propriety, justice, integrity, and honor
东**川**, Dongchuan – lit. eastern Sichuan region; refers to the region around Hanzhong that is today a part of Shaanxi province
西川, Xichuan – lit. western Sichuan region; refers to Sichuan
秋毫无犯, qiuhaowufan – idiom lit. not harming a feather; soldiers not committing the slightest offenses
捉襟见**肘**, zhuojinjianzhou – idiom, lit. pulling on the lapels exposes the elbows; strapped for cash, unable to make ends meet
浪迹天涯, langjitianya – idiom, lit. to roam far and wide; to travel the world

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 11: Scheming Against One Another

Volume 1, Chapter 11: Scheming Against One Another[1]

The young man coughed several times. He looked at me, filled with hope. With no alternative, I had Xiaoshunzi bring him into my room. There, I asked, “This official is untalented, but is still an educated scholar. I can say with confidence that I have never stolen any married women. I wonder why you believe that your honored wife is here with me.”

The man looked at me, unconvinced. He replied, “Although this lowly commoner,[2] Han Zhang, is a citizen of the Kingdom of Shu, I am neither an official nor a soldier. I am an ordinary farmer. This lowly commoner’s wife hails from a prestigious house, possesses a beautiful appearance, and a noble status. Three years ago, because she was unhappy with her betrothal, she left her home. By chance, she married me. A few months ago, my humble wife learned her mother was ill and returned home to visit her family. Because this lowly commoner was busy with the fall harvest, I could not stay long and returned home early. Who knew that Great Yong and Southern Chu would invade Shu? My humble wife’s father was the garrison commander of Ba Prefecture, Tian Wei. He was unfortunate to perish. My humble wife and my mother-in-law were captured. When I heard that Ba Prefecture fell, I traveled day and night. I learned that they had been rewarded by the Prince of De to his military retainer, Jiang Zhe. As a result, I have followed you all the way.”

Confused, I turned to look at Xiaoshunzi. With a look of realization, he responded, “*Daren* , you were ill at the time. The Prince of De saw that Tian Wei’s daughter was elegant and beautiful. He rewarded her to *daren* because of your proposed strategy. At the time, *daren* was in a coma, so I accepted her on your behalf. She is currently staying with Army Supervisor Wang. Over these last few days, because *daren* only recently regained your health, this lowly servant wished to attend to you for a few days. I saw that Lady Tian was quite thoughtful when attending to Eunuch Wang, so I

decided to allow her to attend to him, allowing everyone to be happy."

I finally understood why Xiaoshunzi was always by my side. I asked, "How have they been treated by Eunuch Wang?

Respectfully, Xiaoshunzi replied, "Be at ease, *daren* . Lady Tian is ingenious and nimble. Eunuch Wang even wishes to adopt her as his daughter. As for the elder Lady Tian, she has been mourning the death of General Tian, so she is not too well."

When Han Zhang heard this news, he exposed a look of unrestrained happiness. But not before long, that expression was replaced by one of suffering. Thinking it over, I realized that Han Zhang was not a Shu agent. But he had heard what I had said earlier. Should I still silence him? Having thought it over, I realized there was no need to do so. It was unlikely that he would inform the Prince of De what I had said. While I was hesitating, Han Zhang was at death's door. I quickly took out a small case filled with needles. I took out a golden needle and performed acupuncture before I helped him take some medication. Under the medicinal effects, he fell asleep. Towards Xiaoshunzi, I observed, "I could do nothing to avert the death of Tian Wei. With the two countries in a state of war, casualties cannot be avoided. But his wife and mother-in-law are innocent. Go arrange matters. When we have captured Luocheng and the roads are free of obstacles, release the three of them and allow them to return home."

Xiaoshunzi replied, "Yes, when the time comes, I will explain everything to Eunuch Wang. He will not be unhappy. But it's a pity … Han Zhang's martial arts are quite good. This lowly servant does not underestimate himself. Even among the skilled martial artists in the royal guards, few can take my attacks and live. It would be good if we could keep him by your side as a personal guard."

Thinking that it was unlikely, I stated, "I am an official of Southern Chu. He is a family member of a general of Shu. In addition, he has a wife and mother-in-law. How can he become my personal guard? You are indulging in fantasies."

Xiaoshunzi answered, "This is not impossible. His wife is now *daren* 's

servant. If you allow him to remain and reunite with his wife, he must surely be grateful. But I understand that *daren* requires someone loyal. It won't be good if we force this man to stay behind."

I nodded my head and replied, "That's right. It would be better to be without rather than accept someone substandard.[3] If he is disloyal, it would be useless to have him remain. But for us to capture Luocheng, it will require at least two more months. We can use this time to figure out a way to leave. We can allow him to remain at my side as a personal guard and prevent anyone from being suspicious at our relationship."

Xiaoshunzi agreed and said, "That's good as well. This will prevent me from being always worried about *daren* 's safety."

When Han Zhang woke, it was already late in the night. He could feel the *qi* in his four limbs and hundred bones was vigorous,[4] and could not feel any of the heavy internal wounds that would have cost him his life. He didn't move, but he could sense that he was in a small room. He couldn't sense anyone nearby. Just as he was about to sit up, a cold hand gently pressed down on his chest. Then he saw a spark as someone lit a candle. Under the faint light of the candle, he saw the young man who had injured him earlier stare coldly at him, his eyes filled with killing intent. Han Zhang smartly ceased to move. He did not want to die without reason, especially when he had learned the news about the safety of his wife.

Seeing that he was completely calm, Xiaoshunzi revealed a humorless smile, and said, "I am named Li Shun. The Jiang Zhe that you wished to find is my master. Master has already decided that once the battle for Luocheng is concluded, he will release your mother-in-law and wife. Until then, you must remain and serve as his personal guard."

Han Zhang hesitated for a moment. He was ultimately a citizen of the Kingdom of Shu. He was a bit reluctant to serve as the personal guard of an official of an invader.

Retracting his palm, Xiaoshunzi smiled faintly before departing.

The next day, he led Han Zhang to meet Eunuch Wang. Eunuch Wang was more than happy to fulfill them. The Ladies Tian were my servants and

agreed to allow Han Zhang to remain by my side. Of course, I also informed the Prince of De of this matter, to prevent him from thinking that Han Zhang was a Shu spy. Thinking it over, especially as there were undoubtedly quite a few individuals surreptitiously monitoring me, I told Xiaoshunzi to keep away for now.

Of course, this was the first time that I had the opportunity to meet the servants awarded me by the Prince of De. Lady Tian was named Tian Suying. She indeed possessed an elegant appearance, and a vigorous and heroic spirit—definitely the daughter of a family of generals. From Han Zhang, I learned that Tian Suying also knew martial arts, and that her skills were not below that of Han Zhang. This time she did not escape because of her mother. I took a cold breath. What could I do if Tian Suying were to assassinate Eunuch Wang? When I asked Xiaoshunzi, he did not hesitate to tell me that Eunuch Wang was protected by numerous guards. In addition, he had already warned Tian Suying. If she dared act, her mother would not survive. It wasn't as if they could escape Fushui Pass.

I immediately looked at Xiaoshunzi in a different light. This little fellow was tight and cautious. If he were willing, he could easily become the top ranking eunuch supervisor. When I suggested such a course to him, he replied with contempt, "What good is there to attend to the King? One has to be servile and fawning. If one is even the slightest bit careless, he will be beheaded. You are different. If you really got angry with me, all you would do is scold me. You have to be careful that I will bite back."

Under his aloof and distant gaze, I felt afraid. I immediately began to think back to whether I was too excessive with him. Thinking it over, I didn't think that there was any such occasion. However, regardless of that, I had to remember that this little brat was a skilled martial artist.

At the same time, Chengdu had erupted into chaos. The Shu Prime Minister, Shen Jun, led Grand Generals Fan Hu and Meng Da to defend Jiameng Pass. Great Yong frequently attacked the pass. The defenders at Jiameng Pass found it difficult to sleep.[5] In addition, Grand General Long Bu and General Wei Xian were defending Ba Prefecture. They did not dare relax. The center of Sichuan did not have a single soldier. Over the last few

months, the King of Shu, Meng Yun, saw his black hair turn white. He deeply resented Southern Chu for breaking the alliance, but also hated himself for offending Great Yong. Thinking it over, he could think of no solution to pushing back this invasion. Then, an important official suggested that as the Hanzhong region was already lost, why not negotiate a peace with Great Yong. If Great Yong were to withdraw its troops, then Southern Chu would not continue to attack Shu by itself. Although the King had adopted this strategy, he could not decide who to send as envoy. The Prince of Yong, Li Zhi, was famed throughout the land. If they were to send someone ordinary, then they could hardly say much. Later, the Kingdom of Shu's wild scholar, Yang Can, nominated himself. Yang Can traveled day and night, arriving before Jiameng Pass. Jiameng Pass was brightly lit by flames. Calm and unruffled, Yang Can rested one night. The next day, he left the pass and proceeded towards the Yong encampment, handing over his credentials. Not long afterwards, he was invited into the marshal's tent by the Prince of Yong.

Yang Can was a famed wild scholar of the Kingdom of Shu, known for his conceit, contempt for others,[6] and his condescension.[7] But upon seeing the strict organization of the Prince of Yong's camp—before the Prince's tent, it felt as if there was a majestic tiger—he could not help but feel a chill in his heart. He tidied his appearance and entered the tent. He saw a man in martial attire seated behind the marshal's table. The man had a poised appearance there. Although he seemed to have a gentle demeanor, one could detect a faint but awe-inspiring aura. The Prince of Yong was thirty-one years old. Although he had fought on the battlefield for years, there wasn't a hint of bloodlust. He was wearing a set of light armor in black with a brocade gown on top. He had a natural and serene expression on his face, almost as if he was sitting idly at home and not leading an army on the battlefield. To his left stood a dozen or so generals, all of whom had steady, but fierce and tough auras. To his right stood a dozen or so individuals dressed either in the clothing of civil officials or in the plain uniform of a retainer. One could clearly see that he had many civil and military officials among his subordinates.

Yang Can entered the tent. He remained standing and did not kneel. In a

loud voice, he announced, “The envoy from the Kingdom of Shu, Yang Can, greets Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong.”

The eyes of the generals widened and glowered at Yang Can. One general who looked particularly forthright shouted, “A mere envoy! Why do you not kneel before His Imperial Highness?”

Raising his voice, Yang Can replied, “Although Yang Can is but a commoner, I am a citizen of the Kingdom of Shu. Although His Imperial Highness is respected and honored, he is a subject of Great Yong. Today, Yang Can is here on behalf of the King of Shu. How can I kneel and bow?”

A refined looking adviser around the age of fifty replied in a cultivated voice, “The Kingdom of Shu is about to be destroyed. My Great Yong’s two hundred thousand troops are before the pass. Why does your distinguished country’s King dispatch an envoy instead of seeking victory?”

Yang Can politely answered, “My country’s King knows that he has offended Great Yong. At this critical juncture,[8] how can we not be frightened? And yet, as long as the Kingdom of Shu does not fall, as a subject of Shu, I dare not dishonor our national prestige. If Great Yong is willing to forgive us, then the Kingdom of Shu is willing to become a vassal and pay yearly tribute. Although Yang Can may be arrogant, how dare I not be respectful to a greater country’s important official?”

A young adviser of ordinary appearance, but possessing of an aquiline nose and a deep-set pair of eyes, icily declared, “The Kingdom of Shu is about to be destroyed. Jiameng Pass is about to fall. I wonder what the Kingdom of Shu can offer to sue for peace. My country can soon achieve total victory; why should we allow you to continue your wretched existence?”

Upright and afraid, Yang Can explained, “Although the Kingdom of Shu has suffered a grave defeat, Jiameng Pass and Luocheng both remain in our hands. It is not if we can attain security. If your distinguished country is determined to destroy my Kingdom of Shu, my King is more than willing to offer the entirety of Sichuan to Southern Chu. Once Southern Chu attains the fertile land of Sichuan and continues to hold onto the lands of Jingxiang,[9] no matter how strong Great Yong may be, you can only watch Southern Chu

become stronger. If you are willing to suspend hostilities and call a ceasefire, my Kingdom of Shu is not only willing to become a vassal of Great Yong, but is also willing to cede the Hanzhong region. My King deeply hates the King of Southern Chu for betraying our alliance. Even if we were to bear a grudge, we can only avenge ourselves upon Southern Chu. Great Yong has gained half of the world, and can watch my Kingdom of Shu and Southern Chu mutually fight. Would this not be pleasing?"

Hearing this, everyone fell silent, muttering to themselves. These last few days, they had attacked Jiameng Pass repeatedly without success. Some of them even had the notion to retreat. But with the strategy already determined, everyone's eyes turned to the Prince of Yong, Li Zhi.

Li Zhi smiled slightly, asking, "We wonder how the people of Sichuan are?"

Yang Can clearly replied, "My Sichuan possesses many talented individuals, with civil officials as talented as Xiao He,[10] and military officials as valorous as the Hegemonic King[11] and as conniving as Zhang Liang.[12] My Sichuan has many talents, all loyal and righteous. Although this Yang Can is untalented, I am willing to emulate Tian Heng's brave subordinates.[13] There are others who are willing to emulate the actions of Nie Zheng and Jing Ke.[14]

Li Zhi's eyes flashed an undetectable austere light, before he continued to inquire, "Currently, in the service of the King of Shu, how many are like you?"

Yang Can responded, "Those versatile with both civil and military talent, wise and brave, number in the hundreds. Those with one, innumerable."

Li Zhi questioned, "If that is the case, what position do you hold?"

Yang Can replied, "Under the King, we are rich and have talented citizens in abundance. I am but a wild person who belongs to the bucolic countryside, enjoying the pleasures of life all the time."

Smiling faintly, Li Zhi said, "Your honored envoy has come from afar and must be tired. Please temporarily return to the pass. If there is a response, we will dispatch a messenger."

Yang Can bowed and bade his farewell. Before he had gone far, a white-robed scholar quietly exited the tent. He had fine eyebrows and large eyes,

and had a distinguished bearing. He called out to Yang Can, “Sir Yang is a wild scholar of Sichuan. Why did you switch from arrogance to deference?”

Yang Can replied, “I was first arrogant for the purpose of showing my unyielding resolve. I was deferential afterwards for the sake of the Kingdom of Shu.”

The white-robed scholar fell silent for some time before he stated, “This one is Xuan Song of Great Yong, styled Changqing. If you have any matters that need to be entrusted, you can send me a letter. As long as it does not pertain to matters of state, Changqing will spare no effort.”

Yang Can thanked him before returning to Chengdu via Jiameng Pass to report on the completion of his mission.

In the subsequent half a month, the Yong army did not attack, greatly reducing the pressure on Jiameng Pass.

It didn’t take long before the information was reported to the Prince of De, Zhao Jue, by Southern Chu’s spies. Zhao Jue grew irate. He did not have an easy time during this time period. Even after so long, he could not capture Luocheng. Long Bu definitely deserved his reputation as a Grand General of Sichuan, frequently taking advantage of circumstances to sally from the city and attack, forcing the Southern Chu forces to retreat in defeat. Wei Xian was adept at raiding encampments. A small raid would occur every three days, a major raid every five days, disturbing the soldiers’ rest. Long Bu and Wei Xian’s cooperation prevented the Southern Chu forces from making even an inch of progress in the last month. The supply line was constantly harassed by the earlier routed Shu army. Zhao Jue had run of ideas and was already distressed. At this time, he heard this astonishing bad news. If the Kingdom of Shu and Great Yong were to make peace, then the end of Southern Chu was near.

At this point, he remembered Jiang Zhe. The young *zhuangyuan* had a peculiar personality. Zhao Jue had forced Jiang Zhe to accompany the army. He did not show an interest when Jiang Zhe suffered a shock and fell ill, but one could not blame Zhao Jue. Regarding the first matter, Zhao Jue considered Jiang Zhe as a subject of Southern Chu. As he was talented, how

could he not render services to the country? As for the latter matter, Zhao Jue was busy with military matters, marching, and fighting. How can continuously besieging cities be an easy thing? In addition, Jiang Zhe was quite indifferent to military matters after he had recovered from his illness. First, Zhao Jue believed that Jiang Zhe was slack because he had not fully recovered. Second, he had perceived the deliberate exclusion by his retainer, Rong Yuan, towards Jiang Zhe. Zhao Jue did not want to destroy the relationship that he had long cultivated with Rong Yuan, especially since Rong Yuan was extremely proficient in military strategy. Rong Yuan was his irreplaceable right-hand man. As a result, in comparison, he was indifferent to Jiang Zhe. Because of these reasons, relations between Zhao Jue and Jiang Zhe had become increasingly distant. However, today, finally, Zhao Jue once again realized Jiang Zhe's importance. Jiang Zhe was far superior to everyone not only because of his analytical and organizational ability, but also because Jiang Zhe possessed a farsighted[15] strategic sense. For the battle for Ba Prefecture, Jiang Zhe adeptly planned out the battle's purpose in advance and could find the point of breakthrough from within a vast sea of information. Although his strategic planning required someone prudent and meticulous to enact, his abilities were already rarely seen. Now that he was facing a strategic decision that was difficult to deal with, he finally thought of Jiang Zhe. But what about Rong Yuan?

Just as Zhao Jue was feeling distressed, Rong Yuan came to see him. Upon catching sight of Zhao Jue, he kneeled on the ground, begging for forgiveness. Stunned, Zhao Jue hurriedly helped Rong Yuan up. Zhao Jue queried, "Why has Sir Rong performed a grand rite?"

Ashamed, Rong Yuan replied, "This subordinate is petty, deliberately excluding talented individuals. My crime cannot be forgiven. These last few days, this subordinate has racked his brain trying to think of a strategy to defeat the enemy, but could not think of any effective methods. If Jiang Zhe were here, he would likely thoroughly investigate[16] and come up with a strategy. Your Highness, please allow this subordinate to go and personally beg the *zhuangyuan* 's forgiveness, so that we can unite[17] and break Luocheng."

Exulting, Zhao Jue declared, “Sir recognizes his mistake; this is wonderful. Zhao Jue was also mistaken, neglecting a famous scholar. The two of us should go see Jiang Zhe together to acquire his forgiveness, to ask Jiang *zhuangyuan* to come up with a strategy to break this stalemate.”

Speaking thus, he handed the intelligence report in his hand to Rong Yuan. Rong Yuan took a look, his face immediately becoming ugly. He naturally understood the dangerous situation that they faced. If the Kingdom of Shu were to become a vassal of Great Yong, once Shu were to recover, then they would definitely take vengeance upon Southern Chu. Thinking of this, Rong Yuan hurriedly urged Zhao Jue to go see Jiang Zhe together.

At this moment, I was a guest, immersed in the comforts of life. After learning that Tian Suying knew martial arts, Wang Hai agreed to return Tian Suying and her mother to me. Their entire family’s reunion was naturally joyful. Tian Suying treated me indifferently, as I was a ranking official of Southern Chu and was the prime offender who had come up with the strategy that defeated and killed her father. I did not know that Southern Chu’s sky was filled with black clouds.

Just as I was about to write down a verse, I heard someone ask from outside my door, “Is Jiang *daren* here?”

Footnotes :

钩心斗角, gouxindoujiao – idiom, lit. to fight and scheme against each other
草民, caomin – lit. straw person; used by commoners to refer to themselves when facing those individuals holding an official position
宁缺勿滥, ningquewulan – idiom, lit. better to have nothing (than substandard choice); would prefer to go without than accept a shoddy option
真气蓬勃, zhaoqipengbo – idiom, lit. full of youthful energy; vigorous, energetic, a bright spark
目不交睫, mubujiaojie – idiom, lit. the eyelashes do not come together; fig. to not sleep a wink
恃才傲物, shicai’aowu – idiom, lit. to be inordinately proud of one’s ability; to be conceited and contemptuous

目中无人, muzhongwuren – idiom, lit. to consider everyone else beneath one; so arrogant that no one else matters, condescending
兵临城下, binglinchengxia – idiom, lit. soldiers at the city walls; fig. at a critical juncture
荆襄, Jingxiang – refers to one of the nine ancient provinces of China that is modern-day Hubei and Hunan
萧何, Xiao He was an adviser to the founding Emperor of the Han Dynasty, Liu Bang. He was the dynasty's founding prime minister
霸王, bawang – lit. Hegemonic King; refers to the Hegemonic King of Western Chu, Xiang Yu, who battled Liu Bang for control of the world after the fall of the Qin Dynasty
张良, Zhang Liang was the primary strategist in the service of the founding Emperor of the Han Dynasty, Liu Bang
田横, Tian Heng was a member of the royal family of the state of Qi. After the fall of the Qin Dynasty, Tian Heng attempted to restore the state of Qi and served as chancellor before attempting to become king himself. After being defeated, he fled from the mainland. After the founding Emperor of Han Dynasty attempted to force him to surrender, Tian Heng refused and committed suicide. Tian Heng had five hundred loyal retainers who stayed with him till the bitter end. They followed Tian Heng and all of them committed suicide as well.
聂政, Nie Zheng and 荆轲, Jing Ke were famed assassins during the Warring States Period
远见卓识, yuanjianzhuoshi – idiom, lit. visionary and sagacious; farsighted
抽丝拨茧, chousibaojian – idiom, lit. to spin silk from cocoons; fig. to make a painstaking investigation; to come up
戮力同心, lulitongxin – idiom, lit. concerted efforts in a common cause; united and working together

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 12: Chained Malicious Strategies

Volume 1, Chapter 12: Chained Malicious Strategies

In the twelfth month of the nineteenth year of Xiande, the Southern Chu army was battling for Luocheng. At the same time, the Prince of Yong, Li Zhi, was battling for Jiameng Pass. Before long, there were rumors that Great Yong and the Kingdom of Shu intended to make peace. The Prince of De, Zhao Jue, became extremely uneasy. He asked Jiang Zhe for a strategy and secretly discussed the matter for some time. The next day, the Chu army assaulted the city with extreme urgency. On the nineteenth day of the twelfth month, General Wei Xian was killed in an ambush. At dawn the next day, the Chu army once again attacked the city. Long Bu listened to an erroneous intelligence report and sallied forth from the city to give chase and was lured into an encirclement. After battling for an entire day, men and horses tired, the Prince of De personally proceeded forward to request a surrender. Long Bu refused. In anger, he committed suicide. The Prince sighed in admiration. He personally collected Long Bu's remains and buried them before Luocheng.

On the twenty-fifth day of the twelfth month, Jiameng Pass learned the news of Luocheng's fall. The Shu army lost all desire for battle. On the twenty-eighth day of the twelfth month, Jiameng Pass fell. From then on, the Kingdom of Shu was defenseless. There were those who say that Jiang Zhe offered two stratagems—capturing the city or sowing discord. Then he had a chance encounter with Rong Yuan, a former retainer of the Prince of De, who inquired of this matter. Afterwards, Rong Yuan muttered to himself for some time. When later questioned, he refused to speak any of the particulars. Not long afterwards, Rong Yuan passed away. When others came to mourn, Rong Yuan's son was said to speak on behalf of his deceased father that Jiang Suiyun was a genius, but unfortunately the Prince of De dared not use him….

—*Southern Chu Dynastic Records, Biography of Jiang Suiyun*

I set down my brush. Han Zhang left the room and opened the courtyard gate, seeing a general dressed in golden armor and a white cape. Behind him to the side stood a black-robed scholar. Behind them was a squadron of white-armored personal guards. Han Zhang had stayed within the Southern Chu army for almost a month now. How could he not know the identity of the person before him? Apprehensive, he stepped aside. Zhao Jue gave him a glance before entering the building. Rong Yuan made a gesture before following. The personal guards immediately surrounded Jiang Zhe's study room.

I didn't hear Han Zhang announce the visitor. Just as I was feeling strange, I saw Zhao Jue entered the room. According to propriety, I stood and bowed, saying, "For what reason has Your Highness come to my humble abode? Please excuse Suiyun for not coming out to welcome you. May Your Highness please forgive me."

Zhao Jue first returned my greeting before apologizing, "Zhao Jue has been busy with military matters of late and has not had the opportunity to inquire after Jiang *daren* 's health. Please forgive me."

I replied indifferently, "Your Highness holds a strong army within your grasp, having to deal with ten thousand matters on a daily basis. How do you have the free time to worry about this lowly official? May I ask what is the reason for Your Highness's visit today?"

Zhao Jue glanced at Rong Yuan who hurriedly stepped forward and said with remorse, "Jiang *daren* , I have slighted you before, please forgive me."

I naturally responded, "There is no need for Sir Rong to be so courteous. For the two gentlemen to have come personally, there must be a military matter of extreme importance. Please speak forthrightly."

Rong Yuan gave an ashamed look before saying, "The Kingdom of Shu has dispatched an envoy to seek an audience with the Prince of Yong, Li Zhi, to request to make peace. Li Zhi has not agreed, but also has not declined."

As he spoke, he handed over a hefty pile of intelligence reports. They were extremely detailed, including the entire contents of the conversation between Li Zhi and Yang Can. After I read through them, I could not help but

smile. This Yang Can was very similar to my first student, Lu Can. They had similar personalities, using both threats and enticements. But it was such a pity. I sighed heavily before speaking, “The Kingdom of Shu has many talented people and yet the King of Shu does not know how to use them. And yet, even though the kingdom was in peril, all of these individuals refused to abandon Shu. No wonder it is said that the people of Shu are loyal and righteous.”

Zhao Jue asked, “What is it? Has Suiyun already seen that Great Yong won’t accept the Kingdom of Shu’s peace offering?”

Smiling, I replied, “If the Prince of Yong were willing to agree to peace, he would have asked questions to ascertain the benefits. However, the Prince of Yong inquired after Sichuan’s talents. He clearly intends to win the support of these talents to govern Sichuan. Therefore, the Prince of Yong will not agree to peace.”

Furrowing his brows, Zhao Jue wondered, “But why would the Prince of Yong allow this information to spread? If our Southern Chu were to learn of this, it seems somewhat …”

In an detached voice, I explained, “The Prince of Yong is indeed capable. He deliberately allowed these rumors to be spread with the purpose of allowing our Southern Chu to learn of this. From what this lowly official knows, over the last few days, our Southern Chu has not earnestly attacked the city. I believe that Your Highness wishes that the Prince of Yong would fight a bloody battle to capture Jiameng Pass. At that point, the defenders of Luocheng will be affected and cannot be fully devoted to defending the city. When the time comes, we can easily take Luocheng.”

Zhao Jue and Rong Yuan exchanged a look. This was the strategy that they had adopted after secret discussions. They could not believe that I had seen through it so easily. The two did not say a word, but tacitly agreed. I continued, “I believe the Prince of Yong also is worried about his own losses, and has therefore used these rumors to force us to resolve this battle as soon as possible. Alas, the Prince of Yong is truly fearsome. Even if we are able to see through his intentions, what can we do? At worst, the Prince of Yong agrees to make peace with Shu, forcing us to directly face the entirety

of Shu's anger. Great Yong can tolerate Shu's existence. As long as they control Yangping Pass, they can control the entire Hanzhong region. But to date, after bitter fighting, we have only gained control of the difficult and dangerous road into Sichuan. Our gains do not make up for our losses. We do not have the ability nor do we dare to drag this out. If Shu recovers, they will attack Southern Chu for our betrayal. At this time, this lowly official has three strategies—upper, middle, and low."

Hearing my words, Zhao Jue became disconcerted. He asked, "What are the three strategies? Will *daren* please explain in detail?"

I straightforwardly clarified, "The low strategy would be to continue our current path. If Great Yong becomes impatient and first captures Jiameng Pass, then we will achieve our original aims. The only problem is if Great Yong in a fury changes its mind and decides to make peace with Shu. At that point, we will be completely defeated. With this strategy, victory and defeat are completely in the hands of the Prince of Yong."

Zhao Jue sadly expressed, "If victory and defeat are completely in the hands of others, aren't we completely at their mercy?[1] What is the middle strategy?"

In a heavy tone, I continued, "The middle strategy would be to launch a concerted attack on Luocheng. As long as we are able to capture Luocheng, Great Yong will also forcibly attack Jiameng Pass. At that point, Shu will fall. We will attain more than we had planned, but will also lose far more than we had planned."

Zhao Jue's brow furrowed. He did not want to suffer too many casualties and thus had not made a concerted effort to attack Luocheng. In a heavy voice, he inquired, "Then what is the upper strategy?"

I smiled faintly as I analyzed, "We will use surprise to attack and capture the city. Our losses will not be too great. At that point, as long as we restrain ourselves during the division of spoils, we will have completely achieved our goals."

Zhao Jue's brow smoothed over, as he considered. "But how are we to use surprise to capture the city?"

I was well-prepared[2] and expounded, “Luocheng’s garrison is split in two with one army garrisoning the city and the other army encamped outside the city. The two forces are able to assist each other. If we want to win, we must destroy the city’s external help. I recommend that we urgently attack the city. The enemy forces camped outside of the city will see the flames of battle. The outside enemy forces will immediately believe that Luocheng is in danger and come to reinforce. We can set an ambush along their path and completely annihilate this army. With outside assistance eliminated, we can turn our attention to dealing with the city garrison. Afterwards, we will once again launch another attack against the city. We will then use soldiers dressed in Shu uniforms to feign an attack our supplies, allowing them to believe that there are still Shu soldiers outside to help. We will pretend that our supplies have been destroyed and hastily retreat, enticing the city garrison to sally forth and chase us. We can place an ambush to cut off their path of retreat, tempt, and then kill the enemy’s main commander. When the time comes, it won’t take long for Luocheng to fall.”

Listening to this point, Zhao Jue crushed the teacup in his hand. This strategy was maliciously detailed. He regarded me with a newfound expression. I couldn’t make heads or tails of his gaze. Zhao Jue finally confirmed that this cultured and refined young *zhuangyuan* was actually someone who was so profoundly scheming and capable of such guile. Zhao Jue couldn’t help but feel a chill. He was a straightforward and upright[3] person. Although he had used stratagems before, he had never used such a treacherous chained stratagem that called for an ambush and a targeted killing of an enemy commander. He unnaturally bade farewell to Jiang Zhe and went to prepare for battle.

At dusk of the sixteenth day of the twelfth month, the Southern Chu army began to furiously attack Luocheng. Not long afterwards, a blaze was ignited. Wei Xian naturally and mistakenly believed that Luocheng was in danger. He hurriedly sped over. They were ambushed along the way by Southern Chu forces. Wei Xian fought to the bitter end and was personally killed by Zhao Jue. The Shu army scattered. The Chu army tightly controlled the roads, to prevent any information from reaching Luocheng.

At dawn of the seventeenth day of the twelfth month, the Southern Chu forces once again attacked. Grand General Long Bu commanded the garrison in beating off several attacks, suffering heavy casualties. Around 1 PM, the Southern Chu army was suddenly thrown into chaos before quickly assembling and retreating. Atop the battlements, Long Bu saw that the Southern Chu encampments at Fushui Pass were aflame. At this point, Zhao Jue dispatched one of his trusted aides, disguised as a Shu army scout, to report to Long Bu with the news that Wei Xian had destroyed Southern Chu's supplies. Jubilant, Long Bu saw that the retreat was disorderly and personally led cavalry to pursue. Seemingly defeated, the Southern Chu army scattered. Long Bu gave chase for twenty *li* . His return route was cut off by a Southern Chu force hidden in the mountains. The Southern Chu army formed up and encircled Long Bu.[4] Leading seven thousand elite horsemen, Long Bu charged at all sides. Battling all night, entirely soaked in blood, he was wounded over a dozen times. Finally, he could no longer continue. His bodyguards were all dead and he was completely surrounded with no hope of escape. The Prince of De personally came forward to try to persuade Long Bu to surrender. Long Bu laughed loudly and replied, "My Kingdom of Shu only has decapitated generals; how can there be any who bend their knees and surrender?" Finished, Long Bu slit his throat. Sighing with admiration, Zhao Jue ordered that he be buried with honor.

On the eighteenth day of the twelfth month, the Southern Chu forces retreated to Fushui Pass to reorganize. On the nineteenth day, they launched another attack against Luocheng. With their commander dead, the garrison was unable to properly defend the city and surrendered at dusk.

On the twenty-third day of the twelfth month, Jiameng Pass received news of the fall of Luocheng. Its garrison fell into complete chaos. Chengdu was now completely exposed to the Southern Chu forces. On the same day, the Prince of Yong, Li Zhi, launched a large-scale assault. The pass's defenders had lost the will to fight. On the twenty-fifth day, Jiameng Pass fell. Prime Minister Shen Jun was captured. At this point, the Kingdom of Shu was defenseless.

When the King of Shu, Meng Jun, received the news, he fainted several

times. Within the royal audience chambers, he tearfully sobbed, “Sixty years have passed since the ancestors founded this kingdom. Today, everything has vanished into thin air. Although we will die, I dare not face my ancestors.” He asked for the advice of the officials. Someone advised surrender. Thinking it over, Meng Jun returned back to the palace. The court officials could only look at one another before scattering.

The twentieth year of Xiande, the eighth year of the sixty-year cycle, during the first month of the new year, the courts of Great Yong and Southern Chu celebrated the victory. In contrast, everyone in Shu was gloomy, waiting for the Great Yong and Southern Chu forces to reorganize and rendezvous before Chengdu.

Everyone in the army was celebrating. I drank a couple of cups of wine in the marshal’s tent before departing, returning to my tent. Lying down on the bed, I somewhat confusedly thought over the future. The strategy that I had proposed was only known by Zhao Jue. I had asked that my participation not be revealed. He agreed, probably because he viewed my proposed strategy as too vicious. What he didn’t know was that I had already planned to leave Southern Chu. If anyone were to find out that I was the strategist behind the victory at Luocheng, I probably would never be able to live peacefully. Victory did not bring much joy. I knew that Han Zhang wept bitterly last night, even though he made sure he wasn’t too loud and deliberately avoided his wife.

In reality, compared to my strategy, that employed by the Prince of De was the one that was vicious, forcing others to be his catspaw.[5] At the time, I left out one detail. The Prince of Yong had another motive. He would use the opportunity to collect details on Southern Chu’s intelligence network, identifying those individuals who were working for Southern Chu. When the time came, he could easily eliminate these individuals. Ah … what kind of scheming was this? I didn’t deliberately leave out this detail when I advised the Prince of De. If he could not understand this simple fact, then his thinking was too sluggish. Furthermore, I did not want to offend Great Yong. Alongside Zhao Jue’s fear and exclusion, I lost any intention of serving him.

Alas, I had hoped that Southern Chu would have someone capable of

restoring the dynasty, but unfortunately, Zhao Jue was no Guan Zhong[6] or Yue Yi.[7] He seemed to be a bit like Bao Shuya,[8] too clearly differentiating between black and white, good and evil. He did not understand the need to mask one's brilliance and be one with the dust of the earth.[9]

There was really no hope for Southern Chu , I thought with bitter anguish.

In the first month of the twentieth year of Xiande, the two armies did not rush to advance, instead taking the time to reorganize themselves, consolidating control over the captured territories and waiting for spring. To the Kingdom of Shu, this was their final winter. While the Kingdom of Shu had lost almost of its military power, the situation was difficult to appraise. I had long borne witness to the conceit and stubbornness of the people of Sichuan. In just a month, there were seven rebellions and twenty-three assassination attempts. Of course, I was not targeted, as I was not famous. The majority of Sichuan's famed scholars refused to yield. They could not resist, but they could still silently reject. The situation was quite dangerous, causing Zhao Jue's hair to whiten. We had won, and yet the situation was challenging. Finally, we reached a unified opinion. If the King of Shu surrendered, everything would be for the best. After discussions, both Great Yong and Southern Chu agreed to advance together upon Chengdu upon the first day of the second month.

Before we departed, Zhao Jue met with me. He liked to meet with me in private, disliking publicly seeking my advice. It was probably because my stratagems were often too vicious. But I was quite fond of this kind of meeting. This method was particularly safe, as no one would notice me. Let alone the fact that I thought up numerous strategies, all of them somewhat vicious. I, therefore, had allowed Han Zhang to leave. It was too dangerous to leave a citizen of Shu by my side. If he felt that killing me was worth losing his entire family, it would become disastrous for me.

In order to protect me, Xiaoshunzi racked his brains. From within the Southern Chu prisons, he found a good candidate. This man was named Chen Zhen. He was a Shu secret agent and assassin. He was captured after Luocheng fell. As we discovered that he had attempted to assassinate our officers, he was to be executed. This person was especially cruel, of a

naturally cold disposition. He was someone who cared for nothing except himself. If it weren't for the fact that Luocheng fell so suddenly, he would have fled long ago. Xiaoshunzi settled on him because of his naturally frigid nature. He had me ask Zhao Jue to save him. Feeling that he had not rewarded me for my service, Zhao Jue agreed. Xiaoshunzi used a secret method to leave marks upon him. I was still worried and had Xiaoshunzi feed him a slow acting poison that I had concocted. Chen Zhen was also informed that the antidote was in Xiaoshunzi's hands. In this way, I had a bodyguard. According to Xiaoshunzi, this man would not choose honor over life[10] and kill me. Someone who cherished his life and having taken measures to prevent betrayal was the best guard.

Zhao Jue sat down and hesitatingly said, "We are about to attack Chengdu. When the time comes, without the buffer that is the Kingdom of Shu, how can we face Great Yong? The King has issued a secret edict, ordering us to not offend Great Yong."

I had already prepared a mental outline and detailed, "This lowly official believes that the biggest issue will be in Chengdu. Whoever takes the King of Shu captive will be the biggest beneficiary. We should not contest this point with Great Yong. There is no point. This lowly official has an idea to ensure that the King of Shu does not fall into the hands of Great Yong. This idea will be sufficient. In addition, I have heard the reason that the King of Shu has distanced himself from talented persons and become intimate with vile characters is because he doted on one of his concubines, Lady Golden Lotus, and the eunuch, Zhang Quan. I have heard that Lady Golden Lotus is a great beauty. We should allow the entirety of Shu's officialdom and harem to be taken by Great Yong. If the Prince of Yong were to bring them to Chang'an, then Lady Golden Lotus's beauty will surely gain the Yong Emperor's favor. Through this, we will have laid a spark in the Great Yong imperial harem. If the Prince of Yong were to kill these individuals, although the loss would be regrettable, their deaths will surely infuriate the Yong Emperor. Older individuals love beauty, especially this Yong Emperor, who isn't a particularly wise and capable sovereign. Regardless of success, we will have driven a wedge between the Yong Emperor and his son."

I continued, “Of course, there are things that we must acquire. Immediately after we have entered the city, Your Highness must dispatch someone to the Ministry of Revenue[11] and gather all of the available records, including census data, maps, and books. They will be of particular help in our governance of Sichuan. Of course, we must also plunder gold, silver, and jewels. On the one hand, plundering these treasures will serve to help conceal our seizure of important revenue and census records. On the other, we can use these treasures to properly reward the army and provide kickbacks to the King. Aside from these, we shouldn’t worry about anything else. Allow Great Yong to deal with those official residences of Shu officials.”

Zhao Jue nodded his head at my words. “Jiang *daren* mentioned driving a wedge between the Yong Emperor and his son. Can you explain in further detail?”

Since I was going to leave Southern Chu, I didn’t conceal or hide anything. I therefore explained, “Everyone knows that the Prince of Yong and the Crown Prince, Li An, are battling over being named the heir apparent. As Great Yong relies upon martial might and merit as its foundation, Li An is in an awkward position. The Prince of Yong’s successful invasion of Shu will surely garner great merit. Li An will undoubtedly be so resentful and hateful that he will gnash his teeth. We can use this opportunity to dispatch agents into Great Yong to spread rumors that the Prince of Yong will use the Hanzhong region to declare independence.”

Having spoken this much, Zhao Jue already understood, and he looked at me deeply, filled with fear. He profoundly and respectfully said, “Jiang *daren* ’s good idea can ensure decades of peace for Southern Chu. Does *daren* require anything? Zhao Jue will definitely help you to the best of my abilities.”

Thinking it over, Zhao Jue was likely offering me a path to promotion. I replied, indifferently, “This lowly official is travel-worn and has acquired a lasting ailment. I wish to be able to return home and resign from my position. If I can acquire the approval of Your Highness and offer a suggestion to the King, then I cannot be thankful enough.”

Zhao Jue knitted his brows, thinking. Jiang Zhe was such a deep schemer. It

was a good thing if he was disinterested in power, but if he were to leave and end up joining another country, then he would be a danger to Southern Chu. As a result, Zhao Jue categorically objected, “Jiang *daren* ’s words are mistaken. Sir’s ability and wisdom are outstanding. Zhao Jue is about to rely on you, so how can you leave and go into seclusion? If Jiang *daren* does not like the complicated government affairs, this Prince will report to the King and support you in Hanlin Academy. If there are no other matters, then you will not be troubled.”

What? My eyes widened and my mouth opened. How did things turn out contrary to my wishes? That night, I vented my grievances to Xiaoshunzi. Xiaoshunzi slapped his forehead and replied, “Heavens! *Daren* , how do you not understand the intentions of this royal? You are such a talented individual, even if they would dare to let you go, they fear that you would join Great Yong or Northern Han. Who told you to reveal your talents? It looks like that you can’t resign. From now on, you will most likely have to make sure to hide your abilities and bide your time. When the right opportunity comes, you will have the chance to abandon your post.”

Blushing, I shot an expression of shame and respect at Xiaoshunzi.

On the fifteenth day of the second month, Southern Chu and Great Yong rendezvoused at Chengdu. The two armies besieged Chengdu. The Prince of De went forth to meet with the Prince of Yong, Li Zhi. I could not hold back my curiosity and was interested in meeting this heroic individual. I followed Zhao Jue along. Arriving before the main encampment, I looked carefully at the foreboding terrain[12] and the hidden killing intent of the camp, which I met with approval. The Prince of Yong, Li Zhi, welcomed us at the entrance to his camp. From afar, I already noticed that he was standing at the entrance. He was wearing the attire of an imperial prince, and seemed to be naturally poised and noble. Although he was only standing there, doing nothing, it felt like the entire imperious and powerful aura of the Great Yong camp was gathered on this single person. One hundred paces from the camp entrance, the Prince of De dismounted from his horse and proceeded on foot. I followed his example. Nearing the camp, I saw the Prince of Yong smile faintly and come forward to welcome us. At this time, I finally

discovered a shocking fact that left me inconsolable. I actually recognized the Prince of Yong, Li Zhi.

Footnotes :

人为**刀俎**，**我**为鱼**肉**, renweidaozu, woweiyurou – idiom, lit. to be the meat on somebody's chopping block; fig. to be at somebody's mercy

胸有成竹, xiongyouchengzhu – idiom, lit. to plan in advance; having a card up one's sleeve; forewarned is forearmed

光明磊落, guangmingleiluo – idiom, lit. open and candid; straightforward and upright

十面埋伏, shimianmaifu – lit. ambushed from ten sides; this is a famous piece for the *pipa* ; being ambushed and surrounded on all sides

火中取栗, houzhongquli – idiom, lit. to pull chestnuts out of the fire; to be somebody's catspaw

管仲, Guan Zhong was a chancellor of the state of Qi during the Spring and Autumn Period. Through his reforms and skillful diplomacy, Qi became the most powerful state in China.

乐**毅**, Yue Yi was a general of the state of Yan during the Warring States Period. Forging an alliance between the states of Zhao, Wei, Chu, Han, and Qin, he almost completely conquered the state of Qi (except for two cities).

鲍**叔牙**, Bao Shuya was a famous official of the state of Qi. A capable administrator, Bao Shuya recommended his good friend, Guan Zhong, to Duke Huan of Qi, convincing him to put aside personal enmities for the common good.

和光同尘, heguangtongchen – comes from the fifty-six chapter of the *Dao De Jing* ; to mask one's brilliance and be one with the dust of the earth

舍生取义, sheshengquyi – idiom, lit. to give up life for righteousness; to choose honor over life; would rather sacrifice one's life than one's principles

户**部**, hubu – the Ministry of Revenue was in charge of gathering census data, collecting taxes, and handling state revenues

虎踞龙盘, hujulongpan – idiom, lit. where tigers crouch and dragons coil; fig. forbidding terrain

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 13: One Song to Force Suicide

Volume 1, Chapter 13: One Song to Force Suicide

With difficultly, I resisted the dread in my heart and lowered my head. Yes, I was feeling dread. This Li Zhi was the so-called merchant that I had met on my way to Jianye in order to take the imperial examinations, Li Tianxiang. Heavens! I had actually explained to the Prince of Yong how to conquer the world! In addition, I even explained the internal threats facing Great Yong. Is it possible that the Prince of Yong has really listened to my advice to first destroy Shu and then to target Southern Chu? It's simply impossible. The Prince of Yong was extremely talented, a fine soldier and statesman. He must have thought of this plan long ago.

At this moment, the Prince of Yong had come forward to welcome us. After politely greeting the Prince of De, Li Zhi spoke in a genial voice, "The Prince of De has battled all the way here. The journey must have been exhausting. Breaking through Ba Prefecture, conquering Luocheng. Just from these two battles, one can see Your Highness's reputation as a famous general."

Zhao Jue's face became slightly red, as he replied, "For the Prince of Yong to praise me so, you flatter me too much.[1] Today, our armies have joined up. All that Shu has left is the single city of Chengdu. I wonder what the Prince of Yong intends?"

Li Zhi proclaimed, "Chengdu can be easily captured, but this city is the capital of the Kingdom of Shu. There are tens of thousands of citizens within this bustling city. If our two armies were to attack, the people of the city would be harmed. This Prince has already prepared a document calling for its surrender. What does Your Highness think?"

Zhao Jue indifferently responded, "I have no objection to calling for their surrender, but are we having the King of Shu surrender to Great Yong or to Southern Chu?"

Confident that he was speaking supported by reason,[2] Li Zhi declared, "As

Southern Chu is a vassal of Great Yong, the Kingdom of Shu rightly should surrender to Great Yong."

Prepared for this answer, Zhao Jue nonchalantly stated, "If that is the case, then I request the Prince of Yong dispatch an envoy to convince Shu to surrender. If Shu refuses to do so, our two armies will begin to assault the city tomorrow."

Smiling, Li Zhi asserted, "This ought to be the case. Gou Lian, Sir Gou, is an envoy under my banner. I have already requested that he undertake this mission. Does the Prince of De agree?"

Zhao Jue could not help but look at me. Seeing that I did not object, he replied, "Sir Gou Lian has served the Prince of De for many years. To my knowledge, he has acted as an envoy to numerous warlords and should be capable of persuading Shu to surrender. I await the good news. Alas, I have many military matters to deal with and will return to my camp to await the news."

Seeing that Zhao Jue agreed with his decision, Li Zhi then asked that Zhao Jue leave behind a trusted commander or retainer to serve as a liaison to consult over military matters. After thinking it over, Zhao Jue agreed that there was such a need. He turned to look at those who were accompanying him. Although all of us were trusted, the vast majority could only help to pass along information. There were only Rong Yuan and Jiang Zhe whom were able to actually to discuss military matters and to fight for Southern Chu's interests with the Prince of Yong. Zhao Jue could not do without Rong Yuan, so he calmly replied, "Whether there will be war or peace has yet to be determined. This Jiang Zhe is my assistant. I will have him stay behind. Any deviations can be discussed with him."

Only then did the Prince of Yong glance at me, as if he was just seeing me for the first time. I felt a chill envelop my entire body. Zhao Jue was an idiot. The Prince of Yong so easily tricked him. I did not believe for a second that Li Zhi intended to discuss military matters. It was very likely that the real motive was to have me stay. As I watched Zhao Jue depart, the Prince of Yong invited me to his tent to chat, while waiting for the envoy to return. Restless, I followed the Prince of Yong inside the tent. My personal guard,

Chen Zhen, was halted at the entrance and prevented from entering. Sitting in the marshal's seat, Li Zhi saw that I was reserved and uneasy. With a smile, he said, "Why is Jiang *daren* so uncomfortable? We can be considered old friends. There is no need to be overly polite."

I cursed him in my mind for some time before replying, "That day, this lowly official greatly offended you. I did not know that it was the Prince of Yong traveling incognito. May Your Imperial Highness please forgive me."

Li Zhi watched me sit and replied, "What offense are you talking about? At the time, this prince had traveled under disguise to Shu, to observe the military conditions and popular mood in Sichuan, and had the fortune of meeting young master. Listening to the words of a sage is superior to studying books for ten years. If my Great Yong unifies the world, then young master Jiang will have performed a deed of great merit for the empire."

I was so angry that I almost fainted. If I performed such a deed for Great Yong, didn't that mean that I had performed a crime against Southern Chu? If these words were to spread, wouldn't it result in my death? I quickly tried to explain myself, "The Prince of Yong is a veritable storehouse of ideas. This lowly subject's plan must already have been within Your Imperial Highness's grasp. For Your Imperial Highness to push these meritorious deeds upon this lowly subject, Suiyun dares not accept."

The Prince of Yong smiled faintly. He did not continue to beat around the bush, instead directly saying, "Upon hearing young master's plan and your intentions to serve Southern Chu, this Prince originally thought about playing the role of a bandit and kidnapping young master back to Great Yong. Alas, my whereabouts were discovered by others. These individuals desired to assassinate me. As I did not have many guards, I feared that I could not ensure the young master's safety and was forced to let the opportunity slip by. That young master is an official of Southern Chu leaves me, Li Zhi, to wring my hands and lament the loss."

Listening to his words, I quickly understood what was going on. Even if his identity was discovered by Shu or Southern Chu, there was no one who dared to harm him. There was only one person who wished to have him assassinated. Li Zhi was greatly talented, and yet was unfortunately the

second son, and as a result could not inherit the throne. In addition, he had to face his older brother's jealousy and assassination plots. It left him to lament his misfortunes. But for me to lament was one thing. For him to lament being able to attain my services was a completely different matter. If he had taken me away, I would have likely suffered a disaster, a violent death. Although I was thinking this, I could not directly say it. Instead, I chose to reply, "This must mean that this lowly subject does not have the fortune of serving Your Imperial Highness. It must be Heaven's will."

Li Zhi looked at me, delighted. He said, "That day, we met by chance. When we met again today, young master Jiang had already become the trusted military adviser to the Prince of De. You must have presented many ideas for the Prince of De. The Prince of De and his subordinate retainers and generals are all orthodox soldiers or strategists. And yet, both the battles for Ba Prefecture and Luocheng practically completely relied upon luring-to-kill and ambush stratagems. They must surely be young master Jiang's brilliant schemes."

I felt my entire body become rigid. I could only wryly smile and reply, "This lowly subject does not understand anything about military matters. I only spoke of principles. It was all due to the Prince of De's wisdom and resolution, determining the strategies, that we were able to be victorious."

Solemnly, Li Zhi conveyed, "Sun Tzu's *Art of War* states that 'A general who wins a battle must consider many things in his mind before the battle is even fought. The general who loses a battle considers few things beforehand. More calculations lead to victory, fewer calculations lead to defeat, let alone those who make no calculations at all. By paying attention to this simple point, we can foresee who is likely to win or lose.'[3] For young master to be adept at these calculations already makes you an exceptional talent. For Li Zhi to meet young master is akin to King Wu of Zhou having the fortune of meeting Jiang Ziya[4] and Emperor Gaozu of Han meeting Zhang Liang.[5] Southern Chu has no ambitions and hides in Jiangnan; its officials seeking calm, its soldiers seeking amusement. Although the Prince of De is both a fine soldier and statesman, he does not possess the bearing of a monarch. Young master is no more than a mere *literatus* in Southern Chu,

but if you join Great Yong, you can become my right hand."[6]

Wasn't he being too unbridled by openly recruiting another country's officials? I took the opportunity to ask a question. "I have heard that Shi Yu, Shi Ziyou is the leading strategist in service to the Prince of Yong. Whenever the Prince of Yong leaves the capital, he handles all of the government affairs under your jurisdiction. In your mind, he must surely be your left hand?[7]

Although he did not understand what I was getting at, he still replied, "Ziyou is adept at handling government affairs. Ziyou overseeing my rear echelon allows Li Zhi to deploy my forces capably."

Unflinchingly, I continued, "What if Shi Zhiyou was a subject of another country and was treated indifferently by his monarch, and was easily persuaded to surrender? Would Your Imperial Highness still place him in such an important position?

Li Zhi became dazed at my words. Smiling wryly, he could only respond, "If that were the case, Li Zhi dare not trust Ziyou."

Smiling, I added, "Does Your Imperial Highness understand this lowly subject's difficulties now?"

Sighing, Li Zhi stated, "Southern Chu is not a worthy perch, let alone the perch of a phoenix.[8] Southern Chu treats you like an ordinary person. I treat you as befitting a high minister. Suiyun is still unwilling to join my Great Yong?"

I stared stupidly at Li Zhi. I really was a bit regretful. If at the time, Li Zhi had kidnapped me, I would undoubtedly have been quite unhappy and perhaps even harbor a grudge against him. But it would have likely allowed me to not have to worry about Southern Chu. But that was not the case. *I have become an official of Southern Chu. Throughout the years, my career has progressed smoothly and I have learned much while serving at Hanlin Academy. Southern Chu has treated me well. Under these circumstances, I cannot join Great Yong and then watch Southern Chu be destroyed* . Thinking of this, I sadly said, "Although Southern Chu treats me as an ordinary person, I cannot betray it. As long as Suiyun is a subject of Southern Chu, I will continue to serve Southern Chu."

Heaving a soft sigh, Li Zhi asked, “If Southern Chu were to be destroyed by Great Yong, what then?”

Thinking it over, I replied, “I believe that I am incapable of overthrowing fate. If Southern Chu is destroyed, as long as Great Yong does not charge me with a crime, this lowly subject intends to travel the world, living in the wilds.”

Unenthusiastically, Li Zhi voiced, “During this invasion of Shu by Southern Chu, you took part in the handling of military affairs. Your abilities have captured the attention of others. Although Zhao Jue cannot use your abilities to the fullest, he will most assuredly continue to use you to advise him. When the time comes, no matter what you think, Great Yong will not leave such a talent alone.”

I looked at Li Zhi with admiration. The Prince of Yong was extremely intelligent. From just a few words, he could deduce so much. Without any intention to hide anything from him, I stated, “I will come up with a strategy for the Prince of De that will give Southern Chu several years of peace.”

Suddenly a brilliant light flashed by in Li Zhi’s eyes. He declared, “If I guess correctly, this plan is related to the King of Shu. If the King of Shu is willing to surrender to Great Yong, this will become Southern Chu’s greatest danger.”

Making no attempt to mask my intentions, I answered, “That is correct. If the King of Shu were to surrender, I have a plan to have him die. At the very least, I can prevent Great Yong from taking advantage.”

Deeply contemplating, Li Zhi pondered, “If Shu refuses to surrender, our two armies will attack Chengdu. It is possible that the King of Shu dies by our hands or by his own. But if he surrenders, you really have a way for him to die while in the hands of Great Yong?”

I knew that he did not believe me, but I still resolutely[9] replied, “Precisely so.”

Li Zhi stood and paced in his tent before pronouncing, “Okay. If you are truly able to do so and cease to strategize for Southern Chu upon your return, and are not present in Jianye when Great Yong destroys Southern

Chu, this Prince promises to allow you to pass out your remaining days in peace."

I exulted, as this was an edict that would save my life. I hurriedly stepped forward to express my thanks. Li Zhi inquired meaningfully, "If the King of Shu safely arrives at Great Yong, what then?"

"If that is the case, Suiyun is willing to serve Your Imperial Highness," I responded without hesitation.

Laughing, Li Zhi said, "Good, good. That's settled then." As he spoke, he stretched out his right hand. My heart warmed and I extended my own right hand. We clasped our hands together in a pledge.

For the purpose of insurance, I added, "If this lowly subject wins, after I have returned to Southern Chu, if Your Imperial Highness has any difficulties with issues not pertaining to Southern Chu, this lowly official is willing to help advise."

Li Zhi froze again. He originally thought that if I had the ability to kill the King of Shu while in his hands, then he would have to let me off. But he had yet to decide whether to use his forces in Southern Chu to trap me. He could not believe that I had made such a suggestion. He could not help but gasp in surprise. He was silent for a good while before he replied, "Okay. Let's first see if the King of Shu is willing to surrender." With that, he returned to his marshal's seat and sat down.

I did not know what else to say, so I sat down as well and waited for Gou Lian to return.

When the sun set, Gou Lian returned, reporting to Li Zhi. The King of Shu would exit the city to surrender at noon tomorrow. Both of our faces revealed looks of happiness. The gamble that would determine my fate thus began. After discussing with Li Zhi the details about how our two armies would cooperate tomorrow, I returned to the Southern Chu camps. The Prince of Yong personally escorted me out of his camp, leaving me overwhelmed by his favor.

The next day, the King of Shu, wearing white as a sign of mourning, led his officials and his sons to surrender to Great Yong ten *li* outside of the city.

After accepting the surrender, our two armies split and entered the city through the western and eastern gates. Having come to a mutual understanding, there were no disputes. The only incident occurred at the Ministry of Revenue where Rong Yuan ran into the Prince of Yong's retainer, Cui Luan. Both men had been tasked with taking the revenue and census records. Neither side was willing to stand down. After arguing for some time, the Prince of Yong and the Prince of De personally came to an agreement to divide the records in half. Although this was a pity, half was better than having none. Secretly, Zhao Jue asked me how we were going to sow discord between the Shu King and Great Yong now that the Shu King had surrendered. The Shu King's surrender to Great Yong was a big problem facing Southern Chu's governance of our portion of Sichuan. I was ready with a plan. I informed Zhao Jue that all that needed to be done was to host a banquet before the King of Shu departed for Great Yong.

Having experienced the complicated negotiations and division of the spoils, the Prince of De decided to depart and return back to Jiangnan. According to proper etiquette, the Prince of Yong suggested that a banquet be held in honor of the Prince of De's planned departure. This was to be expected. The Prince of De naturally had to attend the banquet. In addition, the King of Shu would also appear at the banquet to bid the Prince of De farewell. Within the luxurious Shu royal palace, the generals and advisers of Great Yong and Southern Chu sat facing either side, making merry and carousing. The King of Shu sat just below the Prince of Yong followed by the surrendered officials of Shu. Their complexions were all ugly, especially that of the King of Shu. Although he wasn't even fifty, he had a wan and sallow appearance, his hair all white. If one said that he was seventy, it would be believed.

After everyone had partaken in the wine, Zhao Jue followed my plan and suggested that a banquet with only alcohol but no song or dance was too boring, proposing that the ladies of the Shu court sing and dance for our entertainment. Although those representing Great Yong believed that Southern Chu was as weak and soft as expected, they did not have a good reason to prevent it, allowing the ladies to come forward to entertain us. The zither music of Shu was like violent waves or swift thunder, while the

dance of Shu brought forth the vigor of a woman's graceful bearing. Those Shu officials who were about to leave Sichuan fought back tears, while the generals and advisers of Great Yong and Southern Chu applauded.

Seeing that the time had come, I shot Zhao Jue a look. Understanding, Zhao Jue stood and said, "Witnessing Shu's music and dance today is extremely moving. My Southern Chu is cultured and refined. How can we not present song and dance to please our friends? Unfortunately, our army does not have any ladies. This one will have to use his crude mastery of the zither to please our hosts. This is Jiang Zhe of Hanlin Academy, a talented scholar of Southern Chu. For today's occasion, he has especially composed a poem, inviting everyone to appreciate."

Li Zhi's heart jumped. Over the last few days, he had assigned a heavy guard to protect the King of Shu, but did not see a single Southern Chu assassin. After today, the King of Shu would head to Great Yong. He had already guessed that I would make my move today, but what he did not expect was for me to only present a newly composed poem. If he was to prevent Zhao Jue from personally playing the zither, he would undoubtedly anger the sovereign and subjects of Southern Chu for his rudeness. Although he knew that he had to prevent it, he could only agree.

I stood, paying my respects to everyone. Zhao Jue sat and began to softly pluck the zither strings. A clear and sweet melody was released by the zither. It was the music of *Dance of the Cavalry* . In a clear voice, I sang:

"For sixty years my country and home,Three thousand *li* of mountains and rivers.The phoenix pavilion and dragon tower reaching up to the Milky Way,Jade trees and jasper branches forming a cloudy net.Not once did I touch sword or spear!

Suddenly I became a captive slave,My waist frail, my temples gray, grinding away.Never shall I forget the day I bade farewell at the ancestral shrine,The court musicians played farewell songs,My tears streamed as I gazed at the court maidens.[10]

After I finished singing the song, the entire hall was silent. Li Zhi felt chilled, knowing that I had already acted. He looked at the King of Shu. The

King's face was numb and haggard, revealing a look of inconsolable sorrow. The Shu officials within the hall were either crying heavily or glaring angrily. After some time, the King of Shu, Meng Jun stood and said, "This lowly King is exhausted from drinking. Would Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, graciously allow this lowly King to return to palace chambers to rest?"

The Prince of Yong, Li Zhi, had a pained expression. He wanted to stop the King of Shu, but he couldn't say anything. After heaving a heavy sigh, he consented. "Your Majesty can return to your chambers to rest. Please do not think too much of this. His Imperial Majesty will not indifferently treat Your Majesty."

Meng Jun did not reply, only taking a look at the gathered individuals in the hall. When his eyes fell upon me, I could sense the despair and hatred in his eyes. How could you have a favorable impression of someone who tore up your beautiful dreams? The King of Shu left his seat, his subjects rising and kneeling to bid their farewell. Smiling wryly, Li Zhi looked at me, filled with admiration and with anger. He raised his cup in a toast before downing the contents in one gulp.

Not long afterwards, a eunuch tearfully entered the hall. Kneeling, he informed us all, "The King has taken poison and died."

"Good, good. *Zhuangyuan* Jiang is indeed ferocious. A single *Dance of the Cavalry* was enough to take the life of a king," said Li Zhi with a laugh before continuing apathetically, "This Prince will soon return back home and has many military matters to take care of. I bid everyone farewell." So saying, he left.

Zhao Jue and Rong Yuan's backs were soaked with cold sweat. Although they were delighted that the King of Shu had committed suicide, they were also worried about offending Great Yong. I didn't know whether to cry or laugh. Although I went overboard in forcing the King of Shu to commit suicide, it was still necessary for him to feel shame. Li Zhi's words before he departed seemed to express his hatred and displeasure towards me. From a different point of view, I could pass my days peacefully when I returned to Southern Chu. However, his words also meant that I would become famous. There was no way for me to conceal my identity and live anonymously. That

this Li Zhi could strike back under these circumstances showed just how fearsome he was.

Mounted upon his horse, Li Zhi finally completed the final dispositions for Shu and was preparing to return back to Great Yong. Although the King of Shu had committed suicide, the Queen and the heir apparent were still alive. Presenting them to the ancestral shrine would be sufficient. The Southern Chu army had already left the day before. According to the agreement, the Hanzhong region belonged to Great Yong, while the Sichuan region belonged to Southern Chu. In reality, Great Yong controlled Jiameng Pass and Southern Chu controlled Luocheng, leaving Sichuan as a buffer. His strategy had already achieved success. It was only that Southern Chu had gotten no few advantages. Li Zhi smiled wryly. He deeply regretted not taking the risk to kidnap Jiang Zhe.

His retainer, Tan Shuo, rode forward and inquired, “Why did Your Imperial Highness not prevent the King of Shu from committing suicide and for no reason allowing Southern Chu to become pleased with themselves?”

Li Zhi glanced at him. He knew that his retainers and his subordinate generals all had doubts. He coolly replied, “It was too late. If the King of Shu did not commit suicide even under those circumstances, he would have been despised by the people of Sichuan. Even if he lived, he would be no better than a walking corpse.”

Fan Qun, a fierce general under Li Zhi, angrily replied, “This was definitely Zhao Jue’s crafty scheme, having that *zhuangyuan* write those verses to ridicule the King of Shu.” Everyone else agreed with the opinion, although several retainers argued that Jiang Zhe’s poem was a masterpiece.

Li Zhi smiled slightly, but did not speak. In his head, he thought, *How do you know this? In reality that Jiang Zhe was the mastermind. But he acted ingeniously. No one will think that it was his idea. This Jiang Zhe is definitely worth this Prince spending time on* . Looking at the sky to tell time, he said, “Let’s hurry. Allow them to be full of themselves for now.”

***

Addendum:

On the sixteenth day of the second month of the twentieth year of Xiande, the King of Shu, Meng Jun, wore white mourning clothes and surrendered. Shu was destroyed.

On the second day of the third month, the Prince of Yong hosted a farewell banquet for the Prince of De. The King of Shu, Meng Jun, attended. The banquet did not lack in the song and dance of Shu. The Prince of De personally played the zither, commanding Jiang Zhe to sing his new poem. Jiang Zhe sang *Dance of the Cavalry* . Hearing the words, the King of Shu was shamed and retired. Taking poison, he died. He was forty-seven years old. People hailed Jiang Zhe's piece as the *Heartbreak Poem* or as the *Suicide Poem* .

—*Southern Chu Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Jiang Suiyun*

Footnotes :

愧不敢当, kuibugandang – idiom, lit. I'm ashamed and dare not (accept the honor); fig. I do not deserve your praise

理直气壮, lizhiqizhuang – idiom, in the right and self-confident; bold and confident with justice (reason) on one's side

These are the closing lines of the first chapter of Sun Tzu's *Art of War* : *Detail Assessment and Planning* .

周武王, King Wu of Zhou (lit. the Martial King of Zhou) overthrew the Shang Dynasty and founded the Zhou Dynasty. 姜子牙, Jiang Ziya was King Wu's strategist and later prime minister of Zhou.

汉高祖, Emperor Gaozu of Han (lit. the Supreme Ancestor of Han) was the founding emperor of the Han Dynasty who reunified China after revolts destroyed the Qin Dynasty. 张良, Zhang Liang, was his chief strategist.

Basically, Li Zhi considers Jiang Zhe to be capable of being his Right Prime Minister. In China, left was superior/senior to the right. Meaning that Jiang Zhe would be Li Zhi's second most important adviser.

Left is senior to right; in Western parlance, the right-hand man.

This comes from a Chinese proverb: 'a wise bird chooses its perch; a wise man chooses his master.' Basically Li Zhi is suggesting that Southern Chu doesn't deserve someone like Jiang Zhe, who he considers to be a superlative talent (comparable to a phoenix).

斩钉**截**铁, zhandingjietie – idiom, lit. to chop the nail and slice the iron; fig. resolute and decisive, unhesitating

This poem was composed by the third and final ruler of the Southern Tang state during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period, Li Yu. Li Yu was an incompetent ruler, neglecting everything in favor of poetry. In 975, after a yearlong siege of his capital, Li Yu surrendered. He was taken captive to the Song capital. This poem reflects the regret and shame that he felt when he was taken away. This type of poem is called a ci (词), a poetic form that uses a base set of certain patterns to compose its verses. The pattern used in this poem is known as “Dance of the Cavalry,” the same as the poem in Chapter 8 by Song Dynasty poet, Xin Qiji.

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 14: Shattered Jade, Submerged Pearl

Volume 1, Chapter 14: Shattered Jade, Submerged Pearl

From a distance, I caught sight of Jianye. I was overwhelmed by emotions. I had finally returned. Thirty *li* away from the city, the king and all of the civil and military officials came forward to welcome us subjects whom had performed meritorious service and were returning in triumph. We all dismounted and kneeled to pay our respects to the king. The king rejoiced, holding the Prince of De's hand, proclaiming, "Royal Uncle has performed a great deed for our country. We have prepared a banquet to celebrate Royal Uncle's meritorious deeds." After I followed the army into the city, I could sense that someone was looking at me intently from the upper floor of a nearby restaurant. However, I could not ascertain any malicious intent.

After the celebration banquet, I hurriedly brought along Chen Zhen and returned to my home. I had received plenty of rewards for my services during this campaign against Shu. As a result, I had long ago decided to buy an estate on the outskirts of the city, especially as the Prince of De had agreed to help me get around the regulations and allow me to stay at home to convalesce. I was no longer restricted to living within the city walls. Before I had returned, Xiaoshunzi had already arrived with Wang Hai. He had already picked out and purchased an estate for me, acquiring the deed from the seller. Last night, he had come to the posthouse to meet me and gave me the details. Following the information provided, Chen Zhen and I quickly found the place. The estate was a secluded and elegant small grange, and within included the pavilions and kiosks of a typical Chinese garden. Xiaoshunzi had already hired a number of servants and had them clean the estate from top to bottom.

After I had taken a bath, I entered my study. Inside, Xiaoshunzi had already arranged my books. I had just picked up a history book to read when Chen Zhen entered. "*Daren* , there is someone outside asking to meet you."

I froze momentarily. I had just moved here and had yet to register this address with the Ministry of Personnel.[1] How could there be someone paying me a visit?

Seeing my puzzlement, Chen Zhen explained, “When *daren* returned, you rented a carriage. When the coachman went back, someone asked him where *daren* was living.”

I thought of a proverb: “they who worked in those service positions should be killed regardless of guilt to seal their mouths.”[2] Sure enough, this was the case. At the same time I was thinking this, I asked, “Where is the calling card?”

Chen Zhen presented me with the calling card with both hands. To speak frankly, originally, although he was obedient, I could sense that he looked down upon me. But after I had written a poem and forced the King of Shu to commit suicide, his temperament changed, becoming reverent and respectful. I accepted the calling card and opened it. Upon it was written the three characters of Liu, Piao, and Xiang. I hurriedly said, “Is that person still here?”

Chen Zhen replied, “This lowly one has allowed them to wait at the gatehouse.”

I promptly uttered, “Quickly allow them to come in … wait … I will personally welcome them.” As I said this, I immediately rushed out. Arriving at the gatehouse, I saw a green-robed scholar with a heavy black cloak draped over her shoulders and covering her whole body. She wore a bamboo hat with a black veil, hiding her features. But I recognized her from her figure and bearing. Without caring about the two serving girls dressed as male attendants, I rushed over and grasped her two hands, crying out, “You’ve come! Was it you watching me from upstairs earlier today?”

One of the attendants frigidly spoke. “Ever since my lord *zhuangyuan* departed for war, my family’s young miss has been extremely worried and troubled.[3] She even stopped going to the pleasure boat. If my lord *zhuangyuan* did not return today, the young miss would probably still refuse to leave her home.”

With great difficulty, I resisted the joy in my heart, continuing to hold Liu Piaoxiang's delicate hands. I maintained, "I knew it, I knew it, you also love me." I watched as Liu Piaoxiang removed her bamboo hat, revealing her pale and sallow features. I was left speechless for some time before I stepped forward and hugged her tightly to me, saying, "You treat me such, even if Suiyun were to sacrifice this life,[4] it would be insufficient to repay your beauty's heavy grace."

Liu Piaoxiang softly replied, "After you left for war, I was uneasy day and night, worried about your safety. Seeing you return in triumph today, I was finally reassured. I originally did not want to come see you, but I wanted to personally come and ask you how you were."

I gratefully responded, "In reality I wanted to come see you, but I thought that you may not necessarily want to see me."

"Okay! You two, stop being so romantic," said the attendant with a smile. "This lowly servant is going to be worn to death."

Liu Piaoxiang and I looked at one another and smiled. Taking her by the hand, I led her inside. The two attendants were naturally left for others to take care of.

Late at night, I watched Liu Piaoxiang's sleeping posture. I rose and picked up paper and brush. My brush moved like flowing water as I began to write. At this moment, Liu Piaoxiang awoke. Walking over, she hugged me from behind. With a smile, she asked, "My lord *zhuangyuan* is writing another poem."

With deep love, I looked at her briefly before embracing her at the waist and pulling her onto my lap, allowing her to take a look at my new work. Tying up her hair, she picked up the draft. It was poem entitled *Immortals at Magpie Bridge* :

As slender clouds form clever shapes,Shooting stars convey the lovers' complaints.They secretly ferry across the wide Celestial River.In this moment, gold wind and jade dew meet,With more ecstasy than any human would encounter.

Their tender feelings are like soft water,But the reunion is short as a

dream.Unbearable to go back across the bridge built by magpies.If love lasts long between a couple,They don't need to be together morning and night.[5]

"Ah!" she exclaimed in a quiet voice before looking at me with eyes filled with passion. How could I resist such enticement? I picked her up and carried her back to bed, spending the whole night satiating our passion. When I awoke the next day, the beautiful woman was gone. My heart ached painfully. Don't tell me that she still is unwilling to marry me? But she has already stopped receiving customers. Did this not mean she wished to marry me? I saw a newly written short verse on my desk.

On a spring day,Blown apricot blossoms fall upon my head.On the pathway, there is a young master,Amply distinguished and accomplished.Long to be his wife,Though pitilessly I'm disclaimed,I would not feel shame.[6]

Extremely grateful, I kneeled on the floor and prayed, "Heavens bless me, Piaoxiang really wishes to marry me!"

What purity? What reputation and integrity? For an exceptional woman like Piaoxiang to marry me was my great fortune. She wasn't someone tempted by fame, money, or power. Nor was she interested in a stable home life. After I had figured out a way to leave Southern Chu, I would bring her to wander the world and her see all of the sights. Accompanied by a beauty while touring the world … such a life was comparable to that of the immortals! When we were both tired from our wanderings, we would settle down in somewhere with enchanting scenery and live out the rest of our days. What a delightful future!

I hurriedly rushed to the Ministry of Personnel. There, I learned that the king had promoted me. I was now a Hanlin Expositor-in-Waiting. In addition, the king had already agreed to allow me to rest at home to convalesce. After completing all of the paperwork, I happily went to a jewelry store. After browsing through its wares for half a day, I did not find anything worthwhile. Piaoxiang was used to seeing all kinds of jewelry and definitely would not be interested in such vulgar objects. I made my own design and had the jewelers make a golden hairpin and a golden bracelet. Seeing my design, the jewelers requested permission to purchase my design

for their own use. I rejected their offer. I intended to give these pieces to Piaoxiang. How could I allow them to copy the design? However, I did agree to give them two other designs. In any case, it was to simply earn money. There wouldn't be any problems as long as they did not spread the news that I was the designer. Although my design required the exquisite craftsmanship of a master artisan, the time required would not miss my deadline.

I couldn't blame them for their seriousness. The hairpin that I had designed was not an ordinary hairpin, but a real phoenix hairpin—a phoenix pecking the hanging tassels—and required three sparkling and translucent, genuine pearls from the southern seas that radiated brilliant light. The eye-catching ability of the combination of a golden hairpin with pearls and emerald green tassels could be imagined. Even more astonishing was that I asked that a phoenix be carved on each of the pearls that were as small as grains, but lifelike,[7] and located beside the opening of each pearl. If one weren't to look carefully, one wouldn't even notice that they were there. As for the body of the hairpin, the phoenix's mouth was open and held a jeweled ring that could move. This kind of exquisite golden hairpin was difficult to obtain no matter how high a cost you were willing to pay. If Zhao Jue had not privately rewarded me for my contributions, I would not have the financial ability to obtain it.

As for the bracelet, my design called for the main body of the bracelet to be formed by ten strips of golden threads spiraling together. On each golden thread would hang a little bell. The point where the threads joined together would be covered by a lotus. On each little bell would be carved a small lotus. This was my vow to Piaoxiang, telling her that in my heart she was as pure as a lotus.

After busying myself for most of the day, as night approached, I returned home with Chen Zhen. Just as I arrived at the entrance to my home, I suddenly saw one of Piaoxiang's serving girls rush before me crying bitterly. I froze, not knowing what had happened. I did not know why but an ice cold chill spread from my heart. It was only after some time that I heard myself speak in a stiff and rigid voice, "What has happened?"

Crying, the attendant wailed, “The young miss was extremely happy when she returned home this morning, preparing to release all of her servants. The madam of the pleasure boat sent someone over saying that an honored guest had come to see the young miss. Young miss did not agree to go, saying that she no longer wished to take any customers. But the madam said that this guest had a background that could not be offended. The madam begged the young miss to go and save her life. Remembering how the madam took care of her, the young miss went, believing that all she needed to do was to meet the guest and half-heartedly attend to them. After the young miss shed her lowly status, she would be able to properly walk away from her previous life. Who knew … who knew that the young miss would go but not return. At dusk, someone suddenly delivered the young miss’s corpse, saying that the young miss had suddenly fallen ill and died.”

Listening to this point, I suddenly gave a miserable scream and collapsed to the ground, fainting. I awoke to find Xiaoshunzi’s anxious face before me. Grabbing him, I asked, “How could this happen? How could Piaoxiang die?”

Xiaoshunzi sadly answered, “I brought Lady Liu Piaoxiang’s body back. After carefully examining her body, Lady Liu Piaoxiang was raped and then killed using an insidious *yin* internal energy to jolt and snap the arteries and veins of her heart. Although efforts were taken to clean and cover it up, the wounds on her lower body and the traces of internal energy could not be concealed from me.”

With great pain and suffering, I closed my eyes. If Piaoxiang wasn’t trying to remain faithful, how could this have happened? With my eyes closed, I continued to ask, “Who was it? Who killed her?”

Xiaoshunzi replied, “I’ve already investigated. The madam said Liang Wan sent people saying that there was an honored guest who wanted to meet with Lady Liu. The madam thought that Liang Wan would not harm Lady Liu, and could not afford to offend a guest who was from Great Yong, and thus reluctantly had Lady Liu go. I’ve already investigated Bright Moon Pavilion, but did not see any honored guest. But I did capture one of the servants and after interrogation learned that Lady Liu was indeed killed at the Bright Moon Pavilion. If I’m not mistaken, it’s likely that Liang Wan was

the murderer. I ambushed her to test her martial arts. Her internal energy was the same as the energy traces left on Lady Liu's body."

"Liang Wan! Good, good," I replied distressed. "Xiaoshunzi, help me up so that I can go see Piaoxiang."

Xiaoshunzi helped me to a side room. Inside was a coffin containing Piaoxiang's body. I looked at her seemingly still living appearance, then cried loudly, full of wrath and regret. She was really dead. My beloved. The woman that I was going to marry was murdered. In a pained voice, I screamed the name, "Liang Wan!"

Over the following days, I was as numb as a walking corpse. After properly burying Piaoxiang, I fell ill. This illness lasted half a year. I had not fully recovered from the illness that I had suffered in Sichuan and it returned with a vengeance. Afterwards, I only began to recover after re-cultivating *qigong* to maintain my health. Although my appearance also recovered, sorrow could still be clearly seen on my face.

After I fell ill, I had heard that Zhao Jue had been rewarded by the king, receiving permission to carry his sword into the palace and exempting him from kneeling.[8] It was no wonder, as the Prince of De was the Royal Uncle and the Chief Commander. At this point, there really were no further titles or positions that could be bestowed. I persisted and wrote Zhao Jue a letter that Chen Zhen delivered. Not long afterwards, Zhao Jue submitted a missive declining these honors, arguing that as he was already the Royal Uncle, he already had honor and glory. There was no need for these rewards. If the king felt that meritorious service must be rewarded in order to protect the state's dignity, then land and treasure would be sufficient. Extremely happy, the king heavily rewarded the Prince of De. After a while, the Prince of De requested permission to defend the Jingxiang region. The king gladly approved.

Before he departed for the Jingxiang region, the Prince of De came to see me. Seeing me gravely ill, he specifically ordered the royal physicians to heal me. After he arrived in the Jingxiang region, he would often send medicine and supplements. From Xiaoshunzi, I learned that the Prince of De had also dispatched people to keep an eye on me. I couldn't care less, especially since

I was in bed recovering. It was unlikely those spies would be keeping track of those individuals by my side. As for Xiaoshunzi, there were very few people who could keep track of his whereabouts.

There was something that left me worried. The king had originally wanted to restore the empire and declare himself emperor. He faced strenuous opposition from the ranking officials who argued that with Shu newly conquered and having suffered heavy losses, Southern Chu should wait. The king was extremely unhappy. Afterwards, he received a letter from the Prince of Qi. Only then did he sadly abandon these plans. From then on, the King drowned himself in alcohol and women, especially indulging himself with the court musicians from Shu. Accompanied by *literati* , he would drink and make merry, composing poems. He also had all of the calligraphy, paintings, and books recorded and delivered to the Palace of Sublime Culture. Although I admired this last action of his, the rest of his behavior was that of an incapable ruler, including handing over all government affairs to Prime Minister Shang Weijun. The king argued that with his Royal Uncle handling external affairs and Prime Minister Shang handling internal matters, he could drink and feast from dawn till dusk. Under the leadership of the king, many officials began to increasingly do as they pleased. I sent people to collect the poems and verses that they had composed and found that they were all gaudy in nature, all of them too horrible to even read.

Fortunately, while Southern Chu was in a drunken stupor, Great Yong was also finding it difficult. Rumors of the Prince of Yong's intentions to declare independence reached the ear of the Crown Prince, Li An. Li An personally went before Yong Emperor Li Yuan to complain tearfully. Li Yuan recalled the Prince of Yong, keeping him idle. For the last half year, Li Zhi had stayed in Chang'an, unable to find peace. He faced several assassination attempts. After I had heard this news, a mysterious person came to call upon me. The man was travel-worn and claimed that he was a guard for the Prince of Yong. I accepted the prince's letter. In the letter, the prince lamented that he had been slandered, most likely the result of one of my strategies. Recalling my early promise to help advise him when needed and since this matter had nothing to do with Southern Chu, the prince asked for my help to protect himself. I flashed a faint, but sardonic smile. The Prince of Yong really was

using everything to acquire me. After thinking it over, I wrote a letter in response. For my safety, I used my left hand to write the characters, purposely leaving out the header and the closing signature:

Take the advantage and strike first—with strong external enemies, there will be no internal misery.

The Prince of Yong was indeed highly intelligent. I later learned that during a banquet hosted by the Yong Emperor, the Prince of Yong, Li Zhi, drank poisoned wine. Afterwards, Li Zhi unceasingly vomited blood. If it weren't for the coincidental presence of the Medical Sage, Sang Chen, in Chang'an, Li Zhi would likely have died. Because of this, the Yong Emperor erupted with indignation, implicating numerous individuals. Li An could only restrain himself. Soon afterwards, Northern Han began to plunder the frontier. Li Zhi immediately petitioned his father, requesting permission to defend against Northern Han. The request was swiftly approved. The Yong Emperor wished to temporarily separate his two sons, allowing both of them time to calm down. After hearing the news, I smiled faintly. To me, this was killing two birds with one stone. The battle between the Prince of Yong and Northern Han would likely last for several years. With Crown Prince Li An in control of the supplies, he would likely make things difficult for Li Zhi. In this way, Great Yong would be constrained, preventing them from launching a campaign south. When the time came for me to take revenge, with the backing of the Prince of Yong, as long as my methods were brilliant, no one would make things difficult for me.

While I was ill, Xiaoshunzi personally investigated the murder of Piaoxiang. Ultimately he told me that if I wanted to kill Liang Wan, he could take advantage of some of the holes in the defenses and murder her. I refused. Although Liang Wan could not be forgiven for her crimes, there was another culprit who took part in Piaoxiang's murder. While Liang Wan was guilty, her main role was to serve as his procurer (of women) and to clean up after him. This person's identity was definitely not ordinary. Under normal circumstances, Liang Wan would never reveal it. I knew that although this woman was a radiant beauty,[9] she was as venomous as a snake or a scorpion. Even if I were to capture her, I could not have her obediently

divulge the other killer's name. I must place her in a situation where she would die with regrets.[10] Only then would I be able to force her to speak the truth. Because of this, I currently could not kill her.

Liang Wan was truly malicious. After Piaoxiang's death, to pull wool over others' eyes, I hid myself, only allowing the madam to secretly bury Piaoxiang. I had indicated to Chen Zhen to have Piaoxiang's savings be split, giving the madam one portion, while splitting the rest between Piaoxiang's serving girls, helping them leave Jianye and start new lives. This was the result of the secret discussions between Chen Zhen and the madam. Although the madam knew that Piaoxiang was to be married, she had no idea who was going to be the husband, let alone remembering my existence. Seeing that the husband was so generous, the madam was happy. After she arranged everything, Liang Wan's assassins arrived. Liang Wan had earlier dispatched agents to keep an eye on the madam. Seeing that the madam took care of everything clearly and orderly, Liang Wan did not strike immediately, waiting until everything was settled before sending assassins to kill the madam. Seeing that Liang Wan did not send anyone to target Chen Zhen, I was able to confirm that Piaoxiang did not divulge who I was. Xiaoshunzi secretly followed the assassins back and personally watched and listened to them report back to Liang Wan. In Liang Wan's eyes, the trail of evidence had been completely severed. For her, the departure of Piaoxiang's serving girls was the best way to settle this matter. Finding and then killing them all would likely arouse suspicion.

After listening to Xiaoshunzi, I took a deep breath. *Liang Wan, you truly deserve death. Regardless of your background, I will definitely ensure that you meet a tragic end* .[11]

After some time, my health gradually improved. One night, I set an incense burner table in the rear courtyard to properly pay my respects to Piaoxiang. Thinking back to our affection, I felt as if my spirit was broken and my mood grew morose. I silently prayed, *Beloved, you and I fell in love at first sight, bound by deep understanding and emotions. Who knew that fortune was as unpredictable as the weather, and my love would suffer calamity and perish; the jade shatters and the pearl submerges, leaving nothing of your beautiful*

image, making it difficult to find a trace of your lingering fragrance. If beloved's spirit is there, help me find the true culprit and along with his accomplice, Liang Wan, kill them both to comfort beloved's departed spirit in the underworld.

After finishing my prayer, I picked up a small brocade box on the table. Inside were the golden hairpin and bracelet that I had intended to gift to Piaoxiang. Seeing these pieces of jewelry made me miss their owner even more. I became more melancholic. Inside the box was a jade finger ring. Piaoxiang had specifically found this ring with the intention of gifting it to me. I made the decision to gift her jewelry to her serving girls, leaving only this ring behind. This finger ring had been purchased by Piaoxiang. Originally, she loved its dark green color and luster, and its pure texture. It was slightly too big for her and she could not wear it, leaving it in her jewelry container. I placed the finger ring on my middle finger. This was an item left to me by my beloved. Also inside the box were two poems that had been written the last time I had seen her. Taking them out, I began to read them. When I read her poem, reaching the sentence, "I long to be his wife, *Though pitilessly I'm disclaimed,* I would not feel shame," I could not but shed tears in silence.

Footnotes :

吏部, libu – the Ministry of Personnel was in charge of appointments, merit ratings, promotions, and demotions of officials, as well as granting of honorific titles

车**船店脚牙**, **无罪也**该杀, chechuandianjiaoya, wuzuiyegaisha – those who work as coachmen, boatmen, waiters, menial laborers, trade intermediaries, should be killed even if they are innocent. This means that these individuals are untrustworthy and can easily be bought. They should be silenced to prevent any secret information from leaking out.

寝食难**安**, qinshinan'an – idiom, lit. cannot rest or eat in peace; fig. extremely worried and troubled

分身碎骨, fenshensuigu – idiom, lit. torn body and crushed bones; fig. to die horribly; to sacrifice one's life

This is a poem by the Song Dynasty poet, Qin Guan and is about the mythical

love story of “the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl.” Their love was forbidden and they were banished to the opposite sides of the Celestial River (symbolizing the Milky Way). Once a year, on the seventh day of the seventh month, they are reunited by a bridge of magpies for one day. The tale is celebrated throughout Asia as the Qixi Festival in China, the Tanabata Festival in Japan, and the Chilseok Festival in Korea.

This is a poem entitled “Thinking of Imperial Land” by the late Tang Dynasty and early Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms poet, Wei Zhuang.

栩栩如生, xuxurusheng – idiom, vivid and lifelike; true to life, realistic.

Both of these are great honors, as it meant eliminating two of the most important aspects of propriety when a subject is before a King or Emperor – being unarmed and kneeling to properly pay one’s respects.

艳如桃李, yanrutaoli – idiom, lit. beautiful as peach and prune; fig. radiant beauty

死不瞑目, sibumingmu – idiom, lit. to die with being able to one’s eyes; means dying with regret

死无葬身之地, siwuzangshenzhidi – lit. to die without a burial site; to die a pauper; to meet a tragic end

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 15: Preparing to Build a Secret Camp

Volume 1, Chapter 15: Preparing to Build a Secret Camp

Standing some distance away, Chen Zhen saw my grief. He stepped forward and said, "*Daren* , please restrain your grief and accept fate.[1] If Master Li[2] were to find out that *daren* was so grief-stricken, he would think that this subordinate has not been taking care of *daren* ."

I glanced at Chen Zhen, seeing the clear worry in his eyes, I faintly wondered, "Do you still hate Xiaoshunzi and this official?"

Chen Zhen calmly replied, "This lowly one has never blamed *daren* . At the time, this lowly one was imprisoned and tightly bound with my life about to end. If it weren't for *daren* 's rescue, this lowly one would have died long ago. Since this lowly one is from Shu and *daren* is an official of Southern Chu, worrying about my loyalty was justifiable. This lowly one was uneasy at first, especially with my life and death in another's hands. But over these days, this lowly one has gotten the antidote without fail. There have been no additional demands or difficulties. As long as this lowly one is loyal and dutiful, I will certainly not be harmed. Therefore, this lowly one has no complaints."

I looked at him. He was actually quite astute. I continued to ask, "The strategies I proposed captured both Ba Prefecture and Luocheng. I also forced the King of Shu to commit suicide. Do you not hate me?"

Chen Zhen hurriedly kneeled, answering, "This lowly one was only a mere spy in Shu. My entire life was dedicated to those with power and influence, riches and honor. But until the day that Shu fell, I was still a mere spy without power over my own life. When Shu existed, this lowly one did not betray it. After Shu fell, nonentities like myself still needed to live. For *daren* , as a subject of Southern Chu, to present strategies to defeat Shu is a matter of course. Although this lowly one is a citizen of Shu, I do not carry have the responsibility of taking revenge for Shu. Although this lowly one is by nature, merciless, I believe that if a country cannot even protect its own

citizens, then there is no need for that country to continue to exist."

I smiled faintly and observed, "Your temper matches well with mine. In reality, Southern Chu will also be destroyed, though only at a later time. When that happens, what will you do?"

Chen Zhen responded, "Although I do not know what relationship *daren* has with Great Yong, I believe that when that time comes, *daren* will be able to protect yourself. Although Chen Zhen is untalented and has experienced the sorrow of seeing my country be subjugated, when that time comes, I only wish to be able to safely pass my days. Chen Zhen is confident that I will not sell my master to seek honor."

I shook my head. This fellow was intelligent, not saying even one tactful word. He must have understood my temperament. If he said these words while we were in Shu, he would have likely lost his life long ago. In passing, I took out a pill from within my robes and said, "This is the antidote. If you take it, it will completely remove the poison within your body. You will no longer have to take medication on a monthly basis."

Without any hesitation, Chen Zhen took the pill before declaring, "This subordinate is willing to vow my loyalty and devotion to *daren* ."

Seeing how frank and straightforward he was, as if he was forewarned, I asked, "Did you know long ago that I was the one who poisoned you?"

Smiling, Chen Zhen stated, "This lowly one knew long ago that *daren* poisoned me. Typically, those who use poison are all extremely self-confident. If it was Master Li who poisoned me, he would not have left the restrictions on my body."

This man was quite astute , I thought. I realized that I needed to be candid with him and so said, "Since that is the case, I might as well be frank. If I only wanted a personal guard, I would only need you to spare no effort to protect my life and not require your loyalty, as you are only a temporary replacement for Xiaoshunzi. But if I want you to perform tasks for me, you must be trustworthy and loyal. From now on, this official will be surrounded and watched by a pack of wolves. I face many multiple layers of danger and if I am not careful even in the slightest, I could very well lose my

life. If a subordinate of mine is neither trustworthy nor loyal, there is no point having him stay. If you are unwilling, I will have Xiaoshunzi remove the restrictions on your body, allowing you to leave. If you are wholeheartedly willing to serve me, I will treat you as a trusted aide. After I have achieved success, I will also arrange something suitable for you and will not treat you unfairly. However, I may not be able to provide you with meteoric success. What are your thoughts?"

Chen Zhen kneeled again and replied, "This lowly one is homeless and has no dependents. If I were to leave *daren* , I can only be a mere bandit.[3] I will be captured again, sooner rather than later. I have observed that *daren* is capable of handling difficult tasks with ease,[4] someone who will make great contributions.[5] If *daren* does not dislike me, this lowly one is willing serve *daren* ."

I helped me up, believing him for now. I inquired, "If that is the case, I would like to ask you. How should we proceed?"

Chen Zhen showed a look of excitement as he answered, "If *daren* wishes to take vengeance for the mistress,[6] no matter how we proceed, we require a force that we absolutely control. Right now, other than this lowly one, Master Li is not free to do as he pleases. Our strength is far too weak. If we collaborate with others, in the event that our interests conflict, *daren* will likely be restricted."

I lightly nodded my head. The spies of Shu indeed lived up to their name. Right now, of utmost importance was the creation of my own force to protect myself and elimination of my enemies. Raising my own military force would require sufficient capital. Where was I going to get the money?

Over the following few days, I hid in the study thinking over how to establish this force and maintain its existence. I flipped through some books and let my imagination run wild. This force could not be too large, as it would draw attention, and would require money and supplies. At the same time, it could not be too small or it would not be of use. Most importantly, I needed my own income.

A few days later, Xiaoshunzi came over. After learning of my plans, he

advised that we start small. We emptied our savings of the rewards that we had received for the past campaign against Shu. We secretly purchased an estate near where I lived and brought over several twelve-or thirteen-year-old teenagers to train. Following my requirements and opinions, these teenagers were basically orphans, and were obstinate and tenacious children. These teenagers would first be trained by Chen Zhen in basic martial arts before being trained by Xiaoshunzi using the manuals that I had previously given him. According to Xiaoshunzi, after two years of training, these trainees would be considered as second-rate martial artists. Combined with specialized assassination and espionage training, which was Chen Zhen's specialty, these individuals could be of use.

I also thought of a plan to earn money. Thinking back to the jewelry that I had designed, not only were the designs exquisite, but they also could be crafted by first-rate artisans, resulting in their approbation. Although I was not particularly adept at these craft designs, I was knowledgeable, and had read books that were wonderful and exquisite. In batches, I made several designs—including mechanisms, jewelry and apparel, and even some elaborate toys. My favorite was a clock that was a modified pendulum clock that I had seen in a book I acquired from Persia. All of these designs were manufactured in partnership with the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets, from which we received ten percent. The person representing the Pavilion was named Han Wuji, one of Chen Zhen's colleagues. He had luckily escaped Chengdu after the fall of Shu. Because of Great Yong's strict governance, he had come to make a living in Southern Chu. As he was a skilled assassin, plotter, and schemer, there weren't many options for him and as a result, he almost died from hunger. When Chen Zhen was searching for orphans, he found Han Wuji and saved him. Seeing that this person had a moral backbone and did not kill or rob for a living, I allowed him to become the manager of the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets. I had him secretly use my designs to find collaborators. At first, he had to personally meet with others. Afterwards, whenever I came up with a new design, he only had to organize a small auction and invite merchants to bid. The winner would acquire the design and resources. As long as they managed to keep this information strictly confidential, they would have exclusive production rights. The

reputation of the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets spread in secret. No one made its existence public, especially as the merchants would lose their right to bid in the auctions and a way to make money. The invitations from the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets became a symbol of one's strength and also a symbol of trust. Without a good reputation, even if one possessed more than sufficient strength, one could not receive an invitation.

At first, this was all for money, but after a while, it became increasingly meaningful. Through the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets, I could learn many secrets. Many people were willing to trade for my designs using all kinds of secrets. Of course, I made sure that Han Wuji was cautious and careful, ensuring that he did not slip up and wasn't followed. Han Wuji performed very well. As my force began to grow stronger, I dispatched a group of twelve individuals to listen to Han Wuji. Through this, the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets became one of the reputable secret organizations in Southern Chu.

After more than a year, seeing that earnings were sufficient, I began to reduce designs, only producing one per month and only permitting those who had previously collaborated to bid. Later on, these merchants established the Heavenly Secrets Trade Association, which meant they were an association collaborating with the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets. To join, the Association required recommendations from three members and the approval of the Pavilion. The Heavenly Secrets Trade Association quickly became the most powerful trade association in Southern Chu. Through a share of the stock, I was able to receive ten percent of the Association's profits. In the first year alone, I received six hundred thousand taels of silver. The participating companies all had good reputations, ample finances, and influence. Although I wasn't able to control their operation, to lose my designs and cooperation would be devastating. As a result, I was able to ensure their cooperation as long as it wasn't anything too overboard like rebellion.

Aside from this, I began the work of training my "Secret Camp." The Secret Camp was the name I gave to my personal forces. I taught them how to read and write. Although they weren't required to be able to compose poems or

verses, they had to be familiar with relatively famous literature. As I couldn't have assassins around me, I had to teach them the proper etiquette and have them master roles that were suitable to be at my side and for my position.

After careful review by Xiaoshunzi, Chen Zhen, and me, I divided the Secret Camp into four groups. The first group was called the Tiger Group. This group was the main strength of the camp, tasked with resolutely attacking and breaking the enemy. All of them were skilled with various *jianghu* martial arts and were able to kill those who were stronger fighters. At the same time, they could form up into formations to encircle and kill the enemy, as well as serve as defenders and reinforcements. They were able to fill the role of bodyguards and soldiers.

The second group was called the Dragon Group. Although this group had few members, all of them were skilled in special techniques. I had taught them all of my skills, and each was skilled with one or two of these skills. Some were skilled at calculations and arraying formations, some skilled in underwater combat, and some skilled in architecture. All of these individuals were capable of taking charge and operating independently. They would often be dispatched to perform various separate tasks and were members of the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets under Han Wuji.

The third group was called the Covert Group, and was skilled in hiding and assassination. This group would never appear in my presence and would only undertake missions I assigned. As this group had no future prospects, I arranged for them to serve me for ten years without being fettered by any relationships. Once ten years had passed, I would provide them with generous rewards and allow them to return to a normal life. Of course, if they wished, they could remain in my service and due to the nature of their work, receive suitable remuneration each time they completed a mission.

The fourth and last group was called the Hidden Group. All of them were well trained spies and undercover agents, capable of using all of kinds of disguises to obtain information. They did not specialize in martial arts. Instead, they were highly trained in subterfuge and disguises.

After training concluded, I carefully chose eight operatives to serve by my

side. All of them were capable members of one of the groups and were all disguised as my servants. These individuals were under my direct command, serving as my protection and more easily executing my orders. To more conveniently command them, they were all given the surname, Jiang. Their given names in order were Chiji, Daoli, Baiyi, Yulun, Shanzi, Quhuang, Hualiu, and Lü'er.[7] Their names were their ranking. If there were any losses or eliminations, then their replacement would assume their name.

Although these children were still young, under Xiaoshunzi's tutelage, all of them were skilled martial artists. Although Xiaoshunzi could not teach them his own martial arts, they were provided with the martial arts that Xiaoshunzi had organized. When they were sparring, the children were keen to prove themselves and stubborn. In order to ensure that they were able to receive more moves from Xiaoshunzi, they would train bitterly to meet the standards. Those who did not meet the requirements or wavered under the pressure had their martial arts crippled by Xiaoshunzi and their memories wiped by medicine that I provided. This was done in front of the other children. Xiaoshunzi had been clear with them. If they failed to meet the requirements, then they would be secretly arranged to become shop assistants or waiters, and other kinds of relatively stable occupations. Under the tutelage of Xiaoshunzi and me, these children only knew to be loyal to me, and did not have any sense of belonging to either Southern Chu or Great Yong. I finally had built a force that belonged to me.

The next step after finishing building the force was to make use of it. Seeing that Southern Chu's situation was still relatively stable, I formulated a plan to be executed by Chen Zhen where the children would take turns completing different missions, transforming them into more mature, merciless, calm, and ruthless persons. Of these missions, there were two of particular importance. The first involved one of the collaborating companies. Blinded by greed, they had attempted to take my shares. As a warning to the others, I had the Secret Camp move out. The Hidden Group was tasked with intelligence; the Covert Group was to eliminate all of the hired martial artists and managers of the company; the Tiger Group to launch a lightning assault and execute all three hundred members of the

company; and the Dragon Group to use legal contracts to take back everything we deserved. I personally drew up the plan for this cold-hearted, yet meticulous operation. The results were apparent. No one dared to mess with the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets again. Although many innocents were killed, in my view, their deaths were a form of deterrence. From this, people who dared to offend or betray me would have to consider carefully the consequences.

After this operation, the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets was able to successfully go underground. People were not apprehensive of mystery. For the Pavilion to dare to perform such an operation, one could see that the Pavilion represented blood and cruelty. Those who wished to take from me, would have to worry about my vengeance. As a result, the Pavilion's position became stable.

The second operation was both private and public. Great Yong's spy network in Southern Chu had taken notice of the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets. Liang Wan planned an operation and dispatched people to threaten and make promises to a merchant associated with the Pavilion, using him to gain a spot in the auction and collaborating to control the Pavilion. But she was too greedy. Although this merchant was able to collaborate with the Pavilion, the probing and following from Yong spies were discovered by the Dragon Group. The Hidden and Covert Groups carefully investigated the matter. After receiving their report, I organized a meeting, claiming that the Master of the Pavilion would appear. Receiving this news, Liang Wan dispatched her capable subordinates to attend the meeting. They were surrounded and killed. This time, a masked Xiaoshunzi personally killed two of Liang Wan's most powerful martial artists. The merchant was disqualified from participation in the Association and was forced to pay a year's worth of profits as a penalty. Although he was not bankrupted, he had lost his reputation and a significant sum of money, ruining him in one stroke.[8]

I was not only able to protect the Pavilion's reputation, once again demonstrating the Pavilion's supreme stature and a resolution of inviolability, but also I was also able to heavily damage Liang Wan's arrogance. I was left perfectly satisfied.

When I heard the report about Liang Wan's losses and received Xiaoshunzi's personal report about the reprimand and punishment Liang Wan received from Great Yong, I callously said, "This woman forgot her duties. She is responsible for spying on Southern Chu's military situation and popular sentiment, not developing her own forces without permission. If Southern Chu's court weren't so stupid and weak, she would have been captured and killed long ago. If I didn't want to keep her alive, I only need to send a letter to the Prince of De. Zhao Jue would use the military to completely eliminate her."

"*Daren* , when do you intend to move against her?" asked Xiaoshunzi.

I casually looked off into the distance and replied, "Wait. The time is quickly approaching. Great Yong can no longer rest easily. Xiaoshunzi, we lost an operative during this operation. You must improve their martial arts, as I continue to improve their intellect. We can't afford any losses right now, as we don't have a year or two more to waste."

I looked at the intelligence reports in my hand collected from Great Yong:

The Prince of Yong has been victorious in his campaign on the border against Northern Han and will soon return in triumph.The Prince of Qi has been diligently training troops.Great Yong's Ministry of War[9] has been raising troops.The Yong Emperor has once again reinstated the former Fleet Admiral, Ren Haiwang.

Although all of this news seemed trivial on their own, from them, I could see many things. Looking off into the distance at the dark clouds on the horizon, I knew that a storm was coming. Although the coming storm would be violent, and I may even flounder and capsize, I fully intended to take revenge for her. Looking at the ring on my middle finger, I smiled lightly.

Footnotes :

节**哀**顺变, jieaishunbian – lit. restrain your grief and accept fate; is a common condolence phrase used in China

Referring to Xiaoshunzi aka Li Shun

杀**人越**货, sharenyuehuo – idiom, lit. to kill somebody for his property; to murder for money

举重若轻, juzhongruoqin – idiom, lit. lift heavy as if it was light; means being able to take care of difficult tasks with ease
草木同腐, caomutongfu – idiom, lit. to be rotten like grass and wood; fig. to not have any accomplishments
Mistress as in the wife of the master
These names are the names of the eight horses who pulled the chariot of King Mu of Zhou when he dreamed of traveling to heavenly paradise and tasting the peaches of immortality.
一蹶不振, yijuebuzhen – idiom lit. to stumble, unable to rise; a setback leading to collapse, ruined at a stroke
兵部, bingbu – the Ministry of War was in charge of the appointments, promotions, and demotions of military officers, the maintenance of military installations, equipment, and weapons, as well as the courier system

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 16: Great Upheaval Cometh

Volume 1, Chapter 16: Great Upheaval Cometh

In the second month of the twenty-second year of Xiande, the tenth year of the sixty-year cycle, the Prince of Yong, Li Zhi, again defeats Northern Han. The King of Northern Han is forced to issue an edict recalling the General Who Dominates Distant Lands, Long Tingfei, from mourning.[1] Long Tingfei possessed remarkable talent; fighting desperately,[2] he blocked Li Zhi at Yanmen Pass.[3] Although he did not suffer many casualties, Li Zhi was forced to retreat. In the third month of the same year, Great Yong and Northern Han negotiated peace.

At the start of the fourth month, the Prince of Qi, Li Xian, led an army south, amassing troops before Xiangyang. At this time, the Prince of De commanded the defenses at Xiangyang and heavily defeated Li Xian. Subsequently, rumors spread throughout the Southern Chu royal court that Great Yong was attacking Chu because the Prince of De was training troops in preparation for a northern campaign. The King believed these tales and recalled the Prince of De back to the court. On the fourth day of the fifth month, Li Xian again attacked Xiangyang. Regretful, the King dispatched the Prince of De to rush back to Xiangyang with haste….

—*Southern Chu Dynastic Records* , *Biography of the Prince of De, Zhao Jue*

With my arms behind my back, I stood before the window, looking up at the cold moon. Xiaoshunzi stood behind me, while Chen Zhen stood beside the door. Xiaoshunzi asked, “*Daren* , how are you going to reply to the Prince of Yong’s letter? The messenger is still waiting.”

“Write a letter on my behalf,” I apathetically replied. “Simply say that the Prince of Qi won’t be able to win. With the Prince of De present, even if the Prince of Yong himself comes, it won’t be an easy task to break through the defenses established by the Prince of De in the Jingxiang region. I am a subject of Southern Chu, so there is no reason for me to take refuge in Great Yong. It looks like Great Yong will soon attack. Chen Zhen, send operatives to

keep a close eye on Liang Wan. They will soon make their move."

At this point, we heard a knock on the door. After seeing me nod, Chen Zhen opened the door. A teenager of about fourteen or fifteen entered. Kneeling on one knee, he reported, "Young master, an urgent message: the Prince of Qi, Li Xian, has begun to attack Xiangyang."

I smiled faintly. Li Xian knew the *Art of War* . If the Jingxiang region was to fall into the hands of Great Yong, then contact between Sichuan and Jiangnan would be cut off. After that, Great Yong could either nibble away or swallow Southern Chu whole. But I believed in the ability of the Prince of De. The defenses of the Jingxiang region were strict and well organized.

Over the subsequent few days, the court discussed the Great Yong invasion heatedly. Those officials were all afraid, and at the same time, livid. Some indignantly demanded condemnation of Great Yong. The vast majority, however, were wondering how Great Yong was offended. Some were even willing to dispatch a memorial to Great Yong, seeking forgiveness and requesting that Great Yong withdraw its army. Ultimately, Prime Minister Shang Weijun was quite determined, requesting an envoy be dispatched to Great Yong to inquire as to the reason for its invasion. Although this idea received the approval of the entire court, all of the civil and military officials of the court were uneasy. In the following days, many secretly visited the Bright Moon Pavilion to acquire a guarantee of safety. I made no effort to stop this. If even the ranking officials of Southern Chu had lost faith, what was I to do?

I had Xiaoshunzi bring out the map detailing the troop dispositions at Xiangyang. I studied it careful. Xiangyang was composed of the two cities of Xiangcheng and Fancheng that were on located on opposite sides of the Han River. There was a pontoon bridge across the river connecting the two cities. Both cities had deep moats and high wall. If the enemy were to attack, they would assuredly suffer casualties and be unable to capture the cities. If the enemy were to attack either city, troops could utilize the bridge to quickly reinforce the attacked city. In addition, with the support of the navy, Xiangyang was difficult to attack and easy to defend.

When the Prince of De first arrived at Xiangyang, he dispatched a

messenger with a map laying out Xiangyang's defenses to gain my opinion. I did not give a clear and direct response. Instead, I replied with a design for a pontoon bridge. The originally wooden bridge had been badly damaged by time and would be difficult to repair. I advised that two rows of stakes be driven into the river. Each stake was a piece of lumber several meters long and wa driven into the riverbed. Each stake was attached with iron chains and was covered with wooden planks, forming a pontoon bridge that could be repaired at any time. I also provided a mockup for fishnets with bells to the Prince of De. These fishnets were placed around the pontoon bridge and cast into the water, protecting it from individuals launching a sneak attack from underwater. I only gave the Prince of De a design schematics and a fishnet. How they were to be utilized was the Prince of De's own decision and had nothing to do with me. Looking over the defensive information, if the Prince of De was defending Xiangyang, then it would not easily fall. Did the Prince of Qi not know that Xiangyang was easy to defend and difficult to attack?

On the fourteenth day of the fourth month, Li Xian, the Prince of Qi, gave the order to attack the city. The assault was ferocious as the Yong troops did not worry about casualties, throwing themselves fearlessly at the city walls. The Prince of De ordered the navy to use the Han River to launch volleys of arrows and bolts at the Prince of Qi's foot soldiers, forcing the Yong troops to withdraw. The Prince of Qi tried twice again to attack, ordering up catapults to force back the navy, and advancing his army upon the city. He attacked the northern gate of Xiangcheng day and night. Seeing the danger, the Prince of De led three thousand cavalrymen out of the southern gate and launched a surprise attack on the flank of the Yong army. The Yong army were not prepared for the Southern Chu garrison to sally forth from the city and were caught by surprise. The entire army was thrown into confusion. Li Xian commanded five thousand cavalrymen to stop the Prince of De. Zhao Jue lured these horsemen into an ambush at the eastern gate where they were met with rocks and tree trunks, and forced to retreat. Furious, Li Xian commanded twenty thousand troops to guard the flanks while he personally led eighty thousand troops in a continuous and alternating attack on the northern gate. The northern gate fell into grave danger. The Prince of

De did not rest and personally supervised its defense, waiting for the right moment. When he observed the Yong army exhaust themselves in the attack, he gave a signal for the Fancheng garrison to launch a surprise attack upon the rear of the Yong army. Attacked from two sides, Li Xian's army suffered grievous casualties and was forced to retreat. Zhao Jue chased the Yong army for thirty *li* and only withdrew after inflicting heavy losses. After three days of battle, the one hundred and fifty thousand strong Yong army had suffered sixty thousand dead and wounded, while the seventy thousand strong Southern Chu army had lost twenty thousand men. This was a Pyrrhic victory. After the Yong army withdrew, Zhao Jue immediately dispatched an envoy to report the victory to the court and to request reinforcements.

Within the court, upon receiving the report Zhao Jue's dispatch, the king was both joyous and worried. He opened his mouth and declared, "My honored subjects, although Royal Uncle has won, the strength of the Yong army is ten times ours. What should we do?"

Shang Weijun respectfully replied, "Reporting to Your Majesty, although the alliance was betrayed by Great Yong, but our army is far outmatched by the Yong army. We should take this opportunity to dispatch an envoy to Great Yong and negotiate a peace."

All the other officials agreed in succession with Shang Weijun. At this time, an attendant reported on the arrival of an envoy who had returned from his mission to Great Yong. King Zhao Jia hurriedly ordered for the envoy to be brought into the audience chambers. This envoy was named Fu Yulun, the *tanhua* of the royal examinations from the sixteenth year of Xiande and was currently serving in the Ministry of Rites.[4] Fu Yulun hurried kneeled and reported, "By royal decree, this subject went to Yong on a diplomatic mission. Before I could pass into Great Yong, I was stopped by the Prince of Qi, Li Xian. He claimed that his campaign against Southern Chu was to cleanse our court of disloyal subjects. I have here a letter from the Prince of Qi to Your Majesty."

Zhao Jia hurriedly had a eunuch accept the letter and bring it to over. The contents of the letter were as follows:

The Prince of Qi of Great Yong salutes the King of Southern Chu. This campaign was launched was not for any other reason than because of the Prince of De, Zhao Jue, who has rapacious designs. He garrisons Xiangyang and trains his army, always keeping an eye upon the frontiers with Great Yong. Furthermore, he has with designs upon Great Yong. As long as this man is not removed, there will never be peace between Great Yong and Southern Chu. This Prince and Your Majesty have the relationship of a nephew and uncle, and is unwilling to harm Your Majesty. If he is not to be trusted, then he must be recalled to court. He will come up with all kinds of excuses and refuse to return.

I keenly remember the promise that was made on my last trip to Southern Chu. Once Your Majesty restores the empire, that person will raise his army and rise in revolt. When that occurs, Great Yong will not be able to intervene. If Your Majesty takes away his command, our two countries will return to peace. If Your Majesty believes Zhao Jue's slanderous lies, then this Prince will have no alternative but to come to Jiangnan to hunt with Your Majesty.

After Zhao Jia read the entire letter, his entire body grew cold. If he believed the words in the letter, then he feared that it was an attempt by the Prince of Yong to sow discord. But he couldn't say that he didn't believe the letter either. Ever since Zhao Jue had returned from the campaign against Shu, he had constantly requested money and grain for the military. He was personally overseeing the defenses at Xiangyang and refused to return to the court. Did he have the intent to revolt? Zhao Jia also realized that Zhao Jue had a far superior reputation and jealousy grew in his heart. Indifferently, he replied, "Royal Uncle has won and should return to the court to receive his just rewards. By our edict, we recall the Prince of De to return to court."

When Zhao Jue in the distant Jingxiang region received this edict, he refused to return. He wrote to the king that he could not return because of pressing military matters. Originally Zhao Jia was only somewhat suspicious of his uncle, but upon seeing Zhao Jue's refusal to return, this suspicion grew. In succession, Zhao Jia issued several edicts. In the beginning, Zhao Jue

used the excuse that a general on the field could refuse an order. But ultimately, as each successive edict became increasingly incisive, even the court officials began to believe that Zhao Jue had ill intentions. Without any alternatives, Zhao Jue turned over the defenses of the Jingxiang region to Rong Yuan and returned to Jianye with a few of his guards. When they were still dozens of *li* from Jianye, Zhao Jue and his entourage were stopped by an ordinary looking man who delivered a letter to Zhao Jue. Zhao Jue opened the letter and read its contents:

For my lord to not return in the beginning was a mistake. For my lord to return now is compounding that mistake. Under current circumstances, my lord should return to Jingxiang, taking upon your command to protect yourself.

After reading the letter, Zhao Jue heaved a sigh before burning the letter. To the messenger, he said, “Thank your master on my behalf. Tell him that I, Zhao Jue, am not someone who would rebel.”

The messenger silently backed away and left.

When he arrived in Jianye, Zhao Jue arrived before the gates of the royal palace to seek an audience but was arrested and placed in the dungeons by Zhao Jia’s decree. Although Zhao Jue penned a essay explaining the reasons for refusing to return, it was to no avail. For Zhao Jia, if he was not worried about Li Xian refusing to withdraw, he would have long punished his uncle. When Zhao Jue was imprisoned, suddenly numerous petitions appeared requesting that Zhao Jue be put to death. Fortunately, Zhao Jia was not so muddled as to agree. He released Zhao Jue and placed him under house arrest.

Those petitions were my idea. After I received word from Chen Zhen that Zhao Jue refused to rebel, I came up with this plan. Although Zhao Jue was a loyal subject, he was also far too foolish. If he had immediately returned upon the King’s edict, Zhao Jia would know that he had wrongly blamed him. Zhao Jue would have been able to quickly return to Xiangyang. Since he didn’t return immediately, and yet still returned made it seem like he had a guilty conscience. Even if Zhao Jia was wise, there was no one that wouldn’t become suspicious. Never mind the fact that Zhao Jia was no more

intelligent than an idiot. After Zhao Jue was imprisoned in the dungeons, I was placed in a difficult position. According to my plans, in reality, it was better for Zhao Jue to continue to be imprisoned. From this, an opportunity to abandon my post and leave would quickly materialize for me to take advantage of. But thinking of Zhao Jue's painful support of Southern Chu, I found that I could not explain the pain that I was feeling and I could not steel myself. Even if Southern Chu were to be destroyed, I must allow those who love this country to show their loyalty. Thus, I wrote a letter to Rong Yuan, having him conspire with officials to request that Zhao Jue be put to death. My messenger was swift. Not long after Zhao Jue arrived at Jianye, Rong Yuan's people arrived. These individuals provoked those officials who feared Great Yong to petition the King. Zhao Jia was not so muddled. He originally did trust his uncle. Seeing all these individuals wish to kill Zhao Jue, Zhao Jia immediately became suspicious. Zhao Jue's life was preserved. Now, we only had to wait before he would be dispatched back to Xiangyang. His return would rely upon Great Yong's help.

Sure enough, not long afterwards, the Prince of Qi once again attacked the Jingxiang region. The Prince of Qi was too impatient. If it was the Prince of Yong, he would likely have waited patiently to see what would happen. Rong Yuan was capable and was able to stabilize Jingxiang's defenses. When the eight hundred *li* urgent report arrived from Xiangyang, the king was immediately realized the truth and hurriedly dispatched Zhao Jue back to Xiangyang. Not caring about anything else, Zhao Jue led his personal guards and rushed back. Not long after leaving Jianye, he saw a delicate and scholarly young man sitting in the pavilion positioned ten *li* from the city.[5] A pot of wine and two cups were placed on the stone table within the pavilion. Behind the young man stood an ordinary looking middle-aged man. Outside on each of four corners of the pavilion stood two fifteen-or sixteen-year-old teenage menservants. Smiling faintly, Zhao Jue dismounted from his horse and entered the pavilion. Bowing deeply before the young man, he said, "Zhao Jue is extremely grateful and indebted to Suiyun for this rescue. Today for my lord to see me off, Zhao Jue is ashamed."

I stood and returned his bow. I replied, "Your Highness possesses great fortune and virtue. Those treacherous persons and vile schemes naturally

would not be able to harm Your Highness. Your Highness's trip to Jingxiang has only remote prospects. As such, Suiyun purposely has come to see Your Highness off."

One of the menservants stepped forward and poured two cups of wine for us before retreating back to the side. Seeing that the manservant's movements were lively and had an elegant appearance, Zhao Jue could not but be curious. He said, "Over these last few years, Suiyun has lived like a prince. One look at these menservants and one can see they possess the demeanor of someone from a great family. They even seem to possess a scholarly air."

I smiled calmly and raised cup, saying, "I advise Your Highness to drink this cup of wine and wish you safe travels on this trip to Jingxiang."

Zhao Jue raised his cup and drank its contents in one go, replying, "It is a pity that Suiyun refuses to come to Jingxiang with me. If I were to gain Suiyun's help, then Jingxiang will be absolutely safe."

I smiled lightly and asked, "Isn't Your Highness looking too lightly on Sir Rong?"

Zhao Jue rose and stated, "That's enough. You can see someone off for a thousand *li* , but ultimately we must part ways. The war in Jingxiang is urgent. I must urgently hasten on. I must bid farewell. When I have defeated the Yong army, we will meet again to drink our fill. If I am to die, then I ask only that Suiyun offer sacrifices at my grave."

Hearing these words, the cup in my hand almost slipped out and fell. Earlier, I had made a divination for Zhao Jue. After two years, I had gradually become increasingly adept at divination. After bathing and burning incense, I made a divination for Zhao Jue. The divination was ominous and seemed to imply that he would die prematurely on the road. Now hearing the ominous words in Zhao Jue's speech, my heart grew cold. As Zhao Jue mounted his horse and was readying to leave, I suddenly said, "Your Highness, I have two subordinates. Although they are young, they are skilled martial artists. Please allow them to accompany Your Highness to Xiangyang on my behalf as a form of regret at being unable to accompany Your Highness myself.

Daoli, Baiyi, greet His Highness."

Looking at the two youngsters, Zhao Jue forced a smile and replied, "Suiyun, this is a long and wearisome journey. You mustn't make things difficult for these children."

Calmly, I conveyed, "They are skilled in horsemanship and archery, and will not delay Your Highness."

Zhao Jue originally wished to continue, but seeing that I was persistent and with time pressing, could only raise a farewell and whip his horse into a gallop.

Zhao Jue rushed along his way, switching horses mid-journey. He originally was worried that the two children sent along by Jiang Zhe would be unable to keep up. But whenever he looked back, he saw that the two children were completely vigorous and spirited, and so no longer worried about them. After urgently traveling, there was only three hundred *li* left. After switching horses again, they would be able to arrive at Xiangyang. While mounted, Zhao Jue stretched his waist and said, "That's enough. There's a tea shack up ahead. We will rest there. After eating lunch, we will ride all the way to Xiangyang in one go. How about it?" Everyone was happy. They had madly rushed the last several days and were exhausted. Although they still needed to travel, to be able to rest awhile was still good.

Hearing Zhao Jue's commands, Daoli was the first to dismount. After a few steps, he entered the tea shack and ordered that a few tables be prepared with hot tea. Although the tea shack was small, there were a few small dishes of salted vegetables and peanuts. Daoli had them served as well. Following his orders, the shopkeeper became frantically busy and quickly prepared a few tables. Baiyi cleaned a bowl and filled it with water, and retrieved a towel from his bag. Once Zhao Jue sat down, Baiyi stepped forward to help the Prince wipe away the grime from the travels. Although Zhao Jue was royalty who had been fighting upon the battlefield for years, he had not lost the opportunity to experience the pleasure of being from a powerful family. Seeing these menservants so capable, Zhao Jue was joyous at heart. After he had sat down, he drank a cup of hot tea and began to eat voraciously. When he stopped, he saw that Daoli and Baiyi had already

finished and were organizing feed for the horses. Zhao Jue could not help but say, “What a pair of capable children! Jiang *zhuangyuan* is indeed tremendous to be able to train his servants to such a level.”

One of his personal guards laughed. “If Your Highness likes them, then simply inform Jiang *daren* and have them serve you.”

Although Zhao Jue knew that menservants—let alone maid servants and concubines—were frequently used as gifts by aristocrats, he still shook his head and declared, “A gentleman does not steal another’s love. These two children were not casually trained.”

Everyone laughed lightly. Just as Zhao Jue was ordering everyone to get back on the road, one of his bodyguards suddenly screamed in pain. As everyone looked in his direction, they saw an arrow protruding from the man’s back.

All were trained soldiers and so quickly hid behind cover, only to hear clear laughter. A man clothed in white stepped out from the nearby forest. He was extremely handsome. His large, cultivated body could be seen to tightly cling to his white warrior outfit. A silvery white bow was slung over his left shoulder and a similarly-colored quiver was hung at his waist. Regardless of the attire, or the bow and arrow, all were extremely exquisite. Their owner was clearly someone fastidious. Zhao Jue’s heart grew cold, as he asked, “Is the person approaching the Silver Bow Wastrel, Duanmu Qiu?”

The man in white smiled and replied, “This lowly one is indeed. I heard that Your Highness has arrived here and have purposely come to pay my respects. If Your Highness does not mind, I hope that Your Highness would be willing to rest at my humble abode.”

Although the words seemed to be harmonious, Zhao Jue knew that they were spoken in a haughty manner. He coldly asserted, “This Prince is busy with military matters and dares not delay. Your distinguished self has ambushed us. You must be here to assassinate this Prince.”

Feeling it beneath his dignity, Duanmu Qiu claimed, “This one has never been willing to ambush anyone. If that were not the case, then that arrow would have taken Your Highness’s life. The dead man is only a greeting from

this one. I believe that Your Highness will not blame me."

Zhao Jue coolly observed, "This Prince treats his subordinates as if they were brothers. For your distinguished self to so lightly disparage the common soldier, no wonder you do not serve within the Yong army. No one in this world doesn't know about the Golden Bow Zhangsun and the Silver Bow Duanmu. General Zhangsun serves under the Prince of Yong and commands soldiers upon the battlefield, never meeting defeat, while you, Silver Bow Duanmu, can only rely upon your bravery to battle in *jianghu* ."

Zhao Jue's words stabbed directly into Duanmu Qiu's heart. His eyes began to exude an icy, murderous aura. He callously retorted, "This one is only here to prevent Your Highness from escaping. It looks like it won't be acceptable if I do not act. I wonder how many arrows can Your Highness avoid?"

A spoiled sound was heard. "This young lady can guarantee that you will not be shoot him to death." With those words, a young beautiful woman in red also exited the forest. She was gorgeous, but her eyebrows extended to her temples and she was covered with a baleful aura, as if she were a female *luocha* .[6]

Zhao Jue could only smile sardonically as he said, "So you have come as well. No wonder … you martial brother and sister were always inseparable."

Coldly, the woman replied, "The Prince of De knows who I am? I am extremely honored."

Footnotes :

夺情, duoqing – lit. to steal one's emotion; in ancient China, those observing mourning could not hold court offices unless a sovereign issued an edict recalling them into service. These edicts were typically only issued for high ranking or important officials, and required the approval of the Ministry of Personnel

力挽狂澜, liwankuanglan – idiom, lit. to pull strongly against a crazy tide; fig. to try hard to save a desperate situation

雁门关, Yanmenguan – lit. Wild Goose Pass; a pass located along China's northern frontier. Originally built by King Wuling of Zhao during the

Warring States Period, it is today a part of the Great Wall of China and is located in northern Shaanxi

礼部, libu – the Ministry of Rites was in charge of state ceremonies, rituals, and sacrifices; it also oversaw registers for religious priesthoods and the reception of envoys from tributary states and handled foreign diplomacy

十里亭, shiliting – lit. ten li pavilion; these pavilions were positioned ten *li* away from the city along major roads to serve as points where people could welcome and bid farewell to travelers

罗刹, luocha – demon in Buddhism

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 17: A Loyal Spirit becomes Distant and Indistinct

Volume 1, Chapter 17: A Loyal Spirit becomes Distant and Indistinct

The Prince of De was attacked by an assassin on the way. When he reached Xiangyang, he battled bitterly while wounded. Seeing the Prince of De return, the Prince of Qi was stopped and forced to retreat. Before ten days had passed, the Southern Chu King issued an edict, blaming the Prince of De for not doing his utmost on the battlefield and allowing the Yong army to withdraw. The Prince was grieved by this edict as it drilled into his heart, causing him to weep blood. He died in the middle of the night. The entire army wore white in mourning. The Prince was honored as a Virtuous Prince….

—*Southern Chu Dynastic Records* , *Biography of the Prince of De* , *Zhao Jue*

In a calm voice, Zhao Jue said, “Golden Bow Zhangsun, Emei Qingshan, Silver Bow Duanmu, and Red Clothed Luocha. Seeing Silver Bow Duanmu here, Qiao Yan’er, the Red Clothed Luocha, must also be present. It’s difficult to believe that the both of you have infiltrated Southern Chu.”

Duanmu Qiu fingered the bowstring, replying, “There is no one who does not know that Great Yong will unify the world sooner rather than later. Almost all of the heroes of Southern Chu’s *wulin* [1] have also joined Great Yong.”

Furiously, Zhao Jue retorted, “Shut your mouth!” This matter was something that hurt him deeply. Great Yong greatly esteemed military accomplishments and did not care about one’s origins. As a result, many members of Southern Chu’s *jianghu* chose to serve Great Yong. In comparison, in order to become a high ranking official in Southern Chu, one needed to come from a clean background. As such, the military strength of Southern Chu paled far in comparison to the military strength of Great Yong.

Qiao Yan’er’s long, shapely eyebrows rose as she reacted. “What great courage to dare to berate us! Senior apprentice brother Duanmu, cover me!”

As she finished speaking, she drew a long sword from her back and leaped forward, blazing. Zhao Jue's bodyguards drew their own weapons to meet her charge. These guards were all adept at fighting and killing, but Qiao Yan'er was a first-rate martial artist and did not show any dismay even though she was facing six by herself. In addition, Qiao Yan'er's attacks were ferocious and comparable to the bodyguards' unyielding power. Duanmu Qiu closely followed the battle. Shortly, he drew back the bowstring and fired an arrow. A flash of silver sped through the air and, demon-like, pierced through the throat of one of the guards.

Zhao Jue furrowed his brow. These two that he faced, one was skilled in close quarters combat, with the other was skilled in long-range attacks, cooperated with tacit understanding. He had only brought eight bodyguards and they would undoubtedly be killed one by one by these two assassins. Looking at the lone bodyguard who stood behind him, he whispered, "We will deal with Duanmu Qiu."

The man nodded his head. The two rushed towards Duanmu Qiu at the same time. From afar, Duanmu Qiu saw them approach. He drew his bow and fired two arrows in one go, killing two of the guards fighting Qiao Yan'er. At this point, Zhao Jue had arrived before him and lunged forward with his sword. Using his *qinggong* , Duanmu Qiu dodged, avoiding Zhao Jue's attack. Duanmu Qiu's *qinggong* was mysterious. Zhao Jue and his guard could not do anything to harm him. However, Duanmu Qiu could not fire any further arrows, only using his silver bow to block the attacks. His silver bow was specially made, as even Zhao Jue's treasure sword could not damage it. The battle was joined on two fronts. In reality, Duanmu Qiu's martial arts could not even compare to Zhao Jue's. He had wanted to escape several times and was blocked each time. But Zhao Jue could also not kill Duanmu Qiu. However, Qiao Yan'er held the advantage. If Duanmu Qiu could drag things out until Qiao Yan'er had killed the three guards she faced and come assist, then Zhao Jue would have no chance to escape. Just as Zhao Jue's heart began to burn with worry, he suddenly saw two shadows from the corners of his eyes. The shadows were Daoli and Baiyi; the first carried a crossbow, the second a short sword. They were slowly and secretly approaching Qiao Yan'er. Just as Zhao Jue noticed these two, suddenly five

glints of light shot out from Daoli's crossbow. Qiao Yan'er's reaction was quick, using everything to avoid the bolts. Just then, Baiyi launched an attack as swift as lightning with his short sword, lunging towards Qiao Yan'er's body. Raging flames appeared in Qiao Yan'er's eyes. The sword in her hands became an impenetrable defense, meeting Baiyi's short sword. Baiyi stumbled backwards, both his hands bloody from the impact. Meanwhile, Qian Yan'er had been stabbed in the lower abdomen. Her face demonic, she hurriedly stopped the bleeding by hitting her pressure points. She yelled, "Senior apprentice brother!" She sent her sword piercing through the air at Zhao Jue. Zhao Jue dodged. Taking this opportunity, Duanmu Qiu used his silver bow to shoot five arrows in rapid succession to prevent the three guards facing Qiao Yan'er from killing her before firing another arrow to stop Zhao Jue. Afterwards, he hurriedly rushed to Qiao Yan'er's side. Grabbing hold of her, Duanmu Qiu ran.

Zhao Jue finally relaxed. Looking at Daoli and Baiyi, he smiled and said, "Luckily you were here." Just then, Zhao Jue observed that everyone had looks of shock and heartbreak. Zhao Jue immediately became alert and instantly rushed forward. But he was already too late. A sharp blade pierced through his armor into the small of his back. He was fortunate that he had reacted so quickly and was only stabbed in his waist. Zhao Jue's bodyguards rushed forward. The fastest were Daoli and Baiyi. Daoli swept past Zhao Jue. A scream of pain could be heard from behind Zhao Jue. In the meantime, Baiyi supported Zhao Jue. From his clothes, he removed a wax pill. After grinding the pill down, Baiyi fed it to Zhao Jue. Zhao Jue only felt the sharp stabbing pain from his lower back. After crying out in pain, he passed out.

When Zhao Jue awoke, he found that he was lying down on a table within the tea shack. Daoli, Baiyi, and the bodyguards anxiously looked at him. The corpse of the bodyguard who had been helping him fight Duanmu Qiu was lying nearby. "To think that Great Yong had a spy by my side," said Zhao Jue as he smiled wryly. "He has followed me for two years now."

Daoli stepped forward and replied, "Your Highness, this lowly one has temporarily helped bandage the wound to stem the bleeding and has given you efficacious medication. Within one month, as long as Your Highness is

calm and unstressed,[2] Your Highness need not worry about your health. But Your Highness's wound was grievous. If we return to Jianye and undergo my young master's personal ministrations, then Your Highness should fully recover in half a year."

Thinking it over, Zhao Jue responded, "By attempting to assassinate me on the road, it is clear that they do not want me to return to Xiangyang. If I do not return, then Xiangyang will likely fall into danger. We should continue on to Xiangyang."

One of the bodyguards agonizingly spoke. "Your Highness's wound is so severe. How can Your Highness go into battle? Your Highness should return to Jianye to recuperate."

Zhao Jue nonchalantly answered, "No need to say anymore. How can this Prince emphasize myself to the detriment of our country? Depart immediately for Xiangyang." Everyone could only follow his orders. Daoli and Baiyi looked at one another, their expressions filled with helplessness and admiration. When anyone tried to further persuade the Prince, he refused to listen. Daoli could only re-bandage Zhao Jue's wound. Fearing for Zhao Jue, everyone originally did not hurry their horses along with their whips. But Zhao Jue feared for the safety of Xiangyang and hurried forth, not caring about the state of his wound. In the face of Zhao Jue's decision, everyone was helpless. Trying to spin a positive outlook on the matter, they figured that if they did not get to the army encampments, then they would probably still face additional assassination attempts. They could only follow Zhao Jue and hurry towards Xiangyang.

When Zhao Jue finally entered into Xiangcheng, it was already dusk on the second day. Taking advantage of nightfall and support dispatched by Rong Yuan, Zhao Jue was able to successfully enter Xiangcheng. Daoli and Baiyi discussed the matter. Daoli continued to stay by Zhao Jue's side to help tend to the Prince's wound. He had primarily studied medicine under Jiang Zhe. While he was not particularly skilled, he was far superior to Xiangyang's army doctors. Baiyi quickly returned to Jianye to report back to Jiang Zhe.

When I heard the news about Zhao Jue's injury, I could not help but heave a heavy sigh. Before Zhao Jue had left on the campaign, I was already uneasy.

And now that Zhao Jue was going to battle while carrying the heavy wound that he had suffered, did this mean that my premonitions were correct? Although Zhao Jue was suspicious of me, he was a good superior. I hesitated for some time before deciding to go to Xiangyang myself.

For my safety, I brought along Chen Zhen and the seven operatives that were by my side. After rendezvousing outside of Jianye, we rode with the fastest possible speed towards Xiangyang. Because I could not ride very well, I sat in a horse-drawn carriage. Although the trip was bumpy, for me, it was better than riding a horse. Along the way, I received reports from the Secret Camp that the Prince of Qi, Li Xian, had attacked Xiangyang on a large scale, but Zhao Jue had personally led the defenses from the battlements. As a result, the Yong army suffered heavy losses and could not achieve victory. Although I was still far from the battlefield, I was still able to ascertain the situation. After several days, the Yong army had suffered forty thousand casualties, nearing what I believed was the Prince of Qi's limit.

Sure enough, when I was two hundred *li* from Xiangyang, I received news that the Yong army had withdrawn. According to reports from the Secret Camp, the Yong army had most likely completely retreated from within Southern Chu's borders. Due to this retreat, I would run head long into the Yong army. In order to keep away, I gave the order to stay in a small village for the time being. The soldiers of the Yong army did not commit any offenses as they marched and were unlikely to pillage this village. At noon of that day, the Yong army marched on the road outside of the village. Before they arrived, Yong scouts entered the village and ordered all of its residents to stay at home. I had already changed into a commoner's garb, while my subordinates were all dressed like farmers. As a result, we did not arouse any attention. In reality, the Yong army had no intention of entering the village and only needed to control the road. But just as I was waiting for the Yong army to pass, I suddenly heard a clamor erupt outside. Afterwards, someone banged on the door, yelling, "Everyone inside come out. This place has been commandeered by the military."

Chen Zhen quietly walked over to my side, using his eyes to ask me what to do. After thinking it over, I shook my head. Pretending to be panicked,

Chen Zhen walked over and opened the door. In an imploring fashion, he pleaded, “Army sires, spare our lives! Army sires, please spare our lives!”

The person banging on the door was a soldier wearing black armor. From his attire and sword, one could tell that this man wasn’t an ordinary soldier. He looked around the room, as he replied, “No need to panic. We only need to use this room. You go stay in the side chambers. Don’t move and don’t make any sound.”

I stood, leading Chiji out. Suddenly the soldier stopped me and inquired, “What is your name? Have you attained scholarly honors?”

Calmly, I replied, “This youngster is Jiang Suiyun, a simple poor scholar. I have not attained any scholarly honors. Does the army sire need anything?”

Across the soldier’s eyes flashed a look of hesitation before he came to a sudden realization, yelling, “Come quickly! Capture all of them! They are enemy spies!” Following his command, a squad of soldiers charged in. Using their swords and spears, they surrounded us. Chen Zhen hurriedly retreated a few steps, standing before and protecting me. He did not make any sudden moves. He knew that in this moment, he could not be rash.

Adopting a puzzled expression, I asked, “Why does army sire think that we are enemy spies?”

A look of indescribable coldness flashed across the soldier’s eyes, and he declared, “It looks like you still refuse to admit it until forced to face the grim reality.[3] From your bearing and mannerisms, you are definitely someone who has lived a life of luxury. In addition, you have a superior attitude. If you weren’t an enemy spy, why did you say you had not attained scholarly honors?”

I could not believe that this soldier was so astute. I could not help but look at him up and down. Just as I was trying to figure out how to handle the situation, a horseman galloped over. From atop his mount, he said, “Haven’t you finished preparing the house? His Imperial Highness urgently needs to be treated!”

The soldier hurriedly replied, “General, this household is suspicious.”

Before the soldier had even finished speaking, the general looked at me. He

froze briefly before smiling and said, “I thought it was someone else … so it is Academic Jiang, Jiang *daren* . To think we would meet here.”

When the general had arrived, I was already smiling wryly. I could only reply, “So it is the Prince of Qi’s bodyguard, Sir Huang. To think we would meet under such circumstances.”

In a proper manner, the general stated, “When His Highness was sent as an envoy to Southern Chu, *daren* attended to him by royal edict. You were considerate and respectful. I am extremely grateful. Now, the two countries are at war, and *daren* is a ranking official of Southern Chu. Why are you here in this small village in the middle of nowhere?”

My mind raced. He had stated that the prince needed someplace to be treated. I said, “To tell the truth, this lowly official has learned that an old friend is gravely ill. None of the medications taken have been successful. This lowly official understands some medicine and has come all this way to treat him.”

General Huang revealed a look of pleasant surprise. He voiced, “So Jiang *daren* is skilled in medicine…. The Prince of Qi was hit by an arrow. The army doctors can do nothing. We can only rush back to Great Yong. But the traveling has made the wound worse. Jiang *daren* , please take a look at His Imperial Highness.”

I gladly replied, “Doctors have a caring heart. This lowly official dares not refuse.”

General Huang then ordered someone to request the Prince of Qi’s presence. All the soldiers had strange looks on their faces. I overhead one of them ask General Huang in a low voice, “He is an official of Southern Chu, will he sincerely treat His Imperial Highness?”

In a low voice, General Huang whispered back, “At the time, we became acquainted with Jiang *daren* while we were in Jianye. His character is amiable, free, and easy. He cares not for a person’s identity or status. His Imperial Highness has said he is incredibly broad-minded and open, and must not be scorned. His Imperial Highness took care of him. I believe that he will not forget this friendship. In addition, he is now in the hands of our

army. I don't believe he would dare do anything."

It didn't take long for the Prince of Qi's carriage to arrive. General Huang had the prince carried into the house. The prince's face was flushed red. He was in a coma. I stepped forward and checked his pulse. After muttering to myself, I said, "His Imperial Highness was hit by a Southern Chu poisoned arrow. The formula for the poison was acquired from southern barbarians and uses the venom from vipers. If it weren't for the Prince's strong internal energy, sturdy build, and the prompt consumption of a generic poison antidote, he would have died long ago. Right now, the toxicity of the poison has sharpened. If we do not treat him, he will die within three days."

Everyone was shocked. A middle-aged general coldly asked, "If that is the case, do you have a way to save him?" I looked at the man with an inquiring look. The general replied, "This general is Fan Wencheng, the general under the Prince of Qi charged with his protection."

I smiled faintly before replying, "General should not worry. This lowly official has come at the opportune moment. As long as I use acupuncture on the Prince and prescribe a direct antidote, the Prince's life will be saved. However, after this, the Prince will need to recuperate for half a year."

Generals Fan and Huang both revealed cheerful looks. Under their careful gaze, I used my needles on the prince. It took two hours before I finished the complicated process of using the needles upon the acupuncture points. Afterwards, I wrote down a prescription for the antidote. The army was fully prepared and had all of the medicinal ingredients, especially as my prescription did not call for any rare ingredient. It didn't take long for the prince's face to return to normal after taking the medication. His sleep became calmer. Thanking me profusely, General Huang escorted me to the side chambers to rest. Seeing me, Chen Zhen asked in a low voice, "*Daren* , will they let us go tomorrow?"

"It doesn't matter," I indifferently replied. "The Prince of Qi is an intelligent man. If he does not allow us to leave, I have my ways to take his life."

At dawn the second day, the Prince finally woke. General Huang immediately called me over to check the prince's pulse and condition. Lying

in bed, Li Xian smiled as he looked at me. After I had concluded that the poison in his body was no longer a concern and only required the consumption of medicine, Li Xian said with a smile, “To think that we would meet by chance here. Thanks to *daren* , this Prince’s life has been saved. Jiang *daren* should just simply follow me back to Great Yong.”

“Your Imperial Highness’s words are incorrect,” I lightly replied. “This lowly official is a subject of Southern Chu. How can I surrender to Great Yong? If Your Imperial Highness remembers the grace of saving your life, please feel free to kill this lowly official.”

“Do not be angry, *daren* ,” responded Li Xian hurriedly. “How can I forget the life-saving grace? If *daren* is unwilling, then I will not force you.”

I became happy. I had long known that Li Xian greatly admired his older brother, the Prince of Yong. The Prince of Yong was someone who greatly emphasized emotions and friendships. Under these circumstances, Li Xian would not make things difficult for me. As long as I said those words, the Prince of Qi could not show ingratitude. That is why I treated him without setting any conditions.

Seeing that my temper had cooled, Li Xian continued, “I have heard that *daren* is journeying to help treat a friend. I wonder if this Prince knows who this person is?”

Seeing the suspicion in Li Xian’s eyes, I indifferently answered, “Your Imperial Highness naturally knows who this person is. He is Southern Chu’s Prince of De, Zhao Jue.”

“So you are going to treat him,” said Li Xian furiously. “Preposterous! Do you think that this Prince will allow you to go treat him?”

I icily explained, “Great Yong and Southern Chu are at war. The Prince of De was ambushed and nearly assassinated while traveling. And while he lived, he was injured. Since I have treated Your Imperial Highness, then I am not worried that Your Imperial Highness will one day launch another invasion. I did not know Your Imperial Highness so dreaded the Prince of De to go as far as to allow him to die by the hands of assassins.”

Li Xian was silenced. It was some time before he spoke. “I expect that even

if the Prince of De fully recovers, he will be unable to block the crack horsemen of my Great Yong. Fine … you can go take care of him. Tell him, I will definitely have him die by my hands."

I bowed slightly, signaling that I would follow his orders.

Three days later, it was only after the Prince of Qi's injury had improved was I allowed to depart. When I was getting ready to leave, he told me from his carriage, "Jiang *daren* , Southern Chu will sooner or later be destroyed by my hands. When the time comes, Jiang *daren* can come find me. This Prince will protect Jiang *daren* 's property and life." I remained silent. Whether he took my silence to be in agreement or in refusal, was up to him.

After separating from the Prince of Qi, I hurried day and night before finally arriving at Xiangyang. Baiyi was acquainted with the general assigned to the city gates. My entourage and I were quickly allowed to enter the city, and we rushed directly to the home that the Prince of De was staying in. When I arrived at the entrance, I heard the sound of bitter crying. I froze for a moment before I madly rushed in. All of the soldiers guarding the entrance recognized me and allowed me to pass unimpeded. When I charged into the Prince of De's bedroom, I found Rong Yuan fallen over on the ground bawling. On the bed, Zhao Jue's face was as pale as a sheet. Daoli stood beside the bed, his complexion filled with sorrow. Seeing my arrival, Rong Yuan lamented, his voice choking with emotion, "Suiyun, you have arrived too late."

Losing self-control, I yelled, "Daoli, how did it come to this? How were you unable to keep him alive?"

Daoli crept to my side and reported, "*Daren* , this lowly one has helped medicate the Prince to good effect. Even after seven days of personally overseeing the city's defenses, his wound did not worsen. Who knew that the King today would issue an edict lashing out at the Prince? After the Prince saw the edict, he was greatly angered, continuously vomiting blood. Not an hour ago, he … he passed."

Continuing to shed tears, Rong Yuan came forward and sobbed, "Suiyun, do not blame him. He did his best."

I coldly asked, “Where is the edict?”

Rong Yuan sighed heavily before pointing at a nearby table. I walked over and picked up the yellow damask silk edict to take a look. My chest tightened and I felt depressed. There was a taste of sweetness in my mouth before I vomited blood. The words on the edict were frigid:

Royal Uncle is well versed in the art of war. Commanding one hundred elite soldiers and possessing the natural barriers around Xiangyang, how have you been unable to achieve victory after fighting for so long? How are you allowing the Yong army to come and go as they please? Can it be possible that Royal Uncle is in communication with the enemy? May the Chief Commander empathize with the weary and poor state of our nation’s power—resolve this in the shortest time possible.

I dropped the edict, pushing aside Chiji and Daoli who had stepped forward to prop me up. Looking at the table, I noticed that there was a memorial placed upon it. I picked the paper up and unfolded it. Rong Yuan seemed to want to stop me, but ultimately decided to stand still. I lowered my head and read the document. Although the handwriting was neat and careful, there were traces of blood all over.

Jue is an honored member of the royal clan and possesses mediocre talent. I was recognized by the former King and considered a confidant. I commanded armies and spared no effort. However, to no avail, my body has many illnesses, unable to meet high aims, perishing along the way to my eternal regret. Now, Great Yong has invaded and Southern Chu is weary and poor. This, honestly, is a battle for our country’s survival. Jue is about to die and does not dare not to give loyal advice and direct criticism. My Southern Chu, ever since the marriage alliance, has been afraid. Every time that Great Yong even breathes, the court officials are afraid of war and beg for peace. But Great Yong has designs upon us and is unlikely to consent. The King should join with talented subjects, avoid vile characters, neglect the harem, diligently handle governmental affairs, focus upon military matters…. At a distance, ally with Northern Han, and close by, resist Great Yong. Only thus will Southern Chu will be protected. Xiangyang’s defenses are extremely important. Rong Yuan is this subject’s confidant. He is talented and adept in

military matters. Jue's former subordinates can be entrusted to him. Will the King please issue an edict ordering this person to temporarily defend Xiangyang, so as to ensure nothing befalls Xiangyang? The Marquis Who Suppresses Distant Lands, Lu Xin, is loyal and ardent, and is conscientious. He can be entrusted with the position of Chief Commander. Jue sheds tears as he writes this memorial, not knowing whether my words will be heeded. … Jue dies regretfully.

I lowered the memorial back onto the table. Thinking of how Zhao Jue's heart was filled with grief and he drilled into his heart, weeping blood to write this memorial, tears rained down my face like rain. I wondered, "Why was the Prince so obstinate? If he had listened to my advice, using my army to become independent, how could this have happened?"

Rong Yuan stepped forward and replied, "Before His Highness passed, he remembered *daren* . He originally wished to recommend *daren* to defend Xiangyang, but after thinking it over, he said, 'Suiyun is magnanimous and refined, without equal in this world. To no avail, he places his own safety before principles[4] and is most certainly unwilling to die for this cause. Sir Rong, please pass this along to Suiyun. Tell him that one day when Southern Chu is destroyed, please consider Jue's feelings and help ensure some of Southern Chu's royal clansmen live.'"

I was silent for some time before softly saying, "Sir Rong, please restrain your grief. The King is not a heartless person. He will be regretful upon seeing the Prince's memorial. The matter of Sir garrisoning Xiangyang will surely be approved. Suiyun has become disheartened and will soon resign and go on a long journey. If we are to meet again, we will speak our thoughts freely."

After finishing, I turned and left. Arriving at the entrance to the courtyard, as I was pulling aside the carriage curtains and entering, I heard in the distance earth-shattering and heaven-shaking cannon fire. There were twelve in total … signaling that the commander had died. Closing the curtains, I distantly ordered, "Leave." The carriage began to move. After some time, I pulled back the cover of the carriage window, looking at the gloomy skies outside. For the first time, I could distinctly feel that Southern

Chu … was finished.

Footnotes :

武林, wulin – the martial arts community
心平气和, xinpingqihe – idiom, lit. heart calm and even-tempered; calm and unstressed
不见棺材，不掉泪, bujianguancai, budiaolei – idiom, lit. to not shed tears until one sees one's coffin; lit. refuse to admit until forced to face the grim reality
明哲保身, mingzhebaoshen – idiom, lit. a wise man looks after his own hide; to put one's safety before matters of principle

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 18: The King of Southern Chu Declares Himself Emperor

Volume 1, Chapter 18: The King of Southern Chu Declares Himself Emperor

In the seventh month of the twenty-second year of Xiande, Great Yong dispatched an envoy to negotiate peace. Southern Chu's sovereign and officials, all fearing the war continuing, agreed. Afterwards, there were some within the court praised the King as an enlightened sage[1] under whose leadership Shu was conquered and Great Yong was repelled, and should take the imperial throne. The King, addled by these words and believing in the Prince of Qi's previous agreement, approved. The decision was made to take the imperial throne on the first day of the eighth month. A memorial was dispatched to Great Yong, expressing a willingness for the two countries to be brothers.

At the time, many sensible court officials penned memorials to remonstrate, enraging the King. Many were censured and sternly rebuked. Jiang Zhe was among them. Jiang Zhe had penned *Remonstration on Taking the Imperial Throne* . This essay was deep and to the point, its language impassioned, as it severely criticized the king for his wrongdoings. In anger, the King ordered Jiang Zhe executed. The eunuchs advised, "Jiang Zhe is the best of Southern Chu's gifted scholars and cannot be punished without careful consideration." His anger quelled, the King instead issue an edict: "Force him to retire, never permit him to be granted government office again." Jiang Zhe accepted the edict. When advised to temporarily bear this punishment and wait for the opportunity for the king to have his mind changed, Jiang Zhe only replied, "Be it thunder or rain, all are the King's grace." He withdrew calmly and unhurriedly, attaining everyone's respect.

—*Southern Chu Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Jiang Suiyun*

Seeing my frozen expression, Chen Zhen seemed like he had something to

say but couldn't. I listlessly wondered, "What do you want to say?"

After hesitating, Chen Zhen asked, "*Daren* , you have good relations with Great Yong. Why are you so hurt by the death of the Prince of De?"

I was silent for some time before answering, "Great Yong is a golden country with the number of talented individuals it possesses, its powerful military, and it has an enlightened monarch and virtuous ministers. It can be said this opportunity to unify the world lies in Great Yong's development. Although my Southern Chu possesses many capable sons,[1] it emphasizes civil and neglects military. In addition, the people of Southern Chu are feeble scholars. These drawbacks are not easily eliminated. From the beginning, I knew that Southern Chu would be destroyed by Great Yong. The only question was when. Therefore, when I participated in the royal examinations, I already had no intention of spilling my blood, sweat, and tears[2] for Southern Chu. I was only a poor scholar. There is no chance for me to be able to grasp complete authority in Southern Chu. Even if I were to reach a position where I was only below the King, Southern Chu does not have the conditions for me to achieve my grand plans. Furthermore, I know myself well. I can neither bring peace and stability to a region through good governance, nor can I determine the fate of a nation through feats of martial valor. I am adept at putting forward strategies and ideas[3] to plan victory from far away.[4] Without an enlightened monarch and virtuous ministers, I would be unable to play a role. But I ultimately am from Southern Chu. And yet, I am not resigned to watching Southern Chu decline and fall. When I first met the Prince of De, I wished that he was the enlightened monarch of my heart. Unfortunately, he was not. He was only a loyal subject, not an ambitious and ruthless character. He treats the virtuous well, but does not know how to use them. He recognizes the wicked, but does not know how to remove them. As a result, he used up everything and died within the military camps.

"Of the people of Great Yong, I have met the Prince of Yong and the Prince of Qi. The Prince of Yong has the demeanor of a sovereign and will inevitably be a generational, virtuous monarch. Although the Prince of Qi is hot-headed and impulsive, he also has the talent to be a hegemon. I have not met the

Crown Prince, Li An, but for him to be able to compete with the Prince of Yong for so long, he must surely also be an extraordinary individual. I am only an ordinary person. As such, I have been unwilling to offend either the Prince of Yong or the Prince of Qi for the sake of preserving my life."

"For what purpose has *daren* offered advice to both the Prince of De and the Prince of Yong?" asked Chen Zhen.

"I originally did not have to explain my reasons," I indifferently replied. "But seeing as you are willing to serve me, then there is no harm in me explaining it to you. The advice that I offered the Prince of De has already achieved its objectives. The strategies to take the cities need not be explained. The discord stratagem has also successfully attained its goal. Why do you think this invasion of Southern Chu was commanded by the Prince of Qi?"

Thinking it over, Chen Zhen answered, "It must be because Crown Prince Li An is worried that if the Prince of Yong's achievements are too great, he will be difficult to control."

Closing my eyes, I added, "Correct. When I forced the King of Shu to commit suicide, the purpose was not to make it more difficult for Great Yong to control the Hanzhong region, but rather the Shu King's concubine, Lady Golden Lotus. Sure enough, once Lady Golden Lotus arrived in Great Yong, Yong Emperor Li Yuan was bewitched by her beauty and had her brought into the harem. If the Shu King were still alive, the Yong Emperor would be constrained from doing so. The Prince of Yong would face the Emperor's anger for his direct criticisms. Why do you think the Prince of Yong was so stuck and unable to handle the Crown Prince's attacks?"

In a doubting tone, Chen Zhen voiced, "But no one has heard anything about the Prince of Yong admonishing the Emperor."

I smiled and replied, "For this kind of matter, how can the Prince of Yong directly admonish the Emperor? Alas, even if it was a secret admonishment, he would not be able to avoid being reprimanded by his father. Beyond this basic information, the Prince of De did not do anything else. When the Prince of Yong dispatched an envoy requesting my help, I had him pretend

to be poisoned and take the opportunity to have a command on the northern frontier. Although this has ensured the Prince of Yong's status and safety, it has also advanced the discord between him and his father and brother. This is the entirety of my discord stratagem."

Chen Zhen looked at me with surprise, as he marveled, "This subordinate did not know the reason why *daren* would formulate a plan for the Prince of Yong even while ill."

"You shouldn't too highly admire me," I replied, shaking my head. "In reality the conflict between the Prince of Yong, the Yong Emperor, and Crown Prince was already acute. I only added fuel to the fire. In addition, the Prince of Yong's predicament isn't necessarily a bad thing. Once the Prince of Yong comes to the decision to seize the imperial throne, then Great Yong will no longer have any obstacles towards unification. My actions have only won some time for Southern Chu. If Southern Chu were strong, then the Prince of Yong would have no alternative but to slow down his plans. For Southern Chu to survive for another twenty to thirty years isn't impossible. But the King has personally destroyed his own defenses.[5] With the death of the Prince of De, Southern Chu does not have any general capable of resisting Great Yong. Rong Yuan does not have a sufficiently broad mind or tolerance. Lu Xin is stupidly loyal and lacks strategy. The court officials are all shortsighted. Those who are somewhat talented are either wallowing in alcohol and sex or have hidden themselves. Chen Zhen, even if Great Yong suffers internal strife, I believe that Southern Chu will fall within a few years. But with Great Yong suffering internal strife, I believe that Southern Chu will be able to maintain a residual piece of its strength and maintain its separate regime in Jiangnan and Sichuan. Without at least ten years, it will be impossible for Great Yong to acquire Jiangnan without too badly damaging the region."

Memorizing my words, Chen Zhen asked, "Then *daren* , what is our next step?"

"Southern Chu can no longer do anything," I indifferently responded. "When I return, I intend to resign. After that, we will wait in Jianye. I believe that it won't take long before I will have the opportunity to take revenge."

“What about after vengeance has been wrought?” Chen Zhen continued to ask. “Both the Prince of Yong and the Prince of Qi both highly regard *daren* . If Southern Chu were to be destroyed, I’m afraid that the two Imperial Highnesses would both come to recruit *daren* . How will *daren* handle this situation?”

I was silent for a while before replying, “I once thought that I would be willing to serve Great Yong. But I have come to realize that I cannot do so. After Southern Chu falls, I naturally wish to peacefully live out the rest of my days. If the Prince of Yong and the Prince of Qi are unwilling to let me go, then I can only leave the Central Plains. If I were unfortunate enough to be captured by them, I have no intention of dying for Southern Chu. When I have wrought my vengeance, I will have my forces be turned over temporarily to your control. To Great Yong, my force is insignificant. But if they were by my side, they would be noticed and likely annihilated. If they were to be hidden, they may be able to save my life one day.”

Hesitating, Chen Zhen asked, “*Daren* , why not turn the force over to Master Li?”

I shook my head and said, “Xiaoshunzi is of greater use by my side. His martial arts are exceptional and he has a detailed mind. He is my confidant-cum-friend. If he were outside, he would not be sufficiently calm and could not hide the strength I have on the outside.”

Chen Zhen cheerfully nodded his head, stating, “If that is the case, then this subordinate will do as you bid.”

I returned to Jianye in silence. I learned that the king, as expected, regretted what had happened and accepted the Prince of De’s proposal. Rong Yuan was appointed to the position of the Vice Minister of War[6] to defend Xiangyang. Lu Xin was appointed to be Chief Commander. When he returned to the court to accept the staff and battle axe denoting his position, I found that his bearing had deteriorated one bit from years past. His son, the little Marquis Lu Can, my student, had become a twenty-one-year-old youngster filled with power and grandeur. I had heard that over these last few years, Lu Can had become his father’s subordinate serving in the front lines. He was courageous in battle and resourceful. The opinion of him

within the Southern Chu army was highly positive. Not long after I had returned home, Lu Can called; I was his teacher after all. He excitedly told me that he had benefited greatly from my idle teachings of the art of war. Lu Can had come in hopes of learning more from me. Seeing his expression brimming with enthusiasm, I neutrally told him, “In those days, I was only an armchair strategist;[7] the little marquis should ask for guidance from the lord marquis.” After I had seen Lu Can off, I felt pain in my heart. My old student was now a Southern Chu general. Thinking of what he would have to face in the coming days, how could I not feel grief? After pondering it over, I had Chiji deliver to Lu Can the battle formations that I had organized, having him pass on the message to not share that I was the source of this information. These formations may allow him to win a few victories. Although the end result would be more deaths, that was his fate and also Southern Chu’s fate. This may be my final contribution to Southern Chu.

Not long afterwards, someone petitioned the king, praising him for his brilliance and martial prowess. Within the last few years, Southern Chu under the king’s leadership had conquered Shu and had now also repelled the Yong invasion. After considering his virtue and ability, the king should ascend to the imperial throne and declare himself emperor, and directly compete with Great Yong. Zhao Jia was too easily flattered. After hearing these words, he surprisingly also believed that this was Heaven’s Will, forgetting the blood-and tear-stained memorial from the Prince of De who he had persecuted to death. The king quickly issued an edict asking for the opinion of the entire court. The result was that the court officials, dazed by victory, agreed and in succession, petitioned the king urging him on.

After hearing of this, I, who had originally intended to resign, contemplated a good while before I penned the *Remonstration on Taking the Imperial Throne* . After this document was submitted, the king was indignant as expected. Within this memorial, I clearly explained in an outspoken fashion, that although we had won a victory in our invasion of Shu, Great Yong had attained more benefits than we had. In addition, the disparity in the strength of the militaries between the two countries was extremely clear. I further explained that the recent victory against Great Yong was a result of the Prince of Qi taking a straightforward and unyielding approach,

as well as Xiangyang's strong defenses. With the Prince of De dying while in the army, Southern Chu no longer had any comparable ranking military officers. On top of this, Great Yong had not suffered any real damage. If the king became emperor, then Great Yong could consider Southern Chu as a rebel vassal and use this *casus belli* to continue to attack. When that time comes, Southern Chu would be in the wrong. By then, Southern Chu would not have the strength to repel Great Yong's attacks. Within this essay was written my rarely revealed genuine views, as this was to be my last memorial before I left Southern Chu. If the king was willing to accept my opinion, then I would rather present my ability and wisdom to Southern Chu. I would not regret it even if were to die on the battlefield because of my loyalty to Southern Chu.

Unfortunately, what I thought would happen came true. The king became indignant and almost gave the order to have me executed. Fortunately, I had prepared for all exigencies. Beforehand, I had Xiaoshunzi bribe all of the eunuchs. They were able to mollify the king's anger, and as a result, I was only stripped of my rank. I was already thinking about formally tendering my resignation … but I had wanted to take this final gambit. Sure enough, I was removed from office. In this way, Southern Chu and I no longer had any entanglements, with the gratitude and grievances all cleared up.

When the edict was read to me, I had difficulty maintaining a calm and tranquil expression on my face. I almost laughed. Thus, Great Yong no longer had any reason to assign me any fault and could not use pardoning me as a reason to force me to capitulate. The official tasked with issuing the edict was a class colleague, the *bangyan* , Liu Kui. He was now serving at the side of the king. He had penned this edict for the king. Filled with regret, Liu Kui said, "Elder brother Jiang, you should not be depressed. Although the king has stated that you will never be employed, this incident will no longer be an issue. We will put in a few words on your behalf. Elder brother Jiang has sincerely devoted yourself for the sake of Southern Chu. When the time comes, the King will reinstate you."

I did not take notice of his efforts to comfort me. I only distantly replied, "Be it thunder or rain, all are the King's grace. This lowly official does not

dare to have a single complaint. A few years ago, I followed the army into Sichuan and as a result, contracted an illness. I have spent these years recuperating at home. I originally should not be holding a sinecure position." After I escorted the visitor out, I indifferently said, "Let's go, let's go home."

I led Chen Zhen and company out. We had not yet left the Ministry of Personnel when I saw Liang Wan gesturing at me from her carriage. Seeing my gloomy face, Chen Zhen muttered, "*Daren* , no, young master, don't forget …"

I stopped him from continuing. Stepping forward, I asked, "So it is Lady Liang. What instructions do you have?"

Liang Wan smiled and said, "This is not the place to have this conversation. Will the *zhuangyuan* please board the carriage to converse?"

I smiled slightly and boarded the carriage, telling Liang Wan, "Fine, will her ladyship please escort me … to the northern gate will be sufficient."

After seeing me board, Liang Wan ordered the carriage to go. Smiling, she conveyed, "This time, the lord *zhuangyuan* spoke forthrightly in order to remonstrate the King, and this was the result. Truly pitiful. In the past, Bi Gan cut open his heart[8] and Zixu was thrown into the river,[9] and yet were laughed at by the entire world. They were treated inhumanely. If the lord *zhuangyuan* does not refuse, I have acquaintances in Great Yong and am willing to recommend *daren* to become an official in Great Yong."

I smiled faintly and replied, "My ladyship is now a confidante of the Queen of Southern Chu and was the adopted daughter of the former King, and yet does not worry about Southern Chu and serves Great Yong. I can't help but find this to be saying one thing but meaning something else."[10]

With a despising look, Liang Wan countered, "Who cares about Southern Chu's status and position? The lord *zhuangyuan* is an intelligent person. The Prince of Qi has praised you several times. If you choose to dance to a different tune,[11] then you would surely gain rapid promotions[12] without limit."

I smiled lightly without saying anything. My left hand spun the ring on the middle finger of my right hand. This was the item left to me by my deceased

beloved. It was some time before I responded, “My ladyship has been in Southern Chu for years. Although you have made outstanding contributions, all of it relied upon the strength of Great Yong. Now relations between Southern Chu and Great Yong are broken off. When the time comes, my ladyship, please take care of yourself.” After I finished, I ordered the carriage to stop. After exiting the carriage, I casually mentioned, “This is loyal advice upon parting—hope that my ladyship will not blame me.”

Baffled, Liang Wan watched me leave. She did not understand why I refused to surrender, and yet, still try to convince her to be careful. After thinking it over, she thought that maybe I was waiting for a good offer. Fine, after Great Yong had crossed the river, then there was no fear that I wouldn’t surrender. Having thought it through, she ordered the carriage to continue onwards.

After I exited the carriage, I recalled the beautiful[13] woman who had been so close to me, and felt disgust and loathing. This kind of woman truly deserved to have her body dismembered and shattered. If Great Yong really relied upon her to command the spies in Jiangnan, then I would highly doubt the intelligence of Great Yong’s leaders. After thinking over the rumors, I recalled that there were stories that Liang Wan had not married because she had sexual relations with the king. According to my knowledge, Liang Wan had played a major behind-the-scenes role in the king’s decision this time. She had played an indispensable role. She was definitely an outstanding spy, bribing court officials and spreading rumors. I had made no attempt to stop her actions. The king now took her words as decrees. From this, then, Great Yong would consider its opponent when using people. As a result, the leader of the spies in Southern Chu ended up being a beautiful female spy.

After me, there were others who petitioned the king with essays attempting to stop his ascension to the imperial throne, including the Hanlin Academy Chancellor Xie Xian and Minister Who Remonstrates and Advises Luo Wenshu. Their petitions were all ignored by the king. Some were demoted, others dismissed. Luo *daren* attempted to use his death to serve to admonish the king. But even after his blood dyed the royal dais red, the king did not wake up to reality. I did not participate in these disturbances, as I

was now only a commoner.

Just like this, on the first day of the eighth month, the king formally declared himself Emperor, changing the era name to Zhihua.[14] I thought back to the decision made by the king to continue the Xiande era name when he succeeded the throne. At the time, I thought it was strange. It seems likely that the king had wanted to change the era name after he had declared himself emperor. From this, it was apparent that the king had a great and lofty goal. It was a pity that his ambition did not match with his abilities, and did not have any patience. This Zhihua era name was likely the era name for the subjugation of the nation.

***

Meanwhile, in Great Yong, in the estate of the Prince of Yong, Li Zhi was looking at the intelligence report in his hands. He said, “Liang Wan is too unbridled. She does not understand the need for cautious speech and careful action. If it weren’t for her sect, I would not indulge her so much.”

The refined middle-aged man with a black beard sitting beside him replied, “Your Imperial Highness, the Fengyi Sect[15] is the leader amongst Great Yong’s righteous sects and made outstanding contributions to the founding of Great Yong. Now their female hands have stretched too far. Even though Liang Wan is under the command of Your Highness, she repeatedly acts on her own initiative. She even has close relations with the Crown Prince and the Prince of Qi. In addition, the Prince of Qi’s primary consort, Qin Zheng, is the junior apprentice sister of Liang Wan. I fear that they are preparing for the Crown Prince to succeed the throne.”

The Prince of Yong coldly declared, “There is no need to suspect. I have already received intelligence that the Fengyi Sect through their disciple, Imperial Father’s favored concubine, Noble Consort Ji, has directly warned Imperial Father that I have maintained an army to defy the court. If I were to ascend to the throne, then I would murder my brothers. In addition, she has said that the crown prince, although somewhat less competent, will be able to govern well as long as he is assisted by virtuous officials. *Humph* ! This is only because I refused to take one of their disciples as a consort. A bunch of women, deluded to think they can control the world. I, Li Zhi, am not a

puppet or clay figurine."

Deeply worried, the middle-aged man responded, "But the Fengyi Sect possesses formidable strength. What should we do if they attempt to obstruct Your Imperial Highness's ascension to the throne at all costs? Alas, this subordinate is not adept at scheming and strategizing, and cannot help Your Imperial Highness."

A look flashed across Li Zhi's eyes, as he stated, "If that man is willing to serve me then we will be able to deal with the Fengyi Sect. In truth, I do not fear the Fengyi Sect's martial prowess. Although they all possess formidable martial arts, we have already gained the support of the Shaolin Temple and other famous and upright sects. At the least, we can prevent the Fengyi Sect from being able to use its martial prowess. I am worried about their ability of adept use of money and power, and their ability to sow dissension. If we are incapable of using stratagems, allowing them to continue to develop, then I fear that Great Yong's empire will fall into the hands of these women."

"I have frequently heard Your Imperial Highness speak of Jiang Zhe," mentioned the middle-aged man. "This subordinate extremely longs to meet him. Is Your Imperial Highness certain that he will serve you?"

Li Zhi smiled wryly, replying, "How do I put it … To gain him as a subordinate is very easy. However, to gain his loyalty so that he serves willingly is very difficult. That person's thoughts are difficult to read. In addition, he is disinterested in high position or great wealth, the empire or the people. With this kind of apathetic individual, how can I acquire his wholehearted support? I have received a report that he submitted a remonstration essay and has been dismissed from office. Reading the contents of his memorial, I could not but be apprehensive. He understands the situation between Southern Chu and Great Yong as if it were the back of his hand.[16] If I cannot gain this kind of person, it will be the greatest regret of my life."

The middle-aged man accepted the memorial that Li Zhi had passed over. Take a long time to read it over, he finally raised his head and said, "Your Imperial Highness, you must immediately dispatch someone to Southern Chu. If we cannot acquire this person, then our hopes and ambitions will

never be fulfilled. In addition, the Fengyi Sect is not blind. If they bear witness to this person's talents, they will inevitably recruit him. If he becomes a retainer of the Crown Prince, we will be in grave danger."

"I believe that the Fengyi Sect does not have the ability to persuade him," explained Li Zhi with a faint smile. "The 'serve country and people' performance that the Fengyi Sect are adept at using will not be able to move him. It is also impossible for Li An to have him surrender. Contrary to what you might expect, it is actually the Prince of Qi who is extremely likely to have him surrender and swear allegiance. This time, the Prince of Qi has sent a letter in secret, speaking of how he met Jiang Zhe while campaigning in Southern Chu. Jiang Zhe saved his life. Although the Prince of Qi is hot-headed and impulsive, he is sincere when treating people. If Jiang Zhe were to follow him, the Prince of Qi would follow his every word.[17] That would be our greatest crisis. Right now, the Prince of Qi is recuperating. I have already petitioned Imperial Father to immediately attack Southern Chu. As long as I am the first destroy Southern Chu, then Jiang Zhe will fall into my hands. Ziyou, we really ought to dispatch people to Southern Chu; not to convince him to surrender, but to know Jiang Zhe's movements. To convince him to swear allegiance, outside of this Prince, no one will be successful."

Just then, a personal guard in a loud voice sought an audience from outside the door. After he entered, he kneeled and reported, "Your Imperial Highness, His Imperial Majesty has called for Your Imperial Highness to enter the Imperial Palace to discuss the matter of attacking Southern Chu."

Footnotes :

人杰地灵, renjiediling – idiom, lit. illustrious hero, spirit of the place; a place derives reflected glory from an illustrious son
呕心沥**血**, ouxinlixue – idiom, lit. to spit out one's heart and spill blood; to work one's heart out; to shed blood, sweat, and tears
出谋**划策**, chumouhuace – idiom, lit. to put forward plans and ideas, to give advice
决胜**千里**, jueshengqianli – idiom, to be able to plan victory from a thousand *li* away
自毁长**城**, zihuichangcheng – idiom, lit. to personally destroy the Great Wall;

the Great Wall served as one of China's defenses against 'barbarian' incursions from the north, to personally destroy the Great Wall meant that you were personally destroying the defenses

兵部侍郎, bingbu shilang – Vice Minister of War, the second ranking official in the Ministry of War

纸**上**谈**兵**, zhishangtanbing – idiom, lit. military tactics on paper; fig. theoretical discussion that is worse than useless in practice; armchair strategist

比干, Bi Gan was an uncle of the last King of the Shang Dynasty, Di Xin. Bi Gan was known for his kindness and virtue. Listening to the slander of the women in his harem, Di Xin ordered Bi Gan executed in order to see whether his heart had seven openings.

伍子胥, Wu Zixu was a colleague of 孙**子**, Sunzi. The pair served the state of Wu during the Spring and Autumn Period in the service of 阖闾, King Helü of Wu. After Helü's death, his son **夫差**, Fuchai inherited the throne. Fuchai was not trusted by Wu Zixu. Wu Zixu had seen the long-term danger of **勾践**, Goujian, the King of Yue. After Wu conquered Yue, Wu Zixu advised Fuchai to execute Goujian. But Yue had bribed another official of the state of Wu named Bo Pi. Concerned with the safety of Wu, Wu Zixu asked Fuchai to take action. Fuchai ordered him to commit suicide. Before he committed suicide, Wu Zixu asked Fuchai to remove his eyes and have them hung on the battlements so that he could watch the Yue army capture Wu. Wu Zixu died and his body was thrown into the river

心口不一, xinkoubuyi – idiom, lit. heart and mouth at variance; keeping one's real intentions to oneself, saying one thing but meaning something different

改弦易辙, gaixianyizhe – idiom, lit. change of string, move out of rut; dramatic change of direction, to dance to a different tune

青云直上, qingyunzhishang – idiom, lit. rising straight up in a clear sky; rapid promotion to a high post; meteoric career

花容月貌, huarongyuemao – idiom, lit. countenance of a flower, face like the moon; beautiful

至化, zhihua – lit. to arrive at change

凤仪门, fengyi men – Fengyi Sect, lit. Phoenix Ceremony Sect

了如指掌, liaoruzhizhang – idiom, lit. to know something like the back of one's hand; to know something inside out
言听计从, yantingjicong – idiom, lit. to see, hear, and obey; to take advice, to take somebody at his word

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 19: The Strategy to Invade Southern Chu

Volume 1, Chapter 19: The Strategy to Invade Southern Chu

Li Zhi followed the eunuch into the Imperial Palace. He had submitted a petition calling for an invasion of Southern Chu a few days earlier, but had received no response. Today, now that his Imperial Father finally had called him into the Palace, he could not help but feel overjoyed at the turn of events.[1] The official discussion was held in the Imperial Study. After Yong Emperor Li Yuan sat behind the imperial desk, his eyes subtly narrowed. His expression was not at ease. Behind him to the side sat a beautiful young woman wearing court dress. In front of the desk in the first seat on the left sat Crown Prince Li An, followed by Prime Minister Wei Guan, and Cheng Shu, the Duke of Wei. On the right hand side, aside from the first empty seat, sat the General Who Pacifies Distant Lands, Qin Yi, and the Prince of Qi, Li Xian. Although Li Xian's face was wan and looked sickly, he seemed quite vigorous.

Crown Prince Li An was thirty-six years old, older than the Prince of Yong by two years. But he had never trained any martial arts and did not have Li Zhi's glowing and outstanding appearance. Although he seemed to properly maintain himself and did not look old, one could discern a shred of exhaustion in countenance. He watched Li Zhi enter the room, a look of jealousy flashing in his eyes. Without consulting with anyone, Li Zhi strode before the imperial desk and kneeled, reporting, "This child[2] salutes Imperial Father."

Li Yuan inquired, "Zhi'er, why are you so late in arriving?"

Smiling, Li Zhi answered, "Before this child arrived, I had just received an intelligence report from Jiangnan. Therefore, I organized the report before bringing it here so that Imperial Father could take a look."

Li Yuan gave Li An a baffled look, asking, "An'er, didn't you already present the intelligence report on Jiangnan?"

Li An smiled and replied, “Presumably second brother does not yet know that I have already received the intelligence report on Jiangnan.”

Across Li Zhi’s face flashed an icy smile. “The intelligence report received by Your Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, is from Liang Wan. The source of this child’s intelligence report is different and therefore, presumably, has details that Imperial Father does not yet know.”

Li An’s expression trembled. He had acquired control over the Jiangnan intelligence network with great difficulty having used every possible means.[3] He could not believe that Li Zhi still had his own intelligence sources. How could he not be resentful? He coldly replied, “So that’s the case … Just a few days earlier, sixth brother was attacking Xiangyang. If second brother had shared these intelligence reports, then surely sixth brother would not have been so badly defeated.” He was only concerned with striking a blow at Li Zhi and forgot that Li Xian’s mood. Sure enough, a look of cold fury flashed across Li Xian’s eyes.

In a composed fashion,[4] Li Zhi asserted, “This younger brother[5] only realized, after sixth brother’s first campaign against Xiangyang met with defeat, that our intelligence network in Jiangnan was incomplete. The map that we received regarding Xiangyang’s defensive positions was extremely rough and undetailed, undoubtedly the result of Xiangyang’s garrison commander making changes to the map before submitting it to the Ministry of War. From this, we can conclude that the intelligence network controlled by Lady Liang has already caught the attention of Southern Chu’s knowledgeable and experienced individuals. It is only because they are safeguarded by the sovereign and vassals of Southern Chu that they have not been eliminated. Thus when we formally go to war with Southern Chu, our intelligence network will inevitably be destroyed. Facing this obstacle, this younger brother could only establish a new network. Finally, at least, there has been some achievement. That Your Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, does not know the details is because the new network has only just gotten results. Thus, could not help sixth brother in time.” Speaking to this point, Li Zhi looked at Li Xian and bowed slightly to signal his apology. Li Xian lowered his head lightly, signaling that he did not mind.

From the moment Li Zhi entered the chambers, he had been crossing verbal swords with the crown prince. Seeing that they had temporarily stopped, everyone—outside of the Young Emperor, the lady sitting behind him, and the crown prince—all stood to properly greet Li Zhi. The Prince of Qi, Li Xian,[7] had originally wanted to stand as well, but seeing the anger in Li An's eyes, remained seated. Li Zhi sat down at his own seat at the first position on the right, greeting all one by one. From the moment Li Zhi had criticized Liang Wan, the beautiful woman's expression became as cold as ice. When Li Zhi had sat down, she opened her mouth and questioned, "From the meaning of Your Imperial Highness's words, my junior apprentice niece Liang has toiled under bitter hardships in Southern Chu, and yet has missed out on much?" Seeing her speak, Li An lowered his head slightly, the corner of his mouth twitching to form a smile.

Li Zhi bowed slightly as he replied, "Lady Noble Consort, this child dares not evaluate Lady Liang's contributions. That year when Princess Changle was wed to Southern Chu, both Imperial Father and I pitied Changle. She has a gentle and soft temperament. As a result, Lady Noble Consort dispatched Lady Liang to accompany Changle to Southern Chu. Li Zhi cannot be thankful enough. Over these years, our successes in Southern Chu have been in large part due to Liang Wan's meritorious service. It is only that the current situation has changed. Lady Liang has basically already placed herself out in the open. Thus, this child had no choice but to ensure that we do not lose access to information from Jiangnan in the event that Lady Liang is forced to withdraw."

The woman's tender and dimpled face revealed a faint smile, as if she accepted Li Zhi's explanation. All the men in the study could not help but be mesmerized by her smile which was like the plum blossoms after snowfall. But since she was a noble consort, everyone quickly averted their eyes.

Seeing the atmosphere shift, Li Zhi continued, "Since Imperial Father has already received the intelligence report brought by His Highness, the Crown Prince, then He must be aware of the *Remonstration on Taking the Imperial Throne* ?"

From on his desk, Li Yuan picked up a copied manuscript and replied,

“Indeed, this Jiang Zhe is sure enough an extraordinary individual. The Crown Prince and the Prince of Qi have both recommended him to me. I have read his poems, especially his *Dance of the Cavalry* . A single poem forced the King of Shu to commit suicide. Definitely an exceptional talent. Today, after seeing this memorial, I not only believe that he is a gifted scholar, but also an able minister. If Southern Chu were to put him into an important position, then it would be a disaster for Great Yong. Now that this person has been dismissed from office, presumably he can be recruited over.”

“Imperial Father is correct,” replied Li Zhi with a hint of a smile. “The man does indeed possess an extraordinary ability. This child in Sichuan and sixth brother in Southern Chu have both met him. Unfortunately, that man cares not for fame or fortune, and furthermore is a loyal subject of Southern Chu. I’m afraid that he would not be willing to surrender and pledge allegiance.”

Li Yuan nodded and replied, “That’s true. We are also worried about this. Seeing this man’s memorial, he must be a loyal subject of Southern Chu. But as the proverb says, ‘a virtuous subject chooses a master to serve.’ I have seen the freedom and easiness within this man’s poetry. He should not be a stubborn man, right?”

Listening to his father’s words, Li Zhi understood that Li Xian had not told Li An about meeting Jiang Zhe in Xiangyang. Therefore, Li Yuan would not conclude that Jiang Zhe would potentially not serve Great Yong. Li Zhi glanced at Li Xian and saw his brother’s uneasy countenance. Li Zhi smiled softly and continued, “That is true. This time, I thoroughly investigated Jiang Zhe after seeing his submitted memorial. I found that this man maintained close ties with the Prince of De. In Sichuan, he served as a close aide to the Prince of De. Reportedly, while he was recuperating at home over the last two years, he maintained constant communication with the Prince of De in Xiangyang. When Liang Wan dispatched assassins to kill the Prince of De, it was this man’s servants who saved the Prince. In addition, he personally traveled to Xiangyang to see Zhao Jue for the last time. This child has also found that the newly appointed Chief Commander of Southern Chu, Lu Xin, also knows Jiang Zhe. Before passing the imperial examinations, Jiang Zhe

was the teacher of Lu Xin's son, Lu Can. Therefore, this child fears that this man will not easily surrender and pledge allegiance."

Li Yuan listened with keen interest, while Li An and Noble Consort Ji secretly exchanged looks. It seemed that they did not attach much importance to Jiang Zhe. Li Yuan looked to Wei Guan and asked, "Minister Wei, what is your view?"

Wei Guan answered, "There is no need for Your Imperial Majesty to be worried. Southern Chu is exhausted. The south will be pacified within a few years. When the time comes, there will be peace[6] and men of merit will naturally flock to serve Great Yong. We can tell, from his poetry, that this person, Jiang Zhe, is not a stubborn individual. Why would he be unwilling to serve the Emperor?"

Hearing his response, Li Yuan beamed and declared, "Minister Wei speaks the truth. Although this man is deserving of being put in an important position, there is no need to overly trouble ourselves with him. When Southern Chu is conquered, We only need to issue an order decreeing he become an official in the court."

Li Zhi glanced at everyone, noticing that Li An and Noble Consort Ji had apathetic expressions, while Li Xian's eyes were filled with derision. Li Zhi knew that he had achieved his goal. He had purposely esteemed Jiang Zhe in front of everyone in order to conceal the importance he attached to this man. Escaping the attention of Li An and company by enticing Jiang Zhe in secret would be difficult. It was better to be upfront about it, expressing how he valued the man. As a result, everyone's eyes would focus upon Jiang Zhe's talent and not realize his importance. In addition, they would not oppose him over an "ordinary" scholar. The only one able to see through his scheme was Li Xian. Li Xian also understood Jiang Zhe's talent, but he probably also wished to recruit Jiang Zhe for himself, so held his silence. After this, Li Zhi only needed to compete with Li Xian over Jiang Zhe.

Achieving his objective, Li Zhi asked without restraint, "Imperial Father has called this child to discuss the matter of attacking Southern Chu. Does Imperial Father have any plans?"

“This time, Great Yong has suffered heavy losses at Xiangyang,” replied Li Yuan. “I am worried that from now on Southern Chu will be difficult to control and I intend to dispatch you to command an army to attack Southern Chu. Southern Chu taking the imperial title has given us the best excuse. Last time, We used the excuse that the Prince of De had designs upon Great Yong. That reason was too far-fetched. This time, our invasion will be proper and expected. What does Zhi’er think?”

“Imperial Father is correct,” answered Li Zhi. “The Southern Chu army is now quite chaotic. According to this child’s original plan, our army should redouble the siege, cutting off Xiangyang’s connection with Jiangnan and spending a few years to slowly whittle away at Southern Chu’s military strength. But if we were to give them room to regain their breath, their army would have the opportunity to restabilize. Without a decade or more, we would not be able to conquer Southern Chu. If Imperial Father permits it, this child wishes to take a gamble and strike a heavy blow at Southern Chu, causing them to lose the will to oppose our Great Yong. After that, we would pacify every resisting force one by one. Although this plan may end up being protracted, within three years, this child can promise that Southern Chu will be absorbed by Great Yong. And then we will use another twenty years to acquire popular sentiment. What does Imperial Father think?”

Li Yuan understood the meaning behind Li Zhi’s words. According to his view, the best and most perfect plan would be to sweep away all opposition in one go. But the current Southern Chu was still capable of resistance. To be able to conquer Southern Chu in three years at the cost of twenty years of chaos, which would unlikely spread to the Central Plains, would be worthwhile, especially as Li Yuan’s desire to establish glorious achievements outweighed everything. He ultimately agreed with Li Zhi’s suggestion.

Cold fury flashed across Noble Consort Ji’s eyes. She knew that because of this, Jiangnan would be in chaos for several years, creating great hardship for the common people. But she made no attempt to stop this, because she knew that Li Yuan had already made his decision. She once again confirmed that the sect mistress’s decision was correct. Although the Prince of Yong possessed great skill and strategy, in comparison, the mediocre Li An was

more suitable to become the sovereign of Great Yong.

Seeing that Li Yuan had agreed, Li Zhi raised the fine details. According to current intelligence, Southern Chu's forces were spread out across a wide area. Because of the fighting, Southern Chu had reinforced the defenses in Sichuan, trying to prevent Great Yong from breaking through Sichuan and descending down the Yangtze River. In addition, Xiangyang had been attacked twice, suffering heavy casualties. In order to reinforce these two fronts, Southern Chu's Ministry of War had pulled soldiers from other locales and were barely able to make ends meet, especially as they still needed to garrison the defenses along the entirety of the Yangtze River. Li Zhi suggested that Great Yong launch attacks and sieges on two fronts in Sichuan and Xiangyang, focusing Southern Chu's attention there. Afterwards, he would personally lead an elite cavalry unit to directly pierce through the Yangtze River defenses and close in on Jianye. Under normal circumstances, Jianye could not be captured without a siege lasting several months, more than enough time for reinforcements to arrive to save the city and cut off the cavalry unit's lines of supply and retreat. However, Jianye currently had few soldiers guarding the city. Combined with the agents inside the city, Li Zhi was confident that he would be able to capture Jianye in only a few days, and later kidnap the Southern Chu King and the court officials back to Great Yong. When the time came, Southern Chu would be leaderless. The combination of its capital being captured and its King kidnapped would be a severe blow to the morale of Southern Chu. Even if Southern Chu chose a new monarch, it would be incredibly difficult for them to continue to oppose Great Yong. Afterwards, Great Yong can use Zhao Jia to pacify Jiangnan. Although this plan would nominally require more time to complete and would cause significant problems, Li Yuan hoped that Southern Chu would submit sooner rather than later. As a result, he approved the plan.

Although Li An was unfamiliar with military matters, he knew what troubles this plan would cause. But he also knew that if Li Zhi was really successful in conquering Southern Chu, then his own hopes of becoming heir apparent would be greatly reduced. Having failed in his campaigns against Southern Chu, Li Xian believed that this plan would enable him to

regain some face. As a result, neither prince made any objections. Although Cheng Shu, the Duke of Wei, and Qin Yi, the General Who Pacifies Distant Lands, both had some misgivings about the plan, they understood its profoundness. They also knew that there wouldn't be any use objecting. Just this way, this invasion plan that would be castigated by later generations as not adhering to the art of war was approved. Outside of Li Zhi and Shi Yu, no one else knew that Li Zhi's actual target was Jiang Zhe.

After the discussion had concluded, Li Yuan sighed and said, "Zhi'er, you must ensure Changle's safety in this attack on Jianye. You must bring her back. She has already sacrificed too much for Great Yong. We have let her down."

Li Zhi sighed quietly as well. Princess Changle was the beloved daughter of his Imperial Father. Her mother was Noble Consort Zhangsun who was widely known for her virtues. Changle herself was dignified and tender, and as a result much favored and loved by Imperial Father. Noble Consort Zhangsun's son, Li Xian, had died protecting Li Yuan from assassins. Her other son, the Fourth Prince, Li Jin, had died at a young age. Therefore, Imperial Father had tried to comfort Noble Consort Zhangsun by promising that after Changle had reached marriageable age, she would be able to choose her husband. At the time, Changle already had someone she admired, but due to the need to form a marriage alliance with Southern Chu, their Imperial Father could only order Changle be married to then Crown Prince of Southern Chu, Zhao Jia. When she learned this news, Noble Consort Zhangsun had begged the Emperor while weeping, saying that Southern Chu and Great Yong would become enemies sooner rather than later. If Changle were to be married over, then how would she be able to survive? But Imperial Father's decision had been made. The look of despair in Changle's eyes when she departed for Southern Chu had left an unforgettable mark upon Li Zhi. Li Zhi had ingeniously arranged for the court ladies from Yong to purposely steal Zhao Jia's favor and prevent Zhao Jia and Changle from having too much emotional entanglement. But upon learning about Changle's life in Southern Chu, Li Zhi lamented greatly. This was especially the case when Changle became pregnant. The decision had long been made to abort the child, especially as this child would have a cruel

fate before it. Li Zhi could imagine clearly Changle's grief and despair.

Thinking of this, Li Zhi resolutely stated, "Imperial Father be at ease. This child will definitely bring back the Imperial Sister. Imperial Sister has sacrificed much for Great Yong. This child will definitely ensure her safety and bring her home."

"After she has been brought back and some time has passed," replied Li Yuan with a sigh, "We will find her a new husband so that her youth is not completely wasted by being a widow."

Everyone seemed to hesitate. Finally, Wei Guan spoke, "Your Imperial Majesty's intent is good, but if Zhao Jia is brought back as a hostage, we will be required upon his name to control Southern Chu. The Princess is still the Queen of Southern Chu. If Your Imperial Majesty finds a new husband for the Princess, Southern Chu's officials and subjects will definitely hate Great Yong."

Furious, Li Yuan rebutted, "Don't tell me that Our daughter must suffer hardship forever?"

Wei Guan was at a loss for words. In his view, whether Princess Changle was happy was irrelevant. But he did not dare utter such words.

"Imperial Father, Minister Wei speaks with good reason," said Li An trying to smooth things over. "How about this? We will first select a suitable husband for Imperial Sister, allowing them to be secretly betrothed. After a few years with Southern Chu pacified, when Zhao Jia is no longer of any use, we can formally wed Imperial Sister and her new husband."

Li Yuan slightly nodded his head and responded, "Let it be so … This matter must not be revealed. Let's first wait for Changle to return. Okay, We are tired. You are all dismissed."

Li An, Li Zhi, Li Xian, Wei Guan, Cheng Shu, and Qin Yi all rose and bade their farewell. Noble Consort Ji supported Li Yuan and left the Imperial Study. As everyone had left individually, Li Xian did not leave with Li An. Instead, he deliberately stayed behind and spoke to Li Zhi, "Second older brother, do you believe that Jiang Zhe will definitely serve you?"

Li Zhi indifferently replied, "What? Does sixth brother also want him as a

subordinate?”

Seeming eager to get involved, Li Xian said, “Second brother, when I met that Jiang Zhe, I felt like we were kindred spirits. You have so many civil officials and military commanders under your command; give this Jiang Zhe to me.”

Li Zhi smiled faintly and speculated, “You believe that if he doesn’t serve me, that he would be willing to serve you?”

“I believe that this fellow has a clear view of things sometimes,” replied Li Xian, “If he is willing to serve me, I will take him as my teacher and listen to his every word. He will definitely agree, so long as second brother does not fight over him with me.”

Li Zhi smiled wryly. He had not thought that Li Xian would be so shameless as to break with propriety and befriend Jiang Zhe. Li Zhi was not willing to compete with his brother, so he said, “Right now, we’re not even certain if he’s willing to surrender and pledge allegiance to Great Yong. We’re competing too early. Oh right, when are you and Lady Qin getting married?”

“I’m not in a rush, since the status is already confirmed,” answered Li Xian with a smile. “Qin Zheng’s master and father both want it to be soon and so the wedding is set for next month.”

“If that is the case, then I might not be able to get back in time.” Li Zhi also smiled. “You have delayed her for so many years. You’re lucky that Lady Qin waited for you.”

Li Xian scoffed and remarked, “If it weren’t for Noble Consort Ji urging Imperial Father to issue a decree, I originally wanted to wait a little longer. There are so many beautiful women out there, I don’t have enough time for all of them. Last time in Southern Chu, I met Liu Piaoxiang, definitely a naturally, extraordinarily beautiful woman. If it weren’t for Qin Zheng, I would have been able to get my hands on her. On your trip to Southern Chu, second brother, you should go see her. She is definitely a woman of peerless elegance. That Liang Wan is such a hypocritical woman and cannot even compare to her. Women—what use is there for them to worry about the state and common people?”

Li Zhi uttered with a smile, “Fine, fine. I will tell younger sister-in-law and let her know that you look down on her.” Li Xian hurriedly begged to be spared.

Although Li Zhi’s face carried a smile, his heart was cold. Li An had now gotten the backing of the Fengyi Sect and was also supported by Li Xian. If Li Xian matured, then Li An would be able to completely oppose him without needing the protection of Imperial Father. Thinking of the increasingly dangerous situation around him, Li Zhi once again made the determination that he must acquire Jiang Zhe. He required someone who would be able to completely overcome all of the heavy obstacles before him.

In the ninth month of the first year of Zhihua, the Prince of Yong presented a plan to pacify Southern Chu. He led four hundred thousand troops south. The news rocked the Jingxiang region….

—*Southern Chu Dynastic Records* , *the Biography of King Yang of Chu*

Footnotes :

喜出望外, xichuwangwai – idiom, to be pleased beyond one’s expectations; overjoyed at the turn of events
儿臣, erchen – lit. this child subject; translating as this child
千方百计, qianwanbaiji – idiom, lit. thousand ways, a hundred plans; by every possible means
不慌不忙, buhuangbumang – idiom, lit. calm and unhurried; composed, to take matters calmly
臣弟, chendi – lit. this younger brother subject
四海升平, sihaishengping – idiom, lit. all four oceans are peaceful; worldwide peace
贤 – lit. virtuous; different character from the given name of the Prince of Yong

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 20: Profiting from Others' Misfortune

Volume 1, Chapter 20: Profiting from Others' Misfortune[1]

I was not surprised when I learned the news that Great Yong had launched attacks upon Sichuan and Xiangyang simultaneously. In my view, in order to invade Southern Chu, a two-pronged assault was absolutely necessary. Although this plan would take some time to implement, as long as they conquered Jianghuai region,[2] one would need not fear that Southern Chu would not be pacified. So when I heard the news that the Prince of Yong had led twenty thousand cavalrymen in a direct attack on Jianye, I was dumbfounded. I immediately took out the maps and reviewed for some time. The longer I tried to analyze the situation, the more confused I became. The Prince of Yong had great skill and strategy, so why would he employ such a tactic? Although he would be able to capture Jianye, he would be unable to hold it permanently. Even if Southern Chu's sovereign and officials were captured, the court would absolutely select a new monarch or even possibly seize the throne for themselves. In addition, with this plan, Southern Chu would almost definitely fragment. Pacify its entirety would require the difficult task of taking all of its cities one by one. If this happened, then without twenty years, Jiangnan would absolutely be unable to be pacified. After thinking hard for quite some time, I still could not understand the reasons behind Li Zhi's actions.

Considering the situation from a different perspective, I immediately realized that war was only a continuation of diplomacy by other means.[3] What benefits would Li Zhi gain? But as much as I tried to think this through, the only benefit I could think of was that the chaos in Southern Chu would make it difficult for Crown Prince Li An to make things difficult for Li Zhi at will. But even if Li Zhi conquered Southern Chu in one go, this had nothing to do with becoming openly hostile against Li An. I didn't believe that Li Zhi would be unable to beat Li An. No matter how much I pondered the matter, I could not understand. With many doubts, I lowered the intelligence report in my hands on the table. Even if the situation was

unexpected, I could still take advantage and execute my own plans. Thinking of this, I casually called out, “Chiji.”

Chiji, who had been organizing the maps for me, raised his head and looked at me.

“Deliver a message to your master,” I ordered. “Have him come see me tonight.”

“As you command,” replied Chiji before turning and leaving.

At night, Xiaoshunzi quickly arrived. I sat behind the desk. Chen Zhen and Han Wuji stood before the desk on the left and the right. After them stood the eight operatives of the Secret Camp on my left and right. Once Xiaoshunzi had entered the room, he immediately walked over to my side. That was his position. Right now, Chen Zhen was the commander of the Secret Camp and Han Wuji was the head manager of the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets. Although Xiaoshunzi did not have a clear status, everyone knew that he was my standin and had the authority to issue orders on my behalf. In addition, Xiaoshunzi was the martial arts master of every operative in the Secret Camp. All of these operatives were extremely respectful towards Xiaoshunzi. This combination provided Xiaoshunzi with a sublime and transcendent status. However, he treated me the same as before, willingly serving as my servant and follower.

Seeing that everyone had arrived, I said, “Everyone, I established the Secret Camp and the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets for the sole purpose of waiting for this day. The time has come. Today, I ask that everyone unite and work together[4] to complete the great undertaking of vengeance.”

“Young master need only issue commands,” stated Chen Zhen. “If it weren’t for the fact that young master was willing to wait, we would have killed Liang Wan even if it would have cost us our lives.”

Everyone else only calmly listened. According to my established customs, when it wasn’t their turn to speak, they weren’t allowed to speak. Chen Zhen was the commander of the Secret Camp. Outside of Xiaoshunzi and Han Wuji, everyone else were his subordinates. If it wasn’t necessary, Xiaoshunzi wouldn’t say a word. Han Wuji’s status was below Chen Zhen

and he wouldn't casually interject.

I looked at Han Wuji and asked, "Has the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets made all the preparations?"

Han Wuji bowed and answered, "Young master, be at ease. But because of the news that the Yong army is approaching Jianye, many merchants have begun to flee. The portion that was instructed in advance are within our grasp."

I nodded and declared, "Before, I've always waited for an opportunity. Only when Great Yong and Southern Chu have completely fallen out has the opportunity finally presented itself. This opportunity stems from Princess Changle, the Queen of Southern Chu. From the beginning, I have felt that the Yong Emperor greatly favored and loved this Princess. One only has to consider the court ladies that were part of her dowry and consider the lukewarm relationship between Princess Changle and the King. From this, we can see that it was only necessary for the Princess to come to Southern Chu. To prevent the Princess from being in a difficult situation, I believe that the Yong Emperor never had the intention of allowing Princess Changle to have too much emotional attachment to the King."

Listening to my words, Xiaoshunzi was puzzled and suspicious at first before his expression gradually became bright and clear. He said, "Young master is correct. Serving in the court, I know that the Queen does not interact with the King except out of necessity. The Queen would always stay at the secondary palace as much as possible. Even if she is in the Royal Palace, she is melancholic, never competing for the King's favor. Before, I always thought that the Queen was virtuous, but now I believe that she was acting as the young master said—she has no intention of staying in Southern Chu."

I slapped my hand on the table and added, "Indeed, if it weren't that the Yong Emperor loved this daughter, he need not care about her moods and would have used her to properly beguile the King. This would have resulted in a better reward. Since he so treasures Princess Changle, then before Great Yong and Southern Chu completely falls out, he will rescue the Princess. Liang Wan will certainly take charge of this rescue. Liang Wan does not fear

death, but if something happens to Princess Changle then I fear her fate will be worse than death. As such, we should take advantage of their escape from the palace to trap them. For the sake of the safety of the Princess, Liang Wan will have no alternative but to confess. As long as she confesses, whether she lives or dies is unimportant, and I will be able to attain my vengeance. But Princess Changle will have numerous skilled martial artists protecting her. We must be absolutely certain in our actions and must not allow her to escape. Xiaoshunzi, you are the main strength this time. Are you certain of success?"

Thinking it over, Xiaoshunzi responded, "Young master be at ease. Based upon my current martial arts, it may require some effort to capture them, but it would be a piece of cake to kill them. As long as young master's plan is meticulous, I can guarantee that they will not be able to escape."

I happily exclaimed, "Excellent! Hualiu and Lü'er, you two will lead the Hidden Group. Make sure to grasp their movements. Baiyi, Yulun, Shanzi, and Quhuang, you four will lead the Tiger Group and the Covert Group to trap their main forces. Chiji and Daoli, you two will lead the Dragon Group and be responsible for coordination and dealing with the aftermath. The specific arrangements will be made by Chen Zhen and Han Wuji. Depart immediately. Xiaoshunzi, you will first follow the Queen. As long as we hold this thread, Liang Wan will absolutely be unable to escape."

While I was nervously reading all the intelligence reports to determine the best course of action, the court had fallen into chaos. Emperor Zhao Jia's eyes were red from lack of sleep. Indignant, he yelled, "What have we heard on a daily basis? That my Southern Chu is well prepared for war. But now Great Yong has penetrated our defensive lines. In less than six hours, the Yong army will arrive before the city. Quickly speak, what's to be done? What's to be done?"

Prime Minister Shang Weijun replied, "Your Imperial Majesty need not worry. The Yong army is only composed of light cavalry and they have traveled far. By the time they arrive before Jianye, they will already be a spent force.[5] Although Jianye does not have a large garrison, it does possess fifty thousand imperial guardsmen. As long as we are able to defend the city

for a period of time, reinforcements will surely arrive."

At this time, a ranking official stepped forward and said, "Your Imperial Majesty, although Prime Minister Shang's words are reasonable, the Yong army is composed of elite soldiers. If we are unable to defend Jianye, then it will be a great danger to our country. In this subject's view, Your Imperial Majesty should temporarily shift the Imperial Presence someplace safe, returning to Jianye to reorganize when the enemy army has retreated. Your Imperial Majesty should not be placed in danger lightly."

When these words were spoken, the court officials stepped forward to agree one by one. Under normal circumstances, if these weren't painting the town red, they were frequenting brothels. After Zhao Jia succeeded the throne, he had become estranged with all the virtuous subjects, while the number of vile characters grew. Many virtuous subjects had been demoted or dismissed because of the dispute over ascending to the Imperial Throne. As a result, under the current urgent circumstances, one could not find any capable ministers present to discuss these matters of state. Although Shang Weijun was relatively ordinary, this time he was comparatively wise. But he could not face the anger of the multitude. Ultimately, he could only say, "If that is the case, Your Imperial Majesty can temporarily shift your Imperial Presence. Please allow this elderly subject to command the Imperial Guard and defend Jianye. In addition, I ask Your Imperial Majesty to permit the Crown Prince to supervise the governance of this country."

Zhao Jia agreed again and again, "Good, Jianye will be entrusted to the Prime Minister. But the Crown Prince is only four years old. He would serve no purpose staying behind."

Shang Weijun believed that, without a prince staying behind, they would be unable to defend Jianye from the Yong army. He could only request this over and over again. Although Zhao Jia did not have a profound affection for this son of his, all of his other sons were from Yong women. He naturally had to be a bit attentive. But seeing that the Yong army would soon arrive, Zhao Jia was ultimately unwilling to delay. He hurriedly led a group of trusted ministers, concubines, and several thousand imperial guardsmen, fleeing an hour before the Yong army arrived.

Before Zhao Jia had even left the city, Shang Weijun gave the order to raid and seize the Bright Moon Pavilion. He further dispatched guardsmen to surround the palace, placing Princess Changle, who had remained behind, under house arrest. Although Zhao Jia was like a monkey with a hat in taking the Imperial Title,[6] because the aftermath of the war between Great Yong and Southern Chu had not been resolved, he had not promoted his queen to Empress. From Li Xian's first campaign against Xiangyang, Zhao Jia had brought the queen back to live in the Palace. It was only because of fear of Great Yong's strength that he did not place the queen under house arrest. However, Princess Changle grasped the big picture and did not take a single step out of the Palace. In reality, the house arrest ordered by Shang Weijun was only to feign an appearance. Who was to know that the imperial guardsmen would report that the Bright Moon Pavilion was completely empty, while Princess Changle had disappeared, while all of the court ladies were locked in a single room. Shang Weijun turned pale with fright. He knew that he had lost the protective talisman. Not worrying about the city's defenses, he ordered those fighters that he trusted to have Consort Shang and the Crown Prince changed into commoner garb and led to safety. After that, Shang Weijun mounted the ramparts to personally take charge of the defense.

At this time, within a farmhouse on the northern outskirts of Jianye was the scene of bloodstained swords. Liang Wan wore green-colored commoner garb. A short sword was in her hands. Although the sword was unmarked by blood, Liang Wan's forehead dripped with sweat. Behind her, seated on a chair, was a woman with a wan and sallow, but clear and attractive, complexion. She was also in commoner garb. Behind her stood a pretty maid with a short sword in her hands. To the left and right stood a dozen or so Great Yong spies dressed as farmers. All of them were injured. The floor was covered with bloodstained arrows and crossbow bolts.

Liang Wan could not believe her current predicament. After she had brought Princess Changle to this hidden farm, her force had been caught off guard and attacked. She could only retreat into the farmhouse, only to discover that the two individuals she had left there earlier had been captured and bound tightly. The legs of the two individuals had suffered

grievous cuts before being treated. Liang Wan had led her spies out several times to break the encirclement, but had been blocked by volleys of arrows and crossbow bolts. Once, Liang Wan had relied upon the soft armor that she was wearing to charge out. But just as she had left the courtyard, she was stopped by four masked men wielding sabers. Although the martial arts of these masked men were, in Liang Wan's eyes, only second-rate, they were bold and powerful with ferocious blade techniques. In addition, they cooperated well and were using a blade formation to entrap Liang Wan for a period of time. Seeing that the arrows and crossbow bolts were flying towards her, Liang Wan could only break through and retreat back into the farmhouse.

Unfortunately, she was stuck between a rock and a hard place. She was becoming increasingly confused. Those surrounding her were definitely elite soldiers. At the very least they were comparable to the best soldiers of Great Yong. In addition, those martial artists who had stopped her were not easily found. In the current Southern Chu, how could there be such an elite unit near Jianye? Even if they were Southern Chu spies, why had they only now taken action? They could have acted when she had rescued the Princess from the Palace. From beginning to end, Liang Wan could not understand who was surrounding her. But she knew that they absolutely must hold out. For safety, they had not revealed this location to the Yong army. If they could not hold out until the arrival the Yong army, then not only would she lose her life, but also the Princess would be finished. If something happened to the Princess, even if she were to die, Liang Wan would be unable to quell the Yong Emperor's anger. When the time came, the Fengyi Sect would have to bear this anger.

As Liang Wan was thinking, one of her subordinates informed her in a low voice, "Lady Liang, they have finally woken."

Liang Wan was delighted. Although the two that had been left here had suffered numerous injuries, they had not died. They had been in a coma, unable to wake. They must have taken some medicine. She walked over and hurriedly asked, "What happened? Who attacked you?"

One of the men licked his parched lips and replied, "My ladyship, only one

person came. He was dressed in black and had his face covered. He didn't say anything. But his martial arts were extraordinary. Using only one stance, he injured both of us. That person originally wanted to kill us, but was stopped by another. The second person should not know any martial arts, as his footsteps were weak and his breath deficient. He gave the order to leave slashes on our legs. After that, we fainted."

Liang Wan listened to their words, but found them useless. Just then, an icy voice could be heard from outside. "Those in the farmhouse, listen up! We have run out of patience! If you do not come out within the time it takes for a stick of incense to burn, we will burn the farmhouse down!"

"If you set fire to the farmhouse," replied Liang Wan in a loud voice, "Aren't you worried that you'll attract others' attention?"

It was silent outside for a moment before the man returned, "Southern Chu is too busy worrying about itself to care about others, while Great Yong is still more than an hour away. We have plenty of time. The longer you take to think, the more severe the punishment will be. If you surrender now, we can guarantee that at the very least, you all will not die painfully."

Liang Wan could only feel cold sweat flood down her back. For the first time, she regretted that she had not brought more men here. As she was hesitating, several straw bundles were thrown next to the doorway. A lit fire starter was thrown over. Quickly a blaze was started. Without any alternatives, Liang Wan could only yell out, "We're surrendering!"

The two straw bundles were pulled away. A man of average height in black garb and with his face covered stepped into the doorway. His hands were empty, weaponless. But Liang Wan could feel the faint pressure being exuded from his body. Her left hand was holding the flying daggers at her waist. But at this moment, she did not have the courage to throw the daggers. The black-garbed man commanded in a feminine voice, "Raise your hands and walk out one by one."

Liang Wan jolted. She had heard this kind of voice before—it was the speech of a eunuch. But they should be from Southern Chu. Summoning her courage, she threw down her short sword. She raised her hands and

collected her disordered hair. Lithely, she walked towards that man. She knew that this person could be a eunuch. Even if he wasn't, he probably trained in a particularly malevolent and feminine internal energy. If that was the case, then his temperament was probably also insidious. As a result, Liang Wan dared not use her beauty to bewilder him. Instead, she would present the image that she was yielding and compliant. She held her two hands behind her back and walked towards that man. Just as she was passing him, her body moved like a viper and slid back, sending the dagger in her right hand piercing towards the man's throat. This was an impossible-to-defend attack, but the man's right hand softly swept forward, and Liang Wan lost feeling in her wrist. Afterwards a pale white and frigid palm extended forward and grasped her throat. Liang Wan could only feel that the hand was as nauseous and dreadful as a viper. Afterwards, she lost consciousness.

When Liang Wan awoke, she found that she was in the dark. She perked her ears and listened, but she could not detect anyone near her. She tried to move her body, but found that her hands were tightly bound behind her. She still had her martial arts and there wasn't anything strange about the condition of her body. She rejoiced and took a breath. She did not make any more movements, as she did not want to attract any attention. Just then, a frosty voice spoke, "You've awoken; young master wants to see you."

After that, bright lights were revealed. Liang Wan involuntarily closed her eyes. Two men brought her to her feet. From her senses, Liang Wan could tell that the two were still young. Without letting her walk on her own, the two brought Liang Wan into a spacious room without windows. This was a secret chamber. Torches were mounted on the four corners of the room. Seated in the chair in the center of the room was a black-garbed, masked scholar. On the four walls hung all of Liang Wan's subordinates, held in place with five iron chains. There was no sign of torture on their bodies. Liang Wan also saw another man standing next to the seated black-clothed scholar. From his two hands, Liang Wan was able to recognize him as the person who had captured her. Outside of this, there were six men in black standing in the corners. Liang Wan was brought to the wall facing the scholar. With practiced ease, the two men chained Liang Wan's wrists,

ankles, and waist to the wall. The chains were tightened and Liang Wan was immobilized. Another man in black stepped forward, and using a bucket, splashed Liang Wan with cold water. Liang Wan's entire body was soaked, revealing the beautiful outline of an exquisitely developed and mature woman. She was equally ashamed and angry. Although she was already twenty-seven, she was still a virgin. How could she take such humiliation? The men in black all looked her without restraint. Even her subordinates could not help but steal glances.

"Who are you, really?" asked Liang Wan indignantly, "Why are you making trouble for my Great Yong?"

The black-robed scholar coolly replied, "This one is not making trouble for Great Yong. Liang Wan, I am here for you. Everyone else was unfortunate to be fish in the same pool of water."

Liang Wan shivered inside. These past few years, she had been in service to Great Yong. How could there be individuals here to avenge a personal vendetta? Seeing the hesitation in her subordinates' eyes, she questioned, humiliated and angry, "What did you do with the two other ladies?"

She did not dare reveal Princess Changle's identity, but the black-garbed scholar said, "You are speaking of Her Imperial Highness, Princess Changle? Her Imperial Highness, Princess Changle, has nothing to do with this matter. This one greatly sympathizes with the Princess's bitter experiences. As such, she has been arranged to stay in a different room. But her female guard's martial arts were extremely similar to yours. She tried to seize an opportunity to mount a sneak attack and has been mistakenly killed by my subordinates."

Trembling on the inside, Liang Wan uttered, "You are really vicious. My junior apprentice sister was only nineteen. Who would have thought that you would be so cruel?"

The black-clothed scholar did not say anything. The man who stood behind him spoke in a dark and gentle voice, "Who cares if we mistakenly kill one person? If you are unwilling to answer our question, I will make you wish you were dead."

Liang Wan furiously retorted, “Who are you, really? What rancor do you have with me?”

The black garbed scholar coldly replied, “I will only ask you one thing: did you kill Liu Piaoxiang?”

Liang Wan immediately stared back blankly. There was no way she could foresee that she would be asked this question.

Footnotes :

趁火打劫, chenhuodajie – idiom, lit. to loot a burning building; to profit from somebody’s misfortune
江淮, Jianghuai – refers to the region between the Yangtze and the Huai Rivers
This is an aphorism by the Prussian general and military theorist, Carl von Clausewitz.
戮力同心, lulíltongxin – idiom, concerted efforts in a common cause; united and working together
强弩之末, qiangnuzhimo – idiom, lit. an arrow at the end of its flight; fig. spent force
沐猴而冠, muhou’erguan – idiom, lit. a monkey wearing a hat; fig. worthless person in imposing attire

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 21: Learning the Truth

Volume 1, Chapter 21: Learning the Truth

I looked at Liang Wan. I had spent much time thinking of how to capture her and I had dispatched numerous operatives. Finally, I had found where she was planning on hiding the princess. After she entered the trap, I had surrounded and entrapped her using military formations before using superior martial arts and threats on the princess's life to ultimately capture them. Although the entire process seemed simple and smooth, I had, in actuality, spent too much time thinking about this. In order to force Liang Wan to confess, the method I used was to have her feel like she was helpless. Only by having her lose her confidence, could I have her obediently confess. Otherwise, if she were to see that I was not willing to harm the princess, everything would be useless.

Gloomily, Liang Wan asked, "Who is she to you?"

"Piaoxiang and I had promised to wed," I replied casually. "The night before she died, she was with me. Unfortunately, in order to finish her affairs, she agreed to the madam's request and died an unnatural death."

Liang Wan looked at the men before her, quickly searching through her memory, trying to think of everyone who had ties with Piaoxiang. Although there were many officials who visited Piaoxiang, none of them matched with the behavior of the man before her. She once again thought back to the scene right before Piaoxiang's death. At the time, she had entered the room and found that Liu Piaoxiang was bathing. Piaoxiang's beautiful appearance carried a burning anger. When she saw her, Piaoxiang coldly said, "To think that Princess Mingyue is only so-so. Surprisingly, you would deceive and humiliate a lowly lady like myself."

Liang Wan remembered that she had tried to tactfully mollify Piaoxiang. Liu Piaoxiang replied in an icy voice, "There is nothing that I can say about those of you with prestige. It would be useless even if I were to file suit. You can be relieved. I have my own life that I will live."

Piaoxiang was clearly expressed her forbearance, and yet in Liang Wan's heart, she felt a chill. She did not believe that Liu Piaoxiang, who had previously insulted the Prince of Han, Zhao Delong, would let the matter go. If this matter was spread by Liu Piaoxiang, then her own reputation would become sullied, causing her to lose her ability to have standing in Southern Chu. To lose such standing would cause her to lose the enterprise that she had painstakingly built up to someone else. She had ultimately acted, killing Liu Piaoxiang before she could leave.

Seeing Liang Wan search her memories, a monstrous rage bubbled forth from within. If she had not killed Piaoxiang, then she would not think so much. I icily interrogated, "Have you remembered?"

Liang Wan looked at me, thinking in her mind, *So the reason Liu Piaoxiang was willing to compromise and was willing to not retaliate was because she wished to reunite with her lover. It seemed like her lover's status wasn't too high. Otherwise, Liu Piaoxiang would not be willing to agree to not retaliate* .

Just as Liang Wan was continuing to think, the black-clothed man with a frigid voice stepped forward and walked in front of her. In one move, he ripped apart her bodice. Liang Wan felt cold air against her chest, as half of it was revealed for all to see. Liang Wan cried out in shame. Understanding that this was a warning, she could only speak, "Since it has reached this point, I believe that sire has sufficient evidence. Correct, I killed Liu Piaoxiang."

She admitted it. I ferociously looked at Liang Wan and continued questioning. "Good. Tell me who the bastard was who had you humiliate Liu Piaoxiang and then deal with the aftermath."

Liang Wan only now understood why she was still alive. She was originally an extraordinarily intelligent woman. Now that she had an opportunity to take advantage, she smiled faintly and responded, "So sire wishes to know about this. I am the only one who know about this matter. May I ask sire, what price you are willing to pay for this information?"

"I knew long ago that you would make this a transaction," I stated callously. "But why would I act if I did not have sufficient confidence? Lady

Liang, regardless of how important or illustrious your status, you have fallen into my hands today. I can do as I please. If you are willing to reveal that person's identity, I promise you that you will die peacefully. But if you are unwilling, I have a thousand ways of making you die with regrets."

Liang Wan haughtily laughed and countered, "I know that against a woman there are many ways to harm her. You can allow every single man in this room to dishonor me. You can use all kinds of torture upon me. You can destroy my appearance. But you should know that I, Liang Wan, possess an iron state of mind. Regardless of how you harm me, as long as I refuse to speak, then the person who dies with regrets will be you. If you are willing to fairly negotiate, then I promise you that I will one day reveal that person's identity."

I lightly clapped my hands, returning a smile. "Good. Truly deserving of being the leader of Great Yong's intelligence network." Turning to my subordinates, I asked, "Tell me, was my original caution correct?"

In an emotionless voice, Chen Zhen replied, "Young master indeed possesses extraordinary intelligence. This subordinate admiringly pays his respects."

I walked to Liang Wan's side and in an unsympathetic voice, said, "I knew long ago how you would react. You have the conviction and willingness to die. I also believe that you would endure all of the cruel tortures. This one is knowledgeable in medicine. I can allow you to experience life's greatest suffering and humiliation. These people are all your subordinates. I can have them come satiate their lust upon you. When that time comes, what face do you have to be their superior?"

With difficulty, Liang Wan endured the dread she felt. She agreed, "I know that you can accomplish such a deed. I have heard that there are those who are skilled in the use of aphrodisiacs. Women who have taken these drugs suffer a fate too horrible to contemplate. But as long as I remember that I was drugged, then I would not have to lower my head in shame."

I coolly remarked, "You can kill everyone to silence them anyways. After that, no one will know about this, right?"

Liang Wan neutrally denied, “How could I?” But from her eyes, one could see that that was her intention.

I smiled slightly and continued, “You are still a virgin, but I believe that you are not a woman who has avoided immorality.[1] If that is the case, why do you not have any lovers? Is it that you view all men with contempt? Or is it that you already have a sweetheart? Or is it that to you, being a virgin is extremely important?”

Suddenly Xiaoshunzi interjected, “Young master, the martial art that she has trained in should not require her to be a virgin. I believe that she has a sweetheart or her purpose is to be a specific individual’s wife. As such, she must protect her virginity.”

Watching Liang Wan’s expression, I wondered, “Maybe that is the case. Come, bring the wine. Have her drink it.”

Carrying a jug of wine, Daoli and Baiyi stepped forward. Baiyi pinched Liang Wan’s nose, while Daoli poured the contents of the jug down her throat. Their movements were practiced, leaving Liang Wan no chance of resisting. But still, almost half of the wine poured out of her mouth onto her chest. Liang Wan waited for them to release their hands and then coughed several times. While her chest was freezing, her throat was scorching hot. Her face was red from almost suffocating from the wine. Liang Wan could feel everyone’s eyes fall upon her. Although she was ashamed, she understood that life or death, honor or disgrace all rested on this moment. As such, she persisted in staunchly raising her head to look at the black clothed scholar. In her mind, she thought that if she could not control herself, then she would swallow her tongue to commit suicide. Even if she was stopped, these people would know her resolve.

After not much time had passed, Liang Wan did not feel the effects of an aphrodisiac. Instead, Liang Wan felt her spirit bright and vivacious, as if she was in the realm of the immortals. Gradually, Liang Wan felt lazy, itching to lie down and sleep. But just as she moved, she could not do anything because of her bindings. At this time, a gentle voice whispered into her ear, “Lady Liang, do you wish to rest?”

Liang Wan moaned lightly and replied, “I wish to sleep.”

The voice continued to ask, “You have been in Southern Chu for so long. You must have bribed many high-ranking officials and have many spies under your command?”

Her expression misty, Liang Wan answered, “Indeed, the Prince of Yong sent me here to protect Her Imperial Highness, the Princess. Afterwards, he had me take command of the intelligence network in Jiangnan. It is a pity that I could only disappoint his deep favor. Master has said that the Crown Prince is the rightful Son of Heaven.”

“Who is your master?” the voice continued to ask.

Impatiently, Liang Wan responded, “My master is of course the Sect Master of the Fengyi Sect.”

“Oh! So who was it that had you invite Liu Piaoxiang to Bright Moon Pavilion?”

Liang Wan only said, “It was,” before she suddenly awoke. With a cold light in her eyes, she looked at me and coldly said, “What did I say?”

Just then, one of her subordinates callously commented, “You said that you betrayed the Prince of Yong and threw in your lot with the Crown Prince. *Arrgh* …” A black-clothed man punched the subordinate in the lower abdomen, silencing him.

I looked at the deathly pale face of Liang Wan and said, “You have even revealed your betrayal, what else is there that you can hide?”

Liang Wan flashed a cold smile and proclaimed, “Although I indiscreetly revealed that matter, at most all I need to do is overtly serve the crown prince. My only bargaining chip is the identity of that person. So if you are not willing to pay the price, I will absolutely not reveal that man’s identity. In fact, why are you wasting so much effort on a mere prostitute? There are innumerable beautiful women in this world. My Fengyi Sect has many beautiful, extraordinary senior and junior apprentice sisters. If sire is willing, Liang Wan is willing to play matchmaker.”

I disinterestedly uttered, “Although Piaoxiang had the misfortune of falling

into prostitution, her heart was like the brightest moon of the highest Heavens. Although Lady Liang has usurped the title of Bright Moon, your very actions cannot even compare to that of a prostitute."

Liang Wan was so angry her complexion became ashen. I sighed lightly. Liang Wan was indeed difficult to deal with. I had deliberately mentioned aphrodisiacs. As a result, everyone believed that we had forced her to drink an aphrodisiac. In reality, the wine was laced with a hallucinogen. This kind of hallucinogen's greatest weakness was that if the user were prepared then it would be useless. I had previously allowed captured Great Yong spies take this hallucinogen, but even without any preparation, they did not utter a single word. Therefore, I first misled Liang Wan as to my motives to reduce her vigilance. Subsequently, while she was defending against an aphrodisiac, I had fed her a hallucinogen and had her answer several questions. Unfortunately, Liang Wan strictly guarded against matters of life and death. Ultimately, I was unsuccessful. But I was not discouraged. This was only one step in my original plans. To this point, Liang Wan had already understood my interest in the matter. Thus when I revealed my trump card, she would agree to change conditions.

I laughed lightly and said, "It looks like Lady Liang is unwilling to speak. If that is the case, I can only offend you."

"I want to see what other methods you have," spoke Liang Wan arrogantly.

I quietly mentioned, "I want to invite my ladyship to listen to a good performance." Thus speaking, I signaled with my hand. Chiji bowed before turning and opening the stone door behind my chair. Behind the door, everyone could see a copper mirror placed on one side. From the flickering light reflected in the mirror, one could see a large bed with tasseled bead curtains. On the bed sat a young lady in white. It was the Princess Changle. From the angles, Princess Changle must be in the room behind the stone door. Chiji walked into the room and closed the stone door behind him. All of the Great Yong spies looked at me with hideous expressions on their faces. It seemed like they understood what I was planning to do. With a gesture, a hidden copper tube on the stone door was revealed. At this moment, everyone could hear the voices being transmitted through the

copper tube.

“Who are you? What are you trying to do to Us … me?”

“No, don’t come over here … don’t come over here.”

After that, everyone could hear the sound of silk ripping followed by the weeping and struggling sounds of a young lady.

“Stop! Stop!” cried all of the Yong spies. Only Liang Wan did not say a word, her face hideous.

I gestured towards the copper tube. Although no more sounds could be heard, everyone became even more anxious. They all struggled mightily. Some even began to curse.

I coldly expressed, “Lady Liang, if you do continue to refuse to reveal what I want you to say, then you must know what Princess Changle will suffer. You must know that if His Imperial Majesty, the Great Yong Emperor, learned that his beloved daughter experienced such torment because of you, how he would treat you, how the Crown Prince would treat you, and how the Prince of Yong would treat you.”

Liang Wan raised her head in despair. She knew that she had fallen into a deep trap. This person was as terrifying as a devil. From the methods he employed against her, Liang Wan could conclude that he was a fiend with deep and profound thoughts. He was absolutely capable of performing such a terrible deed. There was only one thing he would not do—harm her life—as he dared not bear the consequences of her remaining silent.

In an agonized voice, she spoke, “Have your subordinates stop. If the Princess has not been harmed and you promise to not harm me, I will tell you everything you wish to know.”

I casually conveyed, “Speak quickly. My subordinate’s temperament isn’t hurried. As long as you speak now, then there’s still time. As for your life, I promise that I will not take your life today and will not harm you.”

Distressed, Liang Wan said, “I can only believe you. That person was the Crown Prince, Li An.”

My brow furrowed and I icily retorted, “What are you bullshitting about?

When did the Crown Prince of Great Yong come to Southern Chu?”

“The Prince of Qi promised the King of Southern Chu that he could ascend to the Imperial Throne upon the successful conclusion of the campaign against Shu,” explained Liang Wan, unperturbed. “But he went back on his word.[2] If a suitable person of high status had not come to placate the Southern Chu, if this matter were made public, it would have harmed Great Yong’s prestige. As a result, His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, secretly came to Southern Chu. Outside of Zhao Jia, he did not meet with anyone else. Before he left, the Crown Prince heard the Prince of Qi mention that he must see Liu Piaoxiang. I originally thought that Liu Piaoxiang was only a prostitute, who would willingly attend the Crown Prince upon meeting him. Who could guess that after Liu Piaoxiang arrived, she only sang one song before wanting to depart. His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, was furious and raped her. Afterwards, he had me take care of the aftermath. I only killed Liu Piaoxiang.” Liang Wan told a small lie. Although Li An had told her to take care of things, he had not told her to kill Liu Piaoxiang. He only believed that it would be sufficient to pay additional money. It was just Liang Wan who feared that Liu Piaoxiang would spread the news about what had happened, destroying her reputation and resulting in the crown prince receiving blame. As a result, Liang Wan had killed Liu Piaoxiang to silence her forever. To Liang Wan, Liu Piaoxiang’s death was nothing.

I looked at Liang Wan. Having finally learned the reality of what had happened, I was practically completely disheartened.[3] How was I to take vengeance upon the Crown Prince of Great Yong? Liang Wan could see the change in my demeanor and said, “If sire is willing to allow bygones to be bygones, Liang Wan can promise that you will rise in rank meteorically.”

I frostily questioned, “You speak the truth?”

“You can only believe me,” answered Liang Wan coldly. “If you do not believe me, then you can go against your word and have me killed.”

I didn’t make a sound. Before determining the veracity of her words, I would not kill her. Liang Wan understood this point, thus dared to say so.

Suddenly one of the Yong spies piped up. “Sire, you have not yet let off the Princess.”

I didn’t say a word. Chen Zhen opened the stone door. In the copper mirror, everyone saw the princess still sitting there. The only difference was in her posture. Chiji exited the room and closed the door.

I looked at the spies and explained, “Everyone be at ease. Her Imperial Highness, the Princess, has had much adversity in her life. How could this one harm her? This subordinate of mine is skilled in vocal mimicry and has incurred everyone’s ridicule.”

The spies all relaxed. That the princess had not been harmed left them extremely gratified. On the other hand, Liang Wan looked at me venomously and said, “So it is you! I know who you are! Jiang Zhe, you are Jiang Zhe!”

Her words were like a cold wind blowing, quieting everyone. My subordinates were quiet because my identity had been revealed, while the Yong spies were astonished as they all knew about me, the talented *zhuangyuan* .

I emotionlessly asked, “How did Lady Liang identify me?”

Arrogantly, Liang Wan answered, “From your voice. I finally remembered where I had heard your voice before. In addition, when you were speaking of the Princess, your eyes were tender, filled with sympathy and pity. Back then, when you met with the Princess, you had the same look.”

Admiringly, I looked at Liang Wan and responded, “Formidable, indeed. Lady Liang is a worthy representative of Great Yong’s intelligence network to unexpectedly see through me, a person you have not had much contact with.”

Liang Wan’s expression was strange. She callously declared, “Jiang Zhe, you have seized the Princess, committing a grave crime. Someday, if you are willing, I will recommend you to the Imperial Court of Great Yong. At that point, your future career prospects will be boundless. There is no point in harming your future prospects for the sake of a woman.”

I humorlessly smiled, opining, “Lady Liang, you are truly too terrifying. It is said that ‘The fangs of a green bamboo snake, *The sting on a wasp’s hind part*

— Neither will such venom make / As a ruthless woman's heart.'[4] I only truly believed this verse today. Not bad. I won't kill you and I won't harm you. I will only take your memory and your intellect."

Xiaoshunzi walked over and forced a pill the size of a longan fruit into Liang Wan's mouth. Although Liang Wan wanted to resist, Xiaoshunzi's ice-cold hands caused her to lose the courage to struggle. I apathetically looked at her terrified eyes and said, "I did not kill you, nor did I harm a hair on your body. After taking this pill, you will forget everything. Although I cannot guarantee how much you will forget, I can promise you that you will never remember what has happened today."

Liang Wan looked at me with dread. She knew that I would not easily let her off, but she would never have thought that I would use such a method. She cried out, "I have lied to you! What I told you isn't true!"

I coldly stated, "Lady Liang, if you were really concealing another person's identity, then would it be necessary to use the Crown Prince's name to fob someone off?"

Liang Wan only felt that she recalling everything that had happened to her —the joy of her childhood, the bitter training of her youth, the surprise and feeling she felt when she first met the Prince of Yong, the scheming in Southern Chu, and lastly the look of regret in Liu Piaoxiang's eyes before she died. After that, everything gradually disappeared. At the end, Liang Wan's face revealed a smile like that of a child, filled with innocence.

I indifferently said, "You have killed my wife. I have destroyed your entire life. Although this does not balance things out, you have been punished for your crime. Lady Liang, if we are not to meet again, then I hope that you will live a good life. But if you are unlucky and we meet again, I can only take your life to comfort my departed wife's soul in heaven."

I raised my eyes. Aside from Xiaoshunzi, everyone had looks of dread in their eyes. Even though Chen Zhen, Chiji, Daoli, and the other operatives had all seen me use this kind of pill to wipe the memories of the youngsters that did not meet the standards, I had only used a small dose in those cases. As a result, those youngsters had only lost two to three years of their memory.

They had not seen such a case such as this where Liang Wan had her entire memory erased. I smiled slightly; it was good they feared. I glanced at the Yong spies and indifferently said, “You know my identity. I’m sorry, but I cannot allow you to leave.”

One spy asked, “Will you feed us such a drug?“

I shook my head and answered, “This kind of drug is worth more than its weight in gold. I am not willing to randomly use it. I must take your lives. In any case, you have spent years in Southern Chu. For me to kill you does not cross the line.”

Looks of solemnity and tragedy flickered across the eyes of these spies. One of them stated, “Sire is a ranking official of Southern Chu and possesses animosity because of national and personal reasons. Originally it is nothing for you to kill us. But since sire pities Her Imperial Highness, the Princess, we ask that sire not hand over the Princess to Southern Chu and allow us to bring Her Imperial Highness to the Prince of Yong. We will die without any resentment.”

I looked at the man and replied, “Today’s matter must not be revealed to anyone, be it the Heavens or your parents. For you to know these secrets, even if I spare you, the Crown Prince will not spare you. If you are capable of keeping your promises, I can return your weapons to you and allow you to escort Her Highness, the Princess, to the Prince of Yong. When that mission is completed, you must commit suicide to keep this secret.”

The man’s eyes revealed pleasant surprise, as he asked, “Sire is willing to trust us?”

In a proper tone, I explained, “I believe that a warrior of Great Yong will follow through on his promises. Breaking the promise will cause me to look down upon the Prince of Yong. You have all seen my methods. You must know that it isn’t difficult for me to assassinate someone. The Prince of Yong will be the price of you breaking faith.”

Thinking it over, the man said, “Sire’s methods are grim and ferocious, and your plans are meticulous. If you wished to assassinate the Prince of Yong, you would probably have at least a fifty percent chance of being successful.

Fine, our worthless lives aren't insignificant. Completing the mission is of utmost importance. We only ask that sire allow us to report to the Prince of Yong the relationship between the Crown Prince and Liang Wan."

I indifferently replied, "That is fine. However, you may not reveal anything about my subordinates, my wife, or me."

The man agreed. I smiled faintly and turned to leave. The following matters would be handled by Chen Zhen. Xiaoshunzi followed me out and asked, "Will they fulfill their promise?"

I nodded my head and responded, "I have never misjudged anyone. They are all firm and unswerving warriors."

Footnotes :

洁身自好, jieshenzihao – idiom, lit. clean-living and honest; to avoid immorality, to shun evil influence
出尔反尔, chu'erfan'er – idiom, by Mencius, former definition: to reap the consequences of one's word; modern: to go back on one's word, to contradict oneself, inconsistent
万念俱灰, wannianjuhui – idiom, lit. every hope turns to dust; completely disheartened
This is a line from 封神演义, *Fengshen Yanyi* , aka *Investiture of the Gods* .

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 22: Jianye Falls

Volume 1, Chapter 22: Jianye Falls

While I was in the secret chambers forcing a confession, Jianye had already prepared its defenses under orders from Shang Weijun. Although the news that the Southern Chu Emperor had fled was deliberately leaked, causing the imperial guardsmen to lose their will to fight, Shang Weijun had executed a hundred rumor-mongering “spies,” doing barely enough to stabilize the morale of the soldiers. Shang Weijun had spent a long time presiding over governmental affairs. As a result, the imperial guardsmen were willing to listen to his orders. However, a mere fifty thousand soldiers were not sufficient to defend the city, creating tremendous difficulties for Shang Weijun. Afterwards, he could only urge all the young men within the city to mount the walls and prepare for battle. When Great Yong’s advance scouts arrived, Jianye was ready for battle.

The next day, as the eastern morning sun was exposed through the clouds—as dawn broke—several thousand valiant horsemen in black armor began to approach from afar. At their head was a general in black who guided his horse to the top of a small hill, gazing upon the city of Jianye. All the other horsemen spread out. Shortly, they all seemed to have disappeared, leaving the general and a dozen or so personal guards. After a short period of time, one could hear the faint sounds of bugles sounding, echoing throughout. The black-armored general accepted the bugle from one of his bodyguards and put it to his lips, blowing loudly. The sound was impassioned and mournful. The soldiers on the city battlements all felt their moods become abnormally strained, crying out with fear. Although the defending commanders repeatedly berated their subordinates, one could still hear frightened shouts frequently.

The distant Yong horsemen seemed to stand as still as a dense and awe-inspiring forest of tall trees, making no sounds. After a while, one could hear the sounds of the earth trembling, which could be heard from a distance.

This sound was the rumbling of several tens of thousands of horseshoes trampling the earth. The vibrations were extremely painful to the ear. It wasn't long before everyone saw on the horizon thousands upon thousands[1] of black-armored horsemen charge forth. At the start, it seemed as if the cavalry were formed into scattered groups of three to five horsemen. As they approached, one could see that the scattered groupings formed into orderly military columns, the process natural and unforced.[2] The cavalry came to a sudden stop a thousand paces away from Jianye's city walls.

From within the formation, a horseman clad in golden armor and wearing a black cloak slowly spurred his horse out. Following behind him was a personal guard brandishing a large banner. On the banner stitched in blood red were the words, "Grand General of Heavenly Strategies Li." At the same moment that the banner was unfurled, the sound of bugles began to flood in every direction. The soaring killing aura and the imposing prestige of the Yong army could not but frighten the Jianye defenders.

A literate imperial guardsman squinted his eyes as he gazed upon the banner. Sighing, he said, "Grand General of Heavenly Strategies Li … the Prince of Yong has come. I've heard that he is the most formidable Yong prince. Can we really defend Jianye?"

Standing next to him was a newly conscripted soldier. Apprehensive, he asked, "Wasn't it said that it was the Prince of Yong commanding the Yong army? Who is this Grand General of Heavenly Strategies Li?"

The imperial guardsman rolled his eyes at the greenhorn. "What do you know? The Grand General of Heavenly Strategies is the Prince of Yong's official position; the Prince of Yong is his title. The banner the Prince of Yong always displays is that of a grand general. Some say it's because the Prince of Yong feels that his Grand General official position was the product of his own sweat and labor. As a result, he attaches great importance to this position. Other than this banner, he has a golden dragon banner that he only uses when encamped or when he has won a victory."

Envious, the new soldier replied, "Big brother surely knows a lot."

Please with himself, the imperial guard stated, "That's only natural. I, your

elder, saw the Prince of Yong's army when we were invading Shu back in the day. At that time, they were allied troops."

Crack ! A whip lashed against flesh. The imperial guard screamed in pain and collapsed to the ground. When everyone looked over, they saw an officer of the disciplinary group staring at them like a tiger eyeing its prey.[3] In a stern voice, the officer reprimanded, "You dare disturb the army's morale? If we were not confronting the enemy right now,[4] this official would take your worthless life first."

The imperial guard hurriedly scampered to his feet, humbled. "This little one does not dare, this little one does not dare." Watching the officer walk away, the imperial guardsman spat a mouthful of bloody phlegm on the ground, fiercely cursing the officer under his breath before turning his attention back to the scene below the city walls.

Shang Weijun stood on the battlements, gazing down upon the brave and strong army that was before the city. He calculated in his head. Although the enemy was strong, they only numbered twenty thousand. If they could sally forth and capture the Prince of Yong, then the current perilous situation would be alleviated. Thinking of this, he turned to the Vice Commander of the Imperial Guard and asked, "The enemy only has twenty thousand troops. Can we sally forth to battle?"

"We don't have any cavalry," answered the Vice Commander. "It is best that we remain inside defending the city."

Shang Weijun's brow furrowed. Just then, the enemy soldiers outside the city began to holler, trying to incite battle. Shang Weijun quickly issued the order to prevent any soldier from foolishly leaving the city and had the logs and rocks prepared to defend the city. They all waited for the enemy to attack.

Looking at Jianye from a distance, Li Zhi smiled faintly and said, "I knew that they wouldn't dare to come out from behind the city walls."

Beside him, Sima Xiong, the commander of his personal guards, asked, "Your Imperial Highness, we only brought cavalry. How are we going to attack the city?"

Li Zhi smiled and replied, “Be at ease. I have no intention of using cavalry to attack the city. Although Jianye’s defenses are formidable, unfortunately the morale of its defenders is low and disorganized. I have already prepared agents inside the city. Today, we only need to stay here and take a look. That’s right, have the troops we dispatched reaped any benefits?

“They have,” responded Sima Xiong with a smile. “Your Highness has said that the sovereign of Southern Chu may try to flee before we arrive, and thus dispatched General Chen to block their escape. Our scouts have reported that Zhao Jia has indeed fled. If we are able to bring their captured monarch before the city walls, I wonder if they will obediently surrender?”

“Whether we will be able to capture their sovereign will be based on luck,” observed Li Zhi. “We cannot rely on it. It’s best we think of something to take the city. Were it not for Shang Weijun being completely hopeless with military affairs, our agents would have been unable to prepare plants inside to help us. Each and every Southern Chu general and soldier valiant and skilled in war has found it difficult to stand on solid footing in Jianye. This is a ridiculous fact for the ages. In comparison, all of our Great Yong’s Imperial Guard were selected from the best of the best.”

“Although the Imperial Guard is an elite force,” claimed Sima Xiong in disagreement, “They pale in comparison to Your Imperial Highness’s personal guards. Although this is because the Crown Prince deliberately excludes our men from joining the Imperial Guard, who doesn’t know that only one warrior in a thousand is able to join Your Imperial Highness’s personal guards.”

Li Zhi smiled faintly, not refuting Sima Xiong’s words. His bodyguard consisted of three thousand elite cavalry. All of them were a unit of *huben* [5] filled with soldiers willing to die. This time, the twenty thousand troops he had brought were being regarded as the basis for the expansion of his personal guard. Their elite training far surpassed that of the Yong Imperial Guard, not to mention the regular Yong army.

This day, Li Zhi only ordered his army to strut around[6] before the city. Shang Weijun did not dare sally forth from the city to give battle, causing the morale within the Southern Chu army to become increasingly depressed. As

dusk arrived, Li Zhi gave the order for his army to retreat ten *li* away from the city to encamp and rest. Seeing Li Zhi withdraw, Shang Weijun could finally relax. He returned to his residence. He tried to figure out if he was too cowardly by sending away Consort Shang and the Crown Prince to hide, and considered bringing them back tomorrow. He absentmindedly ate some food and went to sleep with his clothes on in his study. But his sleep was restless, repeatedly woken by nightmares.

Shang Weijun suddenly awoke from his nightmares, his forehead covered with sweat. Afterwards, he heard the distant sounds of shouts and cursing. He sat up. Just then, the door to the study was pushed open and a servant rushed in. Seeing that the Prime Minister was awake, the servant called out in an appalled voice, "*Daren* ! Something has happened! The Imperial Guard has revolted!"

Shang Weijun jumped to his feet and opened the window. He could clearly hear the screams outside. Some were screaming "the enemy has entered the city" and some were screaming "the sovereign has already fled, why are we sacrificing ourselves for him?" The majority of the screams weren't discernible, but some were cursing, while others were instigating the masses. Shang Weijun felt as cold as ice. Suddenly, he saw flames erupt all over the city, the blazes soaring to the Heavens. Shang Weijun looked at the fires stupidly, not knowing what to say.

In the middle of all this, the Yong army had launched a sneak attack on Jianye's western gate. The gate had been opened and the elite Yong cavalry charged into the city, filling the entire city[7] with horsemen in black clothes and armor. Illuminated by the flames, their arrival was as terrible and frightening as demonic monsters. On every street one could hear the tumultuous hubbub[8] of soldiers. In the beginning, Southern Chu soldiers had rushed to the western gate in the hopes of driving the Yong army out of the city, but in the face of the cruel slaughter perpetrated by the Yong army, the Southern Chu soldiers quickly broke, and the streets filled with the scattered remnants[9] fleeing for their lives. The chaos was so much that some of the Southern Chu soldiers even began to break into residences to slaughter and massacre. Within the fire, Jianye shuddered and groaned.

After daybreak, the Yong army had gained full control of the city and began to reestablish order in the city. All of the surrendered Southern Chu soldiers were expelled from and forced into camps outside the city where they were imprisoned. All of the soldiers who had taken advantage of the chaos were executed, their heads hung publicly. All of the common people of the city were ordered to remain in their homes. The fires had been brought under control and extinguished by the Yong army.

In control of the gates and the key points of the city, the Yong army began to interrogate the residents of the city. Each and every member of the Southern Chu imperial clan and every single individual holding a position rated at *sanpin* [10] were all arrested and imprisoned in the imperial dungeons. Everyone else was ordered to remain in their homes. The entire city was deathly silent. Anyone who dared to leave their homes without permission was punished. Any Southern Chu soldier who dared resist was executed. Shang Weijun had originally intended to take advantage of the chaos to flee, but ended up being captured by the Yong army, and was at this moment imprisoned in the imperial dungeons.

When noon approached, Li Zhi entered the city. Looking at the bloodstained streets, Li Zhi smiled faintly and said, “If it weren’t for the incompetence of Southern Chu’s sovereign and officials, it would not have been so easy for us to capture Jianye.”

Cautiously surveying their surroundings, Sima Xiong delivered, “Your Imperial Highness, this subject has already received a report: there are only court ladies and eunuchs left in the Palace. All of the ladies sent from Great Yong are there, but all of the children they produced have been taken away. Consort Shang and the Crown Prince were not in the Palace. After investigation, it is likely that they were sent away by Shang Weijun.”

Thinking it over, Li Zhi replied, “As for the Yong ladies, send someone to ask them if they are willing to return back to their home country and have them prepare to leave. If we capture Zhao Jia, have them continue to attend to him. If he is not captured, then allow them to return to their homes. Shang Weijun is the father of Consort Shang, and is of extreme importance. He must not be allowed to commit suicide. Take good care of him and bring

him along when we go back. As for the other officials, don't worry about them. Release them when we leave."

As the two were slowly making their way through the city, a horseman rushed forward. When he was close to the two, he reported, "General Chen's scouts have reported in. They have captured Zhao Jia."

"They've captured him?" asked Li Zhi, pleasantly surprised. "Where is he?"

"General Chen personally led a unit to pursue," responded the horseman. "Following the report from our agents, we were able to capture all of them. General Chen reports that the three thousand imperial guardsmen escorting Zhao Jia have all been separately annihilated. All of the imperial clansmen have been captured. Zhao Jia was easily captured. They are being escorted to Jianye and should arrive tomorrow."

"Order General Huang to lead a unit to reinforce General Chen," commanded Li Zhi. "Zhao Jia must be brought safely to Jianye." After giving the order, Li Zhi smiled faintly and continued, "Finally accomplished the mission. If we were unable to capture Zhao Jia, then this trip would have been in vain. Sima Xiong, do you remember the task I entrusted to you? I am a bit ill at ease. You will immediately go personally and ensure that location's safety."

Sima Xiong replied in the affirmative. Having his second-in-command ensure the Prince of Yong's safety, he hurriedly galloped forth, filled with suspicions. Before they had even entered the city, the Prince of Yong had ordered him to dispatch soldiers to a location on the northern suburbs of the city, placing that location under strict guard. Sima Xiong knew indistinctly that the location was the residence of a Southern Chu official, but he did not understand why the prince would value this person over everything else.

Arriving at the northern suburbs, Sima Xiong espied a small manor from a distance. It was surrounded outside by over a hundred horsemen, impenetrable.[11] As he approached, Sima Xiong saw that the plaque on the entrance read, "Concealed Cloud Manor." Although Sima Xiong was only a coarse, unsophisticated soldier, he could tell that the calligraphy of the

words was delicate and elegant. As he guided his horse forward, Colonel Duan, the officer in command of the cavalry, hurriedly came forward to welcome him, saluting with his sword.

“How is the situation?” asked Sima Xiong.

“General, after we surrounded the manor,” reported Colonel Duan, “A young boy came out to ask our purpose. I answered that we were following the orders of the Prince of Yong. The boy returned inside. After that, there was no more activity.”

Sima Xiong shook his head, filled with misgivings. He did not know the reason for the Prince of Yong’s orders, even to go so far as to have him personally deliver a message. He dismounted from his horse and stepped forward, knocking on the door. Not long afterwards, the door opened and a delicate manservant about fifteen or sixteen years old opened the door. With a calm demeanor, he asked, “Does the army sire have any instructions?”

“This general is Sima Xiong,” replied Sima Xiong, “I am here on the orders of the Prince of Yong to come seek a meeting with Jiang Zhe, Sir Jiang.”

The manservant smiled gently and welcomed, “Please come in, General.”

Sima Xiong followed the manservant inside. As he walked, he felt his entire state of mind become free of worry. Although this manor wasn’t large, it possessed several pavilions and kiosks separated by either small flowing streams or shoots of bamboo, giving off a fresh and clean, yet elegant sense. The manservant’s footsteps were light and quick, leading Sima Xiong down a limestone pathway. It didn’t take long before they arrived at a small pavilion hidden within a bamboo forest. Standing before the entrance to the pavilion was a delicate looking young man who carried a gloomy and cold aura. Wearing a smile on his face, the young man greeted Sima Xiong, “General has come from afar … my house’s young master should have come personally to welcome you. However, the young master is a scholar of Southern Chu, making it inconvenient for him to lower his status by coming forth to welcome you. Would the general please forgive this disrespect?”

When Sima Xiong heard this man’s voice, he first felt a chill before

shivering. His hand fell and grasped the grip of his sword. This man before him was delicate and refined looking, but his voice was very feminine and sharp. Having accompanied the Prince of Yong for years, Sima Xiong knew that there was only one kind of person who had these characteristics. Filled with suspicion, he asked, “Who are you? Why are you here?”

Disdain flashed across the young man’s eyes, as he replied, “This servant is Li Shun. I was originally in service within the Southern Chu Palace. Because I was on friendly terms with Jiang *daren* and I cared not for palace intrigue, I found a way to disengage myself and leave. I am currently attending by the young master’s side. Unexpectedly, the general has become suspicious.”

Half believing the man’s words, Sima Xiong requested, “Please bring me to meet Jiang *daren* .”

Li Shun turned and opened the door to the pavilion, allowing Sima Xiong to enter. Sima Xiong glanced at Li Shun before entering the pavilion. Inside, Sima Xiong immediately caught sight of a refined and elegant looking young man seated behind a desk, looking at him indifferently. On the desk before him, was an open book, several manuscripts, and an ink-stained brush placed in the brush pot. It looked like before Sima Xiong had arrived, the man was writing.

When Sima Xiong saw this young man, he suddenly remembered that he had met him before. Three years ago in Sichuan, he had met this young man in the Yong encampments. At the time, this young man had accompanied Southern Chu’s Prince of De. This man had even spent some time in deep conversation with the Prince of Yong. Afterwards, during the banquet, this young man had used the *Dance of the Cavalry* poem to force the King of Shu to commit suicide. Unfortunately, he only remembered that the person was an aide to the Prince of De and did not know that this man was the Jiang *daren* that he had come to meet.

Sima Xiong reflexively used a military salute to greet this young man. This person was someone that Sima Xiong greatly respected, even though he did not understand why the King of Shu would commit suicide after hearing that poem. In a respectful and deferential voice, he introduced himself. “This general is Sima Xiong, serving as the commander of the Prince of Yong’s

bodyguard. Under the Prince's decree, I am here to give one's respects to Sir. His Imperial Highness has said that he is busy with military matters today, but will come this evening, hoping that Sir will meet him."

I indifferently said, "I am no more than a commoner. My current situation is tantamount to house arrest. What qualifications do I have to refuse a meeting with the Prince of Yong? However, I do not know what crimes I have committed. I am a mere *sipin* Reader-in-Waiting. I have heard that only *sanpin* and above officials are imprisoned. So why am I, a lowly *sipin* rated official, also to be imprisoned?"

"Jiang *daren* is taking things too seriously," replied Sima Xiong awkwardly. "His Highness only seeks to look after Sir in every possible way.[12] His Imperial Highness feared that Sir would be bothered by the chaos and so dispatched soldiers for Sir's protection. Sir, please do not take offense. If there is anything dissatisfactory, I hope that Sir will consider His Imperial Highness's face and not blame us coarse individuals."

I smiled faintly and suggested, "Since General has come, Xiaoshunzi, pour him a cup of tea. Would the general please sit here for a while?"

"Sir, there is no need to be overly courteous," returned Sima Xiong promptly. "This general does not dare disturb Sir. If it is convenient, it is sufficient to prepare a side room so that this one can take care of some military matters."

I glanced at him and instructed, "Daoli, lead this general to the guest room to rest."

Daoli answered in the affirmative as he stepped forth from behind me. Bowing in greeting to Sima Xiong, he said, "General, please follow me."

Sima Xiong glanced at the servant that he was practically unaware of a moment ago before bidding his farewell and departing.

I smiled slightly and talking to myself, said, "No wonder His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, is famous around the world—even a mere commander of his personal guard understands etiquette, knowing when to advance and retreat."

In a low voice, Xiaoshunzi muttered, "Who knew that the Prince of Yong

would pay so much attention to you. Do you think we should leave immediately?"

I shook my head and answered, "The world is Great Yong's sooner rather than later. If I were to go in this manner, it would be inevitable that I would become an imperial criminal. It is better to wait until he explains everything."

Li Zhi arrived at the Southern Chu Palace, ordering his subordinates to completely seal the separate palace hall, only selecting a side palace hall to work in. While handling military matters, he waited for news of Princess Changle. Fortunately, it didn't take long before a bodyguard reported in. "Your Imperial Highness, Her Imperial Highness, the Princess, has already safely returned, and is waiting outside."

Li Zhi exulted. He strode towards the entrance, crying out, "Changle, Changle! You've come?" Following the sounds of his yells, a young woman in unadorned garb rushed inside. Li Zhi wrapped his younger sister in a bear hug. With a smile, he said, "Younger Imperial Sister, you have finally returned to second brother's side. From now on, you no longer need to be afraid of anything. That's right, where are the men who escorted you? Where is Liang Wan?"

A frightened look flashed across Princess Changle's face, as she replied, "Older Imperial Brother, older sister Liang has become insane. Everyone else is outside."

His brow furrowing, Li Zhi ordered, "Have them enter."

Following his order, a dozen or so men entered. All of them were dressed in commoner's garb and had haggard looks. The two men at the end were dragging along a crying Liang Wan. When they saw the Prince of Yong, looks of gratitude flashed in their eyes, as they knelt on the floor and paid their respects. Li Zhi had them rise and asked, "What has happened? What's wrong with Liang Wan?"

The leader answered, "Your Highness, Liang Wan has pledged allegiance to His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince. In addition, this was the decision made by the Sect Master of the Fengyi Sect."

Li Zhi's expression grew stony. He had already guessed that this had happened, but he could not have even dreamed that the Fengyi Sect would be so unbridled and arrogant. He inquired, "How did you learn this? Furthermore, what has happened to Liang Wan?"

The leader thought it over. If he were to speak, it was likely that he would say something that should not be revealed. If that terrible person were to truly become His Imperial Highness's enemy, then the already surrounded and isolated[13] Prince's predicament would become even more dangerous. He hurriedly paid his respects and replied, "Your Imperial Highness, this subordinate has never dared to forget Your Imperial Highness's patronage while in Jiangnan. Today's matter, this lowly one has no choice. Please take care of this lowly one's family."

So saying, he pulled out his sword and cut his own throat. Just as he drew his sword, the bodyguards in the palace hall all suspected that the man was an assassin. Just as they were moving forward to prevent the assassination, they were left dumbfounded that the man had committed suicide. Li Zhi was extremely shocked and just as he turned to question the others, he saw them say in unison, "Would Your Imperial Highness please take care of our families? Your Imperial Highness, please take care." So saying, they raised their swords and cut their throats. For a moment, the entire hall saw a sea of blood spurt forth. Frightened, Princess Changle cried out before covering her face, not daring to look.

Li Zhi was deeply puzzled, staring blankly at the strange scene before him, not knowing what to say. When he asked Princess Changle, she only knew that they had been captured. Not a hair on her body had been harmed. Not long afterwards, these spies and she had been released. Liang Wan had become insane. When Princess Changle asked the spies what had happened, they remained silent and said nothing. Hearing Princess Changle's words, Li Zhi became even more confused. What the hell happened?

Footnotes :

成千上万, chengqianshangwan – idiom, lit. by the thousands and tens of thousands; untold numbers, innumerable, thousands upon thousands
行云流水, xingyunliushui – idiom, lit. moving clouds and flower water; fig.

very natural and flowing style of calligraphy, writing, etc.; natural and unforced

虎视眈眈, hushidandan – idiom, lit. to glare like a tiger watching his prey; to eye covetously, wrathfully

大敌当前, dadidangqian – idiom, lit. facing a powerful enemy; fig. confronting grave difficulties

虎贲, huben – was a unit of Imperial Guard that originated during the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty. This specific unit was trained were elite cavalrymen tasked with the protection of the Emperor while he was traveling outside of the capital

耀武扬威, yaowuyangwei – idiom, lit. to show off one's strength; to strut around, to bluff, to bluster

大街小巷, dajiexiaoxiang – idiom, lit. great streets and small alleys; everywhere in the city

人喊马嘶, renhanmasi – diom, lit. people shouting and horses neighing; fig. tumultuous, hubbub

残兵败将, canbingbaijiang – idiom, lit. ruined army, defeated general; scattered remnants

三品, sanpin – third ranked

水泄不通, shuixiebutong – idiom, lit. not one drop can trickle through; fig. impenetrable (crowd, traffic)

关爱备至, guai'aibeizi – idiom, lit. the utmost care; to look after somebody in every possible way

四面楚歌, simian Chuge – idiom, lit. on all sides, the songs of Chu; fig. surrounded by enemies, isolated and without help; this idiom is referencing the fate of the Hegemonic King of Western Chu, Xiang Yu, during his final battle against the founder of the Han Dynasty, Liu Bang. In the Battle of Gaixia, the Chu army was surrounded and heard the enemy sing songs of their homeland. The Chu army believed that their homeland had already fallen and lost the will to fight.

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 23: Becoming a Captive

Volume 1, Chapter 23: Becoming a Captive

In the tenth month of first year of Zhihua, Li Zhi launched a surprise attack against Jianye. Helped by spies, Jianye fell on the first night. All of the officials were captured. That day, Princess Changle returned to the Palace, but all of the guards escorting her were dead. That night, Li Zhi traveled incognito and visited the Concealed Cloud Manor, promising Jiang Zhe prestige and generous salary. Jiang Zhe refused. The next day, the captured King of Southern Chu was brought back. Li Zhi issued the order to plunder Jianye. After several days, with numerous Southern Chu reinforcements sent to rescue the King approaching, Li Zhi retreated. Within the retreating army were a significant number of the members of the imperial clan and many of Southern Chu's civil and military officials, including Jiang Zhe. At this time, Jiang Zhe had already retired….

—*Southern Chu Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Jiang Suiyun*

Having settled Princess Changle down, Li Zhi traveled incognito to the Concealed Cloud Manor, his mind filled with questions. Because of the army's forced march, Li Zhi had not brought a single one of his advisers. As a result, the pain that he felt of having no one he could discuss matters with caused Li Zhi to want to meet the person that he considered to be his Zifang.[1] When he arrived at the Concealed Cloud Manor, Li Zhi's mood calmed. He had carefully thought about how he was going to acquire Jiang Zhe as his subordinate, trying to figure out a way to resolve this while he rode. But no matter how much he pondered, there was no way that was dependably certain. Jiang Zhe, this person, was someone rarely seen with anything that could be taken advantage of. Ultimately, Li Zhi made the decision. Whatever the means, he must bring Jiang Zhe with him. Otherwise, he would have come to Jianye in vain.

After calming down, Li Zhi entered the Concealed Cloud Manor. According to his instructions, the Yong army had not done anything to disturb the

manor's master, but they had already controlled the entire residence. Guided by Sima Xiong, Li Zhi walked towards the rear courtyard's Coiling Fragrance Garden, where Jiang Zhe would loiter every day. Li Zhi could see that the entire courtyard was filled with hidden Yong soldiers. Somewhat concerned, Li Zhi glanced at Sima Xiong and asked, "Was Sir Jiang dissatisfied with this arrangement?"

In a low voice, Sima Xiong remarked, "Sir Jiang seems to have turned a blind eye towards us. There are very few people inside the manor. Outside of one Li Shun, there are only four young servants. Their names are very strange; they're called Chiji, Daoli, Hualiu, and Lü'er. These servants are all extremely obedient and have not caused any problems. However, this general feels that Li Shun is very strange. He is a eunuch."

Li Zhi stopped his feet for a moment, explaining, "Chiji and the others are the names of eight horses of King Mu of Zhou. It seems like Sir Jiang is indeed a brilliant literary talent. As for that Li Shun, this Prince has heard whisperings of that person. From our spies within the Southern Chu army, there was a eunuch under the Army Supervisor who was on close terms with Jiang Zhe. I originally thought that this was a mere personal friendship, but now it looks like this man's relationship with Jiang Zhe is not ordinary. But no matter, it's only a single eunuch. There is no need to make things difficult for him, so long as we don't offend the sir."

In a low voice, Sima Xiong continued, "This general gets the feeling that Li Shun is not ordinary. Every single time I meet him, I feel fear."

Li Zhi glanced at him and indifferently replied, "Oh … if that's the case, then keep an eye on him." As they were speaking, they arrived at the Coiling Fragrance Garden. At the entrance, Chiji and Daoli sat at the cloister before the door, conversing in low voices. Seeing Li Zhi and others arrive, they rose from their seats and stood respectfully.

With a smile, Li Zhi asked, "Is Sir Jiang inside?"

"The young master was feeling under the weather today," responded Chiji respectfully, "He went to bed after eating dinner."

Hearing these words, Sima Xiong became angry. In a low voice, he

declared, “Your Imperial Highness, this general has already informed him that Your Imperial Highness will come to meet him. This person is too discourteous!”

Li Zhi gestured with his hand for Sima Xiong to stop speaking. Smiling faintly, he said, “So Sir Jiang has already gone to bed. Has Sir’s body always been so poor?”

Respectfully, Chiji answered, “Ever since young master returned from Sichuan, he has been confined to bed. A few days ago, his condition improved, but with the death of the Prince of De and the young master’s dismissal because of his essay, young master’s old illness has recurred. If Your Imperial Highness has any instructions, this lowly one will invite Steward Li over. I await Your Imperial Highness’s instructions.”

Sima Xiong’s hand wrapped around the grip of his sword and eyed at Chiji in rage. In comparison, Chiji was respectful and proper, a smile on his face, without any sign of fear.

After thinking it over, Li Zhi replied, “That works. This Prince will meet with Steward Li.”

Having spoken, Li Zhi walked to a nearby pavilion and sat down. Looking at the courtyard filled with green bamboo, Li Zhi was contented. Daoli and Chiji delivered tea and snacks, attentively attending to Li Zhi. It wasn’t long before Xiaoshunzi arrived. Respectfully performed the proper courtesies when greeting an imperial prince, he stated, “This servant, Li Shun, respectfully greets Your Imperial Highness. The master of this household was discourteous due to his ailment and cannot personally come to attend to Your Imperial Highness. I pray that Your Imperial Highness will forgive this discourtesy.”

Li Zhi raised his head and considered the eunuch before him. Li Shun’s appearance was definitely not ordinary. Back home, Li Zhi had met many eunuchs, but regardless of their status, regardless of whether they were arrogant or docile, they all shared a singular shared trait—they all had the look of inferior individuals in their eyes. In comparison, this Li Shun’s eyes were cool and neutral. Although his actions were humble, Li Zhi could sense

a certain pride in this eunuch, a pride that came from being able to dictate life or death. Li Zhi could remember clearly. He had seen this kind of look before. That was the first time he had met the Master of the Fengyi Sect. That year, he had accompanied his Imperial Father on his campaigns. Once, while they were marching, the Master of the Fengyi Sect had come like the wind to converse with Li Yuan. The resulting discussion was congenial. Not long afterwards, Great Yong received the support of the righteous sects of *wulin* , while Imperial Father gained a Noble Consort Ji by his side. Li Zhi would always remember the eyes of the Master of the Fengyi Sect. They were a pair of eyes filled with tender mercy and compassion for all living things. But Li Zhi would always remember when he was leading an army to attack Yang Laosheng, the King of Xia, after the Master of the Fengyi Sect had provided assistance in helping kill Yang Laosheng's generals, the Master had revealed a monstrous and conceited aura. It was at that moment that Li Zhi developed the intentions to be vigilant against the Fengyi Sect. Seeing Li Shun's temperament, Li Zhi suddenly understood that this individual before him was a peak martial arts expert. Moreover, this individual had the potential of becoming a worthy opponent for the Master of the Fengyi Sect.

Thinking of this, Li Zhi spoke in a gentle voice, "This Prince has heard some stories regarding Steward Li. If this Prince is not mistaken, Steward Li participated in the Sichuan campaign?"

Li Shun shot Li Zhi a look of surprise before replying, "Your Imperial Highness unexpectedly knows about some of the matters relating to this lowly servant. This servant and the young master have been friends for years, and is indebted to the young master for his frequent care and consideration. As Jianye has fallen into chaos, this servant decided that I might as well abandon that fake glory and splendor, and idly serve at the young master's side. If Your Imperial Highness wishes to find fault in this servant as someone from the Palace, then this servant naturally dares not resist."

Li Zhi gestured with his hand and with a smile, returned, "Although the two countries are at war, it should not affect unfortunate people such as yourself. Let alone the fact that you are now in service to Sir Jiang. Someday

in the future, this Prince may require Steward Li to sing my praises to Sir Jiang. Is Sir Jiang extremely angry?"

A sliver of favorable impression flickered across Li Shun's eyes, as he disclosed, "Although the young master was forced to retire, he has after all served Southern Chu for years. Now, seeing the country in peril, if the young master was joyful, it would not fly no matter where he goes. In addition, the reason behind Your Imperial Highness's campaign is unclear. My young master remains perplexed despite much thought.[2] If Your Imperial Highness is willing to tell this lowly one and allow this lowly one to pass the message, it may cause the young master to smile."

Li Zhi was moved. Was it possible that Jiang Zhe did not completely reject him? With honesty, he stated, "In the eyes of Sir Jiang, this campaign against Jianye would be viewed as acting willfully and making trouble. In reality, this campaign was caused by internal strife within Great Yong.[3] On a daily basis, Li Zhi feels like he's walking on thin ice.[4] If I am unable to receive the assistance of Sir Jiang, I fear that I will not live long. Would Steward Li pass along Li Zhi's intentions? Sir Jiang must be invited to come back to Great Yong with this one, regardless of method. If Sir Jiang continues to refuse to show any concern, then I fear that I will be unfortunate and cannot listen respectfully to his teachings."

Li Shun bowed respectfully and conveyed, "Your Imperial Highness greatly values the young master. This servant respectfully bows in thanks on behalf of the young master. May I ask Your Imperial Highness? My young master only loves the beauty of mountains and rivers, and has no interest in saving the world or its people. Not to mention, he has no wish to achieve or accomplish any goals. For what reason does Your Imperial Highness wish my young master to shed his blood, sweat, and tears? Even if he does serve, he would likely be eliminated once he has served his purpose."[5, 6]

Li Zhi rose to his feet and sincerely expounded, "I cannot guarantee that the ruler and his ministers will be mutually safe, but Li Zhi is definitely not someone who envies the virtuous and talented, and is not someone like the King of Yue who only knows how to share trials and tribulations, without sharing riches and honors.[7] This Prince knows that Sir Jiang is disinterested

in riches and honor, glory and splendor, as well as the opportunity to make contributions and accomplish goals. But if the world falls into chaos, Sir Jiang will not be able to live the rest of his days in peace. Right now, Great Yong is facing imminent internal strife, while Southern Chu is leaderless and will likely soon fall into chaos. Although Northern Han is stable, they emphasize martial prowess and denigrate culture and education. If Sir Jiang's name is spoken to the people of Sichuan, the vast majority would be filled with thoughts of vengeance rather than thoughts of admiration. It is not that this Prince is using threatening words; if my Great Yong is unable to unify the world, then the world will fall into chaos, with no place left in peace. If Sir Jiang is willing to lend this prince a helping hand, this Prince can guarantee that Sir can live in peace in Great Yong. Zhi is willing to share glory and splendor with Sir."

Thinking it over, Li Shun replied, "Your Imperial Highness's words are filled with sincerity. This servant will pass on all of your words to the young master." Having spoken, Li Shun bowed deeply before withdrawing. Li Zhi continued to sit in the pavilion, filled with expectation and hope. From Li Shun's words, Li Zhi could feel that Jiang Zhe wasn't completely refusing. It was only that he was filled with apprehension.

After some time had passed, Li Shun returned. Bowing, he said, "Young master has asked this servant to communicate with Your Imperial Highness. The matter of service concerns the young master's lifelong reputation, and he cannot randomly make the decision. Your Imperial Highness is busy with military affairs. Young master invites Your Imperial Highness to quickly return to the encampments. Young master said that Your Imperial Highness should not mistreat the capture Shang Weijun, Lord Prime Minister Shang. Lord Prime Minister Shang is the father of Noble Consort Shang. Now that the Crown Prince and Consort Shang have fled, if Your Imperial Highness wishes for the difficulty of the later campaign to conquer Southern Chu to be reduced, then it is better to not hunt them down. The sovereign has already fled. If Your Imperial Highness has already captured him, then that is for the best."

Speaking to this point, Li Shun glanced at the Prince of Yong. Li Zhi replied,

“Zhao Jia will be brought to Jianye tomorrow.”

Li Shun continued, “The sovereign is incompetent and is easily persuaded by slander. Now that he has been captured, the country will find it difficult to continue to exist, and everyone will disparage him. There is no point for him to remain in Southern Chu. But if he is brought back to Great Yong, he will not live long enough for him to have the chance to return. When that time comes, the people of Southern Chu will hate Great Yong. In the past, King Huai of Chu died as a prisoner of the state of Qin,[8] enraging the people of Chu. Later there was the saying, ‘although Chu only has three clans, it will be Chu who destroys Qin.’[9] Years later, the Qin Dynasty was indeed destroyed by the people of Chu.”

Hesitating, Li Zhi wondered, “But if I cannot bring back the captured Zhao Jia and all of officialdom from this campaign against Jianye, how am I to report back to Imperial Father?”

Li Shun casually responded, “Young master understands the difficulty that Your Imperial Highness faces. As such, he also said that the Southern Chu can be brought back to Great Yong as a last resort. But he cannot be harmed rashly. Your Imperial Highness must immediately withdraw your army and call for a cessation of hostilities, negotiating with Southern Chu. Have the new monarch cede territory to show his sincerity, while also giving him the opportunity to redeem the captured sovereign and officials. One, this will greatly reduce Southern Chu’s strength. Two, this will prevent the formation of an indissoluble and deep enmity with Southern Chu.”

Li Zhi considered these words for some time before voicing, “Please thank Sir Jiang for his good advice. Regardless of whether Sir is willing to serve Li Zhi, Li Zhi cannot thank Sir enough.”

Watching Li Zhi depart, Li Shun revealed a faint smile. I had purposely had him receive the Prince of Yong, letting him use his insight to judge whether Li Zhi was deserving of my service. His answer was, Li Zhi was worthy.

Listening to Xiaoshunzi’s detailed report, I laid down the book in my hand and quietly said, “It looks like Li Zhi believes that I will fall into his hands.”[10]

Xiaoshunzi asked, “Young master, what is your view?”

I objectively responded, “His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, had one phrase that was extremely tempting. If the world is in chaos, where will I be able to find a place to live in peace?”

“What’s more, there is still Crown Prince Li An,” replied Xiaoshunzi. “If that person is really Li An, then young master’s vengeance will have to borrow the Prince of Yong’s strength.”

I sighed and uttered, “That’s right. Killing Li An may not be difficult. What’s difficult is how to handle the aftermath. However, I don’t want to follow Li Zhi so easily. Back then, I once thought about sparing no effort in serving the Prince of De, but the existence of Rong Yuan caused me to give up that idea. Li Zhi is indeed an enlightened monarch, but I wish to see if he is supported by virtuous subjects. How about this … I will not agree to serve him, allowing this matter to temporarily drag out. I believe that we will be taken to Great Yong as captives.”

Xiaoshunzi’s face was filled with bitterness, as he replied, “Wouldn’t this be too humiliating? Young master is willing to go so far as to be a captive. Unwilling to become the guest of honor, and yet willing to become a prisoner.”

I smiled faintly and judged, “I’m afraid that if I become a guest of honor now, in the future, I won’t even have the chance to become a prisoner.”

The next day, Zhao Jia was brought back to Jianye by the Yong army. Meeting the Prince of Yong, Zhao Jia repeatedly and bitterly begged, “We have never had the intention of rebelling against Great Yong. We hope that Your Imperial Highness can consider the face of the Queen and give us a way out of this predicament.”

Li Zhi replied with mild words, only saying that Imperial Father longed to see his daughter and daughter-in-law, wishing to reunite with them in Great Yong. Zhao Jia begged bitterly, but ultimately, he could only shed tears and agree. He then asked to see the Queen, Princess Changle, but was prevented from doing so by Li Zhi with the excuse that Changle had received a shock and was inconvenient to meet her.

A few days, after Jianye had been completely plundered, Li Zhi left Jianye,

bringing along the Southern Chu King, royalty, members of the royal harem, and many officials. On that day, the Southern Chu sovereign and ministers cried bitterly, losing their voices. The common people seeing them off, looked at one another and also shed bitter tears, but could only hold them back and swallow their' cries in the face of the elite Yong horsemen. Sitting on his horse, Li Zhi looked upon the icy reception on either side of the road and could only sardonically smile, saying, "It looks like Southern Chu has not yet lost popular sentiment."

Sima Xiong, who was following Li Zhi, replied, "That's true. But they don't have the courage to resist. We only have twenty thousand soldiers. Even if every person only slashed at us once, we would be finished."

Li Zhi quietly observed, "The people of Southern Chu are feminine and soft, but we cannot underestimate their strength. If we were to coerce them too fiercely, I fear that they will risk their lives to make things difficult for us. They are adept at scheming. At that time, we will be surrounded on all sides by thistles and thorns."

Hearing the words, "people of Southern Chu are feminine and soft," Sima Xiong could not help but snort callously and say, "The southerners really have reserved minds. Your Imperial Highness has treated that *zhuangyuan* , Jiang Zhe, as one would treat the wise and sagacious. But he still refuses to surrender. Now that Your Imperial Highness is bringing him back as a captive, see if he is still so pretentious."

Li Zhi could not help but wryly smile again and again. He didn't expect it either. After that day, he had gone to see Jiang Zhe several times. Jiang Zhe refused to discuss matters deeply with him, either citing his illness or hurriedly withdrawing at the first encounter. Li Zhi had repeatedly inquired after Jiang Zhe's intentions from Li Shun. Li Shun replied evasively, only hinting that Jiang Zhe was unwilling to go to Great Yong to become an official. Ultimately, Li Zhi had no alternative but to forcibly include Jiang Zhe on the list of captives, bringing him back to Great Yong. He had personally gone to see Jiang Zhe to report this deed. Jiang Zhe only smiled indifferently, as if he was not resentful. When they departed, Jiang Zhe only brought along Li Shun. He had presented silver money to everyone else and had them

disband. Without a care for the world, he had come to the prisoner encampment. He was acquainted with many of the other officials. Although the relationships were not deep, the relationships were congenial. He was calm and composed, helping improve the mood of many deeply worried officials. Li Zhi was worried that he would thoroughly offend Jiang Zhe, finding it difficult to eat and sleep. But with the Southern Chu reinforcements advancing upon Jianye and the Yong army finding it difficult to resist, Li Zhi could only give the order to leave Jianye.

Princess Changle also accompanied the Yong army north. Although she had received a fright, as soon as she remembered that she was returning to Great Yong, her frame of mind became more cheerful and carefree. But as they were preparing to leave Jianye, Li Zhi could sense that Princess Changle wanted to say something but was hesitating to do so. Her expression was somewhat filled with fear. Li Zhi inquired a few times but the Princess only gave perfunctory responses. But Li Zhi could see that Princess Changle did not seem to care about the safety of Zhao Jia, and was not excessively concerned. In any case, when they returned, Noble Consort Zhangsun would be there to figure out what was going on. As for the insane Liang Wan, she was like an infant. If she wasn't crying and causing a ruckus, she was frolicking about. Li Zhi did not have any martial artists from the Fengyi Sect in his army and could only have his subordinates keep a strict eye on Liang Wan, while dispatching some court ladies to take care of her.

Thinking about everything that he had faced, Li Zhi really found that there were many agonized difficulties that he could not speak of. Li Zhi wondered if he had made the wrong move campaigning against Jianye. At the very least, the benefits before him could, in time, become an antidote-less poison that he personally takes.

Amidst the gathered crowd watching the Yong army withdraw, Chen Zhen and Han Wuji calculatedly watched the elite Yong horsemen. In a low voice, Han Wuji muttered, "In reality, it isn't difficult to rescue young master. But young master is stubbornly refused."

Chen Zhen murmured, "You don't understand. Young master and the Prince of Yong have been in constant communication. Although the majority

was because of Southern Chu, I can see that the young master views the Prince of Yong highly. This time, the Prince of Yong is here to quench his thirst for talents. From what Chiji has said, this campaign was clearly launched for the sake of acquiring the young master. How can the young master not be grateful for this high regard? It's only that the young master remembers the Prince of De and still has some sentiment towards Southern Chu, and was thus willing to become prisoner."

Han Wuji callously observed, "In reality, the young master's heart is too soft. At the time, the young master spared no effort in serving Southern Chu. If it weren't for the young master, our Kingdom of Shu would not have so easily fallen. That Prince of De did not wholeheartedly trust or rely upon the young master, and yet the young master is stubbornly unable to let it go. That day, he personally traveled to Xiangyang to save the Prince of De. Alas, the King of Southern Chu is so mediocre and incompetent, forcing the Prince of De to his death and causing the young master to grieve and fall into despair."

Chen Zhen sighed. "That's right. After returning from Xiangyang, the young master's old ailments relapsed. It was only because of Lord Li's consoling that the young master no longer grieved."

In a pained voice, Han Wuji spoke, "The young master with Southern Chu and us with the Kingdom of Shu, have all experienced the same kind of grief. Although you ordinarily boast about your cold detachment and ruthlessness, I don't believe that you don't have any longing for the Kingdom of Shu."

Chen Zhen was silent for some time before replying, "The Shu King treated me harshly and mercilessly, and yet, thinking back, I still reminisce a bit about it. Southern Chu's treatment of the young master can be considered as excellent. It is no wonder that the young master cannot bear to abandon it."

Footnotes :

子房, Zifang – was the style name for Zhang Liang, strategist to the Supreme Ancestor of Han, Liu Bang
百思不得其解, baisibudeqijie – idiom, lit. to remain puzzled after pondering

over something a hundred times; to remain perplexed despite much thought
祸起萧墙, huoqixiaoqiang – idiom, troubles start inside the house; there is internal strife afoot
如履薄冰, rulübobing – idiom, lit. as if walking on thin ice; fig. to be extremely cautious; to be skating on thin ice
鸟尽弓藏, niaojingongcang – idiom, lit. the birds are over, the bow is put away; fig. to get rid of somebody after they've served their purpose
兔死狗烹, tusigoupeng – idiom, lit. to boil the hound once it caught the rabbit; fig. to get rid of somebody after they've served their purpose
This refers to King Goujian of Yue (越王勾踐). Goujian was enslaved by King Fuchai of Wu. During these years, the state of Yue was run by ministers such as 文种, Wen Zhong and advisers such as 范蠡, Fan Li. Goujian was eventually released back to Yue and attacked the state of Wu, destroying it. After the victory, Goujian killed or exiled all of his former supporters.
楚怀王, King Huai of Chu was a King of the state of Chu during the Warring States Period. In 299 BC, while attending negotiations with the state of Qin, King Huai was captured and held hostage. While he later managed to escape, he was recaptured, ultimately dying three years later while in captivity
楚雖三戶, 亡秦必楚, chusuisanhu, wangqinbichu – a Chinese expression denoting the hostility that the state of Chu had for the state of Qin. The state of Chu was one of the most difficult opponents of the state of Qin (later Qin Dynasty). After Chu fell to the Qin armies in 223 BC, its people were implacably hostile towards the Qin governance. After the death of Qin Shi Huang, Chu rose in revolt on several occasions. The Hegemonic King of Western Chu, Xiang Yu, and the founding Emperor of the Han Dynasty, Liu Bang, both hailed from Chu.
势在必得, shizaibide – idiom, lit. to be determined to win; is confident that he will win and acquire the item/person

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 24: Distant Journey of a Thousand Li

Volume 1, Chapter 24: Distant Journey of a Thousand *Li*

After several days of rapid march, the Prince of Yong rendezvoused with the other Yong armies. The Prince of Yong's army of tens of thousands of troops gradually and methodically retreated back into Great Yong. The other Yong forces tasked with blocking the Southern Chu armies forced them to watch from afar as we withdrew. As a result, the subsequent march was unhurried and comfortable. As a prisoner, I received special treatment and was not required to live with the other captives. The Prince of Yong had given the order to allow Xiaoshunzi and me to live alone in a tent. Although it was only an army tent, it was nevertheless comfortable with the floor covered with embroidered fabric and the walls wrapped in thick animal pelts. As a result, the autumn winds were unable to penetrate inside. At one corner of the tent was a bed large enough for two to sleep in. On the other side was a square pinewood table with two seats. On the table was placed a purple granule tea set. In the middle of the tent was an elaborate and yet practical copper stove. Right now, there was a pot of water placed upon it, causing the entire tent to be comfortably warm.

Hearing the water come to boil, Xiaoshunzi helped me make a pot of hot tea with practiced ease. I stretched and began to sit up. The incidents over the last few years had left me with many uncured ailments. Although I persisted in practicing the deep breathing exercises to maintain good health, my illness would still recur from time to time. I had once thought about properly seeking medical treatment. But psychological diseases were difficult to treat, especially as doctors found it difficult to treat themselves. As a result, I was sickly the last several years. Although I would frequently use the excuse to recuperate, my body was truly unwell. Xiaoshunzi helped me sit up, complaining, "Young master is always unwilling to convalesce. This trip to Great Yong is exhausting. I fear that young master's illness will recur."

I sighed and replied, “Is there any other way? You know how I fell ill. The majority of it is psychological. In reality, I am already much better. It is only that this journey has reminded me of the campaign to invade Sichuan years ago. Unfortunately, the Prince of De has already passed away.[1] Now that I am already personally in Great Yong army encampments, recalling past events, I cannot help but wring my hands. Alas …”

At this moment, a clear and bright laugh could be heard from outside the tent before a voice said, “I have heard that Sir Jiang is unwell. This Prince has come to especially visit.” Following the laugh, the Prince of Yong, Li Zhi, entered. He was wearing the garb of an imperial prince. Following behind him were two advisers. The three men entered the tent. With difficulty, I rose from the bed. Li Zhi had already walked over and pushed me back to bed, saying, “Sir does not need to get out of bed. I have heard that Sir has fallen ill. Zhi has been busy with military affairs and only now was able to take the time to pay a visit. This is really ill-mannered.” So saying, he sat down beside the bed, looking at me with concern.

Seeing the two scholars had already sat down, I politely greeted them. “Suiyun’s old ailment has recurred and cannot leave the bed. Sirs, please forgive me. I have long heard that the Prince of Yong’s side is full of talents.[2] I am unaware of how to address you two, sirs.”

The older scholar, possessing a delicate appearance, over fifty years old, rose from his seat and replied, “Guan Xiu of Beihai[3] greets Sir Jiang. Sir’s literary talent is acclaimed throughout the world. I have had the opportunity to read Sir’s verses and they are deserving of their great reputation, and I cannot bear to roll them up.”

The other was a white-garbed scholar who had slender eyebrows and long eyes, and possessed a distinguished and accomplished bearing. He smiled and said, “That day, Sir used the poem *Dance of the Cavalry* to force the King of Shu to commit suicide. To this day, this one still recites it in my heart. I[4] am Dong Zhi.”

I quietly returned, “I have long heard of the advisers in the service of the Prince of Yong. Guan Xiu of Beihai is adept at the organization of army provisions and military equipment. Dong Zhi of Luoyang is skilled at troop

movement and disposition. There is also a Gou Lian of Yingchuan[5] who is a skilled envoy. These three individuals are known as the three distinguished heroes. Today, you two indeed justify your reputation.[6] It is a pity that I am meeting only two of the three distinguished heroes. Suiyun can only sigh at my limited and shallow fortune."

Dong Zhi smiled and replied, "Brother Gou is not in the army presently, so he is not here today. He also highly esteems Sir. That day, Sir followed the deceased Prince of De and came to the Yong army encampments. Coincidentally, the three of us were not with the army. Afterwards, we hurriedly parted ways and did not have the opportunity to sit side by side and have a comprehensive conversation. Since Sir has also come under the banner of His Highness. Presumably, we will have the opportunity, going forward, to raise our wine cups and chat."

I looked at Li Zhi, smiling lightly. I did not refute Dong Zhi's words, avoiding making his face from becoming unsightly. I only neutrally said, "Although Suiyun is constantly ill, my consciousness is still energetic. If brother has any questions or inquiries, feel free to ask Suiyun. Suiyun will answer as best as he can."

After speaking for a short period of time, they saw that my vitality was worn out and after bidding farewell, departed. Li Zhi repeatedly exhorted me to rest well, stating that he had already prepared a carriage to carry me on the journey. He further exhorted Xiaoshunzi to take care of me and told him to seek out Guan Xiu if there was anything needed.

Waiting until they left, I lay down in bed. With a smile, I said, "Contrary to what one might expect, the Prince of Yong's advisers were quite sincere. But in my eyes, I fear that Gou Lian is narrow-minded. Otherwise, why didn't the Prince of Yong bring him along?"

Xiaoshunzi smiled and replied, "Young master is intelligent this time. That Gou Lian is also within the encampments, but his temperament isn't good. Thus, the Prince of Yong did not invite him along so as not to immediately offend young master."

***

The Prince of Yong and his two advisers exited the tent. With a sigh, Li Zhi said, “I was originally under the impression that he was faking an illness. Unexpectedly, he is actually bedridden. Alas, his health is poor and I have forced him on a long journey. No wonder he always treats this Prince so distantly.”

“Your Highness need not be worried,” replied Dong Zhi soothingly, “I saw that although this person is bedridden, his drive is excellent. Presumably, he has not become resentful because Your Imperial Highness brought him along. Although I cannot clearly see through this man’s intentions, when I mentioned that he was serving Your Imperial Highness, he did not directly refute it. It can be clearly seen that this man isn’t someone who will not surrender.”

Li Zhi smiled wryly and stated, “Jiang Zhe, this person, is adaptable and flexible.[7] Even if I were to forcibly confer upon him a position, he may not necessarily refuse. But to want him to serve loyally—that is a difficult matter. At the time, the Prince of De regarded him quite highly, but perhaps there was some degree of reluctance. As a result, he refused to accompany and serve in the army. Even though the Prince of De was the Royal Uncle of Southern Chu, he was so offhandedly denied. I am worried that he would also treat me in a perfunctory manner.”

“Your Imperial Highness, be at ease,” comforted Guan Xiu, “Although this person’s heart is as cold as ice, he nevertheless is still filled with hot blood. Otherwise, he would not have submitted that essay. As long as Your Imperial Highness treats him with sincerity, you will certainly acquire devotion and loyalty. I have heard that he distanced himself from the Prince of De mostly because of the Prince’s retainer, Rong Yuan. I am worried about Gou Lian’s temperament. This person seldom submits to others, always seeking provocation. I’m afraid that Gou Lian will offend Jiang Suiyun.”

“Brother Guan is overthinking matters,” remarked Dong Zhi, “I actually believe that if Gou Lian had come, I’m afraid that there would have been unexpected results. Although Jiang Zhe, this person, has a cultured and refined exterior, he has an innermost being of someone arrogant and obstinate.[8] This temperament is quite similar to Brother Gou. I believe there

won't be any harmful consequences."

Just as the three were discussing this at length, the person they worried about arrived at the entrance to my tent. Gou Lian was extremely proud and arrogant. When he had learned that Li Zhi had especially brought Jiang Zhe back by force, and showed concern and care for him. Gou Lian was quite upset. This time, Li Zhi had brought Guan Xiu and Dong Zhi to check on my illness and yet did not bring Gou Lian along. Gou Lian was even more uncomfortable. With his intelligence and wisdom, he understood that Li Zhi and the two other advisers were worried that he would offend Jiang Zhe. This made him feel even more unwilling. Therefore, Gou Lian took advantage of Li Zhi and company departing not long before to arrive at my tent. I was still a "captive" of the Yong army. Although Li Zhi had commanded that I be left alone, Gou Lian had a high status within the army. As such, the soldiers watching over me did not block him, allowing him to enter my tent.

With one look at the young man with an aquiline nose, I guessed his identity. Watching his complete lack of manners as he regarded me for a while, I signaled with my hand to stem Xiaoshunzi's rage. I smiled and asked, "Excuse me, may I ask if it is the "Tongue as Sharp as a Sword," Gou Lian, Gou Yongquan?"[9]

For a moment, Gou Lian was at a loss for words, before replying, "It is hard to imagine that Jiang Suiyun, who with one song took the life of the King of Shu, would recognize me, this nobody. I am truly extremely honored. I wonder if the lord *zhuangyuan* who once mocked the King of Shu with the lines, 'Suddenly I became a captive slave, / My waist frail, my temples gray, grinding away,' knew that such a day would come? I see that brother has a wan and sallow appearance and has a disorganized and ill body. This should be considered as 'my waist frail, my temples gray, grinding away,' no?"

I quietly answered, "I have long heard that Brother Yongquan was formerly the retainer of Xuzhou General Zhang Chen. Zhang Chen established a new regime and commanded his troops to set up an independent regime. At the time, brother Yongquan received favor and honor while in his service. Later, His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong,

led a punitive expedition against Zhang Chen. Under orders, sire was dispatched as an envoy to the Yong camps. Who knew that you would be subdued by His Imperial Highness's awe-inspiring majesty? When you returned, you convinced General Zhang to surrender. Afterwards, sire served as an envoy on the Prince of Yong's behalf without ever failing. I wonder if this is because of your original failed diplomatic mission on General Zhang's behalf? You consider being convinced by another to surrender as a humiliation, and from that day forward, sire studied assiduously and tirelessly, later gaining many accomplishments."

Gou Lian's face turned red. Although the matter of him convincing Zhang Chen to surrender was an anecdote often told with praise, the reality was that he had gone to convince the Prince of Yong to withdraw his troops and ended up becoming the Prince of Yong's mouthpiece to convince Zhang Chen to surrender. This was unavoidably an incident where he had failed his mission. He could not believe that someone would draw blood with one prick.[10] Blushing with shame, he replied, "The Prince of Yong has the appearance of a dragon and phoenix. He has a grand and refined magnanimity. How can he be swayed by mere words? For this lowly one to fail in my mission isn't something strange. Moreover, this one helped rescue General Zhang saved from difficult circumstances. This meritorious service is able to make up for that earlier mistake. As for your distinguished self, since you know that Great Yong is the legitimate regime, why do you serve an illegitimate regime?"

I smiled and explained, "Brother Yongquan's words are incorrect. I stated that General Zhang was illegitimate, because at the time, the Central Plains would be united in no time. Popular sentiment had already submitted to Great Yong. General Zhang relied upon military might, showing no understanding of the times, and was therefore disparaged. As for my Southern Chu … although it is a small country, its history is longer than that of Great Yong. Suiyun was once the *zhuangyuan* of Southern Chu, a *jinshi* who placed in the top tier. I have served for many years in Hanlin Academy, receiving great favor from the King. How can I abandon my monarch and change my loyalty to Great Yong? Suiyun is aware of honor and shame. My former master is still alive, so how can I curry favor to serve a new master?"

Gou Lian rolled his eyes. “Since your distinguished self is determined to serve Southern Chu, the King of Southern Chu is currently in our encampments. Zhao Jia has bent his knee and is serving my Great Yong. Why is your distinguished self so pigheaded? Leave alone the fact that I have heard the saying that a virtuous subject chooses his master. Zhao Jia is incompetent and muddleheaded, forcing the death of a virtuous prince. In comparison, my master, His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, is modest and open-minded,[11] and respects the wise. His actions are clear and decisive. He is known throughout the world for his benevolence and righteousness and sagacity. Why is your distinguished self such a stickler for tradition[12] and unwilling to surrender and pay allegiance? Acting to such an extent will cause laughter from the entire world.”

I laughed humorlessly and responded, “Although a virtuous subject chooses his master, I have never heard of virtuous subjects who serve new masters when their old masters remain alive. In the olden days, Yu Rang loyally served Zhi Bo only after the Zhonghang family was destroyed. The Zhonghang family treated Yu Rang as merely an ordinary follower, and yet Yu Rang did not abandon them.[13] What’s more, Suiyun served not just Zhao Jia, but the entire Southern Chu royal clan. The former King appointed me to Hanlin Academy. The Prince of De used me as an aide. This kindness is before my eyes. How can I serve a new master upon seeing high position and great wealth?”

Gou Lian uprightly declared, “Although your distinguished self’s words are precious, your distinguished self has been dismissed long ago. Why do you remain so foolishly loyal?”

I answered distantly, “In the olden days, Bi Gan cut open his heart, but his aspirations did not change. Qu Yuan was dismissed from office, and yet when he heard the misfortune of King Huai of Chu, he threw himself into the river.[14] Suiyun is not a sentimental person and dares not imitate the behavior of our worthy predecessors. Moreover, to covet glory and splendor is one thing, but to surrender and serve a new liege to acquire riches and honor, I dare not do so.”

Hearing this, Gou Lian could only kneel and bow, observing, “Sir’s

character is lofty and unsullied, which this one admires greatly. However, His Imperial Highness has the disposition of a ruler. If Sir misses this opportunity, then it would be a great pity. But Sir is bedridden, and Yongquan dares not forcibly compel. We are still a thousand *li* away from the Yong capital. May Yongquan stop by from time to time and respectfully listen to your teachings?"

I smiled and replied, "Brother Yongquan is famed throughout the world. It is Suiyun who should be asking for guidance. The journey has been lonesome; if your distinguished self has time, there is no harm in coming to hold conversations deep into the night. Although Suiyun has extensive knowledge, I am not familiar with the four arts. I have heard that your distinguished self is famed for your skills in these four arts, I hope that sire would offer guidance."

After learning that Gou Lian had visited me, Li Zhi was originally extremely concerned, immediately sending someone over to mediate the situation. Who knew that when the person arrived, he found Gou Lian and I conversing congenially. Hearing of this, Li Zhi's face beamed with joy.[15] From then on, he would frequently have his retainers keep me company. I did not refuse their company. After spending many days in close contact and deep conversation with the Prince of Yong's retainers, I gained a great deal of respect for the three. Guan Xiu was extremely proficient in handling tax documents, money, and food supplies, while Dong Zhi was a master of the art of war and tactics. Once we started conversing, our conversation spilled forth like an unceasing torrent. As for Gou Lian, he was versatile and able, and our conversations were the most congenial. It was only that he had a competitive personality and always liked to argue over complicated issues with me. My mood was fairly good and combined with Xiaoshunzi's attentive care, I gradually began to recover while on the journey.

I had favorable impressions of all three and they treated me with great respect.

***

Guan Xiu was adept with performing the duties of a quartermaster, handling money and supplies for the army. He was the Prince of Yong's

Registrar. But when he discussed matter with Jiang Zhe, he found that no matter how difficult the subject, this young man understood the problem thoroughly. When the young man occasionally spoke, his words would directly hit home. Afterwards, Jiang Zhe unintentionally revealed that he had once handled documents while in the service of the Prince of De. Only then did Guan Xiu understand how this Hanlin Academic could comprehend such tedious matters. He had originally believed that Jiang Zhe was only a simple aide in the military administration of the Prince of De.

Dong Zhi was adept in the art of war. When he debated issues with Jiang Zhe, he found that this young man was familiar with all kinds of tactics, dating back into antiquity. Even parts he was not familiar with, Jiang Zhe was able to explain them in clear and logical detail. When questioned about how he knew all this, the young man smiled and replied that he had read many books on warfare while serving the Marquis Who Suppresses Distant Lands, Lu Xin, and had collected books on warfare and battle tactics. Dong Zhi originally believed that Jiang Zhe was only capable of theoretical discussions that were useless in practice. But when he practiced battlefield tactics and strategies against Jiang Zhe, Dong Zhi found that his opponent's strategies were bold and imaginative,[16] unable to be discerned. Every single time, Jiang Zhe's troops would suddenly appear in the most unimaginable locations. But when he later analyzed these movements, Dong Zhi realized that they were sensible and reasonable, extremely clever and wonderful. After being convinced, Dong Zhi could not help but be competitive. He began to discuss the military equipment used in war. Who could imagine that Jiang Zhe was even knowledgeable about these matters? Although Jiang Zhe did not say much, the times he did speak were enough to force Dong Zhi to reflect on the matter for a long time, and quickly decided to study and improve military equipment.

Gou Lian admired Jiang Zhe the most. He originally was conceited by his erudition, but unexpectedly Jiang Zhe had participated in the establishment of the Palace of Sublime Culture while in Southern Chu, and had read a countless number of books. Every single time they debated literary works, Jiang Zhe would quote from many sources, leaving Gou Lian flabbergasted. As for debate techniques, although Jiang Zhe did not use them frequently,

whenever Gou Lian became complacent and proud, Jiang Zhe would only need to say one sentence and cause Gou Lian to be completely convinced.

What caused the most admiration was not Jiang Zhe's talent, but the way that he conducted himself, indifferent to fame or gain, behaving completely natural. Their discussions with him were like the spring wind bringing forth cleansing rain. They saw Jiang Zhe's brilliance, and also saw that he was not overbearing. Only when night deepened did they feel something different, as cold sweat dripped down their backs. Afterwards, the three's competitive spirits were inflamed. In the face of these spirits, Jiang Zhe would frequently nimbly retreat, leaving the three's fiery zeals to transform into a spring wind, only later discovering that Jiang Zhe had no intention to take up the challenge.

The journey of a thousand *li* , although long, would eventually come to an end. As the army was nearing the Great Yong capital, the three advisers requested an audience with Li Zhi, appealing that the Prince of Yong must absolutely acquire Jiang Zhe as a subordinate. Gou Lian was especially intense in his words, saying, "If Your Imperial Highness is unable to acquire this man as a subordinate, it will be an extreme pity. This man's talent is superior to ours by severalfold. If we were to become his enemy, I fear that even our corpses wouldn't have any place to be buried."

With a bitter look on his face, Li Zhi replied, "Sirs, how does this Prince not know this man's importance? But every single time this Prince tries to persuade him, he would remain silent and not respond, leaving this Prince without any means."

"There is no need for Your Imperial Highness to be so worried," stated Guan Xiu. "That person highly respects Your Imperial Highness and has no ill intent towards us. Under ordinary circumstances, he should not continue to refuse. After this trip back to the capital, we should place this man under house arrest at the prince's residence, and slowly convince him. There has to be a way. In addition, Shi Ziyou is magnanimous and high-minded, and should be capable of talking him around."

Li Zhi sighed. "We can only do this … If Shi Ziyou cannot persuade him, then this Prince, this Prince … alas, this Prince bear to lose …"

Guan Xiu and the other two looked at one another; all of them understood that Li Zhi's killing intent had been stirred.

***

Rain drips and dribbles outside these curtains, spring withers away.The thin silk quilts could not stand the frigid dawn.What once I dreamt of being a minor guest, I clutch at to those pleasures in vain.I must not lean alone by the railings, I do not mourn these lands.A land I left so lightly yet so hard to return again.As blossoms shatter on the rippling waters, spring is spent; heaven on earth remains.[17]

With my outer wear draped over my shoulders, I stood before a window, inside a posthouse. Tomorrow, I would arrive at the Great Yong capital. I recited this *Waves Scouring the Sands* , my heart filling with boundless loneliness. The more that I thought back to the mesmerizing landscapes of Southern Chu, the more my heart would bring memories of the past. Xiaoshunzi walked to my side and whispered, "Young master, over these past several days, you have subdued the advisers serving Li Zhi, and yet you continue to refuse to respectfully and favorably treat Li Zhi. If Li Zhi's killing intent is stirred, what will you do?"

"Xiaoshunzi, you don't understand. Before, I was willing to accept the circumstances and adapt. It did not matter who I served. Even before the Prince of De, my service was desultory. But the Prince of Yong's heart is like a mirror. If I were to serve him, if I cannot serve him with sincerity,[18] then the Prince of Yong would not be satisfied, and I would not help eliminate the dangers he faces. For me to exhaust all my abilities for him, I must test his bearing and magnanimity. I am deliberately pressuring him to kill me. If he were to ultimately let me go, then I would have found a wise liege lord and master to serve. If he ultimately tries to kill me, then he is no more than a hegemon.[19] Rather than worry that he would kill ministers who had performed meritorious service, it is better to test whether he is broadminded and open now. If he ultimately releases me, then I believe that when the time comes, I will be able to receive a respectable end. If he were to try to kill me, then I could take the opportunity to fake my death and escape."

A look of anxiety appeared on Xiaoshunzi's face, as he worried. "Young master … His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, has enormous power and influence. If he wished to kill you, how will you be able to escape? Although my martial arts are relatively good, I dare not guarantee that I will be able to rescue young master."

I smiled faintly and responded, "I believe that in the Prince of Yong's mind, he will not kill a scholar famed throughout the world. He will not come at me overtly. Using poison is the best method. I have already prepared a precious poisonous pill. When the time comes, I will take the pill. My body will become rigid like a corpse. To bring away a living person is difficult. To steal a corpse should be quite easy. When I have escaped, I will hide in the Yong capital and wait for the opportunity to avenge the death of my beloved wife. After that, Xiaoshunzi, you and I will be able to travel the world, living anonymously. Wouldn't this be wonderful? People constantly say that it is better to travel ten thousand *li* than to read ten thousand books. I am greatly looking forward to this."

Relieved, Xiaoshunzi replied, "If that is the case, then I would rather the Prince of Yong tries to kill young master, so that young master is not tied down and forced to shed your blood, sweat, and tears for him."

I smiled slightly. Not just anyone was qualified to have me shed my blood, sweat, and tears. To speak the truth, I was afraid that no one would be able to pass my test. Wise lieges had unspoken thoughts that if a person could not be used, then that person must die. *Alas, the Prince of Yong was someone that I greatly respected* , I thought regretfully.

Footnotes :

驾鹤**西**归, jiahexigui – idiom, lit. to fly on a crane to the Western Paradise; fig. to pass away

人才济济, rencaijiji – idiom, a galaxy of talent; a great number of competent people

北海, Beihai – an ancient prefecture that is now modern-day Changle County, Weifang, Shandong Province

晚生, wansheng – lit. this youngster, I (self-deprecatory, in front of elders)

颍**川**, Yingchuan – modern-day Xuchang, Henan Province

名不虚传, mingbuxuchuan – idiom, lit. name is not in vain; a fully justified reputation; enjoys a well-deserved reputation
随遇而安, suiyu'er'an – idiom, lit. at home wherever one is; ready to adapt, flexible, to accept circumstances with good will
桀骜不逊, jie'aobuxun – idiom, arrogant and obstinate; unyielding
永泉, Yongquan – Gou Lian's style, lit. Perpetual Spring (small stream)
一针见血, yizhenjianxie – idiom, lit. to draw blood on the first prick; fig. to hit the nail on the head
虚怀若谷, xuhuairuogu – idiom, lit. receptive as an echoing canyon; modest and open-minded
抱残守缺, baocanshouque – idiom, lit. to cherish the outmoded and preserve the outworn; conservative, stickler for tradition
豫让, Yu Rang was a famous assassin of the Spring and Autumn Period. He was originally in service to the Zhonghang family, but Zhonghang Yin did not treat him well. After the Zhonghang family was destroyed, Yu Rang served Zhi Bo. Zhi Bo greatly appreciated Yu Rang. Zhi Bo and his family was later destroyed. Zhao Xiangzi especially hated Zhi Bo and used his skull as a drinking cup. Yu Rang swore revenge and attempted to assassinate Zhao Xiangzi, but failed. Admiring his loyalty, Zhao Xiangzi gave Yu Rang his robe. Yu Rang stabbed the robe three times before committing suicide.
屈原, Qu Yuan was a minister of the state of Chu. He was slandered and dismissed from office by the King Huai of Chu. Learning that King Huai of Chu had been captured and that the Chu capital of Ying had fallen, Qu Yuan wrote a lengthy poem entitled "Lament for Ying" before wading into the Miluo River holding a rock to commit ritual suicide.
喜形于色, xixingyuse – idiom, face light up with delight; to beam with joy Iu
天马行空, tianmaxingkong – idiom, lit. like a heavenly steed, soaring across the skies; bold and imaginative, unconstrained in style
This is a poem written by the last ruler of the Southern Tang state, Li Yu, to the ci, "Waves Scouring the Sands" (浪淘沙). This poem was written by Li Yu while he was prisoner of the Song Dynasty in Bianliang (modern-day Kaifeng) and laments his former life as the ruler of Southern Tang.
推心置腹, tuxinzhifu – idiom, lit. to give one's bare heart into somebody else's keeping; somebody has one's absolute confidence, to trust completely,

to confide in someone with entire sincerity

This is a negative reference comparing Li Zhi to the Hegemonic King of Western Chu, Xiang Yu, who lost to the founder of the Han Dynasty, Liu Bang. Xiang Yu was known for his unwillingness to listen to advice and pettiness.

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 25: Arrival at the Yong Capital

Volume 1, Chapter 25: Arrival at the Yong Capital

The second day of the eleventh month of the twenty-third year of Great Yong's Wuwei era (the first year of Southern Chu's Zhihua era), the Prince of Yong returned to court victorious. The King of Southern Chu, Princes, Royal Harem, and Royal Clansmen in front, and Southern Chu officials behind, were presented as prisoners at the Imperial Ancestral Shrine….

—*Yong Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Taizong* [1]

I did not see the grand and majestic welcome that the Prince of Yong received from all of officialdom, as my current status was that of a guest. Unpleasantly, I was a captive, but I did not have the mind to be presented as a prisoner at the Imperial Ancestral Shrine nor did I have the honor. As such, I was accompanied by Gou Lian and entered the city in a carriage before the army arrived. After passing through the Gate of Illustrious Virtue,[2] I opened the window of the carriage and saw a grand avenue that was forty *zhang* [3] wide. On each side of the avenue was a row of locust trees. But because it was winter, there was no greenery. On either side of the avenue were small gutters as wide as small brooks. Where these gutters intersected with other gutters, they were covered by small stone bridges. Although it was the dead of winter, one could feel the heat emanating from the gutters. Water did not stop flowing. In comparison, the snow and ice accumulated on the trees clearly displayed the severity of winter.

In a low voice, I recited, "A country formed by a thousand *li* of mountains and rivers, the Imperial City's walls have nine layers. / Not seeing the robustness of Emperor's residence, how can one know the Son of Heaven's honor and prestige?"[4]

Gou Lian smiled and said, "Since antiquity, the land within the passes has been the territory of monarchs. Chang'an collects historical relics and lies in a strategic location. To the south, there are the many peaks of the central section of the Qinling Mountains. To the north, the roads wind endlessly

through mountains, echoing the remote Qinling Mountains. The Jing, Wei, and six other rivers encircle Chang'an. The eight hundred *li* long plains of Guanzhong possess the resources of a monarch. Great Yong rules Chang'an as its capital, possessing the atmosphere of a sovereign. Great Yong will unify the world; its might cannot be stopped. Southern Chu established its capital at Jianye. Jianye does not possess sufficient imperial aura. Establishing the capital in such a location is frequently the sign of a country's decline within one generation."

I merely smiled and did not reply. I was clear about the feebleness of Southern Chu. I was also clear about Great Yong's power. But this was not the reason why I must surrender and pledge allegiance to Great Yong. A flash of bewilderment passed across Gou Lian's face. Never before did he have such a headache. Regardless of how he tried to persuade and reason, this young man before him would either simply agree or smile without saying anything. However, from beginning to end, he could nothing to convince this young man to serve the Prince of Yong. Gou Lian wondered if he was too anxious. But if he weren't able to convince this young man, if the Prince of Yong found the situation intolerable and decided to execute this man, wouldn't it be a great pity? Gou Lian had suggested earlier that Jiang Zhe be placed under house arrest and attempt to slowly convince him. Alas, the Prince of Yong only bitterly smiled and did not say a word. It seemed as if time was of the essence. Why was this the case?

I pointed outside the window at the passing sights to Xiaoshunzi. "Look, this is the Vermillion Bird Avenue. This avenue is the longest road in Chang'an, going from north to south. The Vermillion Bird Avenue ends at the northern limits of the city. Great Yong's Imperial Clan resides in the Palace City and the Imperial City. The official government offices of the Six Ministries rest within the Palace City. Our current location is the Outer City. Chang'an's Outer City borders the Palace City and the Imperial City to the east, west, and south.[5] The Outer City has eleven avenues traveling south to north and fourteen avenues traveling east to west. The avenues crisscross the Outer City and divide the interior into one hundred ten residential wards. Among these, the three north-south and three east-west avenues pass through the city gates, serving as the city's main transportation

arteries. As for the current Vermillion Bird Avenue that we are traveling on, this avenue is the most important roadway in and the central axis of the city. The Vermillion Bird Avenue terminates at the Vermillion Bird Gate.[6] From there, one can travel through to the Palace City."

"Hearing Sir Jiang's words spoken in such a way," replied Gou Lian with a smile, "Almost makes it seem like your distinguished self was the host."

I replied casually, "If we were to discuss Jianye's situation, I fear that brother Yongquan would know more than this one." Gou Lian could only smile wryly again.

I looked at crowds bustling with activity outside the window of the carriage. This city's prosperity was even superior to that of Jianye. However, in comparison, Jianye was filled with scholars and ladies indulging in luxury and opulence. Here in Chang'an, the city was filled with impassioned scholars and imposing and heroic warriors. One could detect the air of prosperity everywhere. I smiled. I was really fond of this city. Although I was fond of Jiangnan and it was my homeland, I would not use this as a reason to dislike Chang'an. Southern Chu was now something in my memories.

The carriage quickly arrived at the Vermilion Bird Gate, and Gou Lian lifted open the screen and revealed the command medallion of the Prince of Yong. Upon catching sight of the medallion, the imperial guardsman guarding the gate respectfully stepped down. Just as Gou Lian was about to give the order for the carriage to continue, a clear and bright laugh could be heard from in front of the carriage, before a voice could be heard to say, "Sir Gou, is there an honored guest of Elder Imperial Brother within the carriage?"

Gou Lian raised his head and looked out, seeing that there was a luxurious carriage in front. The carriage was embroidered with golden dragon brocade. Behind the raised screen of the carriage, one could see a young and handsome youth accompanied and attended by two dainty concubines. This youth was waving towards him. Greatly astonished, Gou Lian replied, "Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, why are you not attending the celebratory feast and instead leaving the city?"

Li Xian, under the support of his concubines descended from his carriage, responding, “The celebratory feast hasn’t even started. It must wait for Imperial Father to offer sacrifices at the Imperial Ancestral Shrine. This prince had called in sick long ago. I have heard that second brother brought back an honored guest. I believe that he must this Prince’s old friend. No matter what, I must come welcome him. Is it Jiang *daren* ? This prince is Li Xian.”

I had no alternative. Although I clearly knew that he was here to disrupt things, his urgency was beyond my expectations. I stuck my head out and replied, “So it is Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi. Have you come to mock this prisoner?”

Li Xian walked closer and in a clear voice, proclaimed, “What rubbish … Jiang *daren* is an exceptional, gifted scholar. Let alone Elder Imperial Brother, even my Imperial Father would not allow Sir be bound and imprisoned. Although the document submitted by Elder Imperial Brother contained *daren* ’s name, when Imperial Father saw the list, he not only crossed out *daren* ’s name, but also ordered Elder Imperial Brother to take good care of *daren* without any slights or neglects. After a few days, Imperial Father even wishes to call *daren* for an audience. I have managed to ask Imperial Father for a decree. If *daren* is willing, the residence of the Prince of Qi waits respectfully upon *daren* ’s arrival.”

Gou Lian’s brow furrowed. No wonder the Prince of Yong had difficulties. So he knew that someone would come to fight over Jiang Zhe. Hurriedly, Gou Lian stated, “Your Imperial Highness, His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, has long ago commanded me to take good care of Jiang *daren* . The Prince of Qi must not snatch the opportunity to play the host.”

Li Xian retorted rudely and unreasonably, “Even if Elder Imperial Brother were here, he would not make things difficult for this prince. Jiang *daren* , formerly in Southern Chu, you entertained this Prince under orders. This time, it’s this Prince’s turn to play the host.” So speaking, he extended his hand to grab me. Afterwards, Li Xian felt his wrist gripped by an icy hand. Turning, he saw Xiaoshunzi’s frosty smiling expression. Li Xian could only choose discretion and withdraw his hand. In a light and quick voice, he said,

“Since Sir Gou insists, this Prince can only let it be. After a few days, Jiang *daren* must come and stay for a period of time at my residence.”

I smiled faintly and nodded my head, acknowledging, “If there is the opportunity, I will naturally impose upon Your Imperial Highness.” Deeply worried, Gou Lian looked at me, wanting to say something, but hesitating.

At this moment, the Golden Hall was filled with the revelry of liege and vassals. After the captives had been presented to the Imperial Ancestral Shrine, Li Yuan, according to the ceremony formulated by the Ministry of Rites, cleansed his body, announced a general amnesty, received the customary deference from all of officialdom, reviewed the troops, and other elaborate and convoluted ritual ceremonies. Finally, the celebration feast at the Golden Hall began. After the feast began, Li Yuan issued a decree ordering Zhao Jia and Princess Changle to enter the hall. To this Zhao Jia who continuously begged for forgiveness, Li Yuan only indifferently said a few words, “Between a father-and son-in-law, there is deep and profound affection. There will not be any additional offenses.” So saying, he allowed Zhao Jia to reside temporarily in the posthouse. When Li Yuan saw Princess Changle, his cheeks were covered with tears. After Princess Changle had paid her respects, he grabbed Changle’s hand and regarded her up and down. Seeing her thinned appearance, and no longer innocent and unaffected, Li Yuan was greatly distressed. Towards Changle, he expressed, “Imperial Daughter, you have suffered hardships. Imperial Father has let you down. Your mother and others are waiting for you in the palace chambers. You should first pay them a formal visit. Imperial Father will come see you a little later.” Escorted by a crowd of court ladies and eunuchs, Princess Changle was brought back to the palace chambers.

Only then did Li Yuan raise his wine cup. In a loud voice, he announced, “Today, the Prince of Yong has returned victorious! Although We are happy with the Prince of Yong’s meritorious service in attacking the guilty, We are even happier that he brought back Our beloved daughter, Changle. We do not have a good capacity for alcohol. All honored subjects should toast the Prince of Yong on our behalf. Today, a ruler and his ministers revel. If you are not drunk, you are not allowed to return home!” The ministers within

the hall all loudly proclaimed “long live the Emperor!” Simultaneously, they raised their golden cups, all of them beaming with happiness. Li Zhi had already washed away the dust of his journey and was seated just after Crown Prince Li An, accepting the toasts of the ministers. Although Li An, placed in the seat of honor, did not cease to talk and laugh, disdain repeatedly flickered in his eyes. He absolutely detested Li Zhi to the bottom of his heart. Originally, he had arranged for the Prince of Qi to attack Southern Chu. Who knew that the Prince of Qi would suffer heavy casualties? He had no choice but to allow the Prince of Yong, Li Zhi, to gnaw on this hard bone. Unexpectedly, the Prince of Yong launched a sneak attack against Jianye, capturing the sovereign of Southern Chu, causing Li Yuan to become wild with joy, while causing Li An to become endlessly indignant.

Especially painful for Li An was that Liang Wan had returned a complete idiot. With great difficulty, he had gained the allegiance of the head of the Southern Chu intelligence network, Liang Wan. All of the effort he spent on Southern Chu had vanished like smoke. How could Li An not be dejected and embittered? Looking at Li Zhi filled with pride over his success, Li An maliciously thought, *If this Prince cannot obtain the Imperial Throne, you, Li Zhi, will also not gain one’s desires* .

Just as Li An was gnashing his teeth in anger, the palace chambers were in chaos. The Empress, Lady Dou, was the mother of Crown Prince Li An. Noble Consort Zhangsun was the mother of Princess Changle. There was also the mother of the Prince of Qi, Noble Consort Yan. Lastly, there was Noble Consort Ji. These four had gathered as they had learned that Princess Changle’s carriage had entered the Imperial City. These women were waiting there anxiously. Over the last several years, Noble Consort Ji had cried her eyes out. Her sons had all died, while her only daughter was wed to distant Southern Chu. Hearing that the Prince of Yong had brought back her daughter, Noble Consort Zhangsun had long ago become restless. Not long afterwards, the sound of footsteps could be heard coming from outside. Several eunuchs and court ladies entered the chambers to report that the Princess was waiting outside. The Empress, Lady Dou, eagerly ordered, “Waiting for what? Quickly have the child come in.”

After a short moment had passed, Princess Changle entered, wearing unadorned clothing. Holding back her tears, she paid her formal respects to the Empress. Afterwards, she dived into her mother's embrace, crying heavily. Noble Consort Zhangsun was also crying her heart out. She looked at Princess Changle's wan and sallow countenance, and she spoke, her words filled with grief, "My Zhen'er,[7] you were wed to Southern Chu at the age of fifteen. For six years, mother has burned incense and prayed every day. On the one hand, I hoped that my child's marriage would be harmonious. On the other, I worried that war between the two countries would bring disaster to you, child. Now, you have finally returned safely. Mother's heart is finally calm and orderly. Zhen'er, rest at ease, Your Imperial Father has agreed to choose another worthy husband. This time, mother will personally take responsibility and will definitely find a husband that has everything one can wish for."[8]

The Empress, Lady Dou, shed tears as she spoke, "Good child, you have suffered much hardship while in Southern Chu. We have also been extremely worried and troubled.[9] This time, we have already spoken with the Emperor. You have sacrificed too much for Great Yong. No one will be allowed to involve you in any plans. If you settle upon someone, we will help you with the choice."

Covering her face, Princess Changle voiced, "Your Imperial Highness, Mother Consort, Changle complied with an imperial order to wed to Southern Chu. Although I have now returned, I am still the Queen of Southern Chu. Even if this child has no honor and shame, how can I remarry while my husband is still alive? Would Your Imperial Highnesses and Mother Consort make the decision and allow this child to remain beside my mother peacefully for a few years so as to properly display my filial piety to Imperial Father and Mother Consort."

The Highnesses looked at one another. The situation was indeed awkward. Regardless of what they thought, Changle had married the King of Southern Chu. They could not just simply have her remarry. Noble Consort Zhangsun could not help but remember her two deceased sons and now her only daughter whom had experienced such hardships, and cry bitterly without

end. At this moment, Noble Consort Ji walked over to Changle's side. In a soft, consoling voice, she soothed, "There is no need for Princess to be so sad, the Emperor will naturally arrange everything appropriately and satisfactorily, and will not permit Princess to be embarrassed." The Highnesses knew that Noble Consort Ji took part in matters of state. Seeing her speak thus, they were all relieved. All of them were women of the harem and had seen all kinds of treacherous and murderous acts. Since the Emperor intended to take care of the matter, then Zhao Jia would naturally not have long to live. Hearing these words, Changle could not help but feel her intestines twist. Although she had no affection for Zhao Jia, he had always treated her with respect. Now that things had reached this stage, she had become an evil and poisonous married woman who harmed her husband. She could not help but shed tears like a gushing spring.

Noble Consort Ji had a carefree temperament, bantering at will, and at long last was able to eliminate Princess Changle's worried countenance. A smile across her face, Noble Consort Zhangsun said, "Zhen'er, mother has already reorganized and cleaned the Jade Phoenix Hall that you used to live in. Come, bid farewell to Her Imperial Majesty and the Highnesses. Let's go take a look at your home."

The Empress and the others all smiled, allowing Noble Consort Zhangsun to help Changle settle down. Noble Consort Ji said, "*Aiyah* ! Having only elder sister take care of things by herself makes it seem as if we don't also love Changle dearly. This younger sister is still young, allow me to help."

Noble Consort Ji was originally the most arrogant and proud. Seeing that she was deliberately ingratiating herself, Noble Consort Zhangsun naturally could not refuse. The three bade their farewells and walked towards the Jade Phoenix Hall. Everything within this palace hall had been changed. Noble Consort Zhangsun's personally selected court ladies and eunuchs were already there waiting for their mistress to arrive. Princess Changle's luggage had already gone ahead long ago. Under the guidance of the female attendants who had accompanied the Princess to Southern Chu, everything had been unpacked and stored. Changle supported Noble Consort Zhangsun, listening to her mother's chatter. Together, mother and daughter

enjoyed domestic bliss. Noble Consort Ji followed them to the side, uttering a few words of consolation from time to time. She knew exactly what to say, not leaving the mother and daughter pair feel the discomfort of being accompanied by an outsider.

After some time, due to her age and to her excitement, Noble Consort Zhangsun was exhausted. Worried about her mother's health, Princess Changle wished to escort her back to her bedchambers. Empathizing with her daughter's toil, Noble Consort Zhangsun refused her offer, having her rest well, returning to her chambers by herself. Making an excuse, Noble Consort Ji remained behind. The Princess had misgivings. Although she had lived in Southern Chu and she lived an uncomplicated life, the position and environment could change the temperament of people. In her position, she had long acquired the temperament to lead the world by her womanly example. As such, she calmly waited for Noble Consort Ji to reveal her true intentions. Sure enough, it wasn't long before Noble Consort Ji dismissed all the servants and solemnly asked, "Princess, Liang Wan has attended to Princess for many years. How did she return like this? My niece rushed about for years. For her to befall such a fate, how can it not cause us pain?"

Changle's heart jumped. Her older brother, Li Zhi, had interrogated her about Liang Wan for a long time. She had long heard that Noble Consort Ji originated from *jianghu* . She also simply knew that Liang Wan was recommended by Noble Consort Ji. As such, she did not hide anything, explaining what she had experienced.

Noble Consort Ji listened intently. When she heard that Liang Wan had sneak attacked the black-clothed man and had been captured in one move, her face revealed a strange look, as she inquired, "Princess, are you saying that Liang Wan did not even have the opportunity to retaliate?"

Apologetically, Princess Changle replied, "We also could not understand. It felt like that man only extended his hand and was able to capture older sister Liang."

"Did this man in black have any special characteristics?" asked Noble Consort Ji.

Princess Changle recalled her memories. At the time, she was terrified to the bottom of her heart when she saw Liang Wan captured. Afterwards, the spies were forcibly bound one by one. Then the man in black had walked before her. With a gesture, he killed her maid, who had murderous intentions. As the man in black stood before her, Changle clutched her golden hairpin tightly, ready to commit suicide. But she heard a feminine voice nonchalantly say, “There is no need for Your Majesty to worry. We are not from Southern Chu. Would Your Majesty please follow us to someplace? Afterwards, we will deliver you to see the Prince of Yong.”

So speaking, the man had supported her. At the time, the only thing she could think of was the death of her maid. In addition, unrelated men weren’t allowed to touch her noble body. As such, she extremely frightened. To her, the man’s voice was like that of a devil. She shivered as she thought about shoving her golden hairpin through his throat, but was stopped by the man. With a grudging voice, the man instructed, “Relax, Your Majesty. My master has no malice towards Your Majesty. I am a eunuch, and cannot profane Your Majesty’s purity and innocence.”

So speaking, he hit Princess Changle’s pressure points and covered her eyes. The Princess lost all feeling. While she was under house arrest in the secret chambers, she was attended to by this man in black. She was convinced that this man was castrated, so much so that she could tell from his familiarity with etiquette that he was someone from the Southern Chu Palace. As a result, she did not believe his promise of freedom, until that day she finally saw the spies who were protecting her. They had kneeled before her, begging for forgiveness. Beside them was the infantile Liang Wan. Under their protection, she was able to meet her Older Imperial Brother. She could only stare blankly as they committed suicide, their blood splattering all over the palace hall.

From start to finish, she did not know what had happened. While she was being escorted back, no matter how she questioned, they only begged for forgiveness. Gradually, she understood that their suicide was a demand from the man in black. They had agreed only to protect her. Reasonably speaking, she should despise the man in black, but strangely enough, there

wasn't a trace of hatred, because those people were not disrespectful in the least. For them to leave her alive was a risky matter, since at the very least, she had heard their voices and knew that there was a eunuch amongst them. But she did not reveal this information to her brother. Although they had made no demands of her, by not killing her, they had extended their kindness.

Seeing Princess Changle deep in thought, Noble Consort Ji became somewhat impatient. But she knew it was likely that the Princess had remembered something, so she continued to wait patiently. After some time, when the Princess spoke, it was as if she was in a dream. "We only remember that they seemed to operate like an army unit. They maintained strict discipline and scrupulously abided by etiquette towards Us. Other than that, there weren't any special characteristics. That man in black wasn't too tall. His eyes were unsympathetic. That's it …"

"Were those people from Great Yong or from Southern Chu?" asked Noble Consort Ji quietly.

Princess Changle gave a strange look to Noble Consort Ji before replying, "They shouldn't be from Great Yong, as they did not seem to be as tall and lofty as the people of Great Yong."

A distant and bare smile appeared on Noble Consort Ji's face, as she said, "Princess has had an exhausting trip. Please rest well. We bid Our farewell."

Footnotes :

太宗, Taizong – lit. Great Ancestor, a posthumous name, likely refers to Li Zhi

明德门, Mingde Gate – lit. Gate of Illustrious Virtue; this was the main southern gate of the city of Chang'an, modern-day Xi'an

丈, zhang – ten Chinese feet (3.3 meters); about 132 meters wide

This is a poem by one of the four greatest poets of the Tang Dynasty, Luo Binwang (骆宾**王**), entitled "On the Imperial Capital."

Chang'an was divided into three sections – the Outer City, the Imperial City, and the Palace City. The Outer City was main residential and commercial areas of the city. The Imperial City was the administrative center of the city

and of the empire, containing the residences of important officials and imperial clansmen, as well as the official government offices. The Palace City housed the Imperial Palace and served as the home of the Emperor and his immediate family.

朱雀门, zhuque men – Vermillion Bird Gate; this was the southernmost gate of the Imperial City

Princess Changle's name is Li Zhen

称心如意, chenxinruyi – idiom, lit. after one's heart; gratifying and satisfactory, everything one could wish

寝食难安, qinshinan'an – idiom, lit. cannot rest or eat in peace; fig. extremely worried and troubled

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 26: Unceasing Repercussions

Volume 1, Chapter 26: Unceasing Repercussions

On the third day of the eleventh month of the twenty-third year of Great Yong's Wuwei era (the first year of Southern Chu's Zhihua era), the Emperor issued a decree, giving specials honors to the Prince of Qi. Everyone knew that the intentions of this decree were directed at the Prince of Yong….

—*Yong Dynastic Records* , *Biography of the Taizong Emperor*

Leaving the Jade Phoenix Hall, Noble Consort Ji inhaled deeply, venting the depression within her heart. Liang Wan was the beloved disciple of sect master Fan Huiyao and was also one of the Fengyi Sect's most important chess pieces. She had made many meritorious contributions while in Jiangnan and had also come to an agreement with the crown prince. Unexpectedly, she had been ruined while in Jiangnan, causing heartache and distress. The sect master had issued a secret order, commanding her to investigate all the details of how Liang Wan went insane. Noble Consort Ji knew that the sect master suspected the Prince of Yong's involvement. The prince was already dissatisfied with Liang Wan. Otherwise, he would not have set up an alternate intelligence network. Unfortunately, the only witness, Princess Changle, could not provide any useful information.

Noble Consort Ji smiled callously. There were no suspects besides the Prince of Yong. If it were Southern Chu, then it would not have allowed Princess Changle to return. Other than the prince's subordinates, there was no one who would treat the princess with such courtesy and respect. But there was no evidence. As such, she could not accuse Li Zhi without good reason. Recalling the emperor's rewards, Noble Consort Ji grew ice-cold. During the celebrations, Li Yuan had announced that because of Li Zhi's matchless accomplishments and deeds, including the destruction of Shu and the heavy defeat inflicted upon Southern Chu, an edict was issued decreeing that Li Zhi be appointed to the rank of Marshal of Heavenly Strategies and Grand Minister Over the Masses,[1] placing him above all of the princes and

dukes, and was granted tax revenue from twenty thousand households. He was further bestowed with a set of imperial robes and a crown, a golden chariot and palanquin, a pair of jade discs, three thousand kilograms[2] of gold; permitted musical accompaniment as he traveled; and permitted a unit of forty swordsmen to accompany him wherever he went. These were tremendous honors. In comparison, it was only slightly inferior to the crown prince's ceremonial retinue.

What caused the noble consort further bitter disappointment was the emperor permitting the Marshal of Heavenly Strategies to set up its own household. From Li Zhi's petition, the organization of the household would include: a chief clerk and major, two gentleman of the household aides, two military affairs advisers, four document clerks, two registrars, two overseers, two secretarial aides, two adjuncts for each of the six sections (merit, granaries, military, mounted, armory, and levy), and six adjuncts. With this structure, Li Zhi, had a miniature court that although small, was complete in every detail.[3] Would the Emperor change his mind and name Li Zhi the heir apparent? Thinking it over, Noble Consort Ji shook her head. Although the Prince of Yong had many accomplishments, the crown prince had no obvious transgressions. In addition, from what she knew about the emperor, it was likely that he would greatly regret giving the Prince of Yong such generous rewards. After a few days, the emperor would likely think of ways to reduce the prince's strength. Since antiquity, very few overachievers received good endings. Thinking of this, Noble Consort Ji revealed a complacent smile.

At this moment, a eunuch in purple hurriedly rushed over, reporting, "Your Imperial Highness, the Emperor has decreed that he will rest at Your Imperial Highness's chambers tonight. Your Imperial Highness, please return. The Emperor should arrive within the hour."

Noble Consort Ji exulted. She understood that although her appearance was excellent, she was not much favored or loved by the emperor. In addition, because she cared not for the emperor's favor, she rarely had sexual relations with the emperor. But she had a special status as the contact between the Fengyi Sect and the emperor. As a result, the emperor

frequently allowed her to participate in decisions that pertained to matters of state. The emperor's decision to rest in her chambers tonight was likely to discuss the Prince of Yong. It looks like she was right. The emperor greatly feared the Prince of Yong. Thinking of this, a smile like a blossoming spring flower appeared on her face.

While some were delighted, others were worried. After the conclusion of the celebratory banquet, within the dazzling Crown Prince's residence, Li An wrathfully knocked everything on his desk onto the floor, wildly shouting, "Li Zhi, We swear that We kill you one day!" Finished shouting, he sat down in the chair, fiercely staring at the entrance to the study as if the Prince of Yong was going to enter. After a good while, he tiredly requested, "Someone come, invite the junior mentor to see Us."

After a while, an ordinary-looking, bearded scholar entered the study. He wore the attire of the Junior Mentor of the Crown Prince. He did not bow when he saw the crown prince, instead sitting down in a chair on the left-hand side. With a smile, he inquired, "Why is Your Imperial Highness so angry?"

In a rage, Li An yelled, "Li Zhi is already the Marshal of Heavenly Strategies. The old man almost transferred the title of Crown Prince to him. How can I not be angry?"

The scholar smiled and stated, "Your Imperial Highness is overthinking matters. The Emperor will protect Your Imperial Highness in every possible way. If he wished for the Prince of Yong to be the heir apparent, he would have done so long ago. Why would he wait until now?"

Disheartened, Li An replied, "Junior Mentor isn't aware that the Prince of Yong's mother was Imperial Father's original wife. Although I am the eldest son, I was born of a concubine. His mother died early, allowing my mother to become the first wife. After Imperial Father established the empire, he posthumously honored the Prince of Yong's mother as the Filial and Virtuous Empress. If we consider this, then I cannot compare. I am only heir apparent because I am the eldest son and my Imperial Mother is the current Empress. Now … now I don't know what to do. There is nothing I can do if Imperial Father changes his mind."

“Your Imperial Highness is too close to this situation,” responded the scholar, his gaze flickering, “This vassal believes that although it seems like you would fall from the position of crown prince,[4] in reality your position is as steady as Mount Tai. Your Imperial Highness only sees about the Emperor’s favor towards the Prince of Yong. This subject believes this favor to actually be the Emperor’s suspicions and jealousy. Think about it … the Prince of Yong has fought many wars. More than half of Great Yong’s territory was conquered by him. Inevitably, the Emperor feels that he has received his son’s grace. It would be only natural if the Emperor awarded the Prince of Yong for his invaluable accomplishments by naming him the heir apparent. However, the Emperor would rather bestow special rewards upon the Prince and refuses to consider changing the heir apparent. He clearly is biased towards Your Imperial Highness. This subject believes that this is not a result of the Emperor’s love for Your Imperial Highness, but rather Your Imperial Highness’s position represents the Emperor’s supreme authority. As such, the Emperor will never change his decision. As long as Your Imperial Highness displays your filial piety to the Emperor and the Empress, your courtesy to other members of harem, respect the Prince of Yong, and be friendly with your other brothers, then the Emperor will not change the heir apparent. Furthermore, there is still the Fengyi Sect. Does Your Imperial Highness believe that Liang Wan’s support was her own personal decision? After a few days, the Emperor will try to anticipate what will happen after he passes. What would happen if Your Imperial Highness is unable to force the Prince of Yong’s submission? He will think of ways to suppress the Prince of Yong. As long as Your Imperial Highness succeeds the throne, supported by the Prince of Qi externally and the Fengyi Sect internally, it would easy to take the Prince of Yong’s life.”

Hearing this, after some time, Li An finally beamed with joy and asked, “Junior Mentor, much thanks for your enlightening words. In your view, what should we do right now?”

The scholar laughed mischievously, replying, “The more we do, the greater the number of mistakes. The less we do, the fewer the mistakes. There is no harm for Your Imperial Highness to refrain from vying with others. As for the Prince of Qi, Your Imperial Highness should do more to win him over. A

few days ago, because of the defeats he suffered, Your Imperial Highness gave him not a few angry looks. This was wrong. Without the Prince of Qi's support, then Your Imperial Highness will not have a general who is willing to raise his hands against the Heavens to protect the Emperor."

Li An stood and bowed deeply, stating, "Solemnly receiving Sir's advice." An ambiguous look appeared on his face, as he continued, "Sixth brother loves beautiful women. I have newly selected two stunning beauties. I originally had planned to gift them to Imperial Father, but now I think I will gift one of the two to sixth brother."

An ambiguous smile also appeared on the scholar's face before his face became stern. Glancing at him, Li An said with a smile, "There is no need for Junior Mentor to pretend to be so serious. Those beauties cannot be given you. However, this Prince has other women. There is no reason not to send you two of them."

The scholar lowered his gaze and remarked, "If that is the case, then many thanks for Your Imperial Highness's rewards."

Li An laughed heartily, the sound traveling far, far away from the study.

***

Li Zhi returned to his residence somewhat intoxicated. After taking medication to dispel the effects of the alcohol, he quickly took a cold water bath. Soon after, Li Zhi arrived at the conference room, feeling fresh and relaxed. Already seated within the room were the prince's advisors: Shi Yu, Guan Xiu, Dong Zhi, and Gou Lian. All of the military officers had returned completely drunk. Seeing this, Li Zhi did not have them participate in this meeting. Seeing that his advisers were quietly discussing something, he turned to Sima Xiong and ordered him to maintain security outside before entering. With a smile, he said, "This Prince has arrived late, causing Sirs to wait long."

Seeing his arrival, the advisers stood and bowed before returning to their seats. Li Zhi looked at Shi Yu and asked, "You have met with Jiang Zhe. What do you think?"

With a wry smile, Shi Yu answered, "Jiang Zhe has been perfectly

composed ever since arriving at the Prince's residence, almost as if he were in his own home. When this subordinate had arranged the best courtyard for him, he only smiled peacefully before moving in. He had no objections to the servants that Your Imperial Highness had arranged for him. If I didn't know better, I would have assumed that he had already declared loyalty to Your Imperial Highness. In my view, he would not object if Your Imperial Highness arranged an official position. He seems to greatly enjoy living comfortably. At the very least, he would not resist to the death."

Also smiling wryly, Li Zhi opining, "This Prince understands this. This Prince does have some methods if this weren't the case. If he wished to die to protect his integrity, this Prince could only treat him carefully and attentively, hoping he would change his mind one day. But he is able to accept any circumstances without complaint. Even if this Prince gives him an official position, I fear that he would not take the position seriously, choosing to write prose and poetry, and discuss the four arts. Unfortunately, he is stingy with what this Prince requires. This Prince wishes that he can embody the Prince of De, Zhao Jue. Although Zhao Jue is already dead, he once received Jiang Zhe's heartfelt assistance. Alas … this Prince is most worried about the Prince of Qi. Although he is reckless, he is not without his schemes. He has stated to Us that he is willing to respect Jiang Zhe as his teacher."

Guan Xiu and the others looked one another with smiles before responding in unison, "Your Imperial Highness is worrying excessively. We wouldn't have to be so worried if this man would be so easily moved by the Prince of Qi."

Thinking it over, Li Zhi agreed that he was too anxious. Just as he was about to ridicule himself, he saw that Shi Yu had some thoughts. Somewhat worried, he inquired, "Ziyou, do you think the Prince of Qi is able to recruit Jiang Zhe?"

Returning to his senses, Shi You smiled and replied, "Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi's idea isn't bad. It's unavoidably too flattering. However, we can borrow this idea. The heir to the principality is bright and intelligent. Although he is only five years old, he has already learned some

characters. If we were to have the heir formally become his student, then wouldn't he become Your Imperial Highness's support? I believe that once he's met someone talented, he would not let such a great opportunity slip by."

Joyously, Li Zhi agreed, "Ziyou's plan is ingenious! Excellent! Tomorrow, we will hold a welcoming banquet and have the heir come forward to formally select a teacher. We must move quickly. To fool everyone, I have already reported his situation to Imperial Father. Once Imperial Father grants him an audience, we will no longer be able to continue to hold him under house arrest."

Although he had yet to accomplish his objective, there was finally a possible solution. Li Zhi felt his entire body relax. With a smile, he asked, "That's right … Ziyou, can you explain what happened to Princess Changle? I sent people to investigate, but time was too short, and they weren't able to find clues. I sent people to explore the ambush location and discovered signs of a small-scale unit. But who would abduct the princess at that time? In addition, this Prince cannot understand why those returned spies would commit suicide. The Princess was safe and unharmed. Their accomplishments far outweighed any wrongdoings. Even if they committed suicide to absolve their guilt, they should have still explained what had happened."

Guan Xiu and others had already discussed this matter on numerous occasions. Li Zhi brought this matter up now to purposely consider Shi Yu's opinion. Shi Yu answered, "This subordinate has also thought about this incident. We can only come to the following conclusions: They were not targeting the Princess. Their target was Liang Wan. Otherwise, Liang Wan would not be only person to be harmed. As for the suicides, this subordinate believes that they did so not because of any wrongdoing, but rather because they had made an arrangement. They had seen the kidnappers, and possibly knew many things. But they were able to safely bring the Princess back. From this, not only can we tell that the kidnappers had no ill intentions towards the Princess, but also that they knew that the spies would not reveal their secrets. From beginning to end, the Princess didn't know

anything. If that is the case, the spies must have promised to commit suicide to keep secrets."

"If that is the case, then they should have said something," lamented Li Zhi. "Although these spies are Great Yong's warriors, and should keep their promises, they had already returned to this Prince. Shouldn't the importance of telling this Prince the truth surpass the need to keep their promise?"

Shi Yu sighed and replied, "That is probably the most terrifying aspect of this incident. They must have believed that dying from suicide would be more advantageous than telling Your Imperial Highness the truth."

Li Zhi trembled, inquiring, "You're saying that those kidnappers have the strength to threaten this prince?"

Shi Yu nodded his head, continuing, "That's right. From Yongquan, I've heard that Your Imperial Highness investigated those spies' corpses. Although there were signs of torture, the inflicted wounds were not severe. This tells us that the kidnappers did not indiscriminately use torture. But from what we can see from Liang Wan, the method used to eliminate all of her memories is extremely mysterious. In other words, the method used by the other side was sinister and brutal. I believe that the pressure on the hearts of those spies must have been enormous, and ultimately surpassed their ability to endure. Only then did they comply by their promise and commit suicide."

Vexed, Li Zhi asked, "Who would have thought there were such people operating in secret? Ziyou, can you tell their backgrounds?"

Shi You answered, "The sole conjecture that this subordinate can make is that these individuals do not have any hostility towards Great Yong. Otherwise, Her Imperial Highness, the Princess would not have been able to return safely. But from the way those men targeted Liang Wan, this subordinate believes that if this matter is not related to the Fengyi Sect, then it is connected to Liang Wan's behavior and actions while in Southern Chu. There is no harm for Your Imperial Highness to investigate along these two fronts."

Li Zhi nodded his head repeatedly, stating, “Ziyou is this Prince’s courage. Without Ziyou, there is no way that this Prince has any fighting spirit.”

Shi Yu smiled and replied, “Jiang Zhe is Your Imperial Highness’s wings. Your Imperial Highness acquiring his service would be akin to a tiger gaining wings.”

Everyone looked at one another with smiles.

On this sleepless night, I also did not rest. I stood before the window, looking out at the beautiful scenery before me—a courtyard covered with snow. Xiaoshunzi walked over and complained, “Young master, your body has only just recovered somewhat, and yet you choose to stand here enduring the blowing wind. You don’t know how to take care of your body. It is too cold here. I have had them prepare a hand-held furnace.” So speaking, he shoved a hand furnace into my bosom before draping a foxskin cloak around my shoulders.

I smiled and stated, “Be at ease. My body is not so weak. How about it? Have you taken a look at the defenses of this residence?”

Xiaoshunzi smiled and replied, “Their surveillance is very tight. I could only take a casual look. If I were alone, there wouldn’t be any problems. But if I had to bring young master along, then I fear we would not be able to escape.”

I shook my head in response. “It’s not important. I have no intentions of having you rescue me. No matter what happens, I will be able to protect my life. I am only disinterested in sacrificing myself for someone else. Those people will continue to fight. One day, the world will be reunited. It isn’t important who does so. To say nothing of the Prince of Yong’s chances. Xiaoshunzi, look! It’s snowing again.”

Xiaoshunzi’s eyes moved from gazing at me to looking out the window. Like the fluttering of leaves, snow silently fell to the ground, as the cold northern wind blew directly into one’s face. He could not help but smile as he inquired, “In Southern Chu, when it occasionally lightly snowed, young master would always appreciate the beauty of the snow while drinking wine. Now that it is snowing here, has young master’s mood changed

again?”

I nodded my head, responding, “That’s right. Tomorrow, ask them for some first-rate charcoal and some good wine. I suspect that it will continue to snow tomorrow. I want to drink wine and compose poetry.”

Xiaoshunzi replied, “I can only help warm the wine for you. I don’t understand anything about poetry.”

I sighed. “That’s right. The only thing about you that leaves me dissatisfied is your inability to accompany me and compose poetry and pen essays. But without you, I would lose the mood to drink. Neither one of good friends, good wine, or falling snow can be missing. Alas, if only Piaoxiang were still alive.”

Consoling me, Xiaoshunzi said, “Young master, the dead have long departed. Do not be sad.”

Once again I looked out the window at the falling snow; there were no more words that needed to be spoken.

The next day, the snow continued to fall as expected. Li Zhi received news that Li Yuan had issued an edict rewarding the Prince of Qi for his arduous efforts during the two campaigns against Southern Chu and for mortally wounding the Prince of De. As such, Li Xian was granted the title of Grand Minister of the Works,[5] and was also bestowed a set of imperial robes and a crown, a golden chariot and palanquin, a pair of jade discs, one thousand kilograms of gold; permitted musical accompaniment as he traveled; and permitted a unit of twenty swordsmen to accompany him wherever he went.

Learning this news, Li Zhi did not become indignant. Rather, he was completely disappointed. He had fought hard and attained victories, only to gain Imperial Father’s suspicion and jealousy. These rewards were bestowed upon the Prince of Qi for the sake of checks and balances. Apathetic, he told Shi Yu, “Ziyou, Imperial Father treats me so poorly.”

Shi Yu also could not stop sighing. Just as he was about to assuage Li Zhi, Gou Lian hurriedly entered and reported, “Your Imperial Highness, Your Imperial Highness, Jiang Suiyun has had his servant ask for charcoal and

wine. He intends to appreciate the beauty of the snow. I have already had someone lead him to the Overlooking Wave Pavilion."

Li Zhi's anger immediately transformed into delight, as he replied, "Good! You have done well. Let's go and take part. Ziyou, make the arrangements to bring the heir to the pavilion in one hour."

At this moment, I was already sitting within the pavilion. The rear gardens of the Prince of Yong's residence had a small lake measuring about two *mu* [6] in size. Supposedly, there was a clear spring in the garden originally with abundant water flow. The decision had been made to dig this small lake and use Chang'an's drainage system to allow the water to travel along the Yong'an Canal.[7] The Yong'an Canal was connected to the Wei River and provided the city with half of its water supply. It was also a major waterway. As a result, even though this lake was within the Imperial City, there was water flow.

As he was heating the wine, Xiaoshunzi spoke, "Young master, why isn't this pavilion cold?"

I smiled and replied, "I've only read about this in books. You can only see that the roof of the pavilion is covered by a layer of straw. However, there is something below this layer of straw that is more than meets the eye. Below the straw, there is a layer of oiled felt followed by a layer of straw and another layer of oiled felt. There are three of these double layers. Lastly, after that, on top of the uppermost layer of oiled felt, are tiles. These tiles were also specially manufactured. They are hollow. As a result, there is no fear of heat loss. After that, let's look at the pavilion's stone floor and the stools around the pavilion's sides. Furthermore, look at the copper pillars. There are fires burning underneath the pillars and the floor. The idea is similar to the bed stove[7] found in the homes of the common people. Further, let's consider this water. Water is warm during the winter and cold during the summer. With the water flowing, it will bring along the heat from the ground. The closer one is to water, the warmer it is. As such, how can this pavilion be cold? This pavilion was specifically designed to allow rich and powerful families in the north to appreciate the beauty of snow. As long as one wears a light fur coat and carries a hand-held furnace, there is no

possibility one would be cold. That's enough … Look at the continuous snowfall outside, dancing chaotically like flowers, precious jade all over. This really is an excellent place."

Footnotes :

大司徒, da situ – Grand Minister of the Masses was one of the Three Excellencies established during the Han Dynasty that stood at the head of officialdom and tasked with overseeing land and the common people; by this era, with the establishment of the Six Ministries, the Three Excellencies had largely become ceremonial honors

斤, jin – a catty, a unit of weight measurement equal to 0.5 kilograms

麻雀虽小, 五脏俱全, maquesuixiao, wuzhangjuquan – idiom, lit. the sparrow may be small, but all its vital organs are there; fig. small, but complete in every detail

危如累卵, weiruleiluan – idiom, lit. precarious as a pile of eggs; ready to fall and break at any moment, in a dangerous state

大司空, da sikong – Grand Minister of the Works was one of the Three Excellencies established during the Han Dynasty that stood at the head of officialdom and tasked with overseeing construction of buildings and dams; by this era, with the establishment of the Six Ministries, the Three Excellencies had largely become ceremonial honors

亩, mu – a Chinese unit of measure, equivalent to one-fifteenth of a hectare

永安渠, yong'an qu – the Yong'an Canal was built during the Sui Dynasty and provided the city of Chang'an with water.

炕, kang – is a heated bed that was used for general living, working, entertaining, and sleeping; it possesses an internal cavity that is heated by a fireplace

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 27: Appreciating Snow, Composing Poetry

Volume 1, Chapter 27: Appreciating Snow, Composing Poetry

Standing, I turned to face the small lake and in a clear, bright voice, recited:

“Gazing upon the distant cold mountain concealing the full moon,The absolute and limitless snow are like lotuses.Reminiscing about the distant, shining, waning moon,Bamboo spirits, sighing in the dark, jut up into the blue sky.The fragrant cold does not require the multitude’s appreciation,Upon the flowers on red silk itself are attached touching emotions.A good turn causes the beautiful jade statutes to dance,An empty hand gently brushes away the water on the instruments.”

Finished reciting, I couldn’t help but laugh happily. Extending a hand forward, I caught a snowflake in my palm, watching as it melted in a flash. At this moment, someone laughed aloud from a distance, stating, “Sir Jiang has such a refined and elegant attitude of mind, why have you not invited your host to come?”

When I turned and looked, I caught sight of Li Zhi wearing a light fur cloak. Standing behind him were his advisers. All of their faces were filled with smiling expressions. Following them were two servants; one carrying a large vat of wine, while the other carried a food container.

“Your Imperial Highness has to handle much official business,” I stated with a faint smile. “Suiyun is an idle person. How would I dare bother Your Imperial Highness and the others?”

Li Zhi entered the pavilion, brushing away the snow on his clothes, as he replied, “I am only a person, profaned by the world, who has come to disturb Sir’s refined ambience. This vat of wine is imperial wine gifted by Imperial Father. Sir won’t want to miss out!”

With a slight smile, I suggested, “Everything is dependent on order of arrival. Since Suiyun has arrived first, you gentlemen will have to listen to my compositions. Xiaoshunzi, come heat the wine. As we drink, everyone

must recite a poem. The topic is 'Chanting Snow.' If the poem is good, he will drink one cup in appreciation. If it isn't, then the poet will have to drink three cups as punishment."

Seeing that I wasn't displeased at his sudden appearance, Li Zhi replied in a delighted fashion, "Since Sir has set these rules, then this Prince can only comply. That's fine. Everyone listen up … if you can't compose a good poem, you will have to drink three cups of imperial wine. This prince has to tell you that this wine is rich and fragrant. You will regret it your entire life if you drink too much and miss out on Sir Jiang's wonderful poetry."

While we sat down in a circle around the table, one of the servants began to remove the snacks and fruit from the container, placing them one by one on the table. The other servant removed the lid from the vat of imperial wine. The rich fragrance of the wine assailed our senses. Smelling the fragrance, Gou Lian remarked, "If it weren't for the necessity of listening to Suiyun's masterpieces, I almost wish I could get thoroughly drunk."

Li Zhi gestured for the servants to withdraw. With a smile, he stated, "That's fine. I'll send you a vat of this imperial wine tomorrow, and allow you to drink as you please."

Gou Lian hurriedly expressed his thanks. "Your Imperial Highness must not regret this decision."

Not long after we began conversing, Xiaoshunzi had finished heating the first pot of wine and had brought it over, filling each of our cups. I slowly drank the wine, feeling its effects upon my teeth and cheeks, as it warmed my limbs and bones. I could not help but exclaim, "Good wine! Although the wine from my Southern Chu is exceptionally good, when compared to the wine from the north, it inevitably feels diluted and weak."

Shi Yu smiled and said, "Since Suiyun enjoys this wine, you should drink some more."

Li Zhi raised his cup with a faint smile. All of us drank several cups in succession, feeling as if we were floating in the air like immortals. The atmosphere gradually became warm and enthusiastic. With a smile, Li Zhi said, "Just a moment ago, we had already heard Suiyun's composition. In

that case, it ought to be our turn to recite poetry. Yongquan, your skill with composition is the quickest out of all us. Let's start with you."

Gou Lian stood, turning to look at the falling snow outside. Agreeing, he said, "Fine, I will start." So speaking, he began to recite:

"The half snow-covered fields shine in the night,A warm lake covered by a cloud of jade.Delighted when seeing this beautiful scenery,Not envying utopia[1] or immortals."

"Excellent," stated Li Zhi first. "Although the creative conception is ordinary, it closely coincides with what is before our eyes. You may drink a cup."

I also smiled and observed, "'The half snow-covered fields shine in the night, / A warm lake covered by a cloud of jade.' Brother Yongquan really does have a shrewd poetic sense. Everyone's relationship with the Prince of Yong seems to be that of liege and vassal on the outside, but in reality the relationship is one of flesh and blood. There is no animosity or suspicion. Here on this winter day, drinking and making merry, truly no need to envy utopia or immortals."

Seeing an opening, Gou Lian said, "His Imperial Highness has treated us as his own flesh and blood. Why doesn't Suiyun should follow our example and serve His Imperial Highness, sampling the ambiance of not having to envy utopia or immortals."

"Suiyun has no other aptitude aside from composing poems," I replied with a faint smile. "As such, I will compose a poem to repay sir's kindness and hospitality …

'When will the quiet swallow on the maple exhaust itself?The colors of the flowers are diluted and washed away by the gentle appearance of the constellations.Within the courtyard, the birds flutter their wings with cold,from the stove of the small banquet spews columns of warm air.For the second time, the jade-like zither sounds,from four sides, songs stir the fog and restore the clear skies.To claim to be rich and yet desolate,throwing dice across the vast skies.'"

Dong Zhi clapped his hands and exclaimed, "What an excellent 'To claim to

be rich and yet desolate, / throwing dice across the vast skies!' One can see that Suiyun's mind is bright as the moon and clear as the skies. There are very few who are so broadminded … You deserve to drink a cup."

Accepting the cup of wine handed me by Xiaoshunzi, I responded with a smile, "Although my position was low back when I was in Southern Chu, I could only rack my brains and dared not relax. Now, I have finally been able to escape confinement, the so-called 'returning to the natural state.' How can brother Yongquan have the heart to force me to be disloyal and confine me in a cage?"

Gou Lian was silenced and could only smile wryly. I smiled and continued, "I have previously discussed war and tactics with Brother Dong. Today, I hope to experience Brother Dong's poetry."

Clasping his hands together, Dong Zhi replied, "Please do not laugh at my inadequacy …" So saying, he stood and began to recite:

"The handle of the Big Dipper points to the east,My brother travels to the north.With an intermediary, he visits a wise liege,Losing count of the opposing warlords.The evening snow penetrates through one's shoes,When morning arrives, he wears a fur coat.Knowing a guest has come from afar to drink,While intoxicated hears the news of spring from a turtledove."

Upon hearing these verses, my hand trembled, almost spilling my cup of wine on the table. That year, when I became an official of Southern Chu, although I originally did not serve a wise liege and did not have the lofty goal of unifying the world, everything that happened subsequently caused me to faintly regret the decision that I had made at the time. If I had been brought to Chang'an by the Prince of Yong, I probably wouldn't be expressing the prospect of my country ruined and its people starved. Now that I was a guest here in Chang'an, I could not see the smoke and clouds of Southern Chu. This sorrowful and dismal feeling was like a lone goose separated from its flock. Even though I had ultimately yielded and abandoned my country, I was filled with bitterness and misery. I raised my cup and drank the wine. As the wine flowed into my stomach, my worries increased.

Somewhat drunk, I picked up a pair of silver chopsticks. Knocking the

chopsticks against a jar to keep rhythm, I began to sing:

Wine cup in hand, at the Overlooking Wave Pavilion I say,Seeing far and deeply, distinguished and accomplished,Like Crouching Dragon Zhuge.[2] From where does the magpie fly?Treading on tips of the pine branches, it scatters the snow,Which falls on my worn cap and adds to my hair white.The remnant hills and rivers have no bearing,Only sparse plum blossoms blow in the breeze and shiver in the moonlight.Two or three wild geese look sad and dreary.

Of parting and not meeting we made light,Regretting that the clear river could not be crossed in winter,For water deeply frozen cannot flow.No wheels can go forward on the broken roads,All travelers are frozen to the bone.Who do I ask, why have you come with such worries?Was I wrong to yearn today?If I knew originally, I would have used all my courage.Now hearing the flute at night, don't blow us apart.[3]

Finished singing, I repeated the last several lines, "Was I wrong to yearn today? *If I knew originally, I would have used all my courage.* Now hearing the flute at night, don't blow us apart." I recalled the time that I spent unable to sleep when I was strategizing for the Prince of De. Alas, no matter what I did, I was kept at a distance. I recalled the critical essay that I had submitted and the outcome of never being employed again by the state. Sorrow couldn't help but rise in my heart, as tears fell like rain.

Dong Zhi hurriedly stood and apologized, "It was my fault for evoking Suiyun's thoughts filled with sorrow. Please forgive me."

Gesturing with my hand, I replied, "Many days of worry and melancholy are swept clean. Thank you, Brother Dong for your wonderful poem."

Dong Zhi did not dare to continue to try and persuade me, realizing that I had deep emotions towards Southern Chu. How was this going to be resolved? He looked at the Prince of Yong, seeing the admiration and sorrow on Li Zhi's face.

Seeing this, Guan Xiu quickly said, "I only have superficial literary ability. Please do not mock me …" So saying, he rose from his seat, holding the cup of wine in his hands, as he recited:

Exhaustively investigating the cruelty of winter,Loving its snowy wind and enduring its cold.Trailing a bamboo staff as we drink wine from every house, climbing every mountain in a palanquin.Adding to the eldest, turning to the silly and mischievous,Thanking those who taught me to be idle when old.The Taoist believer returns the debt of a happily married couple, intoxicated by the paper veiled plum blossoms as if within a dream.[4]

Hearing this poem, everyone could not help but laugh out loud. Gou Lian choked on the wine that he was drinking. While he wiped away the tears in his eyes, he choked out, “Old Guan, I never knew that you had this kind of wit. I have finally gotten the chance today to experience it.”

I could not help but also laugh. Raising my cup, I toasted, “Good verses, Brother Guan. Suiyun cannot compare, cannot compare.” Everyone laughed heartily for some time, turning the atmosphere increasingly lively and vivacious.

A moment ago, seeing my grief, Xiaoshunzi secretly glowered at Dong Zhi. Now seeing that Guan Xiu’s poem had caused me to smile, Xiaoshunzi couldn’t help but be happy. He promptly refilled Guan Xiu’s cup, a cheerful look appearing in his eyes. His behavior was clearly seen by the smiling spectator, Shi Yu. In his head, he thought, *What a sincerely loyal servant* .

Seeing that I was in a joyous mood, everyone loosened their breath and relaxed. They hadn’t come to anger me. In addition, there was a further hidden meaning to this gathering. I could not be allowed to leave early.

Shi Yu stood and spoke. “Sir Jiang, I have met Sir Jiang much too late. Unfortunately, I have not had the opportunity to seek Sir’s guidance. This cup is to toast Sir, praying that Sir will have fortune and good health.”

I also stood, returning his respect, “For Sir Shi to be like this, you flatter me too much. Suiyun has long heard that Sir Shi is the Prince of Yong’s Xiao He. When His Imperial Highness is away on campaign, it is Sir who takes care of the logistics and administration. Without Sir, His Imperial Highness would probably face enemies in front and behind. Suiyun greatly admires Sir’s great talent.”

With a smile, Shi Yu replied, “I am ashamed that Suiyun esteems me so

highly."

The Prince of Yong rose from his seat and stated, "It really isn't esteemed too highly. Without Sir, this Prince would not be where I am today." Thinking back to his many campaigns and the constant efforts by the crown prince to impede, he would not have been able to be so successful without Shi Yu's help. Raising his cup, Li Zhi toasted, "Today, this Prince salutes Sir, to modestly show the appreciation within my heart."

Shi Yu hurriedly raised his cup in thanks, as tears filled his eyes. A moment later, he said, "I do not have much talent with poetry, but will endeavor to do my best. I hope that Your Imperial Highness and everyone does not mock me." So saying, he began to recite:

"After snow, Chang'an seems to welcome the return of spring,Amassing the plain concentrated magnificence of dawn's sunshine.The borrowed color of the jade stone bewilders the valiant cavalry,The light of the silver candles dazzles the court dress.The moon, falling in the western hills, overlooks sky,The northern watchtower is surrounded tightly by clear skies.Hearing the Taoist immortal youth sing of white snow,The origin of this song gives people hope."[5]

I smiled, clapping my hands. Admiringly, I said, "Sir's poem has the dignity and aura of a prime minister. It is a pity that Suiyun cannot bear to reside long in the magnificence of the capital. Otherwise, I would most definitely see the elegance and grace of Sir's leadership."

So speaking, I calmly began to sing:

Deep freezing clouds, pure shallow weather, the cold harms the open green spaces.A companion in the light snow, the early plum blossoms float in thanks.Blazing hot day, quite bright and beautiful, and yet turning out unrestrained.Song of a beautiful person, wine in a restaurant, facing this scenery, suddenly raising the price.Buying flowers in an alleyway and footpath, forever lighting the pavilion.Good timing, how do you lightly abandon?A lazy wind, sweeping away the hazy clouds, clearing up the night.Jade earth planks, full of magnificent cassia flowers, within the plain light, more worthy of a tour.[6]

Finished singing, I smiled and stated, “Everyone is having a lovely time[7] right now, just right for touring. There is no need to speak of matters of state. Such pursuits only serve to cause distress. In the olden days, able persons composed poems and lived the life of recluses. I am untalented and cannot eat Great Yong’s grain, and also do not love being paid by Great Yong.”

Hearing my words, everyone’s heart grew dejected. Standing, Li Zhi proclaimed, “Sir aspires to nobility and purity, gaining this Prince’s admiration.”

“Your Imperial Highness is this place’s owner,” I stated with a smile, “And should compose a poem to clearly state your aspiration.”

“In that case, Sir must not ridicule me for my poor performance,” replied Li Zhi before reciting in a clear and bright voice:

“The blue sky darkens as dawn is enfolded by fog,The red sun retires as darkness sheathes rosy vapors.Forming on leaves, making profuse the color of clouds,Congealing into jade, all over the snowflakes fall.Gleaming on towers: lustrous white, just like powder,Half-hiding the screen, accumulating as if sand.Like drifting willow floss the flying blossoms float,Or like ‘plum makeup’ the flower petals flutter.

The shining jade disc is a full moon above the terrace,Whirling pearls are piercing dew through drapes.The jasper is immaculate, on the short and long steps,And the jade clustered, from the tops to bottoms of trees.It shines on the trees, whose ‘batons’ are heaped with white,And swirls around the peaks, like lotuses wrapped in purity.Starting and stopping, the weather about to grow heavy,As if hesitating or lingering, the year nears its end.

Embracing treasure: I am ashamed by hidden virtue,Manifesting fortune: I expect a year of abundance.From among the flowers, it flies to the Imperial Gardens,From the cranes’ roost, it dances towards Yichuan.[8] If I were to chant the *Hidden Thoroughwort* song,[9] Together we would enjoy the *Yellow Bamboo* piece.”[10, 11]

I savored this poem for some time before speaking with admiration, “Your Imperial Highness’s poem is profoundly invigorating and steady. The

language is robust and heroic, carrying the aura of an emperor, as if it were composed by the Heavens. Our poems, although graceful and elegant, are coarse in comparison. Suiyun is filled with admiration."

With a smile, Li Zhi responded, "I am an imperial prince. I dare not apply the four words, 'aura of an emperor,' to myself. Do not harm me, Sir! At last, I didn't lose face. This Prince is already perfectly satisfied. I would like to invite Suiyun to compose one last poem to conclude this gathering."

I smiled and jokingly replied, "If I were to continue composing, I would have used all my creative powers."[12]

I was already seventy percent drunk and felt too warm. I undid the front of my fur coat and walked to the side of the pavilion. Feeling the blowing wind, I recited:

"One body touches and violates the scales of a flying dragon,One hand touches and plaits the whiskers of a fierce tiger.

Gentlemen, look upon the city of Chang'an in the olden days,The hoary headed immortal hides the jade pot.

Ziyou[13] hears the sound of the wind blowing against his bamboo window,Inviting them to share the intoxication from the wine within the cup.

What difference does every day's sun have upon the shadows in the mountains?White snow flying chaotically like flowery petals before one's eyes.

I need not worry if there is wine in the gentleman's home,More guests are cheerfully intoxicated under the dancing bright candlelight.

Xie Shang[14] knows the dance of the crested myna,Xiangru[15] is unable to remove the solemnity of the frosted fur coat.

Excited to stop drumming and paddling crossing the river,Pining from a thousand *li* away, the Bright Moon Pavilion."[16]

Finished reciting this poem, I returned to the table. Picking up a cup of wine, I downed it in one gulp. Amidst the haze of intoxication, I laughed heartily and said, "Everyone has enjoyed themselves to the fullest before the

party ended;[17] Suiyun thanks Your Imperial Highness."

Li Zhi looked at Jiang Suiyun. Today's appreciation of the beauty of snow was being used as an opportunity for the heir to become his student, while becoming closer to Jiang Zhe. Who would have expected that Jiang Suiyun's interest in poetry would on full display? He had responded rigorously to the hidden attempts by everyone to persuade him. Overtly, his poems controlled the entire situation. With this kind of refinement and literary talent, even if one didn't know about his heaven-shaking talent, he could not be allowed to slip away. Thinking of this, he was even more eager.

At this moment, Xiaoshunzi took the opportunity to walk to my side. In a low voice, he reported, "There is someone coming. Young master must be careful not to misspeak." Afterwards, he helped me arrange my clothes. With a smile, he said out loud, "Young master's health is poor and has drank a few too many cups—be careful not to catch a cold."

My conscious quickly cleared. My ears caught the faint sound of the footsteps of about five people. Among them, one pair of footsteps was a bit unsteady and light, as if it were a child. Sobering up, I accepted the hot towel that Xiaoshunzi handed me. I wiped my face and stated, "Drinking too much has caused me to forget myself. I pray that Your Imperial Highness and everyone would forgive me."

"Wild song and excessive drink are the comportment of a famous scholar. How can you say that you forgot yourself?" replied Li Zhi with a smile. Growing serious, he continued, "But your servant is correct. Sir has just somewhat recovered and must not catch a cold. It would be better to drink a few more cups to warm yourself."

I returned to my seat, accepting the heated wine, slowly sipping away. Out of the corner of my eyes, I saw Li Zhi and the others exchange mutual looks. I could not help but secretly laugh.

Subsequently, I heard a young and tender voice call out, "Princely Father, Princely Father!" Raising my head to look, I caught sight of a young boy gaily dashing towards us waving his arms. The boy was no more than four or five years old. His appearance was graceful and he wore the yellow robes of a

prince. Following behind him were two wet nurses and two eunuchs. At this moment, a greater part of the young boy's body had traces of snow. It was likely that he had fallen a few times.

Seeing this young boy, Li Zhi's face was filled with delight, as he called, "Jun'er, why are you covered with snow? Come let Princely Father take a look."

The young boy bounced and skipped into the pavilion, snuggling against Li Zhi's knees. His eyes, capable of distinguishing right from wrong, were glued to me. With a faint smile, I hailed, "This commoner greets the heir."

The young boy walked closer to me. Pulling on my sleeve, he asked, "Sir, who are you? Jun'er has never seen you before."

I quietly responded, "This commoner is Jiang Zhe, styled Suiyun. I hail from Southern Chu. The heir has naturally never seen this commoner before."

Hearing my name, Li Jun muttered for some time before replying, "I remember now. Sir's poems are very well written … 'A thousand hills, but no birds in flight, *Ten thousand paths, with no person's tracks.* A lonely boat, a straw hatted old man, / Fishing alone in the cold river snow.'[18] This poem of Sir's, *River Snow* , is excellent. It is only a bit too lonesome. Is it really so lonely on the river in Southern Chu?"

I smiled and responded, "Although Southern Chu possesses illustrious heroes and spirits of the places, it still has many uninhabited regions. There are many rivers there. Therefore, there is indeed such a place. As far as the eye can see, there is only the cold river, snow, and ice. That year, I was traveling far from home with my father. There were no boats on the river because the new year was approaching. Everyone was home with their families. My deceased father personally piloted the boat, having brought me along to fish on the river. Although the river wasn't iced over, there was a vast expanse of whiteness everywhere."

Li Jun's eyes brightened, as he lamented, "Sir's father was wonderful. Every single time I ask Princely Father to bring me out to play, Princely Father would always say he isn't free. Sir, if you have time, can you

accompany Jun'er to fish on the Wei River?"

With a smile, I answered, "The heir's body is precious. How can it be treated the same as us commoners? If the heir is interested in fishing, why don't you angle from within this pavilion? I have seen countless fish within the waters of the lake. Catching them must certainly be extremely amusing."

Disagreeing with me, Li Jun pouted, "There is no point in catching fish here. If I can't hook them, those servants would gladly hang a fish from the fishhook. In addition, my Princely Father fought with the army when he was a young teenager. I want to be like Princely Father. But if I am not even allowed to leave the residence, how will I be able to one day go on the battlefield and fight?"

Although a look of appreciation appeared on Li Zhi's face, he said, "Jun'er must not talk nonsense. In the future, you must properly handle government affairs, and not copy Princely Father and go to battle. When the time comes, our Great Yong will have unified the world. There will be no need for you to go to battle."

Disagreeing with his father, Li Jun explained, "Princely Father is incorrect. I have heard the Sirs say that it is necessary to be vigilant even in peacetime. If we don't have enemies in the future, if this child is unable to go to battle, then how will I safeguard Great Yong? Therefore, I not only need to learn how to handle government affairs, I also need to learn the art of war." So saying, Li Jun revealed an embarrassed look, as he continued, "Thus, Princely Father must allow me to go out and see. This child will not look for trouble."

Smiling, Li Zhi chided, "You little urchin. You merely want to act willfully. If you wish to go to battle, you must be a match for ten thousand enemies. First, you must be familiar with the classics and the histories. What happened with the teacher that Princely Father selected for you? Why did you once again drive him away?"

Stealing a glance at his father, Li Jun replied, "That teacher was useless. I only asked him one question. He could not answer it."

As everyone took interest at Li Jun's words, Li Zhi inquired with a smile,

“What question did you ask that your teacher wasn’t able to answer?”

Satisfied with himself, Li Jun answered, “That day, I heard maternal uncle speak with Princely Father about a case before the Court of Judicial Review.[19] The case involves a man who killed his stepmother because his stepmother killed his father. The county level officials judged him guilty of high treason. But he did not agree with this verdict and petitioned. I asked teacher and he replied that the verdict was correct. I only drove him away because he could not understand the logic.”

Li Zhi remembered this case, also remembering that he had discussed the verdict with his brother-in-law. This incident wasn’t known by outsiders. It was definitely a good topic. Glancing at Jiang Zhe, Li Zhi smiled and said, “That’s because you asked the wrong person. Aside from Princely Father, everyone here can explain how the case should actually be judged.”

Sure enough, based upon Li Zhi’s understanding of his son, Li Jun’s eyes looked at everyone before falling on me. Li Jun sincerely believed that the advisers understood how to judge this case, but what about this person? Pulling on Jiang Zhe’s clothes, he asked, “Can Sir tell Jun’er how this case should be judged?”

With a serene smile, I replied, “There are laws regarding this matter. This one is only a commoner. How do I have the qualifications to discuss this?”

Not letting me get away so easily, Li Jun stated, “If Sir is able to explain, then Jun’er will take Sir as my teacher. If you cannot answer, then Sir will be Jun’er’s attendant.”

I glanced at Li Zhi, seeing the pleasant surprise in his eyes. It seemed that he hadn’t deliberately incited the heir to speak in this way. I could not help but smile, as I responded, “This commoner is a guilty subject of Southern Chu. How can I be the heir’s teacher? But if the heir were to ask me, I would answer that although this man killed his stepmother, he also took revenge for his father. Killing her husband, the stepmother cut off all relations with her husband’s family. As such, the man only killed an outsider. He should be judged guilty of murder and not guilty of high treason.”

Li Jun happily replied, “Sir is indeed someone who understands reason. I

have used this incident to ask many people. None were able to explain it so clearly." So saying, Li Jun kneeled before me, stating, "Although Jun'er is young, I understand the importance of keeping one's promises. Jun'er is willing to take Sir as my teacher. Sir must bring me fishing on the Wei River."

I could not but giggle. This child went around in circles without getting anywhere. His goal was to have me bring him out of the residence to play.

At this moment, Xiaoshunzi's voice sounded in my ear, "Young master cannot agree."

My heart shivered for a moment, as I pleaded, "The heir is joking. As heir, you have a precious identity. I am no more than someone from a destroyed country. Everyone else here is more suitable than this one to be your teacher. I dare not agree." So saying, I stood. Turning to Li Zhi, I said, "Suiyun cannot handle his alcohol and will bide his farewell."

Just as I turned and prepared to depart, I heard Li Zhi's disappointed voice ask, "Sir Jiang, are you really so heartless?" My body trembled slightly. I ultimately did not respond.

Footnotes :

桃花源, taohuayuan – the Peach Blossom Spring, a hidden land of peace and prosperity; utopia
诸葛亮, Zhuge Liang, aka Crouching Dragon, served as a strategist and administrator for Shu-Han who lived during the Three Kingdoms Period.
This is a poem entitled *Congratulations to the Bridegroom* by the Song Dynasty poet, Xin Qiji (辛弃疾).
This is a poem by the Song Dynasty poet, Zhu Dunru (朱敦儒), entitled *Partridge Weathe* r.
This is a poem entitled *White Snow* by the Tang Dynasty poet, Cen Shen (岑参).
This is a poem entitled *Ganzhou Command* by the Song Dynasty poet, Liu Yong.
良辰美景, liangchenmeijing – idiom, lit. fine time, beautiful scenery; everything lovely
A county in Luoyang, Henan

The *Hidden Thoroughwort* song that is paired with the song *White Snow* within the song anthologies by Song Yu and Sima Xiangru.
The *Yellow Bamboo* is a poem sung by King Mu, the fifth king of the Zhou Dynasty, during a snowstorm to express his sorrow over his subjects.
This poem is by the second emperor of the Tang Dynasty, Li Shimin, entitled *Happy Snow* .
江郎才尽, jianglangcaijin – idiom, lit. Jiang Yan has exhausted his talent; fig. to have used up one's creative powers, to have writer's block
Refers to Wang Huizi (**王徽之**), styled Ziyou (**子猷**), who was a Jin Dynasty poet and calligrapher.
Xie Shang (谢**尚**) was a Jin Dynasty official who was skilled in dance.
Sima Xiangru (**司**马**相如**) was a Han Dynasty official who was the court poet, writer, and musician of Emperor Wu of Han.
This is the second of two poems by Li Bai (**李白**) with the title *Jeering Wang Liyang* .
尽欢**而散**, jinhuan'ersan – idiom, lit. to disperse after a happy time; everyone enjoys themselves to the full then party breaks up
This is a famous poem entitled *River Snow* by the Tang Dynasty poet, Liu Zongyuan.
大理寺, dalisi – the Court of Judicial Review was a government department responsible for reviewing judicial proceedings

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 28: Extreme Disappointment

Volume 1, Chapter 28: Extreme Disappointment

Watching my receding image, Li Zhi crushed the cup in his hand, cutting and causing fresh blood to cover his hand. From youth, he was the center of everyone's attention. Even during these years of marching and fighting with the army as a leader, he was always the aloof and remote[1] prince of the state—loyally served by the soldiers, beloved and respected by the common people, revered by the ministers, and admired by the imperial clan. On numerous occasions, he only needed to show respectful etiquette towards a talented person, and would receive that person's tearful gratitude. On numerous occasions, he had done as he had pleased in handling these small matters, thus creating this modest and unassuming persona of his. Gradually, he became accustomed to using his glamor to pacify others, and his modesty and moderation to obtain their loyalty. Today, he had truly experienced a bitter and painful setback. Regardless of his conduct, that person would only smile and remain at a distance. It was true that he could forcibly keep this person beside him as an official. But what use was that? He had not been able to pacify this person. He had not been able to gain this person's loyalty. At this moment, Li Zhi tasted the painful consequences of failure. He had suffered many defeats on the battlefield and he had been deeply embarrassed in court, but he had never experienced such disappointment and pain.

Just as Li Zhi was finding it extremely difficult to extricate himself from this dilemma that he faced, the sound of graceful happiness reached his ears. He could faintly discern that the sound was noble and lofty, gentle and honest. Li Zhi's heart could not help but be moved. His mood gradually calmed down. He glanced at the worried expressions on the faces of his advisers. He glanced at frightened look on Li Jun's face. He spoke in a helpless tone, "This Prince is tired and will go rest." So saying, he stood and departed.

Shi Yu and company watched the Prince of Yong's receding figure, keenly

feeling his loneliness and sorrow. Their own moods could not but be heavy as well. Although they could not understand Li Zhi's frame of mind, they were well aware of the psychological shock that Li Zhi had just received. Seeing that the gathering had ended, Dong Zhi declared in an enraged tone, "Jiang Suiyun went too overboard. His Imperial Highness treats him so well, and yet he unexpectedly is still so heartless."

"Regardless of how overboard he goes, we cannot blame him," replied Guan Xiu with a smile. "It is said that 'a loyal official does not serve a second master.' There is nothing strange about his unwillingness to loyally serve His Imperial Highness."

"It would be fine if he were really a so-called loyal official, and would rather die than submit," declared Dong Zhi angrily, "But he clearly isn't that kind of person. And yet, he continues to refuse to serve His Imperial Highness. If he is unwilling to serve this kind of wise liege, then does he want to serve someone like Li An?"

Shi Yu thoughtfully replied, "I am actually worried that His Imperial Highness's killing intent has been stirred. If this person is killed, then not only would the world lose a gifted scholar, but His Imperial Highness's reputation would also be harmed. But His Imperial Highness is correct to be worried … How can this kind of talent be allowed to be used by someone else? These last few days, he has learned so much about His Imperial Highness's affairs. Even if His Imperial Highness isn't worried, we should be worried."

Gou Lian seemed to refute these words. "I feel like this person actually has thoughts about serving His Imperial Highness. It is only that he has a difficulty that we cannot understand."

Three pairs of eyes immediately turned to look at Gou Lian. For Gou Lian to be able to serve as an envoy, he not only relied upon his formidable mouth, he also relied heavily upon his ability to discern how someone thought from their body language.[2] For him to speak thus, he definitely had some certainty. Gou Lian suddenly smiled, as he saw a servant walk over. In front of the four advisers, the servant respectfully reported in, "Sir Gou, this lowly one asked the servant who escorted Sir Jiang to his room. En route, Sir

Jiang suddenly stopped to pick a bamboo leaf and played a tune."

Gou Lian waved his hand to dismiss the servant before turning to look at the other three. Dong Zhi thoughtfully inquired, "Are you saying that the music just now was played by Jiang Zhe?"

Gou Lian faintly replied, "I listened to that tune a moment ago and realized that the skill wasn't particularly brilliant. However, the tune was gentle and honest, seemingly from the heart. In addition, it did not seem to be the sound of traditional instruments. Therefore, I dispatched someone to take a look. It was indeed Jiang Zhe. That this person was able to discern His Imperial Highness's violent indignation only speaks to his talent and wisdom. But he played that tune to calm His Imperial Highness's mood. This shows that he was not completely indifferent to His Imperial Highness. That is why I stated that he definitely is facing an enormous difficulty that prevents him from serving His Imperial Highness."

Shi Yu retorted, "But that is exactly the problem. His Imperial Highness is humane and benevolent, with wisdom reaching the heavens. If he were interested in position and wealth, His Imperial Highness need only speak a word. If he really had some difficulties, His Imperial Highness would definitely be able to help him resolve it. Can His Imperial Highness's behavior towards him be inferior in any way to how he was treated by the Prince of De, Zhao Jue?"

Serenely, Dong Zhi wondered, "If we aren't able to help deal with His Imperial Highness's problems, what face do we have to remain here in this manner? His Imperial Highness attaches such importance to this man. Does this mean that we are inferior to him?"

Shi Yu heaved a heavy sigh before responding, "Our specialties are governance and the art of war. Although our talents can assist a liege, His Imperial Highness's current foe is not someone who we can take care of. To speak clearly, His Imperial Highness's enemy is Crown Prince Li An. Although this person appears to be loyal and filial, he is in actuality fiercely sinister. Unfortunately, he stands in the position of righteousness. Even if there are vile characters committing outrages under his banner, there are also persons of noble character who strongly support the legitimate

succession to the throne. This kind of enemy is extremely difficult to deal with. In addition, the Junior Mentor of the Crown Prince, Lu Jingzhong, is a sly and crafty schemer, a genius at assessing people's intent. As a result, His Imperial Highness has never been unable to shake the Crown Prince's position.

"On top of all this is the Prince of Qi … although he appears to be debauched and reckless, he has never gone overboard. We can clearly see that he is talented and capable. He is also a capable commander, serving as the Crown Prince's courage. With the Prince of Qi's support, the Crown Prince can concentrate on dealing with His Imperial Highness and not have to worry that Great Yong does not have any capable generals to command its armies in the future.

"As for the Emperor, not that I am slandering the Emperor, but he is jealous of His Imperial Highness's talent. The mutual suspicion between father and son is not something recent. At critical moments, the Emperor may give His Imperial Highness a helping hand, but under normal circumstances, he is more than happy to see the Crown Prince suppress His Imperial Highness. Although these enemies are powerful, based upon His Imperial Highness's demeanor and capability, and our support, His Imperial Highness still has a fifty percent chance of success.

"However, the most dangerous opponent is the Fengyi Sect. I once had the chance to meet their sect master. She is adept at astronomy and yin and yang, and is also familiar with geography and the teachings of the Hundred Schools of Thought.[3] There is nothing that she does not understand about schemes and plots. Although she is a woman, she has always had the ambition to bring peace and stability to the world. Even more frightening is that she is aware of her limitations. She knows that she cannot overtly seize the world. As a result, she uses any and all methods to try to control the Great Yong court. Noble Consort Ji who is beside the Emperor, the Crown Prince's second wife, Consort Xiao, and the Prince of Qi's consort, Qin Zheng, are all disciples of the Fengyi Sect. Beyond that, no one knows how many people they have next to us. They all pretend to wholeheartedly assist the state, causing everyone to respect them and not take precautions against

their strength. Now, they have clearly shown their support for the Crown Prince. With their existence, the Emperor, the Crown Prince, and the Prince of Qi form an inseparable entity. How can His Imperial Highness oppose them?"

Hearing Shi Yu's words, the three advisers all noticeably shivered. They originally did not know how challenging the situation was for the Prince of Yong, only knowing that the prince had rejected the offer of marriage from the Fengyi Sect. They all were against allying with the Fengyi Sect, although all three of them had different reasons for doing so. They did not expect that the current situation was practically irreconcilable. Dong Zhi took a deep breath and asked, "If that is the case, then how does this relate to Jiang Zhe?"

Shi Yu sighed again before replying, "Although the Fengyi Sect Master is a frightening, generational talent, she has one weakness. She is ultimately a woman, and is indecisive in her decision-making. She is sometimes overly cautious. Defeating this person requires someone extraordinary who can operate independently. This is the so-called 'irregular troops are victorious against standard troops.' Although Jiang Zhe, that person, has an outward appearance of someone accepting circumstances with good will, he is someone who does not go along with the pack, clearly standing out with his peculiarity. Considering his behavior, he is someone who has no qualms and is unconstrained in style. Considering the stratagems that he employs, all of them have been unusual and crafty in their decision-making, happening outside of everyone's expectations. Moreover, his arrangements are profound and long-lasting, his thought processes meticulous and careful. His execution is sinister and fierce to the extreme, adept at prevailing over opponents within the most dangerous of circumstances. His Imperial Highness has spoken of the several times he has gone against this man. Every single time, His Imperial Highness has suffered. What is even more alarming is that His Imperial Highness did not have any way of resisting. That year, he offered His Imperial Highness a suggestion. Although it ensured His Imperial Highness's safety, it also successfully sowed discord between His Imperial Highness and the Emperor. His Imperial Highness could clearly understand the intentions of this advice, but had no way of stopping its effects. Only Jiang Zhe, this person, is capable of attaining

victory over the Fengyi Sect Master. If we cannot annihilate the Fengyi Sect, our Great Yong will one day fall into the hands of these women. That is why His Imperial Highness would lose his self-control. Everyone please understand the painstaking efforts of His Imperial Highness and not resent His Imperial Highness's preferential treatment of Jiang Zhe."

"Many thanks to Ziyou for your instruction," recognized Dong Zhi ashamedly, "Zhi cannot help resolve problems for His Imperial Highness and yet is jealous. I am extremely ashamed."

Shi Yu rose from his seat and said, "Brother Dong is too serious. We are close advisers to His Imperial Highness. We naturally should be wholeheartedly showing our devotion and loyalty to His Imperial Highness."

At the same time that Shi Yu was eliminating the disturbance, I was half sitting in bed, half drinking a fragrant tea that could dissipate the effects of alcohol. I was completely absorbed in recalling today's events. Ever since Piaoxiang had died, my heart was frequently filled with melancholy and gloom. Today's gathering had immediately turned my mood clear and bright. If I had then made my decision, I fear that I would have already acquiesced. I remembered the fear in my mind during our meeting in Sichuan in his encampments. Now, I did not have any restraints upon my decision-making thus reducing any fear I had of the Prince of Yong. However, I could not but admit that the Prince of Yong was unusually tolerant. If it was me, I probably would have killed such a discourteous fellow.

Ah, it was unfortunate that I could not change my mind no matter the circumstances. I, Jiang Suiyun, could randomly participate in the examinations and offer my advice once up a time, but right now, I cherished my freedom. Under the prerequisite of ensuring my survival, I will never again be loyal to anyone. I smiled faintly. I had come to this decision even though I had never before been genuinely loyal and devoted to anyone.

Before I went to bed, I once again thought of the heir to the Prince of Yong, Li Jun. What a cute and innocent child. It was a pity … from what I could see from this child's appearance, he was intelligent but would likely die prematurely. This child would not have the fortune of ascending to the

throne. Thinking it over, I smiled again. Although this child's physiognomy was somewhat poor, he had a good-natured temperament. Combined with the Prince of Yong's fortune providing shade for him, he should not live a short life. To say nothing of the fact that he was a precious imperial grandson. What regrets could he have? There was no reason for me to worry for him.

Though already half asleep, I had suspicions. In my view, the Prince of Yong wasn't someone who would unceasingly harass someone. Why would he respond so abnormally? It was almost as if he absolutely must acquire my service. This was not in keeping with conventional wisdom.

***

Li Zhi, immediately after he had calmed down, received word that the Prince of Qi had come calling. He was not happy. Before him, Li Xian flattered and threatened, "Second brother, just let me meet Jiang *daren* . At that time, I became acquainted with him while in Southern Chu. Imperial Father has even said that he will appoint him to an official position. Did you place him under house arrest?" Without any other options, Li Zhi could only agree to allow Li Xian to meet with Jiang Zhe.

When he entered the courtyard I lived in, Li Xian shouted out, "Suiyun! Suiyun! It looks like second brother treats you quite well. This Perched Phoenix Courtyard is much loved by second brother, and yet unexpectedly he is willing to allow you to live here."

At that moment, I was playing *weiqi* with Xiaoshunzi. My skill was mediocre, while Xiaoshunzi was quite good. According to him, playing *weiqi* helped him with his cultivation. If it weren't for my pretty good strategic and macro sense, and occasionally making strange moves, I fear that I would lose badly. When Li Xian was shouting out and walking in, I was thinking about my next move with my brow furrowed. Seeing Li Xian enter, Xiaoshunzi stood. Bowing respectfully, he greeted Li Xian, "This servant greets Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi." Afterwards, he nudged me lightly.

Li Xian took Xiaoshunzi's seat. Seeing that I was still racking my brains, he stated, "Stop thinking. I've the opportunity to experience your skill at *weiqi* ,

and it's notoriously bad."

Roused from my thoughts, I looked at Li Xian seated opposite me. Staring blankly, I inquired, "Why did Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, come here?"

Deliberately revealing a look of deep hurt and disappointment, Li Zhi replied, "Heavens! Don't tell me that Jiang *daren* only just now saw my seven *chi* [4] tall body?"

I smiled slightly, pushing away the board and ordered, "Xiaoshunzi, prepare a cup of tea for His Imperial Highness."

Xiaoshunzi brought over a cup of hot tea which Li Xian accepted. He sized up Xiaoshunzi for a while before asking in quick succession, "Are you a eunuch in service here in the prince's household? How come I've never seen you before? Are you new? Why are you wearing those clothes?"

In an neutral voice, Xiaoshunzi answered, "This servant is from Southern Chu. I once met Your Imperial Highness within the Southern Chu royal palace. Naturally, your Imperial Highness does not remember me."

Li Xian froze for a moment before looking at me and asking, "How does Jiang *daren* have someone from the Southern Chu palace?"

With a smile, I replied, "He is an old friend of mine. He took advantage of the Prince of Yong capturing Jianye to run away from the palace. He decided that he might as well not go back."

Li Xian suddenly understood. "So that is the case. For Jiang *daren* to have such a servant by your side, *daren* is truly blessed. *Daren* should allow him to take up a formal position. If someone were to submit a memorial to censure *daren* for employing a eunuch, then *daren* will be charged."

I smiled distantly and replied, "I am no more than a commoner. Who out there would submit a memorial to censure me? Furthermore, Xiaoshunzi is someone from Southern Chu. Don't tell me that Great Yong won't allow those people from a destroyed country find new livelihoods?"

Seeing my obstinate temperament, Xiaoshunzi hurriedly stated, "Young master, His Imperial Highness is being thoughtful."

Only then did my complexion become calm. I inquired, “For Your Imperial Highness to come to see me is Suiyun’s honor and privilege. But Your Imperial Highness would not come see me without a reason.[5] I wonder if there’s anything that this one can help with?”

Li Xian’s expression grew serious, as he replied, “Jiang *daren* , when I first saw you, I realized that you were someone that I, Li Xian, require the most. Don’t ask how I know, but if *daren* is willing to become strategist, I, Li Xian, am willing to treat and respect *daren* as my teacher, taking your words as holy writ and absolutely never objecting.”

Seeing Li Xian’s earnest gaze, I could not but smile wryly. This year, Li Xian had just reached the age of thirty. His handsome appearance carried with it a dense, awe-inspiring domineering aura. His sincere and yet aggressive aura made one feel dread and at the same time, feel closer to him. If there weren’t the Prince of Yong, Li Zhi, I would have thought that Li Xian was the most suitable individual to succeed to the Imperial Throne. This person was clear about important matters and pretended to be muddled about less important ones. He had selected Li An not because he considered Li An to be outstanding or because he would be highly regarded, but rather because Li Zhi did not require someone else who was a capable commander on the field of battle. In comparison, Li An would not be able to do anything without him. As far as I was concerned, it was impossible for me to select Li Xian. After learning of Liang Wan’s identity, I had the Secret Camp begin to collect intelligence on the Fengyi Sect. Before I had arrived at the Yong capital, I had already received preliminary reports containing information that was widely known. Within included information on Qin Zheng, the Prince of Qi’s consort. Although she was the daughter of an important family, she was a major disciple of the Fengyi Sect. Li Xian was definitely not someone capable of cutting off his ties with the Fengyi Sect. As for me, because of Liang Wan, I had become the enemy of the Fengyi Sect. I dared not say that what had happened would remain secret forever. In the world, there was not a single wall that could completely block the wind. As such, I could not serve Li Xian.

Thinking of this, just as I was about to forcefully decline, I suddenly remembered my plans to fake my death. I immediately changed what I was

going to say. “Suiyun is extremely grateful of Your Imperial Highness’s great kindness. Merely, His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, does not permit me to leave this place, and so I can only decline Your Imperial Highness’s good intentions.”

In astonishment, Li Xian exclaimed, “What? Second brother dares put you under house arrest? I think that you know that when she returned to Chang’an, Changle brought back a collection of your poems. Imperial Father really enjoyed reading it. If it weren’t for second brother saying that you were sick and in bed, Imperial Father would have granted you an audience long ago. You might as well as return with me. This Prince expects that second brother won’t dare to make things difficult.”

I calmly replied, “Your Imperial Highness is mistaken, Suiyun’s health is poor. I caught a cold en route to Chang’an. I have only started getting better these last several days. His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, stated that Suiyun’s health is poor and should be confined to the official residence. His actions were meant to empathize with Suiyun’s situation. Your Imperial Highness must not misconstrue their intent.”

Li Xian averted his eyes. “If that is the case, when I go back, I shall send someone over to formally invite you to come and recuperate in the Prince of Qi’s household.”

“I’m not accustomed to staying in the official residences of princes,” I replied indifferently. “It’s too inconvenient. If possible, can Your Imperial Highness see if there is a small and quiet residence or manor? Suiyun has some savings and can’t afford to buy something too large.”

Li Xian rubbed his hands together and refused, “How is that acceptable? I want you to be my teacher. How can I allow you to live outside my residence?”

Deliberately, I stated, “If that’s the case, then forget about it. I’ll just ask His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, to think of something. I believe there has to be an appropriate manor out there. Alas, if Your Imperial Highness is unwilling, then matters will be difficult. Who allowed me to become beholden to His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong?”

Suddenly, Li Xian responded, “There are no problems. I will definitely help Jiang *daren* , no Sir Jiang, find a suitable manor. It will both be tranquil and elegant, and easily accessible to allow me to visit.”

“If that is the case, then Suiyun can only thank Your Imperial Highness very much,” I replied.

Seeing the Prince of Qi depart in high spirits, I felt somewhat guilty. Although the Prince of Qi was impulsive and reckless, he treated me with sincerity. It was a pity that I would ultimately have to betray his trust. In reality, the one who I was letting down the most was the Prince of Yong. He treated me diligently and attentively. Otherwise, why had he launched a sneak attack on Jianye? This was something that I had thought through recently. I was afraid that the reason for his attack on Jianye was to acquire me.

After Li Zhi had seen Li Xian off, he reentered his residence with a pale white face. The Prince of Qi’s delight had left him thoroughly discouraged. Shi Yu was also extremely disappointed. Li Zhi could not believe that the Prince of Qi had so easily and without effort received Jiang Zhe’s acknowledgement. If that was the case, what was he?

Returning to his study, Li Zhi quietly stated, “Ziyou, help me prepare a banquet to see off Sir Jiang.”

Shi Yu dropped to his knees. In a trembling and frenetic voice, he cried out, “Your Imperial Highness, this man cannot be allowed to leave.”

Li Zhi’s voice was extremely calm. He replied in a misty voice, “Prepare a pot with a compartment for me. I want to see him off.”

Shi Yu’s entire body trembled, as he replied, “As you command.” His eyes were filled with sorrow and despair.

Raising his head, Li Zhi stated, “Ziyou, did I do the right thing? If this man were to serve the Prince of Qi, I would not be able to eat or sleep in peace. It would be better to kill him to forever remove the danger.”

Distressed, Shi Yu replied, “Poisoning this man to death will remove the danger. If we don’t kill that man, we will eventually die by his hands.”

With tears falling down his face, Li Zhi sadly said, “But if we were to kill the man, this Prince’s mind cannot be at peace. This Prince has always believed that I am magnanimous. Now, I will have to murder someone who is unwilling to pay his allegiances to this Prince.”

Shi Yu remonstrated, “Your Imperial Highness must not be too softhearted. This person possesses superlative talent. If he were allowed to leave, it would greatly endanger Your Imperial Highness’s great ambitions.”

Weakly and powerlessly, Li Zhi gestured with his hands and replied, “This Prince has already made my decision. Tomorrow, We will use a Soul Enrapturing Pill.”

“Yes,” replied Shi Yu, “If this happens, his life will end without any outward signs in twenty-four hours. He will not suffer any pain.”

Li Zhi did not make a single sound….

Footnotes :

高高在上, gaogaozaishang – idiom, lit. set up on high; not in touch with reality; aloof and remote
察言观色, chayanguanse – idiom, lit. to weigh up somebody’s words and observe their facial expressions; to discern what somebody thinks from their body language
百家, baijia – the Hundred Schools of Thought refers to the philosophies and schools that flourished during the Spring and Autumn, and Warring States Periods
尺, chi – measurement used for height; its length ranged anywhere from 23.1 cm to 29.4 cm; seven chi is about 161.7 cm to 205.8 cm
无事不登三宝殿, wushibudengsanbaodian – idiom, lit. one doesn’t visit a temple without a cause; fig. to visit somebody with an ulterior motive, having a hidden agenda

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 29: A Matter of Life and Death

Volume 1, Chapter 29: A Matter of Life and Death[1]

I watched Xiaoshunzi gather our belongings. My mind was blank. I would regain my freedom tomorrow. But there was nothing that could be done to make me happy. It was a long time before I could steel my heart. There was no reason for me to spend my time worrying about someone who had decided to kill me with the poison of a Soul Enrapturing Pill. At this moment, a servant came to report that Guan Xiu, Dong Zhi, and Gou Lian had come to see me. Their arrival denoted the final, last effort. I grew warm. Regardless of what was going to happen, they were all good men. Since after today, there wouldn't ever be an opportunity to sit and drink with them, there was no harm in drinking through the night. I smiled and ordered the servant to invite them to come in.

Guan Xiu and company were all intelligent. After chatting for a few moments, they realized that I had made my decision and ceased efforts to change my mind. We talked to our hearts' content through the night. As the morning arrived, I looked at the approaching dawn outside the window. With a smile, I stated, "All good things must come to an end.[2] After we part today, when we meet again, I'm afraid that we will have become strangers."

Distressed, Gou Lian replied, "Since Suiyun knows this, why are you entering service with the Prince of Qi?"

I smiled slightly before responding, "His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, is reckless, impulsive, and candid. I am only planning on idling in his service. After a period of time, I plan on leaving Chang'an. When that time comes, we will be friends and not enemies. There is no need for you gentlemen to be overly anxious."

In a low voice, Dong Zhi said, "The only fear is that His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, is unwilling to allow Sir to leave."

I only tranquilly remarked, "Gentlemen, please go back. I will leave the

Prince of Yong's residence today. His Imperial Highness has already stated that he plans to see me off. Suiyun cannot possibly go meet His Imperial Highness like this. I must bathe and change my clothes, before I can go bid farewell to His Imperial Highness."

Rising to his feet, Guan Xiu said, "Since that is the case, we won't disturb Suiyun any further. We won't participate when the Prince throws your send-off banquet so that we can avoid the grief and sorrow of parting. Those feeling overwhelming sadness forget that it's nothing more than bidding farewell."

After seeing these three advisers off, I walked into a rear room. This room was the designated room for bathing. Within the room was a pool five *zhang* wide. The entire floor of the pool was covered with limestone. The water intake valve was at the center of the bath. Above it was the water outtake valve in the shape of a lotus. Underneath the limestone floor were copper pipes, drawing and heating the clear spring water from the gardens. After pressing the mechanism to allow the water to enter, the clear spring water would spray forth in all directions from the lotus. After I entered, Xiaoshunzi was letting water into the pool. The entire room grew foggy, the splashing water like pearls and jade. I smiled slightly. Every single time I entered the room, I thought that the imperial clan certainly knew how to enjoy themselves.

After undressing, I stepped into the pool, openly and unrestrainedly enjoying the hot water bath. With a smile, I called, "Xiaoshunzi, tell me, can I build a similar pool in the future?"

Xiaoshunzi did not answer me. Feeling odd, I turned my head and took a look, seeing that his mind was wandering. Feeling strange, I shook my head. However, I did not rouse him from his reverie. He would never hide his feelings or worries from me. I believed that he would soon have something to say to me.

After I had finished bathing, I put on the clothes that Xiaoshunzi had prepared for me. I had given special instructions that the interior undergarments and the exterior scholarly garb had to be snow white. Just as I was dressing conscientiously, Xiaoshunzi suddenly appeared and

kneeled on the ground before me. In a voice filled with sorrow, he stated, “Young master, please stop making things so difficult for yourself.”

I stared blankly at him for a moment, my hands that were just about to take the proffered robes stopping in midair. Unsure, I asked, “Xiaoshunzi, what are you saying?”

Xiaoshunzi replied, “Xiaoshunzi knows that young master is wholeheartedly determined to avenge your wife. May I ask young master if we were to take vengeance for the lady, what stratagems could be employed?”

I looked at him and softly said, “We are in the same boat.[3] I won’t conceal anything from you. As soon as I learned the identity of main culprit, I had devised three plans—upper, middle, and low.”

Xiaoshunzi asked, “May I ask young master’s low plan?”

I took the proffered robes from his hands. In an unhurried voice, I responded, “The low plan is the most difficult. After I extricate myself from the Yong capital, I will go into hiding and wait for the opportune moment. It is said that there will always be something neglected by a wise person’s overthinking. As long as we wait carefully, there will eventually be an opportunity to assassinate Li An. Even if we can’t assassinate him, we will be able to cause huge damage from that moment’s negligence.[4] I can wander the world, cultivating and training forces that are dissatisfied with Li An. Presently, the Hanzhong region has not yet wholeheartedly submitted and soon, Southern Chu will be reestablished. Borrowing the entire world’s strength and with the Prince of Yong eyeing covetously on the side, I will one day take revenge. It is only that killing a country’s heir apparent is not a small matter. After we have succeeded, I will have to scatter my subordinates and wealth, and from that moment forward, travel the world. In addition, even if we are the slightest bit inattentive, our fate will be of defeat and death.”

In a low voice, Xiaoshunzi continued to ask, “May I ask young master’s middle plan?”

I draped the robes over my shoulders and quietly replied, “The middle

plan is somewhat better. Crown Prince Li An's biggest supporter is the Prince of Qi. Although the Prince of Qi is impulsive and reckless, that is only his outer appearance. In reality, he is an outstanding talent of the present age. If the Prince of Yong did not exist, then the Prince of Qi would be a good choice to inherit the throne. I will pledge my allegiance to the Prince of Qi, strategize for him, inciting discord between brothers. At the right moment, have him instigate internal strife. Whether this benefits the Prince of Yong or the Prince of Qi, I will break Li An and kill him. Even if we were unable to achieve this objective, we would incite a civil war in Great Yong, avenging both state and personal grievances."

Xiaoshunzi moved forward on his knees and asked, "May I ask young master's upper plan?"

I fastened my robes. With a smile, I responded, "This upper plan is the fairest and most aboveboard. I pledge allegiance to the Prince of Yong and borrow his strength to attack.[5] When the time comes, I will have the Prince of Yong murder his older brother and force his father to yield the throne. Not only will I have taken revenge, the world will also have received a wise and virtuous ruler. With unification, the dawn of a new era will be at hand. Not only will I, Jiang Zhe, be famous in the annals of history, after success, I will be able to either retire and become a recluse, or enjoy riches and honor. This is the upper plan."

In a grave and serious voice, Xiaoshunzi said, "Young master, over the last several years, Xiaoshunzi has always been attending by your side. How can Xiaoshunzi not understand young master's thoughts? Young master clearly knows that pledging allegiance to the Prince of Yong is the best course of action. Why have you been so stubborn? Young master's personal enemy is also the enemy of the Prince of Yong. As long as young master enters into the service of the Prince of Yong, the moment that the Prince of Yong ascends to the throne is the moment that young master's vengeance is realized. From beginning to end, young master has refused to pledge your allegiances to the Prince of Yong, and even repeatedly and deliberately instigated provocations, forcing the Prince of Yong to come to decision to kill young master. In reality, as long as young master submits to the Prince of

Yong and takes revenge, young master will be able to become a recluse and live out your remaining years in peace. There is absolutely no need to take such risks. Although young master's medical expertise is extraordinary, you may not be able to save yourself from the poisons secretly stored away by Great Yong's imperial clan. If by chance, young master suffers misfortune, what then? Even if Xiaoshunzi were capable of killing the Prince of Yong, what use is that?"

I distantly replied, "How can I not understand these things? But through the entirety of my life, while I have been willing to use any available tools to confront my enemy, I have never arbitrarily schemed against those I am close with. The Prince of Yong is an unrivaled wise liege of this era. He trusts Suiyun completely. How much thought has he put in to acquire Suiyun's services? Over a long journey of a thousand *li* , he has given me his clothes, his food. Suiyun does not have a heart of stone. How can I not be moved? But I have been graced by the favor of the King of Southern Chu formerly, and have incurred grievances with Great Yong latterly. There are already many misunderstandings present.

"Let alone the fact if I were to submit, I must wholeheartedly and sincerely consider His Imperial Highness. Without my planning, His Imperial Highness might not necessarily lose. Although the resulting conflict will be bitter and desperate, his reputation will remain faultless. But if I were to submit, Suiyun is only an ordinary person, and won't be able to stop myself from resolving my personal grievances. Because of that, I would have harmed the righteousness of the cause. If I were to be completely impartial, how would I be able to face Piaoxiang's spirit in the underworld? Thinking it over, since I am unwilling to mar His Imperial Highness's reputation in the annals of history, and am unwilling to forsake my wife, Piaoxiang, because of my conscience, I can only make things difficult for myself. As for the middle plan, although I will not injure my resolution, it will inevitably cause the Prince of Yong to be badly hurt. I already feel guilt and shame in my heart because I cannot serve this kind of wise and virtuous liege. How can I bear to harm him? That is why I have adopted the low plan."

Xiaoshunzi inquired, still filled with questions, "Young master is unwilling

to serve the Prince of Yong, and yet considers the Prince's needs. But is there a need to force the Prince of Yong to kill young master? If you were to fake your agreement, after some time, it wouldn't be difficult to escape from Chang'an.

I smiled and explained, "I may have been careless in the way I have handled small, unimportant matters, but in matters this important, I am unwilling to lie and deceive. I did not lie or deceive back then, when I refused to serve the Prince of De. As I have the decision to not serve the Prince of Yong, I will not lie and deceive him into thinking otherwise. Moreover, if I did not force the Prince of Yong to kill me, how would I be able to completely serve the Prince of Yong's inclination to recruit me? Xiaoshunzi, you must remember, faking my death today does have some degree of danger. But if I were to suffer misfortune, you must remember not to take revenge for me and harm the Prince of Yong. The Prince of Yong did not make any mistakes. A hegemon must not be softhearted. I only ask that you remember to one day kill Li An on my behalf. After that, bring my dead body back to Southern Chu to be buried alongside Piaoxiang. Do you promise me?"

Xiaoshunzi lowered his head to the ground. It was some time before he was able to speak, weeping, "How can this servant not listen to young master's orders? If misfortune befalls young master, after I have killed Li An, I will return to Southern Chu and spend the rest of my life guarding young master's grave."

I quietly replied, "Many thanks to you. Actually, my chances of success are quite high. There is no need for you to feel bad. After we have overcome this obstacle, there will be nothing in this world that can fetter me. You can be assured that even for the sake of vengeance, I will not sacrifice myself."

Xiaoshunzi fell silent and had no more words. I knew that he didn't believe me. I was speaking the truth, though. I had never become crazy or frantic for the sake of vengeance.

Within his study, Li Zhi silently gazed at the silver pot on his desk. Shi Yu stood in front of the table. Deeply worried and sick at heart, he said, "Why does Your Imperial Highness not use Great Yong's secretly stored Mandarin

Duck Pot and use this Concealed Sharpness Pot instead?”

Li Zhi softly replied, “Although the Mandarin Duck Pot secretly manufactured by the previous dynasty is reliable, Jiang Zhe is knowledgeable of the histories and adept at identification. He may recognize the Mandarin Duck Pot. This Concealed Sharpness Pot was delivered by this Prince’s subordinates in Southern Chu. It has an elaborate mechanism. There will absolutely be no loopholes. It is better to use this pot. The Soul Enrapturing Pill will not change the silver color of the pot.[6] Jiang Zhe won’t be able to detect anything.”

Shi Yu had followed Li Zhi for many years. He could clearly detect the sorrow in Li Zhi’s heart. He could not but blurt out, “Your Imperial Highness, just now, Guan Xiu and others came to report that Jiang Suiyun has stated that he will serve the Prince of Qi for long. If Your Imperial Highness cannot bear to do this, then there is no harm in letting him off.”

Apathetically, Li Zhi inquired, “Is this what you really think?”

Shi Yu wanted to say something, but hesitated. Eventually, he said, “This is all this subordinate’s mistakes, encouraging Your Imperial Highness to seek out talented individuals. But right now, Your Imperial Highness can neither pacify Southern Chu nor obtain a talented individual. This is all this subordinate’s doing. But if we do not kill that person, I’m afraid that this subordinate will never be able to be at peace.”

Li Zhi slightly sneered as he scoffed, “This has nothing to do with you. This Prince was too self-confident, believing that all of the world’s talents would willingly serve us. Let’s be done with it and give Jiang Zhe a farewell dinner in the front reception hall. Pity this exceptional and gifted scholar, from henceforth buried forever in the earth. This is this Prince’s sin and his misfortune.”

Not far from the residence of the Prince of Yong, a luxurious carriage waited peacefully. Within, Li Xian’s face was lit up with delight. Opposite him sat his consort, Qin Zheng. Today, she did not cross-dress, instead wearing a moon-white dress. She was an outstanding beauty. Callously, she griped, “It’s only that Hanlin Academic, Jiang Zhe. Why does Your Imperial Highness

regard him so highly?”

A faint look of ridicule flashed across Li Xian’s face before he replied in a cordial manner, “That year, Zheng’er, your tongue was as sharp as a blade and was still unable to persuade the Prince of De. But this person only had to speak a few words to convince Zhao Jue. Reportedly, this man accompanied Zhao Jue to conquer Shu. I closely studied the plan Zhao Jue used to conquer Shu. He did not employ his usual style. It can be clearly seen that this Jiang Zhe is quite talented. Furthermore, I have loved this man’s elegant manner for quite some time. Even second brother attaches great importance to him. What’s inappropriate about me treating him thus? Not that I’m criticizing you, although Zheng’er, you are a talented woman of this era with family background, appearance, and talent all superior, your sole flaw is your temperament that lacks humility and tolerance. It’s not surprising as you are proud woman of the Heavens. However, this Prince will state this clearly: if you offend Sir Jiang, don’t blame this Prince for being ruthless.”

A scowl appeared on Qin Zheng’s face. Back then, she had received orders to approach the Prince of Qi. This Prince of Qi was an elegant young man, and also had a loose and casual character, quickly gaining Qin Zheng’s love. In Southern Chu, she had fallen into the Prince of Qi’s trap because of jealousy. After a night’s romance, she had become the Prince of Qi’s fiancée. But from then on, the Prince of Qi reverted to his old ways, not only visiting prostitutes, but also engaging in falconry and hunting. Towards her, he seemed be keeping his distance, at times as sweet as honey, other times as cold as ice. Before she had even been wed and entered the prince’s household, there were already three or four children born of concubines. She could only blame herself for being infatuated and head over heels in love,[7] and could not extricate herself. It was only until they were wed by imperial decree that she realized the truth. Although Li Xian seemed to respect her greatly, she was confined to the inner courtyard of the prince’s residence, while he lived shamelessly. She had even complained tearfully to her master and her father, but they all explained it away as the prince’s dissolute character, stating that she could only scrupulously abide by the womanly virtues, and apply gentle and tender fetters. Without any other

choice, she could only turn a blind eye. But today, the Prince of Qi only intensified the aggravation, unexpectedly bringing her along to bow her head to a Southern Chu captive. Ultimately, after thinking it over, she was unwilling to fall out with the Prince of Qi. She could only endure and reply, “Your servant will do as you bid.”

Li Xian smiled unsympathetically. He understood this intelligent woman very well. She was proud and arrogant, and lacked tenderness. As a result, he did not make any excessive attempts to persuade her. However, he knew that Qin Zheng would not violate his commands. Seeing that it was approaching the stipulated time, Li Xian said, “All right, let’s go to the Prince of Yong’s residence.”

The front reception hall of the prince’s residence stood out, as it was not splendid and majestic like the typical halls in a prince’s residence. Instead, it was expansive and long, solemn and dignified. Today, Li Zhi was also dressed in plain, unadorned clothes. His heart was in mourning. Seeing Jiang Zhe, he froze, staring blankly. Jiang Zhe was also wearing plain, unadorned clothes, taking advantage of his delicate and scholarly demeanor. Combined with a slightly wan and sallow appearance, Jiang Zhe’s clothes only served to manifest his natural and poised bearing.

A burst of regret and pity filling his heart, Li Zhi’s gaze fell upon Shi Yu. Because they were going to poison Jiang Zhe to death today, he had only brought along Shi Yu to see Jiang Zhe off. Shi Yu’s eyes were icy, as he shook his head slightly. No longer hesitating, Li Zhi stated, “Today, we are here to see Sir off. Knowing that Sir possesses a noble and moral character, therefore there is only a cup of fine wine to see you off. Sir must not decline.” So saying, Shi Yu carried over a black wooden tray. On top was placed the Concealed Sharpness Pot and two silver cups.

When my eyes caught sight of the Concealed Sharpness Pot, I could not help but smile in spite of myself. I had personally designed this Concealed Sharpness Pot, selling it through the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets. In order to obtain a high price, only three had been manufactured. Every pot cost a thousand taels of gold. Who would have thought that I would run into my design here? The bottom of the pot was double-layered, large enough to

hold an entire cup of poison. If one wanted to use this pot to harm someone, they only needed to fill the bottom of the pot with poison. When pouring the wine, one only needed to press the lotus engraving on the handle of the pot, and the poison at the bottom of the pot would flow along a hidden path to reach the spout. No one would be able to realize that poison was being used in this manner, not revealing a single thing even after killing hundreds or thousands of people. Of course, the poison cannot cause the silver pot to change color. This would prevent just any person from using the Concealed Sharpness Pot to harm people and would prevent the drinker from becoming suspicious. Unexpectedly, this Concealed Sharpness Pot was being used on my own self. Could this be considered as reaping what you sow?

Li Zhi picked up the pot and first poured a cup of poisoned wine before moving his thumb and pouring a cup of clean wine for himself. Replacing the pot on the tray, he picked up his own cup. With a forced smile, he stated, “Sir, please drink the entirety of this cup. From now on, I hope that Sir achieves meteoric success in your career.”

I picked up my cup of poisoned wine. I thought to myself, *If I were to shed my blood, sweat, and tears for this man then I’m afraid that at the end, I probably would only receive this cup of poisoned wine* . I gazed in the Prince of Yong’s direction, seeing his forced smile. I smiled unenthusiastically. Thinking of this person’s previous favor and generosity, I could not help but say, “With Your Imperial Highness’s renown, you should not be bothered by these trivial matters. From today onward, Your Imperial Highness need only train your troops externally and cultivate benevolent governance internally. Even though the Crown Prince will be afraid of you, he will not dare to lightly provoke Your Imperial Highness. As for other matters, there will be talented individuals who will advise Your Imperial Highness. Today, Zhe takes leave of Your Imperial Highness, and after today, no one knows when we shall meet again. I hope that Your Imperial Highness can soon unify the world, giving the world peace, and the common people happiness and peace. Even though Suiyun will be far away in the *jianghu* , I will pray that the Heavens bless Your Imperial Highness.”

These words that I had spoken came from the bottom of my heart. I really

did not blame him. He wanted to kill me because I had pressed so harshly. Real dragons had scales that could not be touched, lines that could not be crossed. Thinking that I would never meet him again after today, I could not help say a few words that expressed my true feelings. I raised the cup. I could tell that there was poison in the wine. The “Subdue Ten Thousand Poisons Pill” that I had taken was also extremely poisonous, but it was capable of protecting the arteries and veins of my heart, and preserving my life. Tonight was the perfect opportunity to fake my death. I raised the cup and prepared to down the poisoned wine.

From the moment that I had taken the wine cup, Li Zhi’s heart was extremely disturbed and restless. He had never done this kind of thing, murdering a talented individual. Inevitably, he felt shame. Now hearing Jiang Zhe speak from the heart, his right hand, which had the power to determine life or death, unexpectedly began to tremble. Seeing Jiang Zhe preparing to drink the poisoned wine, his mind began to repeatedly roil over. Suddenly, he reached out with his hand and stopped the wine cup from touching Jiang Zhe’s lips.

I looked with confusion at Li Zhi’s hand that covered the wine cup. I looked at his pale white complexion, my heart chaotic. Although in the beginning, Li Zhi was only momentarily impulsive, he quickly calmed down. He took away the wine cup and softly said, “Although Sir is only a scholar, your vision and spirit is comparable to that of a warrior on the field of battle. We should use large cups, not these kinds of small silver cups. Someone come, bring my golden helmet.”

It wasn’t long before a servant waiting on Li Zhi brought the golden helmet from the armor set bestowed by the emperor. This time, Li Zhi did not employ the secret mechanism on the pot. Opening the lid, he poured the entire contents into the golden helmet. Holding it with both hands, he proclaimed, “Jiang Zhe, although you are gifted scholar from the opulence of Southern Chu, you have a will and characteristic that even surpasses that of the warriors guarding Great Yong’s borders. This Prince uses this golden helmet to bestow this wine, hoping that you will have a pleasant journey.”

At this moment, Li Zhi no longer had resentment or animosity in his heart,

and was instead calm and gentle. In his mind, he thought, *Being unable to gain Jiang Zhe's service is due to my lack of virtue and talent. If I were to carelessly kill this innocent talented individual, even if I were able to gain the Imperial Throne, what right would have to sit upon it* ?

Footnotes :

千钧一发, qianjunyifa – idiom, lit. a thousand pounds hangs by a thread; imminent peril; a matter of life or death

天下没有不散的筵席, tianxiameiyoubusandeyanxi – idiom, lit. all banquets must come to an end; all good things must come to an end

休戚相关, xiuqixiangguan – idiom, lit. to share the same interests; to be closely related, to be in the same boat

千里之堤, **溃于蚁穴**, qianlizhidi, kuiyuyixue – idiom, lit. an ant hole causes the collapse of a great dike; fig. huge damage from a moment's negligence

借刀杀人, jiedaosharen – idiom, lit. to borrow another's knife to kill someone; to attack using another's strength, to get somebody else to do one's dirty work

Silver is said to change color when exposed to poison. In modern science, we know that silver tarnishes upon contact with sulfur, denoting the presence of arsenic sulfides and warning of arsenic poisoning.

神魂颠倒, shenhundiandao, idiom, lit. spirit and soul upside down; infatuated and head over heels in love; fascinated, captivated

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 30: Tiger's Wind, Dragon's Cloud

Volume 1, Chapter 30: Tiger's Wind, Dragon's Cloud[1]

In the twelfth month of the first year of Southern Chu's Zhihua era, Jiang Zhe was held as a captive in the official residence of the Prince of Yong. Although the Prince treated him with courtesy and respect, Jiang Zhe's will was unyielding. The Prince of Qi, Li Xian, fond of Jiang Zhe's talent, urged the Prince of Yong to pardon him. The Prince of Yong had no alternative and could only allow his release. As Jiang Zhe had a noble and lofty character, the Prince of Yong saw him off with magnificent wine in a golden helmet bestowed by the Emperor. Jiang Zhe was moved to tears and unexpectedly capitulated to the Prince of Yong….

—*Southern Chu Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Jiang Suiyun*

Subconsciously, I took the golden helmet. My entire mind was still filled with the scene of Li Zhi stopping me from drinking that poisoned wine. He was unexpectedly letting me go, letting the mad scholar who had repeatedly offended go, someone who was a like venomous stinger in one's heart who could transform his entire great undertaking into dust. I did not know why, but tears began to fall one by one into the golden helmet and onto my white clothes. It seemed that I couldn't move. I recalled the day when the Prince of De realized that I would not faithfully and loyally serve Southern Chu, and began to become vigilant against me. While I recuperated in Jianye, the Prince of De's spies never stopped monitoring me. I remembered the last essay that I submitted. I had laid my heart bare to show my loyalty to Southern Chu. The only result was denunciation and dismissal. Previously, I believed that I couldn't care less about what had happened in these incidents. Only today did I discover how deeply I buried them in my heart. This was something that I had no way of detecting or maybe I was unwilling to recall the sorrowful past.

With both hands, I picked up the golden helmet. I had no qualms about the splashing and dribbling liquid, drinking the fine wine within the helmet. In

my mind, I thought to myself, *This must be the reason why the Martial Marquis Zhuge strived his utmost for Shu-Han* .[2] Drinking all of the wine, I felt as if my chest was afire. Raising the golden helmet up high, I kneeled on the ground. In a clear and bright voice, I proclaimed, “Even if this subject offers my life in sacrifice, it will not be sufficient to repay the tiniest part of Your Imperial Highness’s deep favor. If Your Imperial Highness does not dislike this subject for my fickleness, this subject, Jiang Zhe, is willing to serve Your Imperial Highness.”

Li Zhi was initially downhearted and did not expect that I would suddenly pledge my allegiance. For a short period of time, he didn’t know what to say. It was Shi Yu who was clever, giving Li Zhi a gentle nudge. Li Zhi promptly stepped forward and pulled me to my feet. Emotional, he responded, “Sir, since you have changed your mind, this Prince … this Prince truly doesn’t know what to say. Quickly, quickly, quickly get up.”

How could I, a mere scholar without the strength to truss a chicken, resist? I was pulled to my feet by Li Zhi. My frame of mind had gradually calmed down. In a low voice, I recited, “If they had not met the kings, the two heroes would have wasted their life. / By chance they met Kings Tang and Wu, the clouds follow the dragon, while the winds follow the tiger.”[3] Looking at Li Zhi, I softly stated, “Your Imperial Highness is magnanimous, sparing this subject’s life. This subject is unable to repay this great favor. Only by promising to spare no effort can this subject compensate Your Imperial Highness for the offense committed these several days.”

Li Zhi’s hands shook, looking at me in astonishment. He originally was rejoicing in his heart that he had not poisoned Jiang Zhe to death and thus lose such a talented individual. By my words, it was clear that I knew that he had poisoned the wine.

Looking at the uneasy expression on Li Zhi’s face, I smiled faintly and acknowledged, “There is no need to overthink this, Your Imperial Highness. If Your Imperial Highness had not stayed his hand, Zhe would not willingly serve.”

Li Zhi looked at Shi Yu. Shi Yu had already sent away all the servants. Hearing my words, at this moment, he could not help feel slightly fearful,

turning to look back at Li Zhi.

I made no attempt to obfuscate the situation, continuing, “There is no need to worry Your Imperial Highness, Sir Shi. Formerly, Zhe shamefully rejected His Imperial Highness’s grace. For His Imperial Highness to want my death is to be expected. Now that this matter has passed and the situation has changed, this subject will not bear any grudges. May Your Imperial Highness not fault me for my arrogance these last several days.”

For me to speak thus, I was trying to not expose their faults. Since I had decided to serve the Prince of Yong, I needed to carefully consider the nature of the relationship between a liege and his vassal. If we clearly remembered the Prince of Yong thinking about poisoning me and my deliberate efforts to provoke him, then inevitably there would be suspicion and animosity in the future. For me to speak of these matters now, then the Prince of Yong would not feel that he had treated me unfairly and will not begrudge me my offenses. In the future, the relationship would naturally be harmonious. Don’t say that I was overthinking this. Since antiquity, many rulers have been ridiculed for getting rid of their vassals after they had served their purpose. However, to speak clearly and definitely, these deaths were not only the result of the fear of the rulers, but also subjects exceeding the limits on a subject. Thus, hereafter, I made sure to leave an escape route for myself.

Sure enough, after Li Zhi’s expression had changed several times, he spoke in a cheerful voice, “It’s all good as long as Sir does not blame this Prince. I willing to appoint Sir to become a major under the household of the Marshal of Heavenly Strategies, working alongside Ziyou to assist this Prince.”

I once again kneeled on the floor to offer my thanks. With a wry smile on his face, Li Zhi stated, “There is no need for Sir to stand on ceremony. I regard Sir as a friend who I can seek advice from. Sir must not hold our relationship at such a distance.”

With a smile, I replied, “The necessary ceremony between a superior and his subordinates cannot be discarded. How can Suiyun lack in manners? But if Your Imperial Highness does not blame Suiyun for failing to exhibit proper etiquette, then Suiyun can only be impolite.” This was my real intention.

Since I had pledged allegiance to the Prince of Yong, I would inevitably see him every day. It was quite painful to be continuously respectful and deferential. In any case, I would not have to spend much time considering etiquette before the Prince of Yong succeeded the throne.

Having achieved my goals, I instructed resolutely, “Your Imperial Highness, Suiyun also wishes to have an in depth conversation with Your Imperial Highness, but not right now. Would Your Imperial Highness please send someone to notify the Prince of Qi with the news that Suiyun’s old ailment has suddenly relapsed, and can only remain here to recuperate. The Prince of Qi will inevitably come to call personally. Suiyun boldly asks Your Imperial Highness to personally attend to the concoction of the medication. This is the first thing that needs to be done. Secondly, although Suiyun is somewhat familiar with Great Yong, I am unfamiliar with and do not clearly understand the tangled confusion of power and influence within the court. Would Your Imperial Highness please collect all of the intelligence reports and deliver them to me? After Suiyun has had the opportunity to review the information, I will discuss with Your Imperial Highness in detail later tonight. Thirdly, Guan Xiu and the others are still unaware of what has happened today. There will inevitably be suspicions and animosity in their hearts. Would Sir Ziyou go and inform them? There is no harm in somewhat obfuscating what has happened today so as to manifest Your Imperial Highness’s benevolence and high mindedness, and to pacify the hearts and minds of the advisers. These three matters are of the utmost importance.”

Hearing my words, Li Zhi’s eyes lit up, as he replied, “Suiyun indeed thinks meticulously. This Prince will immediately follow your instructions. This Prince will immediately accompany Sir back to the guest courtyard. Ziyou, you first go inform the Prince of Qi.”

Shi Yu and I glanced at one another, smiles on our faces. Shi Yu hurried departed, while I began to hold a performance, having the Prince of Yong support me as we exited the hall. Seeing me exit, the incomparably anxious Xiaoshunzi, who been waiting for me, hurriedly rushed over. Glancing coldly at the Prince of Yong, he asked, “Young master, what has happened?” So speaking, he replaced the Prince of Yong and supported me.

I quietly replied, “Xiaoshunzi, do you have any way for me to become temporarily ill? I have to meet the Prince of Qi.”

When Li Xian arrived at the Prince of Yong’s residence, he was full of happiness. However, cold water was poured over him. When Shi Yu informed him that Jiang Zhe’s old ailment had relapsed, Li Xian’s first instinct was that the Prince of Yong was forcibly holding Jiang Zhe. But after thinking it over, Li Xian realized that his brother’s methods wouldn’t be so clumsy. Regardless of what had happened, Li Xian requested that he be allowed to see Jiang Zhe. Leaving Qin Zheng in the carriage, Li Xian made a beeline for the guest courtyard. His heart was filled with resentment and anger. But when he entered the room, he caught sight of Jiang Zhe reclined on the bed. Jiang Zhe’s entire face was pale. Meanwhile, his second brother was concentrating his attention on carrying a bowl of piping hot medicine, blowing on it. Seeing Li Xian arrive, Li Zhi smiled slightly before stating, “Sixth brother, Sir Jiang spent all of last night in deep conversation with my retainers. Today, when I was seeing him off, Sir drank a few cups too many, and unexpectedly his old ailment relapsed. I fear that he won’t be able to leave.”

Li Xian looked at Jiang Zhe’s pale face and angrily replied, “Isn’t this too coincidental? He just fell ill and you’ve already prepared and concocted the medicine.”

Li Zhi casually uttered, “Ever since he arrived at my residence, Sir Jiang has had to take medicine practically on a daily basis. This has become routine. Therefore, this brother of yours has instructed that medicine be ready at all times. It’s fortunate that this was the case. Sir suddenly fell ill today, if it weren’t for this medicine, I fear that Sir would have to be confined to bed for several days.”

With difficulty, I opened my eyes, cursing Xiaoshunzi in my heart for his zealous and excessive conscientiousness. My entire body felt freezing from the yin energy that he had inserted into me. Any movement was difficult. Weakly and without any strength, I spoke, “Ever since Suiyun became ill in Sichuan, this ailment would frequently flare up without concern for time. Unexpectedly it would flare up today, really wronging Your Imperial

Highness.” Finished speaking, I coughed several times.

The Prince of Yong lightly tasted the medicine before reporting, “It’s done.” So speaking, he allowed Xiaoshunzi to help me sit up, while he personally fed me the medicine.

After I had taken the medicine, my complexion became somewhat better, and I said, “Your Imperial Highnesses, after taking this medicine, Suiyun will have to take a nap. I hope that Your Imperial Highnesses will not take offense.”

The Prince of Yong promptly replied, “Please rest well, Sir. This Prince will go now.”

I gently nodded my head, giving him a look that seemed to express how moved I was before I gradually fell asleep.

Rising to his feet, the Prince of Yong whispered, “Sixth brother, we should not stay here bothering Sir. Let’s go outside to talk.”

Leaving the courtyard, Li Xian spoke, a look of stupefaction on his face, “This is Heaven’s will. It seems like second brother has won.”

With a smile, Li Zhi responded, “Sixth brother is overthinking this. Once Sir Jiang has recovered, he will naturally go to your residence.”

Li Xian smiled coldly and replied, “He fell ill opportunely. The majestic Marshal of Heavenly Strategies, His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, personally fed him medication. I would have been baffled if he were not moved.”

In his head, Li Zhi grumbled that he had been sincere in treating me from the beginning and yet I was still unwilling to pledge allegiance. When he opened his mouth, he said, “Sixth brother is overthinking this.”

Abruptly, Li Xian flicked his sleeves, turning and leaving. After leaving the Prince of Yong’s residence, he did not board his carriage. Instead, he appropriated a horse from one of his personal guard. Venting his anger, he ferociously gave his horse a whip, causing the steed to neigh before dashing off. Li Xian completely ignored the calls and shouts behind him, departing angrily.

Within the courtyard, I had Xiaoshunzi remove the yin restrictions that he had placed on my body. With a smile, I stated, “My entire body is covered in cold sweat and stinks of alcohol. Quick, I want to take a bath.”

Smiling, Xiaoshunzi replied, “I’d already prepared it long ago. How can I not know young master’s temperament?”

Looking at him, I asked, “You’re not going to ask why I changed my mind?”

“The distance was only a dozen or so *zhang* ,”[4] Xiaoshunzi offhandedly explained. “I could hear clearly. Xiaoshunzi has never questioned young master’s decisions. Young master, be at ease. As long as Xiaoshunzi is alive, no one will be able to harm young master.”

Hearing the tranquil and calm, and yet firm and resolved tone of his words, I warmed. I replied, “Naturally. Xiaoshunzi, you have to practice well. In officialdom, I can put my own safety above all else, but there is another realm in this world. If there is a peak expert martial artist trying to assassinate me, I would have to rely upon your skills.”

A look of fervor flashed in his eyes, while he calculatedly responded, “Young master, be at ease. I have already mastered the sword manuals that young master gave me earlier. Although there are some opponents that I cannot defeat, no one will be able to easily pass me.”

I nodded my head. Xiaoshunzi never bragged or said empty words. However, I still had my doubts and asked, “I remember that some of the sword manuals required pure yang internal energy. How can you use them now?”

Xiaoshunzi flashed a slight smile, as he replied, “Young master is a master of the *Book of Changes* . How can you not know that when yin reaches the extremes, yang is produced?”

I looked at Xiaoshunzi, unable to cover up the cheerful and happy look on my face. Although I did not understand a thing about martial arts, I still knew that Xiaoshunzi’s martial arts had already reached a new realm. In my heart, I thought over what I had heard. Reportedly, training martial arts required more than twenty years before reaching this higher realm. How was Xiaoshunzi, who was only a little over twenty, already so formidable?

Was he really a martial arts genius? I did not know that my wild imaginations were correct. Xiaoshunzi was innately intelligent and clever, and had a resilient temperament. The martial arts that he practiced conformed to his body's condition. In addition, having followed me for years, he had achieved no small attainments in arts and sciences. This combination resulted in his present accomplishments. Although he was still far from the three grandmasters, he had already far surpassed the average peak experts.

After changing into a set of azure robes, I followed Shi Yu to the Prince of Yong's confidential study in a cheerful frame of mind. This study was located on the right side of the manor and was heavily guarded. Here, within an ordinary room, was collected all of the secret and classified documents within the manor. Other than the Prince of Yong and Shi Yu, no one else was permitted to enter without permission. Attending to the study were four pages who were eighteen or nineteen years of age. All four individuals had fitting demeanors, their gaits strong and vigorous. One could see that they were the Prince of Yong's trusted and personal aides. After some time had passed, and they were given a command, they would become the Prince of Yong's capable subordinates. Mentally, I praised the Prince of Yong as truly remarkable before entering the study. Within, I began to examine the information that I needed to know. Although Xiaoshunzi had delivered intelligence reports from Chen Zhen, the information that they had provided could not compare to the comprehensive information here. The pages left here to wait upon me were extremely efficient. I asked for documents following the directory. They were able to immediately retrieve them. Although I was a bit unused to not having Xiaoshunzi at my side attending to me, it didn't really matter. Later on, I would be working in my own study. With my photographic memory, I only needed to take one look at the things here.

Li Xin again stole a glance at the twenty-something year old handsome youth, curiosity filling his heart. Li Xin's father was originally a personal guard to the Prince of Yong. During an assassination attempt on the prince, Li Xin's father was killed, leaving him behind as an orphan. Seeing that the orphan had no one to depend on, Li Zhi had the orphan brought to the

manor to be taken care of. After several years, the orphan's diligence, studiousness, loyalty, and mental agility gained Li Zhi's recognition. The orphan was bestowed the surname, Li, and was allowed to enter the confidential study. Although conduct here was strictly restricted, having access to this confidential information and serving at the prince's side provided profound benefits. Moreover, the Prince of Yong had said long ago that once they reached adulthood, they would be allowed to go out and become officials. Li Xin was very clear that this was an excellent career path. Of course, the price was his eternal loyalty, thus he took great pains to be cautious and prudent. As a result, inquisitiveness was the biggest shortcoming. There was once a page who had stolen a glance at a document, violating the rules. When the Prince of Yong found out, the normally good-natured prince abruptly erupted in anger, ordering the page be beaten to death. Li Xin would always remember that tragic incident and as a result, never presumed to exceed his bounds. He understood that he ought not guess at this youth's identity. But the moment he discovered that the Prince of Yong was waiting for this youth in the other study, he could not help but be curious.

Within the other study, although Li Zhi was perusing a military manual, he could not stop feeling ill at ease. Turning to look at Shi Yu, he spoke in a caring voice, "Ziyou, you should go ahead and rest. It is sufficient for this Prince to wait by myself. You must not exhaust yourself!"

Shi Yu smiled and replied, "Today, once Jiang Suiyun pledged allegiance to Your Imperial Highness, he acted swiftly and decisively. He first had the Prince of Qi give up before relieving the hearts and minds of the advisers, filling Ziyou with admiration. Therefore, I wish to know what kind of strategies and tactics he would offer to Your Imperial Highness. My eagerness is not below that of Your Imperial Highness's."

Li Zhi also smiled as he replied, "That's right. I am really looking forward to the strategies and tactics that he would propose. You thoroughly understand the present situation. This Prince is trapped in a net. The more I struggle, the tighter the net. I really want to know what methods he has to allow this Prince to escape this encirclement. Thinking it over, this Prince

can't help but break out in a cold sweat. If I really poisoned Jiang Zhe to death, it is likely that there would really be no reprieve, no survival."

"That's right," agreed Shi Yu. "Luckily, Your Imperial Highness was benevolent and high minded. Otherwise, how could Jiang Zhe have submitted willingly? This subordinate has thought it over. I fear that our inclinations and minds were all within his grasp. I'm afraid that today's poisoned wine was very likely Jiang Zhe putting Your Imperial Highness to the test."

Puzzled, Li Zhi inquired, "But if this Prince had not acted in the nick of time,[5] would he have really drunk the poisoned wine?"

Shi Yu smiled wryly and responded, "This subordinate is incapable of knowing what he had planned. But since things did not progress to that stage, there is no need for Your Imperial Highness to trouble further."

Li Zhi also smiled and concurred, "That's right. Why should this Prince worry about matters of the past? Ziyou, I fear that he will not come out soon. How about we play a game of *weiqi* to pass the time?"

"Since Your Imperial Highness is interested," replied Shi Yu, "This subordinate will naturally accompany. Would Your Imperial Highness please be lenient?"

The two exchanged smiles, bringing forth the board and began to play. After a while, a page named Li Zhong entered the study, reporting, "Your Imperial Highness, when this subordinate delivered the tea, I saw that Sir Jiang was somewhat moody. Sir even asked where his servant was."

Li Zhi stared blankly for a moment before glancing at Shi Yu. His mind racing, Shi Yu spoke, "Your Imperial Highness, this subordinate has seen that Jiang Zhe relies heavily upon that Li Shun and seemingly can't bear to be parted for him even if it's for a short moment. As for Li Shun, he is dedicated and loyal to Jiang Zhe. It would be better to allow Li Shun to go in and serve Jiang Zhe, especially as Li Shun will inevitably have access to classified information."

Thinking it over, Li Zhi agreed, "Correct, Li Shun, this person, is not an ordinary individual. The friendship and camaraderie between master and

servant are extremely deep. Li Zhong, dispatch someone to bring Li Shun to attend in the study."

After a while had passed, Li Zhong once again came to report, "Your Highness, Sir Shi, Sir Jiang was extremely happy. Li Xin reported that Li Shun abided by the rules, only focusing upon attending to Sir Jiang and never paying any attention to the contents of the documents."

With this, Li Zhi finally set aside his worries and spoke, "That's good. Ziyou, it's your turn."

Looking at the board, Shi Yu smiled and said, "Your Imperial Highness's state of mind was elsewhere. It looks like this subordinate will win this game."

With a wry smile, Li Zhi looked at his trapped white stones and replied, "That's right, this Prince has lost."

"This was because Your Highness was not focused," stated Shi Yu. "There is no need for Your Imperial Highness to worry yonder. Your Imperial Highness should be careful and not let this subordinate win the next game."

Collecting the stones, he said, "Fine, watch this Prince cause a bloodbath with my attacks."

The two gradually engrossed themselves in playing *weiqi* . When the third game had ended, Shi Yu rose to his feet and looked out the window. At this moment, dawn was about to break. It was pitch-black outside the window. Looking at the board, Li Zhi stated, "This Prince has won by half a stone."

With a smile, Shi Yu replied, "Your Imperial Highness's skill is not ordinary. As long as Your Imperial Highness is somewhat attentive and diligent, this subordinate will suffer a crushing defeat."

At this moment, Li Zhong entered the room and reported, "Your Imperial Highness, Sir Shi, Sir Jiang requests a meeting with Your Imperail Highness."

Hearing this, Li Zhi didn't even bother collecting the stones and jumped to his feet. Concerned, he asked, "How does he look?"

"Although Sir looks tired," answered Li Zhong, "His bearing is extremely serene. He even bantered with this lowly one, jokingly saying that he would

have this lowly one drag Your Imperial Highness from your sleeping chambers."

Feeling his heart, suspended in the air the entire night, calm down, Li Zhi breathed out deeply and responded, "Not bad, not bad."

Looking out the window, Shi Yu exclaimed with pleasant surprise, "Your Imperial Highness, look!"

Li Zhi raised his head and looked over. Outside the window, the sunshine of daybreak had already penetrated through the thick clouds. The sky to the east was already becoming brighter. With a smile, Li Zhi exclaimed, "A good omen! Let's go and see Sir Jiang." So speaking, he walked out of the room. Seeing the heroic disposition of Li Zhi's gait, Shi Yu could not help but feel relaxed, and followed the prince out.

Footnotes :

风**虎云**龙, fenghuyunlong –lit. winded tiger, clouded dragon; is a reference to line 5 of Hexagram 1 (**乾**, the Creative) from the Book of Changes aka the I Ching that states that the 'clouds (breath of the heavens) follow the dragon, while the wind (breath of the earth) follow the tiger'

武侯诸**葛**, the Martial Marquis Zhuge is one of the posthumous names that Zhuge Liang is known by. This sentence references Zhuge Liang's loyalty and dedication to Shu-Han starting with Liu Bei and culminating with his death.

This is a poem by the Song Dynasty reformer, Wang Anshi, set to the ci, 'Waves Scouring the Sands.' This poem speaks of Yi Li and Jiang Ziya who helped King Tang of Shang and King Wu of Zhou found the Shang and Zhou Dynasties, respectively.

A **仗**, zhang is about 3.3 meters. A dozen or so zhang is at least 39.6 meters.

悬**崖勒**马, xuanyalema – idiom, lit. to rein in the horse at the edge of the precipice; to act in the nick of time

Volume 2: Internal Strife

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 1: The Legend of Fengyi Sect

Volume 2, Chapter 1: The Legend of Fengyi Sect

Lowering the scroll in my hand, I could not but gasp with surprise. This scroll contained all the information and intelligence available to the Prince of Yong on the Fengyi Sect Master. The compiler of this information painted a vivid picture, as if he were writing a legend or a saga.

The Fengyi Sect Master of unclear origins was adopted by the original sect master at the age of four. At the time, the Fengyi Sect was merely a small sect that took in and organized female orphans for self-preservation. Their martial arts were mediocre. And yet, Fengyi Sect Master Fan Huiyao was a gifted and talented heroine. Unexpectedly, she was able to rely upon a half-ruined *Moon Heart Sutra* to become an exceptionally powerful martial artist. At the age of twenty, she already stood out in the *jianghu* for her outstanding talent. What was even rarer was that even though she was a woman, she conducted herself chivalrously and upheld justice. After no more than a few years, this woman, known for her white robes, noble and lofty bearing, and beautiful appearance like that of an immortal, was included in the ranks of the peak experts in *jianghu* .

Even so, the Fengyi Sect Master's looks and delicateness still drew innumerable lewd and lecherous individuals. This remarkable woman did not unyieldingly refuse, nor did she sweet-talk and flatter. Instead, she announced clearly that she had no intention of ever marrying, transforming countless admiring elites into her intimate friends. It was only natural that she was also ferocious. Once, the young master of the Black Mountain Stronghold took Fan Huiyao's adoptive mother-cum-master hostage, using any means necessary to force Fan Huiyao to marry him. At the time, the Black Mountain Stronghold was the underworld's number one sect, its strength shaking the world. The Fengyi Sect Master indignantly agreed to the wedding.

At the wedding reception, before the guests, while wearing crimson,

festive wedding garb, Fan Huiyao suddenly attacked. The sword sped through the air like a rainbow, beheading the bridegroom. The master of the Black Mountain Stronghold ordered his subordinates to dice Fan Huiyao into pulp. Removing the festive garb and revealing plain, unadorned clothing, Fan Huiyao began to slaughter. Her personally created “Gale-Wind Sword Style” was famous throughout the world. Within the festive hall, surrounded by a thousand guests, the swift sword that surpassed the limits of the human body harvested an uncountable number of lives in an unrestrained fashion. The entire air was filled with azure glints of steel. Even within this cruel slaughter, the snow-white, beautiful image of a woman remained graceful and luxurious. In this battle, of the forty-eight protectors of the Black Mountain Stronghold, more than half died. Of the one hundred eight members of the discipline team, forty percent died. Ultimately, Fan Huiyao’s body and sword became one, and she charged out of the encirclement. Just before this, Fan Huiyao’s adoptive mother had been rescued during the chaos. Later, all those who had seen Fan Huiyao said that her white robes were completely covered in blood. More than thirty injuries covered her body, both large and small. Her escape was due to luck and good fortune. What caused greater amazement was Fan Huiyao inviting all the outstanding heroes of the world to a meeting while she was recuperating, calling for a combined attack against the Black Mountain Stronghold. Taking advantage of the heavy losses suffered by the stronghold, the various tyrants and strongmen chose to add insult to injury.[1] With Fan Huiyao’s mediation of the different sides, the once notorious Black Mountain Stronghold disappeared like smoke.

After the Black Mountain Stronghold was destroyed, Fan Huiyao formally became sect master. Under her brilliant leadership, the Fengyi Sect quickly became the leader of the righteous sects. And so, Fan Huiyao was even more able to move unhindered throughout the world, trailing the glinting steel of her sword. At the time, thirty years had passed since the fall of Eastern Jin, and the Central Plains were in chaos. Although Fan Huiyao was chivalrous and upheld justice, providing relief and helping the poor, but how was one person’s strength able to stop the heaven-reaching stormy seas? After having seen enough of the suffering of the common people, Fan Huiyao

swore an oath to unify the world. At the time, everyone laughed at her arrogance and cockiness. A woman, no matter how capable and skillful, could never unify the world. Fully aware of the difficulties she faced, Fan Huiyao chose both the easiest and most difficult path. She chose Li Yuan, who at the time was not the most powerful warlord, but the one with the clearest politics. Relying upon the Fengyi Sect's leadership of the righteous sects, relying upon her own ability to move about unhindered and open any doors, and relying upon her exceptional martial arts, the Fengyi Sect made tremendous contributions to the founding of Great Yong.

For Great Yong, Fan Huiyao traveled all over the Central Plains, helping Li Yuan win over the support of many influential families and heroes. For Great Yong, Fan Huiyao even assassinated many enemy generals and ministers. On one occasion, Fan Huiyao targeted an enemy general. At the time, the enemy general was accompanying his wife to a Buddhist temple to burn incense. Wearing plain, unadorned clothes, barefoot, and with her hair tied up, Fan Huiyao held a willow branch in her hands, masquerading as a statue of Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy. When several hundred guards skilled in martial experts searched the main hall of the temple, none noticed that the solemn and dignified statue of the Guanyin atop the lotus throne was actually a living person. Just as the enemy general entered the hall to pay his respects, Fan Huiyao attacked with her finger and killed him. Afterwards, she floated down like an immortal and walked out of the hall. All of the guards outside watched her leave, completely stupefied. As everyone watched her depart, her bare feet trod over areas covered with snow, leaving no traces of her passage, her feet unmarred by the slush. Several thousand elite troops, overwhelmed with shock, shouted, "Goddess Guanyin has descended!" Fan Huiyao was able to depart peacefully.

On another occasion, the Prince of Yong, Li Zhi, was leading an army and fighting against Yang Laosheng. Yao Laosheng had a fierce general under his command named Wen Hu. With a huge halberd in his hand, he was invincible, killing generals and seizing standards, valiant beyond compare. All hailed him as a superior Lü Bu.[2] No general under the Prince of Yong's banner was this man's match. Several tens of thousands of soldiers were tangled up by a tenacious ten thousand men. Coincidentally, Fan Huiyao was

personally escorting army provisions and arrived with the army. Learning of Wen Hu, she left the encampments with a smile on her face. That night, an envoy dispatched by Yang Laosheng arrived at Wen Hu's encampments, transmitting an order. Extremely loyal to Yang Laosheng, Wen Hu personally came out to welcome the envoy. No one could have guessed that the envoy pulled out an army command, and in a loud voice, proclaimed, "Wen Hu is colluding with the enemy, his crimes are unpardonable. This envoy is here on orders to execute him." So saying, the envoy unsheathed his sword. The sword, disdaining the heavens and disdaining everyone, cut down the unsuspecting and unprepared Wen Hu from his horse. Amidst the chaos, Fan Huiyao took the opportunity to float away. The next day, the Prince of Yong took advantage and attacked, annihilating the enemy army.

Fan Huiyao's bitterest battle was with the sovereign of the Devil Sect, Jing Wuji. The Devil Sect supported Yang Laosheng with the goal of unifying the Central Plains. As a result, the Fengyi Sect and the Devil Sect became arch enemies. The methods of the members of the Devil Sect were sinister and vicious, using all kinds of unscrupulous methods, including assassination and poison, while Fan Huiyao's Fengyi Sect was inevitably somewhat weaker. In order to protect Great Yong's ministers and generals, Fan Huiyao persuaded the abbot of the Shaolin Temple, and after taking the necessary protective measures, she personally began to find and kill all of the Devil Sect's assassins and spies. This was a decisive battle unprecedented in history, as both sides assassinated each other. Within the short period of half a year, Great Yong had lost thirty percent of its generals. However, the losses suffered by the enemy were greater. Fan Huiyao's brilliance was on full display. The many kinds of assassination techniques dazzled everyone. Finally, Jing Wuji could no longer endure such disastrous losses, challenging Fan Huiyao to a duel atop the Lotus Flower Peak of Huashan at the Sacrificial Cliffs.

The day of the duel was sunny and calm. Atop Lotus Flower Peak were assembled many of the outstanding heroes of the age. Everyone wished to witness the duel between the grandmaster Jing Wuji and *wulin* 's most unusual woman, Fan Huiyao. When noon approached, the two arrived as arranged. Jing Wuji was in a set of blue robes, his appearance handsome and

scholarly. Fan Huiyao was wearing a snow-white dress, her magnificence unparalleled. Before the assembled heroes, the two conversed leisurely, discussing the world's warlords and powers. Their discourse was congenial, almost as if they were close friends. Who would have thought that these two were sworn enemies?

After an hour's worth of discussion, Jing Wuji sighed and stated, "Alas, we regrettably met so late. One of us has to die in today's battle. If I were to die, then as long as you are in the Central Plains, my Devil Sect would not take one step into the Central Plains."

The Fengyi Sect Master smiled indifferently and replied, "If sire meets misfortune, then Huiyao will no longer have an intimate friend. If I were to die, the Fengyi Sect will withdraw from *jianghu* ."

The battle between the two shook the world. Jing Wuji was the sovereign of the Devil Sect, his bladesmanship was dazzling and tyrannical, as fast as electricity, as swift as the wind, attacks sweeping forth like a dragon, graceful and elegant like an immortal. Fan Huiyao's swordsmanship was graceful and magnificent, not carrying a single shred of killing aura. As the two sides battled fiercely, everyone was left stupefied by Jing Wuji's bladesmanship. However, Fan Huiyao's swordsmanship was also exquisite beyond compare. Fan Huiyao's martial arts however were a step inferior. After bitterly fighting, she had already been wounded a countless number of times. If she weren't fighting without concern for her life, she would have likely lost long ago. But after over a thousand exchanges, Fan Huiyao actually seemed to become braver as she fought. All of her abilities were drawn out by this formidable opponent. Everyone heard her whistle sharply, like the cry of a phoenix reaching the nine heavens, as her sword increased in speed, the glinting steel like the waves, each wave higher than the previous one. Within a dozen moves, the sword in Fan Huiyao's hand pierced through the air and penetrated through the waves, the move fantastic and magnificent, beautiful beyond imagination, piercing through Jing Wuji's chest. After suffering such a crushing defeat, Jing Wuji departed sadly.

At the time, Fan Huiyao stood facing the wind. Her snow-white clothes

were covered with blood that seemed to blossom like red roses. Her figure was tall and thin, her eyebrows stretching all the way to her temples, and her phoenix eyes were profoundly deep. She seemed to float like an immortal, majestic like a revered deity. After this battle, she was hailed as the "Greatest Sword in the World" and was included in the list of grandmasters. She also became the spiritual leader of the righteous sects. Her reputation was even above that of another grandmaster, the True Compassion Elder of the Shaolin Temple. Jing Wuji fled to Northern Han, going to the distant prairie. There, amidst the wind and mist beyond the Great Wall, his bladesmanship improved significantly. After several years, he became the State Mentor. It was said that his bladesmanship had reached the celestial being realm. It was because he abided by his promise that he did not take a step into the Central Plains.

If it weren't for Fan Huiyao, Great Yong would have taken more than ten years to unify the Central Plains. Under her encouragement and guidance, many experts from both the righteous and underworld realms all joined and served the Great Yong army. Amidst the campaigns and battles, the Fengyi Sect's power and authority expanded at a rapid rate.

What was even harder to come by was that Fan Huiyao had an earth-shakingly exceptional talent. Her input in decision-making on several occasions caused great shock among the other participants. Because of this, Li Yuan even had several of his sons take her as their master. Although Fan Huiyao asserted that she did not take male disciples, she would still frequently advise and guide them, benefiting the princes greatly. This allowed Fan Huiyao's power and influence to be implanted within Great Yong's imperial family.

After the Central Plains were pacified, Li Yuan even asked for Fan Huiyao's hand in marriage, but the intelligent Fan Huiyao refused, declaring that as the Fengyi Sect Master, she would never marry. This announcement preserved her transcendent position. However, she privately dispatched her disciple, Ji Xia, to personally attend to Li Yuan. Not long afterwards, Li Yuan appointed his second wife, Lady Dou, as the empress, while Ji Xia became a noble consort. After Great Yong's regime gradually stabilized, Fan

Huiyao returned to the Fengyi Sect to cultivate. Although she was no longer involved in the affairs of the world, her concealed strength grew increasingly powerful.

After Fan Huiyao took over the Fengyi Sect, she established a new system and new sect regulations. Under her stipulations, the Fengyi Sect was divided into the Internal and External Halls. The Internal Hall was further subdivided into the Spring River Hall, the Golden Stamen Hall, and the Cold Frost Hall. The Spring River Hall was the heart of the Fengyi Sect's power and authority. Its disciples were all capable of taking charge of a section and were permitted to mobilize and transfer any and all personnel. The scope of their authority was not limited. The Golden Stamen Hall wielded the power of punishment and promotion with the implicit meaning "the autumn wind rustles and kills." The Cold Frost Hall was responsible for campaigns and punitive expeditions. Its disciples all had frighteningly powerful martial arts and were all cold-hearted and unfeeling killers. Only extraordinarily capable women were permitted to join the Internal Hall as disciples after they had vowed to never marry and pledged their lives to the Fengyi Sect. The External Hall included all of the branches of the Fengyi Sect scattered throughout the world, as well as all of the named disciples that Fan Huiyao collected in order to expand the power and influence of the sect. Only women were permitted to be members. However, the Fengyi Sect was extremely secretive. One could not discern whether a disciple was an Internal Hall disciple or an External Hall disciple. It was only when a disciple married was one sure that the disciple was an External Hall disciple.

Fan Huiyao's methods were ingenious. First, she relied upon her intimate relationship with the Great Yong court, taking the daughters of many officials as disciples. Great Yong was warlike and all of these officials were happy to see their daughters practice martial arts. The Fengyi Sect had a close relationship with the imperial clan and was composed entirely of women. Therefore, Fan Huiyao was able to smoothly receive the daughters of officials. From them, she selected some talented individuals. Some of the women esteemed the Fengyi Sect's prestige such that they would rather not marry and instead enter the Internal Hall. In addition, Fan Huiyao used her connections with the court ministers to marry some of her unordinary

looking disciples into rich and powerful families. Although these women came from all kinds of backgrounds, under the guidance of Fan Huiyao, they all had exceptional behavior and appearance, masters of both brush and sword. As a result, many of Great Yong's ministers quite willing for their children to take Fengyi Sect External Hall disciples as brides, viewing it as an honor. Thus, Fan Huiyao's Fengyi Sect had forged a complicated and deep-rooted, intimate relationship with the imperial court. Fan Huiyao could easily shake the foundations of the Great Yong empire if she had mind to.

Putting aside the others, the Yong emperor's noble consort, Lady Ji, was the younger apprentice sister of Fan Huiyao and repeatedly participated in important decisions. The crown prince's concubine, Xiao Lan, was refined, beautiful, and alluring. While she does not pay any attention to matters of state, she was the beloved concubine of Crown Prince Li An, who doted on her more than the crown princess. If the crown princess had not hailed from a prestigious house and given birth to a son long ago, her status could not be guaranteed. The Princess of Qi, Qin Zheng, was an outstanding talent. She was originally going to join the Fengyi Sect's Internal Hall. But because she was her father's only daughter, he strenuously begged the Fengyi Sect Master to stop her. Fan Huiyao rejected her request. After receiving the love of the Prince of Qi, she was wed to him. Moreover, Fan Huiyao once even intended to wed her beloved disciple, Liang Wan, as the Prince of Yong's second wife, only to be tactfully rejected by Li Zhi. Reportedly, Li Zhi and his wife, Lady Gao, were on exceedingly excellent terms. In addition, while Li Zhi was constantly away on campaigns, Lady Gao not only was rigorous in maintaining the household, but also honored and respected the advisers and generals under Li Zhi. Even Li Yuan had praised this daughter-in-law as a virtuous and good wife. Furthermore, Li Zhi's concubines were all part of Lady Gao's dowry. The tale of the mutual respect between Li Zhi and Lady Gao was one that captured the imagination and spread far and wide in Great Yong. Otherwise, the Fengyi Sect would certainly have tried to take advantage.

If one were to ask what matters had not gone smoothly for the Fengyi Sect, they were:

First, although Noble Consort Ji was trusted by the Yong emperor, she was not especially favored compared to the empress and the other consorts. Empress Dou was virtuous and kind, and was the mother of the crown prince. As a result, she led the world by example and her position as empress was stable and secure. Although Noble Consort Zhangsun had lost both of her sons, she still had Princess Changle. Feeling remorseful, the Yong emperor was practically docile and obedient towards Noble Consort Zhangsun. Noble Consort Yan was the mother of the Prince of Qi and had a naturally cheerful and generous temperament. Within the harem, she was most favored by the emperor. Considering affection, Noble Consort Ji could not compare to the empress and the two other noble consorts. Considering looks, Noble Consort Ji could not compare to newly selected women who entered the harem. Although she was trusted by the Yong emperor, her favor was somewhat lacking. In addition, she had no male children.

Second, although the crown prince's concubine, Xiao Lan, was much favored by the crown prince and had even given birth to a prince, the crown prince especially doted on his heir and was not partial to his son by his beloved concubine. It seemed that even if Li An ascended to the throne, he would only name his son by his first wife as heir apparent.

Third, even though the Prince of Qi had just married, he was as dissolute and wanton as before. Although he treated Qin Zheng well, he continued to keep mistresses as before and already had a number of sons by concubines. Although Qin Zheng was unhappy, there was nothing that she could do.

It wasn't that the Fengyi Sect did not have any opposition. One of its opponents was the third prince, Li Kang. He was born of petty and low origins because his mother was a palace maid. She had been enfeoffed as Concubine Yi. Although she was not favored by the emperor, Concubine Yi had a gentle and agreeable temperament and did not try to compete for the emperor's favor. She wholeheartedly focused on raising her beloved son, hoping to be able to wait until the day her son was enfeoffed as a prince and would then be able to move out of the palace into her son's official residence to spend the rest of her days in domestic bliss. However, once when Li Yuan had returned to the capital and called the entire harem to a banquet, he was

suddenly attacked by Devil Sect assassins. In order to protect Li Yuan, Noble Consort Ji unexpectedly pushed Concubine Yi onto the assassin's blade. Li Yuan was unharmed, while Concubine Yi perished. Although Li Yuan posthumously enfeoffed Concubine Yi as a consort and buried her generously, Li Kang was left embittered and indignant. After failing in his petition that Noble Consort Ji pay with her life, he left the capital furious. After several years, he returned, having acquired excellent martial arts. He once attempted to assassinate Noble Consort Ji in front of everyone, but failed. In memory of his dead mother, Li Yuan did not blame him. Instead, Li Kang was bestowed the title of Prince of Qing and was ordered to garrison the Hanzhong region. Although Li Kang was denounced, he refused to change his behavior. Inside his fief, he did everything he could to exclude the Fengyi Sect. With the sympathy of Li Yuan and the secret help provided by the Prince of Yong, Li Kang was able to sit securely in his fief.

Furthermore, there was Li Yuan's nephew, Jiang Yong. Li Yuan's older sister, Grand Princess Ninghua, was married to a warlord named Jiang Wuya. Later on, Great Yong went to war against Jiang Wuya. Jiang Wuya was assassinated by Fengyi Sect assassins, while the grand princess committed suicide. Furious, Jiang Yong continued to battle Great Yong, only to be defeated at Xuzhou. Ultimately, Jiang Yong led his few remaining subordinates and fled into the eastern seas, becoming a pirate. He repeatedly raided the coast, harassing Great Yong's merchant ships. In the beginning, Li Yuan sympathized with this nephew of his, caring for this only descendant of his elder sister and sought to have Jiang Yong surrender. After Jiang Yong killed an envoy dispatched by Li Yuan, Li Yuan erupted with anger and dispatched several expeditions to suppress these pirates. Because of the boundless seas, these expeditions were unsuccessful. Jiang Yong even raided the Fengyi Sect's merchant ships. Although the Fengyi Sect wished to deal with him, they were helpless before Jiang Yong's innate naval prowess. The Fengyi Sect could not find his whereabouts. It was inappropriate for them to truly kill Jiang Yong, as Li Yuan was extremely respectful towards the grand princess because of the teachings and considerations she had shown him in his youth. Having killed his brother-in-law and hounded his elder sister to death, Li Yuan felt guilty and ashamed towards this nephew

of his. Although Li Yuan had issued a decree to suppress this nephew, he nevertheless still demanded that Jiang Yong be captured alive.

The hostility between the Fengyi Sect and an imperial prince and the emperor's nephew was probably the biggest hidden anguish in the heart of Fan Huiyao. But this did not mean that these two were able to affect the power and influence of the sect. Were it not for the Fengyi Sect refraining from acting against them in fear of unforeseen consequences, the two would likely have lost their lives long ago. Even so, the Prince of Qing, Li Kang, could only behave in such a manner in the Hanzhong region. In addition, his exclusion of the Fengyi Sect caused Yong Emperor Li Yuan to place an army in the region to monitor and restrict Li Kang. The Fengyi Sect set a trap for Jiang Yong. If it weren't for his subordinates sacrificing their lives, Jiang Yong would have been captured long ago. As a result, these days, Jiang Yong laid low.[3]

Finished reading the information on the Fengyi Sect, I was both astonished and excited. This kind of terrifying and formidable group was the powerful enemy that I had to deal with. This Fengyi Sect Master definitely possessed an earth-shaking talent. Looking at her behavior and conduct, although she seemingly took many risks, her status as a grandmaster and her martial arts leveled the playing field. Planning before acting, she not only had talent, she was also adept at schemes and plots. No wonder the Prince of Yong was suppressed so hard that he could hardly breathe. However, a separate delight also boiled up from my heart. If I was able to force this kind of powerful enemy into desperate straits, this ought to be my life's greatest achievement. If I only joined the Prince of Yong because of my gratitude for his kindness and grace, then my objective was to eradicate the Fengyi Sect. If the Fengyi Sect had not produced such arrogant and willful disciples, how could Piaoxiang have died? Liang Wan, Liang Wan, you alone are insufficient to compensate for the life of my beloved.

Footnotes :

落井下石, luojingxiashi – idiom, lit. to throw stones at somebody who fell down a well; to hit a person who is down, to add insult to injury
吕布, Lü Bu, styled Fengxian, was a general and warlord who lived during

the waning days of the Han Dynasty. Wielding a halberd and atop the horse, Red Hare, he was considered the mightiest warrior of his day. He served and betrayed Ding Yuan and Dong Zhuo before becoming nominally independent. He was ultimately defeated and executed by Cao Cao.

销声匿迹, xiaoshengniji – idiom, lit. to vanish without a trace; to lie low

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 2: Presenting the Lord with Three Stratagems

Volume 2, Chapter 2: Presenting the Lord with Three Stratagems

After organizing my thoughts, I instructed the page named Li Xin to notify the Prince of Yong after he had woken that I wished to see him. Who could have imagined that it wasn't long before I saw the Prince of Yong and Shi Yu hurriedly enter the confidential study? Moreover, their clothes were orderly, while their expressions carried tired looks. They clearly had not slept. At first, I stared blankly at them before I suddenly realized that the Prince of Yong had stayed awake and waited throughout the night because of his anxiety.

After inviting the Prince of Yong to sit down, we first chatted randomly for a few moments. Only after I saw that the Prince of Yong's expression had stabilized, did I inquire, "Excuse me, may I ask Your Imperial Highness, why are you determined to ascend to the Imperial Throne?"

The Prince of Yong froze, not knowing how to reply. In his heart, Li Zhi considered ascending to the Imperial Throne as something that he was required to do. Besides believing that the throne was his just recompense, Li Zhi believed that aside from himself there was no one capable of unifying the world for Great Yong. For the sake of the empire, it was necessary for him to destroy his own reputation. But for Jiang Zhe to ask such a question, Li Zhi suddenly found that it was extremely difficult to answer. Usually, he and his subordinates all considered this matter as inevitable and proper.[1] But now, he did not know how to explain this to Jiang Zhe.

I smiled faintly. This was something that I noticed long ago. When the Prince of Yong was urging me to pledge my allegiance, he completely failed to explain his own philosophies and thoughts. This could only mean that the Prince of Yong's own will and resolution were unclear, his position not firm and resolute. A skyscraper, thousands of meters high, rises from the ground up. Without a philosophy or idea serving as the foundation, then the Prince of Yong's great undertaking would ultimately be nothing more than a pipe

dream.

I continued, “Considering the current circumstances, Great Yong’s foundations are already quite stable. His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, is not only the eldest son and the son of the first wife, he has also not committed any clear violations of virtue. As such, there is no need for the civil and military officials to violate the intentions of the Emperor for Your Imperial Highness. Your Imperial Highness has control of the military. If you call, people will respond en masse. If you forcibly take the throne, people will raise objections, claiming that Your Imperial Highness is plotting treason to seize the throne. Your Imperial Highness is admittedly brilliant and has amazing martial might, but would leave a mistaken example for your descendants and offspring, believing that as long as they have power and meritorious contributions, they will be able to ascend to the throne. In that way, rebellion becomes perfectly legitimate.[2] As a result, the power of the sovereign would suffer. A stable system is more important and useful than an enlightened and wise monarch. Therefore, although Your Imperial Highness’s contributions are unrivaled, it cannot be the reason for Your Imperial Highness to seize the throne.”

Li Zhi pensively asked, “Is this the reason why the court elders refuse to actively support my succession of the throne even though they regard my contributions as important?”

I nodded my head and replied, “If I were those senior figures, having witnessed Great Yong start from scratch, I would inevitably not wish to see internal strife reduce Great Yong’s strength. Therefore, it is impossible for them to support Your Imperial Highness in succeeding the throne. Even if Your Imperial Highness is a particularly excellent choice for heir apparent in their minds, it is unlikely for them to be so resolute. At this time, the only ones willing to support Your Imperial Highness are those seeking glory, splendor, and riches. Only a small number of people understand that only with Your Imperial Highness’s ascension to the throne can Great Yong’s empire be preserved. Since those ordinary individuals don’t understand the importance of Your Imperial Highness’s ascension, then Your Imperial Highness should tell me.”

Hearing my words, Li Zhi remarked, “To tell the truth, this Prince only feels that the throne cannot be passed onto elder imperial brother. His ties with the Fengyi Sect are too close. But I can’t explain it clearly.”

Uprightly, I expounded, “Therefore the first strategy that this subject presents Your Imperial Highness is to demonstrate your sincere convictions. Although Great Yong is currently flourishing, there are heavy internal concerns. This concern is the Fengyi Sect. Great Yong’s worry isn’t powerful enemies outside its borders, but rather within the borders. The Fengyi Sect pretends to be benevolent and righteous, but in actuality schemes for power, controlling the harem and officialdom. If this is allowed to last, the Fengyi Sect will sooner rather than later be the puppet master ruling in the place of the Emperor. Though His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, is the heir apparent, he does not know to promote virtue and does not know to practice respect, virtue, and piety to restrain the hearts and minds of the officials. In addition, he is too inseparably close to the Fengyi Sect. If Your Imperial Highness were to allow the Crown Prince to ascend the throne, not only could your life not be guaranteed and thus destroying a pillar of the state, but would also allow the empire to be controlled by women. If the Crown Prince eliminates the flattering officials by his side and cuts his dealings with the Fengyi Sect, then even if he didn’t have a single soldier, Your Imperial Highness would not dare to compete for the heir apparent. In the current situation, the Crown Prince has first lost virtue, and Your Imperial Highness is not deliberately scheming to commit treason.

“Furthermore, to speak from the heart, the world does not belong to one family or one surname. If the Fengyi Sect were really a good choice, then this subject would not necessarily seek its eradication. But in this subject’s view, the disciples of the Fengyi Sect are arrogant and willful, and do not understand the pain and sufferings present in the world. They are only committed to wholeheartedly struggling for power. Although this subject is from Southern Chu, I have witnessed Liang Wan’s behavior in Southern Chu. If these kinds of shortsighted, arrogant, and willful women without any priorities were allowed to take control, I’m afraid that the people of the world would be dragged into trouble. It may be true that the Fengyi Sect master was really working for the state and for the common people in the

beginning, but now the Fengyi Sect has already begun to seize the tools of power. If Your Imperial Highness is unable to eradicate the power and influence of the Fengyi Sect, I'm afraid that Great Yong not only will not be able to unite the world, it will also perish in the hands of the women. Your Imperial Highness is a prince of Great Yong … How can you watch the empire perish? The common people suffer hardship? Since the Crown Prince has been enticed by power and authority, and cannot fulfill the responsibilities of a benevolent heir apparent, then Your Imperial Highness naturally must remove and replace him by right."

Hearing this, Li Zhi was radiant with delight as he replied, "Sir has truly explained this Prince's thoughts. This Prince also thinks this way, but it was never enunciated so clearly and plainly. That's right, if the Fengyi Sect did not exist, it would be perfectly fine for me to be a peaceful and carefree prince."

I smiled faintly, not bothering to argue with the falsehoods in Li Zhi's words. In any case, that was unimportant.

I serenely went on, "The strategy to demonstrate your sincere convictions allows Your Imperial Highness to show your staunch resolution. Please allow this subject to first elaborate the current situation for Your Imperial Highness. Your Imperial Highness presently feels surrounded and isolated, without help, because of the close relationship between the Emperor, the Crown Prince, the Prince of Qi, and the Fengyi Sect not giving Your Imperial Highness any place to start. However, in this subject's view, first, they really aren't blended together well. It isn't as Your Imperial Highness imagines. The Emperor, the Crown Prince, and the Prince of Qi do not completely lack safeguards against the Fengyi Sect. It is only because of their respective selfish motives that they allow the Fengyi Sect to exist. If the Emperor did not have any fear in his heart, then Noble Consort Ji would have children. These past few years, the Emperor's harem is still heavily favored, as concubines have given birth to a dozen or more princes and princesses. This clearly illustrates that the Emperor's body is healthy. And yet, Noble Consort Ji is childless. I believe that the Emperor does not want Noble Consort Ji to have any sons to compete over the position of heir apparent.

Although the Crown Prince heavily favors his concubine, he extremely loves and protects his heir. As they say, 'the mother's status is based on her son; the son's status is based on her mother.' Since ancient times, there have been a countless number of wives who have been killed because of a doting concubine. Were it not for the fear by His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, towards the Fengyi Sect, I'm afraid that the heir would have lost favor long ago. There is also the Prince of Qi. Although His Imperial Highness has married, he keeps his distance. I have met the Prince of Qi before. From his physiognomy, although the Prince of Qi is innately dissolute, his cold shoulder towards his first wife is peculiar. Therefore, the Emperor and the Princes do not completely trust the Fengyi Sect. But without the Fengyi Sect, they do not have the means of competing against Your Imperial Highness.

"Second, although the Emperor is partial to the Crown Prince, if the Crown Prince were to jeopardize the empire, then the Emperor would not tolerate it no matter how partial he is. Therefore, over these past few years, although Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, has repeatedly faced danger, your position is as steady as Mt. Tai, because Your Imperial Highness is the heaven-raising pillar of the state of Great Yong. The Emperor will absolutely not allow the Crown Prince to harm Your Imperial Highness. As long as Your Imperial Highness does not cross the Emperor's bottom line, then Your Imperial Highness's safety will be guaranteed. As long as Your Imperial Highness eliminates the Crown Prince, then even if the Emperor becomes indignant and angry, he can only transfer the Imperial Throne to Your Imperial Highness. Therefore, Your Imperial Highness must control all authority and power while the Emperor is still on the throne. In that way, Your Imperial Highness will be able to succeed the throne perfectly legitimately.

"Lastly, the Crown Prince relies heavily upon the Prince of Qi. Your Imperial Highness perhaps believes that the alliance between the Prince of Qi and the Crown Prince is unbreakable. But in this subject's view, animosity exists. From what I can see from intelligence gathered by Your Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince isn't a tolerant person. The Prince of Qi has a bossy and domineering personality. Even before the Crown Prince, he would constantly present this personality. The Crown Prince only tries to

win the Prince of Qi over to deal with Your Imperial Highness. This subject has learned from the intelligence reports that the Crown Prince previously snubbed the Prince of Qi because of the defeats he suffered. It was only to deal with Your Imperial Highness that he once again began to express goodwill towards the Prince of Qi these last several days. The Prince of Qi understands this clearly. How can he not understand the Crown Prince's fickleness? It is only because the Prince of Qi has no alternatives, as Your Imperial Highness yourself is someone who can command troops into battle. Therefore, in the eyes of the Prince of Qi, if Your Imperial Highness ascends to the throne, then he wouldn't have any opportunity to display his abilities. Actually regarding this matter, this subject must admonish Your Imperial Highness. As someone precious and honored, Your Imperial Highness must not put yourself into danger. Your Imperial Highness has already accrued celebrated military merits and should promote other generals. There is no need for Your Imperial Highness to compete with your subordinates over meritorious contributions. Leave alone the fact that Your Imperial Highness is someone who will govern the world and cannot only focus military matters. If there is no one who can take the place of Your Imperial Highness to fight, don't tell me that Your Imperial Highness would personally campaign?"

Speaking to this point, I saw Li Zhi blush with shame as he looked towards Shi Yu. Shi Yu's face was filled with approval. It seems as if this was something that Shi Yu had chided before.

I paused, looking at the expression of consent that Li Zhi had already revealed before I added, "This subject has already explained the current situation to Your Imperial Highness. Now, would Your Imperial Highness allow this subject to explain the second strategy—cutting out the heart. Presently, although Your Imperial Highness is in a desperate situation, the enemy remains hostile and suspicious of each other. In this subject's view, the biggest weakness in the alliance formed by Your Imperial Highness's enemies is the Crown Prince himself. The Crown Prince cannot make any mistakes, otherwise the Emperor will inevitably doubt the decisions he has made, the Prince of Qi will worry about his future prospects, while the Fengyi Sect will lose the basis of its opposition to Your Imperial Highness.

Therefore, as long as the Crown Prince errs, then Your Imperial Highness can break the alliance into pieces. But the Crown Prince isn't an imbecile. He will have advisers beside him admonish him. To desire the Crown Prince to err is not easy. Therefore, we must act on two fronts. First, we must place one of our people beside the Crown Prince. This individual must be able to obtain the Crown Prince's trust and have the Crown Prince listen and follow his advice. Second, Your Imperial Highness must allow the Crown Prince to secure, on the surface, dominance. In this way, the Crown Prince will be so pleased as to forget himself, and will harm himself."

Li Zhi's brow furrowed as he replied, "For us to feign weakness is doable, but how are we going to place one of our people beside the Crown Prince? The Crown Prince is quite careful when it comes to these matters. Although we have some people who work for the Crown Prince, they are not able to participate in confidential matters."

I smiled lightly and stated, "Since this subject has so spoken, then naturally I have ways of doing so. As long as Your Imperial Highness supplies a suitable candidate, this subject will naturally be able to have the Crown Prince trust him, so much so that he is completely obedient. This person must be adept at currying favor with the Crown Prince and also must be capable of helping the Crown Prince make difficult decisions. In short, he must have sufficient talent to replace the Crown Prince's think tank, Lu Jingzhong. In this subject's plan, this person will become a favored minister and trusted aide that the Crown Prince cannot do without. Your Imperial Highness will then be able to control and manipulate the Crown Prince. If the Crown Prince were within our palm, Your Imperial Highness could do as you wished, shaking the law and discipline of the court. By then, you would have no worries about succeeding the throne."

Li Zhi's expression was filled with astonishment and bafflement. Thinking it over repeatedly, controlling the crown prince was easier said than done. Not to mention the fact that Lu Jingzhong was not someone to be taken lightly. Even the Fengyi Sect would not allow us to succeed.

I smiled and continued, "When this subject speaks of controlling the Crown Prince, I am not suggesting that we control the Crown Prince's life or

death. Rather, we will control the Crown Prince's thought process. As long as we allow the Crown Prince to act according to our plans, what the Crown Prince originally thought and did will have nothing to do with Your Imperial Highness. Your Imperial Highness, be at ease. This subject already has a feasible plan. Although the process will naturally have its twists and turns, as long as we achieve our objective, we will be able to guarantee Your Imperial Highness's safety."

"We can discuss the particulars at a later date. Since Sir is certain, then Li Zhi is reassured," stated Li Zhi before asking, "However, what will we do after we have controlled the Crown Prince?"

I smiled and answered, "We're not going to do much, only have the Crown Prince become jealous and suspicious of the Prince of Qi. The Crown Prince is the type of person who is naturally filled with suspicions. Today, he is jealous of Your Imperial Highness's achievements. Another day, it is hard to avoid him being jealous of the Prince of Qi. This subject is only planning on having this kind of situation happen ahead of schedule. As long as the Crown Prince is under the impression that he has suppressed Your Imperial Highness, he will naturally be unmasked and reveal the truth. I will then arrange a lure for the Crown Prince to arrogantly make some mistakes. Within two years, the Crown Prince will become a tyrannical and incapable ruler in the eyes of the world. With the Crown Prince out of the way, who else is capable of competing with Your Imperial Highness over the position of heir apparent? When the time comes, the Fengyi Sect will find itself in an extremely difficult position. At that time, this subject and Your Imperial Highness will again discuss the situation and ensure that the Fengyi Sect can no longer assert influence on the court."

Hearing my words, Li Zhi smiled with delight. He thought to himself that Jiang Zhe was indeed someone with outstanding ability and sagacity. *How could I not have thought that the enemy's greatest strength was also their greatest weakness* ? The crown prince was the core of the alliance. If questions arise about the crown prince, then their alliance would naturally collapse. Although he did not know the full details of the plan, Li Zhi had already swept away all of the melancholy and worry in his mind. Getting to

his feet, he bowed and recognized, “Listening to the words of a wise man can be superior to studying books for ten years. Zhi thanks Sir for your instruction.”

I stood and returned his courtesy. “Your Imperial Highness praises me too much. Would Your Imperial Highness please listen to this subject’s third strategy—recruiting the worthy and virtuous. Although Your Imperial Highness is known for your virtue and possession of talented generals and advisers, in this subject’s view, they are not sufficient. Since Your Imperial Highness’s ambitions are the world, then Your Imperial Highness must consider how to manage and control the government. In the current court, the ministers all have links with the Fengyi Sect. If Your Imperial Highness were to succeed the throne and continue to use these people, then you would have inevitably allowed the Fengyi Sect to recover its influence.”

Li Zhi’s brows furrowed and he voiced, “I also understand this point, but if I were to abruptly replace all of them, then I fear that the entire court would be in turmoil. The rich and powerful families would rebel. At that instant, my Great Yong would perish.”

I softly responded, “Your Imperial Highness views the civil and military officials as quite important, but has overlooked the hearts and minds of the army and the common people. These past few years, Your Imperial Highness has been victorious and undefeated,[3] repeatedly opening the eyes of the common people. Who in the world does not know of Your Imperial Highness’s accomplishments? However, in the beginning, Great Yong relied upon not a few local despots and tyrants. At the time, this kind of method admittedly accelerated the process of unification, but today, these individuals have taken and occupied the land of the common people and do not pay any taxes. From what this one knows, after many commoners lost their land, they had no choice but to become the slaves of influential families and local despots. None of the people of the world do not bear a strong hatred toward these individuals. However, Your Imperial Highness using the need for strong soldiers as the reason has allowed the common people to open new land for agriculture. Although the land nominally belongs to the army, in reality, they belong to the common people. As a result, many robust

young men all have been willing to enlist so their families can obtain land. This is also one of the reasons why those elites all support the crown prince. If Your Imperial Highness were to excessively tolerate this situation, there would be one day when Great Yong would be divided by warlords. It would be better to avail yourself to the present competition to become the heir apparent to involve these elites. Your Imperial Highness can use this as the reason to purge the world of elites, allowing the poor and the talented to rebuild Great Yong. As long as Your Imperial Highness uses the appropriate plans, these elites will never have the opportunity to rebel. Although in the short term, Great Yong will weaken, it will allow Great Yong to change wholly[4] in several years' time to really become the most powerful country. When that time comes, it would take no effort to pacify Southern Chu, wipe out Northern Han, and chase out the southern barbarians."

Li Zhi listened closely, completely enthralled. He understood all of these problems, but he had been suppressed each time he had tried to raise the issue of reform. This was one of the reasons why he wished to acquire the throne. He had originally thought about slowly thinking of a way when he had succeeded the throne. Although Jiang Zhe's plan was fierce and vicious, it would prevent harm to Great Yong's strength. After all, the fight over the throne was one that would implicate hundreds of thousands of people. As long as he acted ingeniously, then he would be able to eliminate a significant part of the elites, replacing them with his own talented subordinates. Within ten years, Great Yong would no longer be affected by these elites.

Thinking it through, Li Zhi once again rose to his feet and bowed, saying, "Although the first two strategies allow this Prince to ascend to the throne, this Prince only bowed from admiration. This strategy would ensure the empire's good health. This Prince bows in thanks to Sir on behalf of Great Yong's imperial clan and the common people of the world."

I rose to my feet and returned his courtesy, replying, "It should be this subject bowing to thank Your Imperial Highness on behalf of the common people of the world for Your Imperial Highness's willing to listen to this subject's delirious utterings. This subject was originally a commoner and understands the suffering of the people. Your Imperial Highness's

willingness to open your eyes wide for the common people is the great fortune of all the people."

After sitting down, I continued, "Eliminating the rich and powerful families is only a part of this strategy. If there aren't any capable and talented individuals to assist, the court will be empty. How then can Your Imperial Highness govern the world? Therefore, Your Imperial Highness must broadly recruit talented individuals to govern the world. If you are worried about the suspicions and jealousy of the Emperor and the Crown Prince, Your Imperial Highness can ask the Emperor for your own personal fief. When the time comes, Your Imperial Highness can utilize these talented individuals to administer your own fief, preparing and having them ready. After Your Imperial Highness ascends to the throne, they can be allowed to comprehensively take over the government."

Li Zhi responded, "This Prince has always been away on campaigns. Imperial Father has given me Youzhou[5] as my fief. The current person managing Youzhou is a trusted confidante of this Prince, Pei Ji. He has administered the fief well. However, he is not adept at developing talents. How does Sir think this ought to be handled?"

I smiled and replied, "If Your Imperial Highness is worried that recalling Pei Ji would harm the loyalty of the subordinates, then Your Imperial Highness need not be worried. Your Imperial Highness can petition the Emperor and allow the heir to go safeguard Youzhou. Afterwards, Sir Shi can be dispatched to assist the heir. Sir Shi is the chief clerk of the Marshal's office. Your Highness can promote Pei Ji; the best would be to transfer him back to Your Imperial Highness's side. Afterwards, Sir Shi can recruit talents on Your Imperial Highness's behalf. Others may be suspicious if Your Imperial Highness sees these talents and then has them remain by your side. It would be better to have them temporarily sent to Youzhou, allowing them to familiarize themselves with government affairs. Of course, Sir Shi must properly guide them, allowing them to immediately take over administration of the empire when the time comes. At that time, Your Imperial Highness needs only give a single order and they will be able to enter the capital to become ministers."

With difficulty, Li Zhi controlled the excitement in his heart. Although he was extremely happy with Jiang Zhe pledging allegiance, the probing done by Jiang Zhe over the last several days inevitably created some hostility. Now with the three strategies of demonstrating one's convictions, cutting out the heart, and recruiting the worthy and virtuous, Li Zhi felt as if he had received payback for all the suffering that he had experienced previously. If not for his sincere courtesy towards such a man of merit, how could he have been able to hear such strategies? With great effort, he serenely stated, "Since that is the case, I will entrust everything to Sir. Ziyou will go to Youzhou to build a foundation for this Prince. This matter is of utmost importance. Outside of Ziyou, no one else can take care of this matter."

Shi Yu naturally understood that his responsibility was of great importance. However, he was somewhat worried. If this were to happen, the future sovereign's ministers would all be his students and followers. If that were to happen, then his authority would be excessive. Somewhat anxious, he glanced at Jiang Zhe. When all was said and done, he couldn't directly say this to the Prince of Yong.

I was already prepared and explained, "Your Imperial Highness, Sir Shi carries a heavy responsibility. The heir has no one to discipline and teach him. It would be better if Your Imperial Highness chooses another worthy individual responsible for assisting and instructing the heir. This way, Sir Shi's heavy load can be reduced and prevent a delay in the heir's education."

Thinking it over, Li Zhi suggested, "How about this? The heir's maternal uncle, Gao Rong, is intelligent and capable. The son of Senior Mentor Chu Ping, Chu Wenyuan has an upright and proper moral character, and is an exceptional talent. He can be allowed to assist the heir. Thus Ziyou can concentrate on recruiting the worthy and virtuous."

With this, Shi Yu felt relieved and replied, "Ziyou will do his utmost. Your Highness please be at ease. When Your Highness's decree arrives in Youzhou, Ziyou will travel throughout the night to return. The matters within the capital will all be entrusted to Suiyun. I have to ask Suiyun to trouble yourself."

Solemnly, I stated, "Sir Shi be at ease. Since Suiyun has determined the

strategies, I will definitely accomplish them. Otherwise, I will not only have let down His Imperial Highness, I will have even more so let down Sir's hard work in Youzhou."

Li Zhi smiled and declared, "Good. We have talked for so long. This Prince feels his stomach rumbling from hunger. How about we first eat? Afterwards, the two Sirs rest, otherwise you two will be too exhausted. At that point, who will advise this Prince? With Ziyou, this Prince does not have any worries about future consequences.[6] With Suiyun, this Prince no longer needs to fear demons and monsters."

"Your Imperial Highness speaks incorrectly," I denied, shaking my head. Seeing the looks of astonishment on Li Zhi and Shi Yu's faces, I explained, "Your Imperial Highness is a noble and benevolent character.[7] When did you ever fear vile characters? It was merely because Your Imperial Highness did not have any strategy to sweep away the filthiness. This subject only has some crafty plots and machinations. Those that noble characters cannot deal with, this subject can take care of."

Li Zhi looked at my face filled with sincerity, moved. He did not know what he should say. It could be assumed that he couldn't guess that while some of the words were sincere and genuine, there were some that were fawning. If Li Zhi were a pure and unadulterated gentleman, then I fear that he would not have the qualifications to become emperor.

Footnotes :

理所当然, lisuodangran – idiom, lit. as it should be by rights; proper and to be expected as a matter of course, inevitable and right
名正言顺, mingzhengyanshun – idiom, lit. in a way that justifies the use of the term; genuine, proper, in a way that conforms to logic, justifiable, appropriate, perfectly legitimate
攻无不克, 战**无不**胜, gongwubeke, zhanwubusheng – idiom, lit. to triumph in every battle and win every fight; all-conquering, ever victorious
脱胎换**骨**, tuotaihuangu – idiom, lit. to shed one's mortal body and exchange one's bones; to turn over a new leaf, to change wholly
幽州, Youzhou – a former city, prefecture, and province that is located around modern-day Beijing

后顾之忧, houguzhiyou – idiom, lit. fears of trouble in the rear; worries about future consequences
光风霁月, guangfengjiyue – idiom, lit. light breeze and clear moon; period of peace and prosperity; noble and benevolent character

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 3: Prelude to the Storm

Volume 2, Chapter 3: Prelude to the Storm

Leisurely, I sat within a refined wing on the second floor of a small building. Gazing out the window, I looked at the bamboo forest. It was almost as if I had returned to Southern Chu. At present, I was already a major serving in the prince's household, with a position of extreme importance. However, I still wished that I could bring Xiaoshunzi along and tour the world incognito, even though the Prince of Yong repeatedly advised me to be careful with my safety. Presently, I lacked a suitable candidate capable of becoming a mole in the service of the crown prince. Unfortunately, all of the candidates supplied by the Prince of Yong were unsuitable for this task. The individual must be dissolute and licentious to conform to the crown prince's temperament. This individual must also be adept at ingratiating himself so that he can obtain the crown prince's favor. This individual must also be an outstanding talent so that he can receive the crown prince's recognition and appreciation. Finding this kind of individual was really quite difficult. Although the candidates supplied by the Prince of Yong were just barely suitable, I still wished to find a more suitable candidate.

I hadn't been sitting for too long when the door quietly opened and Chen Zhen and Han Wuji entered. I had prepared this location long ago. The owner of this extremely famous restaurant in Great Yong, Jing Shunqing, was my younger cousin. Two years ago while I was still in Southern Chu recuperating, when the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets had already become quite famous, Jing Shunqing had come seeking refuge. The reason was because he had a disagreement with my maternal uncle.

My mother hailed from a prestigious family. In Jiaxing, the Jing clan was a literary family that was second to none. But after my mother had passed, a huge conflict erupted between my father and the Jing clan, because the house we resided in and all of the land had been gifted to my father by my

maternal grandfather. After my mother passed, my maternal uncle, who never got along with my father, demanded that everything be returned. Reasonably speaking, these assets were under my father's name. They had no right or authority to take them back. But my father had an innately proud character. Under the abuse, bullying, and humiliation of my uncle, my father abandoned everything. Bringing me along, he left Jiaxing. He also explicitly stated that he was breaking all ties with the Jing clan. Therefore, after I became the *zhuangyuan* , the Jing clan did not have the face to reconcile with me.

This younger cousin of mine was somewhat dull and wasn't fond of studying. As a result, he was not favored or doted upon by my uncle. In addition, he had intimate relations with a maid, impregnating her. After my uncle learned this, he wanted to abort the fetus, sell off the maid, and force my cousin to immediately marry his fiancée. In reality, to my cousin, as long as he was able to take the maid as his concubine, the pair would've satisfied. However, my uncle resolutely refused to allow my cousin to offend the in-laws. At the end, this younger cousin of mine angrily brought along the maid and ran off to seek refuge with me in Jianye.

I had a pretty decent impression of this cousin. Although he wasn't suited to studying, he was extremely shrewd and astute. Reportedly, he had begun to handle the family's estates and other affairs long ago. His fiancée was the daughter of one of Southern Chu's rich merchants. His would-be father-in-law only arranged the marriage because of my cousin's talents. My uncle, seeing that my cousin had no hopes of attaining scholarly honors, decided that my cousin might as well be allowed to marry up. Who could have imagined that my cousin would engage in an illicit sexual relationship with a maid and offend the in-laws? That was why my uncle became abruptly angry.

I was both sympathetic towards my cousin and resentful towards my uncle. Therefore, I arranged for my cousin to seek a meeting with the master of the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets. It was only natural that the "master" of the pavilion, Han Wuji, extremely appreciated and recognized my cousin, providing him with the finances to become a merchant. To avoid the

suppression of my cousin's in-laws, my cousin crossed the Yangtze River and went to Great Yong. At the time, relations between Southern Chu and Great Yong were outwardly peaceful and harmonious. As a result, my cousin did not meet with any obstacles, setting up roots in Great Yong. My cousin was really a commercial genius. In merely two years, my original investment of one hundred thousand taels of silver had increased immeasurably. Through trade between Southern Chu and Great Yong, my cousin became fabulously wealthy. In addition, he had shrewdly planned ahead and transferred his funds to other investments in time, becoming a major player in the manufacture of silk. This success was due to improvements I made to the loom and his own intelligence and ability. Moreover, a year later, his would-be father-in-law came calling. Not only did they reconcile, my cousin's marriage to his fiancée was concluded. In reality, although the fiancée was stubborn, she wasn't someone unreasonable. The cooperation between my cousin and his father-in-law allowed my cousin's business to grow rapidly. Businessmen all attached great importance to one's interests. They all had seen the crisis in Southern Chu. Therefore, the two made preparations to transfer a part of their businesses and wealth to Great Yong. Thus, my cousin became the pioneer opening the path.

At the time, I didn't think that my cousin would be so remarkable. At the time, we had agreed that the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets would own fifty percent of his businesses. After my cousin had achieved great success, the pavilion suggested that its share of the business be sold for five hundred thousand taels of silver. Of course, my cousin had prepared for us to ask for a ridiculous price. However, I naturally would not be overly greedy. In addition, the pavilion never did anything that would cause its collaborators to feel distressed. As a result, the shares were sold at a reasonable price. However, in accordance with the usual practice, the pavilion maintained a ten percent share. For my cousin, he understood the power and influence of the Heavenly Secrets Trade Association. Therefore, the two sides cheerfully came to an agreement. My cousin was someone who valued benevolence and righteousness. Although he did not know of my relationship with the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets, he still sent heavy gifts on several occasions, thanking me for my earlier guidance.

Before I had been captured by the Prince of Yong and brought to Great Yong, I dispatched Chen Zhen and company ahead to wait in Great Yong. I had placed many people within my cousin's businesses. Although they had no recollections about their experiences in the Secret Camp, they still remembered the Secret Camp's benevolence and favor in arranging gainful employment for them. In addition, their natural aptitude was quite remarkable after all. As a result, they all became important managerial personnel. Combined with an identity from the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets, the Secret Camp members were able to come and go as they pleased within my cousin's businesses.

As for this restaurant, it was one of my cousin's businesses. It was named "Jiangnan Spring," specializing in the distinctive style of Southern Chu cuisine and was greatly welcomed by the influential officials of Great Yong. This cousin of mine was quite good. When he learned that I had been taken captive, he personally came to Chang'an, hoping that he could help me. Several times, he had tried to use his connections to beseech the Prince of Yong to be magnanimous.[1] But because he did not have the right connections, it was only after I became a major serving in the prince's household did the Prince of Yong learn that my cousin had tried to use his connections to save me. Contrary to what one might expect, he valued my cousin highly. Only so was I allowed to easily leave the prince's residence to eat and drink at Jiangnan Spring. After all, there was no one who could secretly plot with the owner against me here. The Prince of Yong also sent several guards with excellent martial arts to protect me. Otherwise, the Prince of Yong would be uneasy about my safety.

Gazing at Chen Zhen and Han Wuji, I smiled and said, "How have you two gentlemen been? I was headstrong and willful, causing you two to worry."

After the two greeted me, Han Wuji smiled and jokingly replied, "This subordinate racked his brains[2] to arrange young master's plan to fake your death. It is a pity that it could not be used.[3] Young master was still moved by the Prince of Yong. Young master should compensate us for our meticulous planning!"

Giving Han Wuji a supercilious look, Chen Zhen retorted jokingly, "Stop

talking rubbish. Who was it that kept on saying that there was no need for the young master to dangerously fake his death? Who was it that after hearing that the young master changed his mind was wild with joy?"

Although I knew that Chen Zhen was only joking, my heart was still moved. I looked at Han Wuji, my mind racing. He was someone from Shu. Why would he approve of my allegiance to the Prince of Yong? My suspicious gaze was fixed on Han Wuji. If there were problems with this person, then wouldn't that mean that the existence of my Secret Camp had already been divulged? But there haven't been any signs indicating this.

In his former life, when all was said and done, Han Wuji spent every day scheming and plotting. Seeing my gaze, he inwardly trembled. Hurriedly, he kneeled to the ground, explaining himself, "Young master, this subordinate truly supports Great Yong. A few days ago, while we were waiting in Chang'an for young master, this subordinate ran into a former colleague of mine. Seeing that my situation wasn't too bad, he told me that he wanted me to join them to save the Crown Prince of Shu and reestablish the kingdom. At the time, I tactfully refused. However, that person stated that there were already people organizing a resistance. If I did not agree to join, then when those people found me, they would absolutely not let off a rebel like me who forgets his roots. This subordinate knew that those people could only bully the weak and fear the strong. If young master pledged allegiance to the Prince of Yong and can draw support from the Prince of Yong, then these people would not dare to brazenly seek out this subordinate."

I sighed gently. It was not strange that the remnants of Shu would form a resistance. However, this kind of method was too stupid. Han Wuji was originally someone who was opposed to Great Yong. At the time, when I had planned to fake my death, although he didn't say much, his behavior and actions were extremely proactive. But now, he was overjoyed at the news of my allegiance to the Prince of Yong. This kind of transformation was precisely brought about by the rebels. How could someone, who had already abandoned his past and built a new life, be willing to invest himself into a rebellion without any future prospects? After confirming that those rebels would not be able to cause any major problems, I still made clear to

Han Wuji and the others to pay close attention to their own personal safety and well-being. Even though assassinations could not change a country's fortunes, they were still able to completely change the fate of a single person. Pondering, I spoke to Han Wuji, "The next time they come to force you, you simply say that you are currently in the middle of doing business and are willing to give them financial support. However, you yourself are unwilling to participate."

Surprised, Han Wuji asked, "Young master, why do this?"

I smiled distantly and replied, "I want you to be able to control their operations. If this happens then it will be of some assistance to me. In the future, it will make things easier if we want to eliminate them."

Han Wuji fell silent. I was somewhat puzzled. Just as I was about to ask him what was going on, Xiaoshunzi's voice reached me, "Young master, he is someone from Shu."

Only then did I recall that although he had just expressed relief at my allegiance towards Great Yong, this did not imply that he was willing to see the Shu resistance fail.

Lightly shaking my head, I explained, "Wuji, I understand your thoughts. However, you must understand that the majority of those people aren't loyal and devoted to the Kingdom of Shu. Rather, they are intent on rebelling so that they can seize back the power and authority they lost. For them to use such a method to plot rebellion will not only have no chance of success, but also implicate and harm many more people. For example, if you didn't have the ability to defend yourself, how would they deal with you? You should think this through clearly. I will not have you do something that you are reluctant to do. I will assign this to someone else."

Still kneeling on the floor, Han Wuji lowered his head to the ground and replied, "This subordinate thanks young master for your magnanimity."

I glanced at Chen Zhen and saw him lightly nod his head, signaling that he would handle this matter. Moreover, he would also monitor Han Wuji and prevent him from jeopardizing my cause.

Seeing that Han Wuji had already calmed down, Chen Zhen inquired, "I

wonder if young master is prepared to tell the Prince of Yong about the existence of the Secret Camp?"

I smiled faintly and responded, "What is your view?"

"This subordinate thinks that if the Prince of Yong were told," answered Chen Zhen, "Then young master would have reduced your own ability to protect yourself. But if the Prince of Yong isn't told, then I'm afraid the Prince of Yong will become suspicious of young master's loyalty."

I glanced at Xiaoshunzi. Xiaoshunzi coldly uttered, "You speak the truth. However, we absolutely cannot allow the Secret Camp to come out into the open. The reason why young master has room to maneuver is all because of the existence of the Secret Camp. Moreover, even if the Prince of Yong becomes suspicious of young master's loyalty, at worst, we leave Great Yong."

Thinking it over, I stated, "Xiaoshunzi is taking it too far. If this happens then we will become enemies with the Prince of Yong. This is no good. The Secret Camp cannot be revealed. How about this? Afterwards, I will limit as much as possible my meetings with Chen Zhen. Chen Zhen will be responsible for and take charge of the Secret Camp. Xiaoshunzi will be responsible for passing along my directives. From now on, the Secret Camp's mission will be to blend its members into the lower rungs of society in Chang'an. Remember my words: they must not become involved with the upper class and influential officials. With this, even if the Prince of Yong discovers the existence of the Secret Camp, he will not be afraid. All in all, His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, will not believe that I do not have a bit of my own strength that I can rely upon. At worst, I will say that the Secret Camp is Xiaoshunzi's subordinates. I believe that this reason will be acceptable. At the least, they can see some of Xiaoshunzi's abilities."

Xiaoshunzi nodded his head and replied, "During the period when the Prince of Yong had the young master placed under house arrest, there were always experts assigned to keep an eye on us. Although I could come and go at will, if I were to bring along young master, I fear that I would not be able to escape easily. Currently, the martial arts of the guards that the Prince of Yong has dispatched to our sides aren't bad. However, they are tasked with

protection, as there are no experts capable of bothering me. As a result, their fighting strength is a lot weaker, merely prepared to help me protect young master."

Just as I was about to give them instructions, a cacophony of noise and the sound of weapons clashing could be heard from outside. My brows furrowed slightly. This room was Jiangnan Spring's best and most high-level location. How could there be people acting here? I glanced at Xiaoshunzi. Understanding my signal, he walked out of the room. It wasn't long before he returned and told me that there were actually people outside fighting. According to what he could tell, Xiaoshunzi believed that it stemmed from a grievance in *jianghu* . I had previously witnessed the bloodiness and chaos of battle and had also witnessed the verbal sparring of scholars, but I had never seen someone kill due to grievances from *jianghu* . I could not help but be interested. After informing Xiaoshunzi, I walked out of the room.

Although Jiangnan Spring was nominally a restaurant, in reality it was a small courtyard. The entire courtyard was composed of a garden that ingeniously showcased Jiangnan's landscape—flowers and plants, bamboo forest, small bridges, running water, and rock gardens. These aspects divided the garden into over a hundred spaces. Each space was composed of different kinds of balconies and pavilions, making for true peace and quiet amidst noisy surroundings. Every pavilion was joined by winding corridors. The corridors were surrounded by luxurious vegetation. As a result, the layout was extremely graceful and reserved, most suitable for private discussions and meetings.

The small pavilion I was currently in was very refined and elegant. Pushing open the second floor door, the exterior balcony was surrounded by vermillion banisters. On the side was a corridor leading to the stairway down. The Prince of Yong's guards were all waiting on the bottom floor. I stood before the banister and looked down. Below, in the corridor connecting this pavilion to another, stood an elderly man with his hands behind his back. Behind him stood two formidable looking middle-aged men and a beautiful and graceful young woman. Along the corridor, atop a rock garden stood a yellow-robed scholar. His appearance was elegant, although

he carried a bit of frivolousness. In his hand, he held a jade flute. Opposite him stood a handsome youth, a sword in his hand. The two were currently fighting. The youth's swordsmanship seemed to be pretty good, the glinting of the steel forcing the scholar into a difficult situation. However, the scholar would occasionally laugh, abuse, and taunt. I watched as the youth flushed with anger, almost as if he were insane.

The moment I looked down, the scholar was fighting back and yelling at the same time, "*Aiyah* ! Truly scary! This lowly student only made a few jokes. It's not like I was fighting over a beauty with you. Be at ease! Although your junior apprentice sister is beautiful, this lowly student is used to seeing the beauties of the world. There are innumerable women who are more beautiful than her! It's only a few teasing sentences, not a hair on her body was harmed. Why are you fighting so desperately?"

The youth shouted back, "Nonsense! Nonsense! You came to us to rely on us. With good intentions, we accepted you. And yet … and yet, you did such a rude thing! Offending my junior apprentice sister." So speaking, his swordsmanship rapidly increased in speed.

The yellow-robed scholar simultaneously blocked the attacks and solemnly vowed, "A sweet, fair, graceful, wise, and virtuous woman can only be matched by a gentleman. This lowly student is only respectfully admiring a beautiful woman and tried to woo Lady Sha for several days. There is definitely no intent to molest. Moreover, Lady Sha is a disciple of the Fengyi Sect. Even if this lowly student was extremely daring, I would not dare to offend her! Jingjing! Jingjing! Plead for leniency on my behalf. I have not offended you!"

The beautiful young woman's face blushed, as she ferociously countered, "What wooing? You stay beside me every day, bothering me. When you have nothing to do, you would play your flute outside. And … and you even stole my belongings! Be obedient and let my senior martial brother beat you up! Afterwards, return what you stole. Otherwise, I will absolutely not let you off!"

The yellow-robed scholar heaved a deep sigh and lamented, "Alas! It seems you won't let me off! Those watching have seen enough, right? Little

brother, if you still don't come save me, I'm going to die!" As he was speaking, suddenly the jade flute in his hands erupted into a thousand phantoms. The youth wasn't able to clearly distinguish it clearly and subconsciously retreated a step. Who would have thought that he would forget that he was standing atop a rock garden? He stumbled. In the split second that he was hurriedly stabilizing himself, the scholar suddenly flew up high into the sky, charging towards my location. He called out, "Little brother! Help me!"

Just as his figure flashed, one of the middle-aged men standing behind the elderly man suddenly sprang forth like a hawk. The scholar's hand shook. Everyone only heard the sound of a violent explosion, covering the area with roiling smoke. Within the smoke was also a light, reddish mist. The scholar shouted, "Little brother! Don't use poison! I don't have any significant grudges against them!" Everyone immediately covered their noses, waiting for the smoke to clear. When everyone was able to see, they found that the scholar had disappeared. In the direction that the scholar had fled was a balcony with a wryly smiling black-clothed scholar. Behind him stood a delicate looking servant who was turned away, secretly laughing.

Pointing furiously at the balcony, the youth roared, "Where is that scoundrel? Quickly hand him over! You actually dare use poison in broad daylight? You must surely not be a good person!"

Being so accused, I could not help but continue to smile wryly. Unexpectedly, I had been framed. A moment ago, Xiaoshunzi had whispered to me that the scholar was preparing to escape. I merely was curious as to how he would escape. When the smoke roiled, Xiaoshunzi immediately stepped in front of me. Afterwards, we heard the scholar's words framing and shifting the blame to us. I did not know what that red smoke was, but I was completely positive that it was not poisonous. But how was I going to explain it to those people glaring at me?

At this moment, the guards from the prince's household charged to the second floor of the pavilion. Seeing that I was unharmed, a guard walked forward to my side and in a low voice, asked, "*Daren* , what has happened?"

I lightly shook my head. Raising my voice, I said, "Gentlemen and lady, that

person does not have any relation with this one. Please perceive the truth."

The youth loudly retorted, "Quibbling! When we met that person, he was heading directly towards this pavilion. A moment ago, he escaped in your direction. It would be strange if you weren't accomplices. Hurry up and speak, what is your relationship with the Dissolute Wastrel, Xia Jinyi?"

I smiled slightly and answered, "This one has nothing to do with that person, please understand."

The elderly man suddenly said, "Does your distinguished self so despise our intelligence? That surnamed Xia was originally walking towards your pavilion. A moment ago, when he saw you, he repeatedly tried to escape in your direction. If he did not have any relationship with you lot, why did all of you not refuse even once?"

At this moment, the guard whispered into my ear, "These people are from Chang'an's Guanzhong Alliance. That elderly man is the Alliance Head, Sha Qingyuan. The Guanzhong Alliance consists of Chang'an's warriors. In reality, it is used by the court to exercise control over *jianghu* . Sha Qingyuan is currently neutral, but is leaning towards the Prince of Qi, because many of his disciples are serving in the Prince of Qi's army."

Suddenly, a vague plan began to be formulated in my mind. I thus spoke, "Alliance Head Sha's words are mistaken. We only came out to see what was happening after we heard the uproar outside. There are a number of pavilions nearby. When that person abruptly shouted out, how could we know that he was trying to implicate us? Alliance Head has only heard one side … Doesn't this unavoidably harm your dignity?"

Footnotes :

高抬贵手, gaotaiguishou – idiom, lit. to let someone off lightly; to be generous, to be magnanimous
费尽心思, feijinxinsi – idiom, lit. to rack one's brains; to take great pains to think something through
功亏一篑, gongkuiyikui – idiom, lit. to ruin the enterprise for the sake of one basketful; to fail through lack of a final effort

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 4: Old Friends Reunited

Volume 2, Chapter 4: Old Friends Reunited

The brows of the elderly man tensed and locked up. Although the young man before his eyes seemed to be weak and cultured, however while his words were gentle, they carried with them a faint and indistinct deterrence, almost as if this young man did not regard his identity with much importance. He was a shrewd individual and knew that the people who could visit Jiangnan Spring were all distinguished persons. Then taking a look at the guards behind me, he saw that they were all experts of grave bearing with eyes emitting contempt. He could not help but speak, “Your distinguished self speaks reasonably. I wonder how to address your distinguished self?”

I smiled slightly, indicating towards the guard by my side. In a loud voice, the guard announced, “This person is the new major of the office of the Marshal of Heavenly Strategies in the service of the Prince of Yong, Jiang Zhe, Jiang *daren* .”

The elderly man trembled. A major of the office of the Marshal of Heavenly Strategies was one of the most important civil official positions under the Prince of Yong. The elderly man bowed respectfully and said, “This commoner, Sha Qingyuan, has offended the major. Would *daren* please forgive me?”

“One who does not know is not guilty,” I uncaringly replied before asking, “Who was that yellow-robed scholar to unexpectedly dare to frame this official?”

“That person is surnamed Xia and is called Xia Jinyi,” explained the elderly man, blushing. “In *jianghu* , he is a bandit known as the Dissolute Wastrel. He was once a disciple of the Kongtong Sect. Because of his licentious conduct, he was expelled from the sect. But as he did not commit any major mistakes, his martial arts weren’t destroyed. This person arrived at this one’s residence a few days ago, hoping to join the Guanzhong Alliance. This

commoner saw that although this man was somewhat frivolous, he seemed intent upon rendering service to Great Yong. Therefore, he was accepted. Unexpectedly, this person was debauched, not only taking liberties with my daughter, but also stealing an item belonging to her. I originally only dispatched men to capture him, but unexpectedly ran into him here today. And was once again tricked by him to such an extent as to offend *daren* .

I thoughtfully nodded my head and responded, “May the Alliance Head do as you please. This man is so unbridled, if I were to capture him, I would definitely deliver him into Alliance Head’s hands, allowing Alliance Head to punish him as you please.”

Sha Qingyuan happily replied, “If that is the case, then much thanks to *daren* .”

Returning inside, looking at Chen Zhen and Han Wuji, I suddenly laughed lightly and said, “Who would have thought that there was someone who presumed to swindle me?”

Xiaoshunzi asked, “Young master, do you really want to capture him?”

“That’s right,” I replied with a smile. “We must definitely catch him. However, he must not be harmed. I want to use this person. Xiaoshunzi, do you have any way to catch him without anyone else knowing? This is a bit difficult. It doesn’t matter if unsuccessful. I will have other methods.”

“Young master be assured,” stated Xiaoshunzi, smiling. “Just a moment ago, I was focusing on protecting young master so did not touch him. However, I did leave the scent of the Chasing Spirit Fragrance on his body.”

Glancing at Chen Zhen, I watched as he opened his mouth and spoke, “Young master be assured. We have brought along the gnawing fragrance rats used in the pursuit. May I ask where young master plans on meeting this person?”

Thinking it over, I answered, “Think of a way to secretly deliver him here. Remember, don’t leave any traces. I will come tomorrow to see him. Remember, no one can know. Have his acupuncture points sealed and have him placed in a chest and brought over.”

Chen Zhen promptly acknowledged, “Young master be at ease. We can

basically make decisions here. We will definitely not leave behind any traces."

On the road back to the prince's residence, I calculated whether the plan could be successfully implemented. The more I considered it, the greater the probability. Just as I was seated in the carriage repeatedly calculating, the carriage came to a sudden stop. My body shifted forward and would have knocked into the side of the carriage if Xiaoshunzi had not helped me. At this moment, a voice reported in from outside the carriage, "*Daren* , it was a man who collided with the carriage. This man suddenly charged out from the alley, alarming the horses. However, this man has already fainted. Oh! *Daren* , on this man's back is a child and there are blade wounds on his chest."

At this time, the sound of clashing swords and blades could be heard. Not long afterwards, some people informed, "*Daren* , there were several people who came chasing. We have captured two of them, but allowed one to escape."

In a low voice, I ordered, "Bring the man back with us. Interrogate in detail. When finished, tell me everything."

A respectful response came from outside.

I smiled lightly and said, "No wonder the common people are fond of high positions and great wealth. Who doesn't like people agreeing when commands are issued?"

In a soft voice, Xiaoshunzi inquired, "Should I go take a look?"

I shook my head and responded, "There is no need. It should not have anything to do with us. Have the Prince of Yong's people investigate."

On the morning of the next day, one of the guards from yesterday came in to report that the person we had rescued had already awoken. But because of his injuries, he was unlikely to live long. This person called himself Han Zhang. Apart from this, he refused to say anything else. Filled with doubts, I glanced at Xiaoshunzi. Was this the Han Zhang that we were acquainted with? Xiaoshunzi went out, returning shortly after, offhandedly informing me that it was the guard who had protected me while we were in Sichuan, Han Zhang.

I jumped to my feet and hurriedly rushed to where Han Zhang was recuperating. Han Zhang was lying on a bed within this clean and tidy room. His complexion was yellow. I stepped forward and checked his pulse at the wrist. Not long after, I removed my hand. He was already close to the end of his life. I lightly shook my head, pushing a pill into his mouth. Gradually, his complexion improved, becoming ruddy. He opened his eyes. Catching sight of me, vigor appeared in his eyes. I sat down beside him and calmly asked, "Brother Han, we have met too late. These days, you must have suffered injuries on top of injuries? In addition, you did not rest properly. I am already powerless to help. How did you fall into such dire straits? Do you have any final wishes? Tell me. Considering our acquaintance, I will do anything."

Xiaoshunzi gestured for everyone to withdraw, standing behind me, impersonally gazing at Han Zhang. Han Zhang opened his mouth and asked, "Jiang *daren* , it is unexpected to meet you here. Have you already pledged allegiance to Great Yong?"

I smiled faintly and replied, "After Southern Chu took Shu, it also suffered a crushing defeat. Although there is the chance that Southern Chu can make a comeback, it can only struggle while at death's door. That's correct, I have already pledged allegiance to the Prince of Yong."

Han Zhang sighed and replied, "That's fine, that's fine. Great Yong is rich and powerful. Those people are all shortsighted and have no chance of success. *Daren* , my mother-in-law and wife have both died. I beg you to look upon our former acquaintance to take care of my daughter, allowing her to grow up safe and sound."

My expression moved, as I asked, "Tell me what has happened. Otherwise, how can I explain everything to your daughter?"

Han Zhang's eyes gazed into the distance as he explained, "After leaving *daren* , Han Zhang did not return to farming. I was originally a disciple of the Qingcheng Sect and had trained in martial arts. In the face of grievances both public and private, I joined an underground organization resisting Great Yong, the Embroidered Union. *Cough* . However, the general garrisoning Sichuan, Marquis Lu, executed brilliant strategies, and we repeatedly

suffered defeats. Afterwards, the union became crazy and began to brutally and ruthlessly massacre the common people of Shu. They claimed that if you refused to resist Southern Chu and Great Yong then you were a traitor. They somehow learned about the time that I spent in the Southern Chu army, and wished to kill me. It was useless no matter how I tried to explain the situation. I could only carry my daughter in my arms and escape. I originally thought that, as my wife was the daughter of General Tian and the younger cousin of the head of the union, she would not be harmed. But when I later captured one of the men chasing after me, I learned that my wife had died…. She died miserably, because the head of the union was my wife's fiancé. That year, she had run away from home to avoid the marriage and married me instead. The head of union deliberately wished to kill me. After he raped my wife, he killed her. My mother-in-law committed suicide by hanging herself from the ceiling. At the time, you tried to persuade me to return to the countryside to live out my days in peace. I did not listen, resulting in today's conclusion."

Looking at Han Zhang's mournful and desolate expression, I softly replied, "At the time, when you cried bitterly late at night, I already knew that you would not set yourself apart. However, you are a person from Shu, and there was no way for me to dissuade you from seeking to restore the Kingdom of Shu. From your standpoint, you weren't wrong. You only picked the wrong companions. Be at ease. Your enemies will not meet good ends."

Han Zhang's eyes blazed with passion, as he wished, "*Daren* , please take care of my daughter. Do not tell her anything. I do not want her to be bound by her grievances, civic or private."

I sighed softly and ordered, "Bring his daughter here." Xiaoshunzi left for a short moment before returning with a one-year-old infant in his arms. The baby girl laughed, reaching out with her hands towards her father, wanting to embrace him. On her lovely and adorable face, her large black eyes were as clear as spring water. I saw the emotions swirling on Han Zhang's face, but he had no strength to sit up. I extended my hands and pulled the baby girl into my arms. I could not help but lightly kiss her face.

"Daddy!" called out the baby girl suddenly, extending her hands to grasp

the head-covering wrapped around my hair.

I joyously looked at the baby girl and spoke, “Brother Han, your daughter is very bright and also very adorable.”

Han Zhang somehow managed to find the energy to sit up. On the bed, he bowed and begged me, “*Daren* , I know this matter is difficult, but I beseech to *daren* take care of this child and properly raise her.”

I was shocked. Just as I was about to refuse, I glanced at the child’s beautiful silhouette and found that I couldn’t speak those words. My mind suddenly thought about the child that Liu Piaoxiang and I would’ve had if she had not died. The child would have been this big. My heart softened and I responded, “I am alone and do not have a wife. If Brother Han does not despise my current situation, then this child will be my adopted daughter. I will certainty treat her as my own. Brother Han, what is this child’s name?”

Grateful, tears fell down Han Zhang’s face like rain. In a low voice, he stated, “*Daren* , Han Zhang was originally an orphan. Even my surname was only obtained after I followed my master. If *daren* does not despise her, please treat this child as your own. Do not tell her of her origins.”

I looked at Han Zhang. Through his sorrowful and heartbroken eyes, I could see the true love he had for his daughter and the heart filled with remorse. I gently replied, “Fine. My humble wife, Lady Liu, met with disaster and perished. I will tell this child that she is my own daughter. Her name will be Jiang Roulan.”

“Many thanks to *daren* . Roulan, Roulan …” repeated Han Zhang, his heart filled with gratefulness before he warned, “*Daren* , the Embroidered Union Head Huo Jicheng’s methods are vicious and sinister. *Daren* must be careful.”

Finished speaking, Han Zhang closed his eyes, no longer breathing. At this moment, both of Roulan’s hands were still extended towards her father, asking to be hugged. I hugged her into my embrace. A lone tear rolled down my cheek. Amidst this chaos of war, how many bitter and painful matters occur? Suddenly, Roulan began to cry loudly, seemingly knowing that her father had left this world.

I summoned the household's supervisory eunuch, Chang En, having him organize Han Zhang's funeral. I also had him find a wet nurse and several maids to care of Roulan. I first handed Roulan to the maids, determined to interrogate the captured criminals. Since they were chasing Han Zhang to kill him, they must be related to the Embroidered Union. Strangely, they were so savage and wild in Chang'an. How could I let them off and not question them thoroughly?

Inside the dismal dungeons in the prince's residence, under the guidance of the jailer, we walked through the limestone corridors. On both sides were thick and heavy wooden doors. There was only a small window about a man's height with steel bars. Located at the end of the corridor was the torture chamber. Walking down the platform, one could see two men of average height, but extremely sturdy looking, rigidly tied to the wall with straps and iron chains. There were no wounds on their bodies. It seemed that they had not been tortured. Pleased, I nodded my head. If they carelessly and recklessly used torture, on the contrary, it would reduce the torture's effectiveness. It seemed that the Prince of Yong's household was extremely cautious. I looked at the torture instruments placed all around, seeing that they were all caked with blood, causing the torture chamber to reveal a sinister and dreadful atmosphere.

I looked at the two men. Contrary to what one might expect, I was skilled in torture. Originally, in order to deal with Liang Wan, I had consulted all the available works until I was finally able to make a suitable harvest. I discovered that the most important factor of torture was destroying a person's confidence. Thereafter, they will answer anything that is asked.

Looking at the dozen or so jailers and single secretary in the room, I smiled and said, pointing to one of the men, "Bring him over here." Two jailers stepped forward, and with practiced ease, untied him from the wall. Afterwards, they twisted the man's arms behind his back, binding them. Their technique was skilled, not permitting the man any chance of resisting. The man was dragged before me. One of the jailers grabbed the man's hair, forcing him to raise his head to allow me to clearly see his appearance. This man's appearance actually seemed upright. However, his expression

revealed grave and vicious tendencies.

Xiaoshunzi waved his hands, indicating that the jailers bring over a chair, allowing me to sit. I smiled and inquired, “So you are the traitors who dared to charge my carriage?”

A look flashed in the man’s eyes and he denied, “*Daren* , this commoner did not collide with your carriage. It was your guards who forcibly captured this lowly one.”

“That father and daughter pair were being chased by you, no?” I nonchalantly asked. “If it weren’t for you, how could someone have collided with the carriage? Speak, who are you people? Don’t even think about leaving this place if you are unwilling to speak the truth. If you obediently confess, I will only deliver you to the Imperial Capital Magistrate to be held accountable.”

The man’s expression changed. If he were really handed over to the Imperial Capital Magistrate, although he was guilty of murder, however, the gravest sentence handed down would be execution after the arrival of autumn.[1] During the intervening months, there was the chance of escape. In a mournful tone, the man answered, “This commoner was murdering for money.[2] Who could have thought that we would bump into *daren* ’s carriage?”

I did not indicate whether I believed him or not, removing a hairpin from my hair. This hairpin was a treasure that Chen Zhen and company had found in a secret chamber after eliminating the traitorous company on my orders. Although this was only a hairpin, it was manufactured from mysterious metal from a meteorite that fell from the heavens. It was incomparably sharp. Even the hardest diamond would be easily pierced through by it. However, the hairpin was too small. As such, it was useless to the average martial arts expert. Although Xiaoshunzi could easily use steel needles as weapons, his temperament was arrogant and proud. Aside from his two hands, he refused to use any other weapons. Ultimately, I kept the hairpin. One couldn’t say for sure when one might have a use for it. As a matter of fact, I could use this hairpin as an acupuncture needle, although it was a bit too crude. It was highly suitable for use as a torture instrument.

With a smile, I inquired, “You’re willing to confess?”

The man continuously nodded his head.

“Without using torture, I never believe anyone’s confession,” I stated callously. Finished speaking, I lightly stabbed the man several times with the hairpin.

The man’s complexion suddenly changed greatly. His face was at one moment, green; at the next, red. His body trembled violently. If there weren’t two jailers holding onto him tightly, he would have probably already collapsed to the floor. What was most frightening was that he did not even make a single sound. One could only see that his forehead was sweating like a pig.[3] The man raised his head, his eyes filled with mournful sincerity.

I continued to look at him leisurely and contentedly with the demeanor of a cultured and refined scholar, as if there wasn’t anyone or anything struggling painfully before me. When employing torture, the most important factor was to attack the mind. It seemed as if I had let him off so lightly, but in reality I had made a show of strength. Thus in a while, if he dared to randomly beat around the bush with his testimony, I need only say that he will suffer crueler and more violent torture, inevitably causing him great dread. Moreover, he would believe that I could accomplish this.

After a short period, I could see that the man’s consciousness was already gradually becoming hazy and unclear. With a soft wave of my hand, the hairpin once again stabbed into the man’s body. The man’s body gradually relaxed. From his mouth, a feeble moan was heard. However, this wasn’t his fault. After removing the pain, the body would relax to an extreme extent. The voice that had been forcibly suppressed a moment ago was finally released. I instructed the jailers to bring cold water and had it carefully poured down the man’s throat. His consciousness gradually returned. Seeing me, his eyes could not hide the dread within them.

I smiled and asked, “Alright, the words you say now should be somewhat trustworthy? May I ask of your name? Where are you from? Why were you chasing after that father and daughter pair?”

The man answered, “This lowly one is Qiu Xing and was originally from Shu. After the fall of Shu, a large part of Sichuan fell into the hands of Southern Chu. Marquis Lu Xin was brutal and tyrannical, and thus was forced into exile to Great Yong. Because I did not have any savings, I sought to murder for money. These are really words from the bottom of my heart. *Daren* , please believe them!”

I looked at Xiaoshunzi and offhandedly asked, “Is this man’s confession reliable?”

“I don’t think it’s reliable,” replied Xiaoshunzi unmoved.

I smiled and asked, “Why so? He seems to be quite honest and guileless. He shouldn’t want to be subjected to further cruel torture.”

Xiaoshunzi respectfully analyzed, “Young master, the clothes on this man’s body were all manufactured in Great Yong. It seems that he has already stayed in Great Yong for an extended period of time. On him was a banknote worth a thousand taels of silver. If he was content with his lot in life, the money he has is sufficient for him to pass the rest of his days free and unfettered. That father and daughter pair did not even have ten taels of silver on them. How can this be murdering for money? Moreover, they were so arrogant and unbridled as to dare to commit murder in broad daylight in Great Yong. If they didn’t have a patron, even if this servant dies, I do not believe it for a moment.”

I smiled warmly. With a satisfied look, I looked at the man and said, “Okay, I would have been bored if he had confessed honestly.”

Everyone, including the jailers, all looked at the elegant and refined looking youth. His gentle smile somehow made everyone feel chilly. Everyone believed that the scholar had always intended from the start to use torture, and had no intention of obtaining an oral confession.

Afterwards, the hairpin in my hand once again stabbed into Qiu Xing’s body. His body began to curl up and twitch. This time, the two jailers were unable to restrain him. After looking on for a while, I spoke, “Bring a cup of tea.” Hearing me speak, the man’s original expectations of being reprieved were dashed and a look of despair flashed across his face.

Xiaoshunzi glanced at him, the expression on his face seemingly somewhat sympathetic. Opening his mouth, he said, “The tribute tea newly delivered by His Imperial Highness takes quite some time to be steeped.” At this moment, the hopeful Qiu Xing immediately lost consciousness.

I once again stabbed Qiu Xing’s body. After Qiu Xing had been woken up by a bucketful of cold water, he gazed blankly at me. I indifferently stated, “It doesn’t matter. Bring over the tea set. Boil a pot of water right here to steep the tea. Before you’ve finished, I will test out several new acupuncture torture techniques.”

Qiu Xing could no longer endure, howling and wailing from the pain. He tried to throw himself at my chair, but was tightly restrained by the two jailers. In a loud voice, he begged, “*Daren* , spare my life! This lowly one is willing to confess. This lowly one is an assassin for the Embroidered Union. I beseech *daren* to spare my life! This lowly one is willing to confess to anything!”

I glanced at him indifferently and replied, dissatisfied, “You’re willing to confess to anything? How can you so lack a backbone?”

Tears and mucus flowing profusely, Qiu Xing begged, “*Daren* , spare my life! This lowly one is willing to confess. I beseech *daren* to stop torturing me.”

Bored to death, I shook my head and instructed, “Bring him to the side room and have him confess. If he even tries to conceal anything or to beat around the bush, bring him back here. Bring the other one over.”

Seeing my excited look, the other man, who had long been scared out of his wits, quickly shouted out sorrowfully, “This lowly one is Shang Wei and am willing to confess.”

I shook my head and remarked, “That won’t do. Wouldn’t it be too unfair if you aren’t tortured?”

At this moment, Xiaoshunzi’s voice traveled to my ear. “Young master, you’re overdoing it. You aren’t taking note of the expressions and emotions in the jailers’ eyes. They think that you’re a cruel and brutal evil spirit.”

I smiled lightly and spoke with a double meaning, “It doesn’t matter. While

we’re waiting for the confession, I can first test your fortitude. If you are willing to listen to instructions, at most, I will use fewer needles. How about this? In a moment, I will ask you again when his confession is produced. If you can find oversights or omissions in his confession, I will let you off. If you can’t find anything, I will have to torture you. For the moment, how about you try the side dishes first.” Finished speaking, I stabbed my hairpin into Shang Wei’s body.

After four hours had passed, I left the torture chamber satisfied, leaving behind the terrified and alarmed jailers, and two barely alive Embroidered Union assassins.

Footnotes :

In the northern parts of China, farmers only had one crop a year. As a result, they were frequently idle during the autumn and winter after the harvest. To serve as a deterrent, magistrates would often execute criminals after the harvest had been collected. This practice would spread throughout China during the Tang Dynasty.

谋财害命, moucaihaiming – idiom, lit. to plot and kill somebody for his property; to murder for money

汗如雨下, hanruyuxia – idiom, lit. sweating like rain; to perspire profusely, to sweat like a pig

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 5: A Nimble Chess Piece

Volume 2, Chapter 5: A Nimble Chess Piece

Holding the confession, I returned to the Phoenix Perch Pavilion, as I wished to see my adopted daughter, Roulan. Why was this? I always felt as if she was delivered to be my daughter by a manifestation of Piaoxiang's spirit in the underworld. When I hurriedly returned to the Phoenix Perch Pavilion, I caught sight of the Prince of Yong sitting there, teasing little Roulan.

I stepped forward and greeted the prince, apologizing, "Your Highness has waited long. This subject was busy interrogating and getting confessions. This subject did not know Your Imperial Highness was here."

Li Zhi smiled and replied, "I heard that Sir had adopted a daughter and especially came to take a look. How are things going?"

"Your Imperial Highness, this subject has discovered the forces of the Embroidered Union within Great Yong," I reported with a smile. "I have interrogated them clearly. Although a night has passed and there inevitably are some changes, we should still be able to easily to eliminate them in one stroke[1] if we desired."

Li Zhi seemed to hesitate as he looked at me. Aware of what he was thinking, I stated, "This subject understands Your Imperial Highness's intentions. The Embroidered Union is currently primarily wreaking havoc in Sichuan and Southern Chu. To them, Great Yong is a place used for recuperation and recovery. Therefore, Your Imperial Highness desires to temporarily allow the Embroidered Union to continue to exist."

Li Zhi smiled wryly and replied, "To be quite honest, Sir, this Prince has long known the existence of the Embroidered Union. I merely have chosen not to get involved. But for them to be so unbridled and to wreak such havoc, if this were to spread that Great Yong allowed them to exist, then I'm afraid that Great Yong would have lost popular sentiment in the Hanzhong

region and Sichuan."

I bowed and stated, "Your Imperial Highness be at ease. This subject already has a plan, allowing a portion of the Embroidered Union's strength to escape, but it requires the elimination of all of their strength in Chang'an. If this happens then it will be impossible to pull Great Yong in no matter how they try."

"This method is good, so that we can avoid them taking advantage of the chaos in Chang'an," responded the Prince of Yong. "When all is said and done, they are enemies of Great Yong. I have some intelligence reports. Combined with the confessions that you have acquired, it should be sufficient. This Prince will immediately issue the order to encircle and annihilate them."

"What meritorious service can Your Imperial Highness render by eliminating this small Embroidered Union?" I questioned, shaking my head. "If Your Imperial Highness is at ease, please allow this subject to plan. We can not only eliminate the Embroidered Union's strength in Chang'an, but also realize this subject's 'cutting out the heart' stratagem."

A look flashed in the Prince of Yong's eyes, as he replied, "As this Prince has already conferred total authority, then I invite Sir to preside over this matter. If you need anything from this Prince, speak."

I smiled and gave my thanks. At this moment, the Prince of Yong took a look at Roulan and spoke, "Sir is alone. Your daughter is young. It is inappropriate to care for her without a mother. During this period, the Princess has grieved over the heir's coming departure to Youzhou and will undoubtedly feel the absence of her child. If Sir doesn't object, how about allowing the Princess to take care of Roulan, so as to prevent Sir from worrying?"

Thinking it over, I stated, "If this happens, then it will be inconvenient for this subject to see my daughter."

The Prince of Yong smiled and recommended, "If Sir misses your daughter, just have Xiaoshunzi go to the Princess and bring her to you."

There were no qualms or issues with Xiaoshunzi coming and going from

within the inner residence. This was definitely a good idea. Thinking it through, I acknowledged, “If that is the case, then this subject thanks Your Imperial Highness. The Princess will certainly be able to raise my daughter into a wise and virtuous lady from a prestigious house. Would Your Imperial Highness please bow in thanks to the Princess for me?”

The Prince of Yong looked at me for a while before suggesting, “Sir is already twenty-six this year. Why have you chosen to follow a solitary path? [2] You should settle down and get married.”

The Prince of Yong’s words aroused the pain and suffering within my heart. I was silent for some time before answering, “This subject originally had a fiancée. However, she died before we could get married.”

“This Prince did not know this,” replied the Prince of Yong after freezing momentarily. “However, marrying and having children is the most important aspect of filial piety.[3] Sir cannot spend the rest of your life alone and in pain. This Prince will have the Princess help Sir find a virtuous woman. I wonder what Sir thinks?”

Feeling relieved, I smiled. “This subject’s temperament is carefree, acting according to my wishes, just short of cutting off all ties and becoming a recluse. I’m also unwilling to fail to live up to the expectations of a good woman. There is no need for Your Imperial Highness to trouble yourself over this.”

The Prince of Yong shook his head. Heaving a sigh, he spoke, “Let’s talk about this matter later. Sir, go do what you were doing. This Prince is convinced that Sir will provide me with a satisfactory outcome.”

I bowed and advised, “Your Imperial Highness, please be at ease. Within a few days, Your Imperial Highness will be able to place a reliable agent beside the Crown Prince.”

***

Xia Jinyi had never before been so frightened. He was by nature frivolous and was sometimes too impulsive. As a result, he had offended the elders of his sect and been driven out. He had hoped to advance himself within the Guanzhong Alliance and yet had offended Lady Sha. For lack of a better

option, he had begged for help from one of his senior apprentice brothers. This senior apprentice brother, while proper in temperament, had a decent relationship with him and was currently serving as the supervisor of the guards of the crown prince's household. Without any options, he could only ask his senior apprentice brother to recommend him, otherwise he did not have the ability to pass the imperial examination nor did he have any way of going to battle to fight. What could he rely upon to make something out of himself? Unfortunately, before he could even meet with his senior apprentice brother, he had been surrounded by the Guanzhong Alliance. Without a choice, he had use trickery to escape. Who could have imagined that the person he had framed was actually a major in the service of the Prince of Yong? This matter had originally left him extremely discouraged, but his senior apprentice brother informed him that he would be allowed to stay if the crown prince knew what had happened to harm the Prince of Yong's face. He was wild with joy and could not help himself, drinking a few cups too many.

When he returned to the inn, his extreme joy turned to sorrow. Someone attacked and overwhelmed him. He did not know their origins. He had been tightly bound, while his two hands were chained together using steel manacles and his mouth was covered, before he was stuffed into a chest. When he could no longer detect the shaking and bumping, no one had come to let him out. Being tied for so long, Xia Jinyi felt his limbs grow numb, as blood flow was restricted. The most painful part was that he could not straighten his body no matter how much he tried or wanted to. This left him in endless suffering. He would be willing to pay any price if he were allowed to straighten his body. In other words, his willpower had already disappeared.

Finally, he could hear the sound of footsteps. Someone opened the chest. In the man's hand was an oil lamp, the light falling on Xia Jinyi's face causing him to subconsciously close his eyes, preventing harm to his eyes accustomed to the darkness. After a moment, Xia Jinyi opened his eyes, looking at the delicate and handsome looking youth standing before him. The youth looked no more than fifteen or sixteen years of age and was looking curiously at Xia Jinyi. Xia Jinyi's eyes revealed a beseeching and

inquiring look.

The youth indifferently said, “This lowly one is Chiji and has been ordered to come to take care of young master Xia. If young master Xia cannot receive this lowly one’s approval, then you will be buried here. If fortunate enough to pass, you will be permitted to meet my master. Young master Xia, if you are to shout loudly, this lowly one can only immediately kill you. Therefore, young master should conduct yourself with dignity and be careful.”

Finished speaking, the youth placed the oil lamp on a nearby table before stepping forward and removing the rag in Xia Jinyi’s mouth. Xia Jinyi took a deep breath and begged, “This little brother, please let me out first. If I don’t stretch my body, I fear that I will become handicapped.”

Seeing the enemy, Xia Jinyi’s consciousness gradually returned to normal. He was already prepared to start a battle of wits with this enemy. Although he found it odd that his enemy was actually a youngster, however, Xia Jinyi was extremely clear that the most fearsome people in *jianghu* were monks, women, and children. As a result, he held no contempt or scorn.

The youth smiled slightly, lifting Xia Jinyi out of the chest and placing him on the ground. As such, even though Xia Jinyi was still tightly bound, he could stretch out and straighten his body. A comfortable groan issued from his mouth and his eyes closed, almost as if he wanted to have a good nap.

The youth smiled and gave Xia Jinyi a kick, speaking, “Old fellow, did you forget something? Your fate is still in my hands.”

Xia Jinyi opened his eyes and replied, comfort covering his entire face, “Little brother, I am no more than a wastrel in *jianghu* . If your honored personage had no use for this one, there would be no need to expend such effort to kidnap me here. I believe that little brother would likely be punished if you were to casually kill me.”

The youth suddenly sat down on the ground beside Xia Jinyi and stated, “You speak correctly. Unfortunately, my master’s temperament is arrogant and proud. If you are a good-for-nothing loser, then he will definitely not use you. Therefore, you have to convince me to bring you to meet him. If you cannot convince me, then it doesn’t matter even if I were to kill you. In any

case, you aren't the sole candidate."

Xia Jinyi shivered. The youth before him, although young, spoke as if he was extremely experienced. In addition, there wasn't a single emotion when he spoke of murder. Trying to feel out the situation, Xia Jinyi inquired, "Little brother seems young … have you killed many people?"

Chiji smiled and responded, "I dare not conceal this…. To protect myself at the time, this lowly one killed eight or nine people. Later, in my master's service, I've killed men, women, the old, and the young. The most pitiful was when we were forced to kill many innocents. Among them were several pregnant women. To tell the truth, I really did not want to kill them at the time, but who let them stay at a location they shouldn't have? On one occasion, this lowly one didn't kill anyone, but they were still all killed."

Although Chiji spoke ambiguously, there were no lies in his words. During the Secret Camp's training period, they frequently fought against one another. If someone suffered too many defeats, their memories would be wiped and they would be sent away. Later on, they said that these people had all already died. In the view of these operatives, losing the memory of the Secret Camp was worse than death. As for working for the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets, killing was difficult to avoid. Only with the incident involving Liang Wan did they not kill anyone. However, the only ones to escape alive were Princess Changle and the mind-wiped Liang Wan. One couldn't consider this as benevolent.

Xia Jinyi could hear that Chiji's voice was completely filled with sincerity and without a single shred of boasting. Xia Jinyi knew immediately that he had run into a cold-blooded and ruthless demon. Forcing a smile on his face, he replied, "So that is the case. Then I cannot compare with little brother. Although I have the moniker of a wastrel in *jianghu* , I haven't killed that many people. When all is said and done, my martial arts aren't that great and it is troublesome to kill someone. Under which conditions would little brother let me off?"

Thinking it over, Chiji answered, "This is difficult. Although I don't have any money, I do not lack for funds when I need to spend money. Although my martial arts isn't great, it is sufficient. As for high position and great

wealth, although everyone wants it, I am still young. It won't be too late even if I vie for it in ten years' time."

As he spoke, his tone gradually became cold. From his bosom, Chiji pulled out a small dagger and gestured towards Xia Jinyi's throat. With a smile, he continued, "All right, speak. Tell me what you can give me."

Xia Jinyi immediately uttered, "Don't be hasty, little brother. I have an idea … It seems like little brother is fifteen or sixteen years of age. The children of great families have already been married. I can tell that little brother's bearing is not ordinary. Even if you don't hail from a great family, you should still marry a pampered and virtuous lady from a great family. Otherwise, wouldn't it be burying yourself in darkness? I may not have any other abilities, but I am really good at wooing women. Moreover, no one knows more about the outstanding women than me. If little brother has such intentions, there is no harm in allowing me to advise you on how to take a beautiful wife. How about it?"

Chiji looked at Xia Jinyi for some time. He suddenly giggled. "Having seen you flee for your life while being chased all over by Lady Sha, who would have thought you had such abilities? Let me hear your ideas."

Xia Jinyi relaxed. He could tell that Chiji's killing intent had already dissipated. With a smile, he quipped, "Little brother, you shouldn't disparage me. When it comes to it, Lady Sha is not bad, but she cannot be taken as wife. I only stole her *dudou* [4] and she chased me everywhere intending to kill me."

Hearing this, Chiji's mouth fell open. Looking at Xia Jinyi, he stuttered, "You stole her … you stole her … that thing …"

Xia Jinyi smiled. "What's strange about this? I, your elder … no, this young master found her objectionable—a mere young lady stirring up all the young men in the Guanzhong Alliance into seeking her hand. I, your elder, am so dissolute and confident; that little girl enjoyed hearing me talk rubbish. But if you were to cross this line, her face would immediately become stern. Who cares that she is a disciple of the Fengyi Sect? Therefore, I, your elder, might as well employ bewildering incense to cause her to faint.

I personally went to her sleeping chambers and stole her *dudou* . Haha! Even if she wants to kill me, your elder, she dares not speak the reason. Little brother, I, your elder, remind you that the disciples of the Fengyi Sect cannot be married. Each and every one of them are usually irreproachable, entirely relying upon their beauty to seduce men. I don't believe it … without any hints from a girl, why would so many men tenaciously chase after you? They are all adept at loosening the reins to grasp them better.[5] I, your elder, have the ability pursue beautiful women, but cannot compare to their ability to tempt and seduce men. Most annoyingly, even if you were really successful, they would be obedient under ordinary circumstances, but if you do not follow their intentions, they would swiftly become hostile. Let me tell you, marrying an illiterate country bumpkin is superior to marrying a disciple of the Fengyi Sect."

Chiji stared blankly at the chatty Xia Jinyi and expressed, "Your story is so terrifying. Have you really experienced such matters?"

Xia Jinyi stared back blankly for a moment before his expression suddenly underwent huge changes. It was a long while before he spoke, "No I haven't, I haven't. I'm only a *jianghu* wastrel. Those disciples of the Fengyi Sect are either married into the families of ministers or into influential families in *wulin* . How could there be any involvement with me?"

Chiji looked at Xia Jinyi's awkward complexion and asked, "Do you not fear that I have any connections with the Fengyi Sect?"

Cold sweat dripped down Xia Jinyi's back. In a split second, he returned to normal. With a smile, he responded, "How could that be possible? Although the Fengyi Sect can order about some men, someone with little brother's elegant temperament should not be someone infatuated with beauty." In his head, he thought, *The Fengyi Sect couldn't have extended their hand to instigate such a half adult* .

Chiji smiled tranquilly and questioned, "Since you aren't fond of the Fengyi Sect, why are you seeking refuge with the Crown Prince? Who doesn't know that the Crown Prince is in the same boat as the Fengyi Sect and it is the Prince of Yong who isn't bound to the Fengyi Sect?

With a wry look, Xia Jinyi explained, “Little brother, as they say, wearing clothing and eating meals are the most important parts of life. You should know that I cannot till the fields and farm, and cannot go into battle. If I wished to serve as a bodyguard, no one would care for my temperament and appearance. If I were to become a thief or burglar, to speak the truth, my martial arts aren’t enough to deal with the constables of Great Yong. I’m afraid that I would become a parasite and sit in prison for several years. As for pledging allegiance to the Prince of Yong, I fear that I do not have such good fortune. The Prince of Yong wants people with ability. I fear that I won’t be able to muddle my way in. The Crown Prince is more relaxed and takes things much less seriously. In fact, I originally wished to pledge allegiance to the Prince of Qi, as I have heard that the Prince is fondest of places of joy and beauty. Who can say, I may be able to obtain the Prince’s appreciation and recognition. However, after I came to Chang’an, I heard that although the Prince of Qi liked to visit prostitutes, the warriors beside him had all experienced bloody battles. The kind of person that I am is not enough.”

Chiji thought it over and agreed, “What you say isn’t wrong. The people of *wulin* are fond of exquisite martial arts skills. You members of the Kongtong Sect attach great importance to strange and unusual martial arts. If you were to go into battle, I fear you would not even be capable of becoming a common general. Moreover, not everyone wishes to join the military. With your frivolous temperament, I fear that it wouldn’t take long before you are punished by military law.”

Xia Jinyi concurred, “That’s right! Although I don’t have any ability, I still understand myself quite well. If I am able to stay a few years in service to the Crown Prince, it should be superior to drifting about in *jianghu* .”

Chiji looked at him before he finally smiled gently and spoke, “Although there aren’t any benefits to letting you off, I really don’t want to kill you. All right, I believe you can be allowed to see my master. A word of warning: my master is usually benevolent and amiable. However, once he gets serious, you best hope that you die quickly.”

Xia Jinyi suddenly laughed, as he replied, “Much thanks to little brother for

the warning. I have always adapted to the circumstances."

At this moment, in another room, I couldn't help but laugh. Through the copper tubes, I could hear Xia Jinyi's words. My mood became happy. At this moment, Xiaoshunzi suddenly also laughed. I asked, "What is it? Do you also feel that he is really interesting?"

Restraining his laughter, Xiaoshunzi responded, "Young master, this servant is going to say something impudently…. He really resembles you. If it weren't for young master's brilliance, I feel that he actually resembles you."

I originally was somewhat annoyed, but when I carefully thought about it, I could not help but laugh. Thinking it over, it was true. I became even more interested in this Xia Jinyi. In addition, I was even more certain that my plan would be successful.

A short moment later, Xia Jinyi was escorted in by Chiji. Chiji had released Xia Jinyi from his fetters, allowing him to walk. However, he was intelligent enough to not dare to resist, otherwise it would have been unlikely for him to arrive in my presence. After nearly a day's worth of torment, Xia Jinyi's stomach was rumbling from hunger and his clothing were disheveled. His handsome appearance was covered with grime. With difficulty, he walked in. Chiji gently nudged him. Raising his head, Xia Jinyi caught sight of the black-clothed man sitting behind the desk and the handsome servant behind him. Afterwards, he obediently kneeled to the ground and announced in a low voice, "This commoner greets Your Excellency, the Major."

This was outside of my expectations and I looked at him. Although he had seen me once from a distance, that he was able to remember me left me pleasantly surprised. I smiled and spoke, "Young master Xia, you hail from the Kongtong Sect. From what I can see, you're not someone who would commit a major offense. Why were you expelled?"

Xia Jinyi raised his head and looked at me, straightforwardly answering, "*Daren* , I wonder how this lowly one can be of service? *Daren* can interrogate me if this lowly one is up to the task. If I cannot, this lowly one is

unwilling to casually to talk about my past events with anyone.”

I once again seriously looked at him and indifferently stated, “I require a chess piece. It is best if this chess piece has its own ideas and thoughts. In other words, I want a clever and nimble chess piece. You are very suitable.”

Revealing a splendid smiling expression, Xia Jinyi inquired, “Then I don’t need to die?”

I also smiled and responded, “If you are sufficiently intelligent, not only will you not die, after this matter is successful, I will give you a way out.”

The two of us looked at one another and smiled. At this moment, an indistinct voice floated into my ear. It was Xiaoshunzi speaking, “You two really resemble one another.”

I could not help but shoot a supercilious look at Xiaoshunzi. Although this method of secretly transmitting voices was very useful, it shouldn’t be always used to bully me!

Footnotes :

一网打尽, yiwangdajin – idiom, lit. to catch everything in one net; to eliminate in one stroke, to solve the problem with one fell swoop
孤家寡人, gujiaguaren – idiom, lit. one who is cut off from others; one who has chosen to follow a solitary path; used to refer to an unmarried person
In Chinese culture, for men to not be married and have no sons to continue on their family name was considered as the biggest failing of filial piety.
肚兜, dudou – is an undergarment that is a traditional Chinese form of the bodice
欲擒故纵, yuqinguzong – idiom, lit. in order to capture, one must let loose; to loosen the reins only to grasp them better

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 6: A Top Level Operative

Volume 2, Chapter 6: A Top Level Operative

I smiled and waved my hand, stating, “Chiji, provide a seat for young master Xia. You first withdraw and bring some tea and snacks. In all likelihood, young master Xia is already hungry.”

Chiji turned and left. Not long afterwards, he returned with a tray filled with tea and snacks before withdrawing. Xia Jinyi sat down and promptly began to devour the food.[1] A short while later, he gave a satisfied belch. Having eaten his fill, he almost seemed to collapse in the chair. Looking at me, he spoke, “*Daren* please command me.”

I casually inquired, “Do you know my identity?”

Xia Jinyi blushed and responded, “I already know that you are a major in the service of the Marshal of Heavenly Strategies. I have also heard your name from my senior apprentice brother. I have heard that you are Jiang Zhe, Jiang *daren* , the one who with one poem killed the King of Shu.”

I smiled and replied, “You forgot something else—I am from Southern Chu and was removed from my official position by the King. Today, I am dancing a different tune[2] and am in service to the Prince of Yong.”

Xia Jinyi grinned. “That doesn’t concern me. Though Southern Chu looks down on you, however I have heard that the Prince of Yong attaches great importance to talented individuals. There is nothing wrong with *daren* pledging allegiance to the Prince of Yong.”

I calmly remarked, “All right, I originally intended to question you about your past, but after thinking it over, there is no need to do so. However, in the future, if there are any mishaps because you didn’t reveal any unusual enemies or unusual experiences now, don’t blame me for being unable to help.”

After thinking it over, Xia Jinyi replied, “This commoner does not have any particular experiences that I need to report. However, with my

incompetence with both brush and sword, I do not know what I can do for *daren* .

I indifferently stated, “It’s very simple; you will pledge your allegiance to the Crown Prince. However, I want you to become the Crown Prince’s confidante.”

Xia Jinyi was stunned as he questioned, “*Daren* , I am a nobody, so how can I get close to the Crown Prince?”

I did not say anything. Picking up a piece of paper filled with densely packed words, I handed it to Xia Jinyi. After seeing the words on the paper, Xia Jinyi’s expression became unreadable, as he asked, “*Daren* , it’s this simple?”

I smiled and explained, “That’s right, I don’t want you to find out any secrets, and I don’t need you to be in communication with us. I only want you to follow my plan to acquire the Crown Prince’s favor. To speak the truth, with your temperament, although you can’t become a capable subordinate, you are more than capable of becoming a doted upon subject. I have already prepared all the conditions for you to become favored by the Crown Prince. After that, everything will depend on your ability to handle exigencies. You only need to adhere to one principle: to allow the Crown Prince to indulge himself. When the right opportunity presents itself, speak a few words to sow discord. However, remember that these matters can only involve the Prince of Qi. Outside of him, you must completely listen to the Crown Prince. You must do whatever wrongdoings that he wants you to commit. Even if you hear any giant secrets, even if they were planning to immediately harm the life of the Prince of Yong, you cannot pay any attention. Understand that today is the only time that we will ever meet. After today, even if we were to ever meet again, I shall never say anything that happened tonight.”

Although Xia Jinyi did not understand the meaning behind my words, he still nodded his head and stated, “I understand. *Daren* wants me to attain the favor of the Crown Prince. For everything else I will make my own decisions. I only need to try and please the Crown Prince, accompanying the Crown Prince to eat, drink, and play.”

I nodded my head and replied, “That’s correct. You can tell your senior apprentice brother about the intelligence reports on the Embroidered Union. At the very least, through this matter, you can enter the Crown Prince’s household, which allows you to acquire the Crown Prince’s favor. Everything thereafter will rely upon your own cleverness. I will give you three medicinal prescriptions. These prescriptions, all of differing dosages, are excellent aphrodisiacs and will cause the Crown Prince happiness. Present them to the Crown Prince in order. Remember to say that you personally improved the medicine. Since you have used bewildering incense before, then you should also be aware of the usage of aphrodisiacs. The Crown Prince does not dare allow the imperial doctors to prescribe such prescriptions. As a result, you should be able to acquire the Crown Prince’s favor without any problems.”

Xia Jinyi blushed and revealed, “Not hiding anything from *daren* , although this lowly one has not committed such sins as rape, I am familiar with the usage of bewildering incense. I can also understand the prescriptions provided by *daren* . They are definitely excellent medicines, increasing sexual delight without harming one’s body. As long as it is not overused, these medicines are extremely good drugs.”

“Fine. If that is the case then I am more at ease,” I replied with a smile before I inquired, “Do you have any more questions? After today, there won’t be any more opportunities to ask.”

Xia Jinyi hesitated for a moment before he asked, “*Daren* , are you sure that I will not betray you?”

I smiled casually and quipped, “Betray me? With what can you betray me? I’ve given you intelligence to make a meritorious contribution. I gave you prescriptions to win the favor of the Crown Prince. I am not asking you for anything. As for keeping the Crown Prince company as he plays around, if the Crown Prince were virtuous, you would not have any place to use your talents. Even if the Crown Prince learns that I am having you sow discord between him and the Prince of Qi, does the Crown Prince actually fully trust the Prince of Qi? Therefore, if you are smart enough, you will follow my instructions. You will not only win the Crown Prince’s favor, you will also

not meet with a fatal disaster. Otherwise, Xiaoshunzi …"

From his bosom, Xiaoshunzi pulled out a tael of silver. With practiced ease, he ground the tael into flecks with his hand. Xia Jinyi swallowed hard, turning to look at me.

I continued, "However, I cannot fully trust you. How about this: write a written pledge, stating that you are a spy sent from the Prince of Yong. You will leave it here with me. If you don't keep the secret, I will allow the Crown Prince to see this written pledge. When the time comes, not only will the Prince of Yong wish to kill you, the Crown Prince won't let you off. As for this attendant of mine, he can easily kill you. You can only forget what happened tonight. Bringing my present and prescriptions with you, you can easily please the Crown Prince, acquiring the glory and riches that you so desire. But do not forget that if you do not have the ability to acquire the Crown Prince's favor in two months, then I'm sorry, before I make a substitution, I must first have you slaughtered."

Xia Jinyi kneeled to the ground and declared, "This lowly one will definitely not forsake *daren* 's trust. *Daren* be at ease, this lowly one is only pleasing His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, and will not have any guilt."

I smiled and said, "Good, write the written pledge now. I'm waiting to see your good performance. Remember, after everything is done, you will be implicated. However, be at ease. I will arrange an escape route for you."

Xia Jinyi lowered his head and replied, "This lowly one understands." Finished speaking, he stepped to the desk and wrote the written pledge. He knew that if he didn't leave this written pledge behind, he would immediately be killed.

"Come," I called out after he finished writing. When Chiji entered the room, I indifferently ordered, "You will first return to the inn to rest. Didn't you make an appointment at the Jiangnan Spring restaurant tomorrow with your senior apprentice brother? During the meal, you need only say that you found traces of the Embroidered Union, remnants of the Kingdom of Shu. Afterwards, the Prince of Yong's guards will upon my orders come arrest you and deliver you to the Guanzhong Alliance. However, I believe

that your senior apprentice brother will save you."

Xia Jinyi's heart jumped. Without any alternatives, he could only say, "Young master's preparations are so comprehensive. This lowly one will definitely not make any mistakes."

I waved my hands before I spoke, "All right, you must return in the way you can. I will not see you off."

Xia Jinyi immediately became stupid, opening his mouth, as if he wished to say something. But after thinking it over, he dejectedly[3] followed Chiji out.

After Xia Jinyi departed, Xiaoshunzi indifferently asked, "Young master, should I put away the written pledge?"

I smiled slightly as I ignited the written pledge using the flame of the lamp. When Xiaoshunzi looked at me with bafflement, I nonchalantly stated, "What use is this written pledge? Even if it was given to the Crown Prince, doesn't it make real the Prince of Yong's crimes? If Xia Jinyi is intelligent, he will not betray us. If he is really that stupid, we will not suffer any losses. However, I believe that he will not betray us."

Looking at the lamp light, I smiled again. With this kind of convenient arrangement, if Xia Jinyi were to betray us, then he would truly be the stupidest idiot in the world.

Xia Jinyi once again had his acupuncture points sealed and placed into the chest. In the wee hours of the morning, he was returned to his room in the inn. On the road, Xia Jinyi repeatedly thought over what he should do. He was not someone to scrupulously abide by honor. However, after thinking it over, the other party only gave him the opportunity and the method to gain the crown prince's favor. His own reputation was poor, his martial arts mediocre. By missing this opportunity, it was very likely that he would be unable to acquire the high position and wealth that he had dreamed of day and night.[4] Even if he were to reveal everything, what would happen? At present, no one did not know that the Prince of Yong's star was bright. He was only a nobody…. How was he capable of shaking the Prince of Yong's position? Recalling Chiji's methods—that such a lowly attendant was so fierce and ruthless—then his master's methods could only be imagined. The

best path before him was to listen to their words and acquire the crown prince's favor within two months.

Returning to his own bed, after his sealed acupuncture points were released, Xia Jinyi sat up. He slowly calculated how to proceed until noon had arrived, before walking out of the inn and once again arriving at the Jiangnan Spring. The waiters saw that although there weren't any changes in his complexion, his eyes were extremely odd. Who let him offend the Guanzhong Alliance yesterday and now have lunch with someone from the crown prince's household.

Entering the elegantly decorated reception pavilion, Xia Jinyi quickly caught sight of several brocade-clad men seated together and chatting happily. He stepped forward, bowing deeply towards the square-faced, middle-aged man seated at the chief seat and spoke, "Eldest apprentice brother, I, your little brother, have arrived late. Would eldest apprentice brother please forgive me?"

The middle-aged man was named Zhang Jinxiong. He was thirty-seven. His appearance was extremely upright and proper. His clothes from head to toe although gorgeous, were quite ordinary. His sleeves were extremely wide. He was a twenty-seventh generation disciple of the Kongtong Sect and had learned outstanding martial arts. There were already faint rumblings that he was already the top candidate to be the next generation's sect master. Originally, he was completely focused on diligently training his martial arts and did not listen to the slightest distracting thoughts. Outside of following his sect's orders to handle matters, he rarely left the sect. However, two years ago, an envoy from the Fengyi Sect had personally come to the Kongtong Sect. After talking through the night, Zhang Jinxiong was dispatched to Chang'an to become a fourth-rated blade-carrying imperial bodyguard. Zhang Jinxiong had an upright temperament and would never agree to exceeding propriety. Therefore, he quickly gained the crown prince's confidence and became the supervisor of the crown prince's household's imperial bodyguards. Under normal circumstances, he never paid any attention to political maneuvering and outside of his responsibilities defending the crown prince's household, he would diligently

train. He would occasionally go out and drink a few cups with some friendly imperial bodyguards. Although his temperament was strict and severe, his generosity and magnanimity, and his just and fair behavior, let him receive the complete respect of his subordinates. To speak strictly, he was not the confidante of the crown prince, as a lot of the matters that the crown prince did not wish to make public were handled by others. These matters were handled by Vice Supervisor Xing Song.

When he caught sight of Xia Jinyi, Zhang Jinxiong's face revealed a smile. He gently said, "You've come, come sit. These are all my subordinates. Once you've entered into the Crown Prince's service, you should invite them to look after you."

Xia Jinyi stepped forward and bowed, as he said, "Older brothers, this little brother is skilled with neither brush nor sword. Fortunately, I am somewhat clever. If you older brothers do not despise me, if there are any errands that needed to be run, hand them over to this little brother."

A slim middle-aged man smiled and replied, "We have long heard Supervisor Zhang mention that you little joker are proficient in dining, wining, whoring, and gambling.[5] However, you aren't diligent when training. If it weren't for your loyalty to your friends, and knowing when to advance and when to retreat, Supervisor Zhang would not even allow you to call him senior apprentice brother."

Without blushing and without his heart palpitating, Xia Jinyi replied, "It is only natural that senior apprentice brother cares about me. At that time, I did not follow good examples and was expelled from my sect. If it weren't for senior apprentice brother pleading for leniency, my martial arts would have been crippled long ago. Come, allow little brother to salute senior apprentice brother. In the future, would senior apprentice brother and all the elder brothers please take care of me? This little brother will absolutely not stir up any trouble."

Everyone laughed as they drank a cup of wine. Zhang Jinxiong was naturally pleased with his junior apprentice brother's words and actions, while the several imperial bodyguards did not mind this youth who could not threaten their positions. Following, the well-trained servants delivered

exquisite dishes. One of the imperial bodyguards picked up his chopsticks. With a smile, he said, “Southern Chu’s specialties as expected have unique flavor. However, the names are too strange. Look at this dish … although it is extremely delicious, it is actually called ‘beauty’s liver.’”

Xia Jinyi smiled and replied, “This dish is made from duck pancreas. That is stir-fried duck gizzard and chicken breast and winter bamboo shoots, using duck oil and a high flame. The name has historical antecedents. Reportedly, at the time, a famous scholar of Southern Chu was hosting a banquet at a local famous restaurant called ‘Autumn Rivers Pavilion.’ Unknowingly, the restaurant’s chef accidentally left out one course. If this were allowed to happen, then the restaurant’s reputation would have suffered. After looking high and low, that chef caught sight of the pink and tender color of the duck pancreas floating in the water. He combined it with chicken breast and stir-fried it using high heat and duck oil. The outcome received the guests’ approbation. When asked the dish’s name, the waiter who had delivered the dish saw the milky white color and the glossy fresh tenderness, and speaking without thinking called it the beauty’s liver. As a result, the dish became known by this name. In fact, Southern Chu has another dish called ‘Xi Shi’s tongue.’”

The gathered imperial bodyguards all repeated the name in amazement, “Xi Shi’s tongue.”

Xia Jinyi smiled and continued, “In reality, it’s only the tongue of a mussel. Reportedly, the flesh is fat, white, and tender, and is a delicacy of this world. However, it is only available on the coast.”

One of the imperial bodyguards smiled and said, “As expected, Brother Xia is quite knowledgeable. If there’s the opportunity, we should definitely try this Xi Shi’s tongue.”

After Xia Jinyi’s mind turned, he spoke, “In reality, this little brother loves the delicacies of Sichuan. I have heard that Chang’an has several restaurants that specialize in Sichuan cuisine. The Red Cloud Pavilion and the Xi Shi Pavilion all make pretty good Sichuan cuisine.”

One of the imperial bodyguards sneered, “Brother Xia has said that he has

already become familiar with Chang'an. This time, however, you have exposed yourself. I am a local, how can I not know the restaurants of Chang'an? The Red Cloud Pavilion is indeed a Sichuan restaurant. Their Taibai duck is one of the best in the world. However, the Xi Shi Pavilion is one of the most famous brothels. I understand clearly that the pavilion's beauties are seductive beyond belief. In addition, there are many women from Southern Chu. Reportedly, they were all trafficked here from Southern Chu. Although the food and drink aren't bad, they have no distinguishing characteristics. I have heard that the owner is one hundred percent from Great Yong. How can it have outstanding Sichuan cuisine?"

Xia Jinyi deliberately looked amazed as he commented, "Oh? You don't know? Little brother has roamed the world. I know the owner of the Xi Shi Pavilion. He is He Tieshan from the Qingcheng Sect. Although his swordsmanship is pretty good…. Hehe … Eldest apprentice brother, you know that little brother later became a disciple of a Taoist priest from the Heavenly Capital Temple. As a result, little brother frequently sell medicinal pills and what not. It was coincidental, but I got to know Old He. That was about five or six years ago. Purportedly, he was a Supervisor of some Shu prince. Surprisingly, he is now a big businessman. However, to speak the truth, although we people of the *jianghu* must find ways to make money, there aren't many people like him who would force honest women into prostitution."

Everyone's expression, including Zhang Jinxiong's, all changed. In a heavy voice, Zhang Jinxiong asked, "You didn't recognize the wrong person, right?"

Xia Jinyi smiled and replied, "How is that possible? Senior apprentice brother knows my abilities. When little brother first arrived in Chang'an, I took shelter with the Guanzhong Alliance. Once when I went out to take a walk, I ran into Boss He in front of the Xi Shi Pavilion. It was only because that place was too expensive and little brother was embarrassingly short of money that I didn't go in."

Seeing Zhang Jinxiong's ashen complexion, Xia Jinyi found the situation extremely laughable. His words were only seventy percent truthful. The remaining thirty percent were made up. He had met this Boss He and he had

traveled to Sichuan before. Even him selling medicine was true. However, Boss He had never bought medicine from him. He also did not know that this Boss He was an expert from the Qingcheng Sect or a supervisor in the household of a Shu prince. This information had all been provided by Jiang *daren* of the Prince of Yong's household.

Seeing that the room's atmosphere was amiss, Xia Jinyi did not wait for his senior apprentice brother to interrogate him, gesturing that the dishes immediately be served. Just as a jar of fine wine was being delivered and Zhang Jinxiong was about to interrogate Xia Jinyi, a cold and solemn voice could be heard from outside, "Xia Jinyi, quickly come out and be bound. This one will exempt you from death."

Xia Jinyi revealed an expression of panic, looking at Zhang Jinxiong. Zhang Jinxiong glanced at him before speaking in a raised voice, "Who is it that is making a racket out there? This one is a fourth-rated blade-carrying imperial bodyguard, the Supervisor of the Crown Prince's imperial bodyguards, Zhang Jinxiong."

From outside, a shout of surprise could be heard. Subsequently, a man could be heard bellowing in a loud voice, "This one is the fourth-rated blade-carrying imperial bodyguard, the Vice Supervisor of the Prince of Yong's imperial bodyguards, Hu Wei. Zhang *daren* , this official is acting under orders to arrest the criminal who disturbed Major Jiang of the Marshal of Heavenly Strategies' household, the Dissolute Wastrel, Xia Jinyi. For what reason is Zhang *daren* here?"

Zhang Jinxiong ferociously glared at Xia Jinyi. Xia Jinyi paled, repeatedly bowing with hands in front. Zhang Jinxiong joylessly replied, "Hu *daren* , please come in to speak."

The door opened and a formidable, austere, and severe looking large man entered. He wore the brocade dress of a court official. Not even bothering to look at Xia Jinyi, he stepped forward and saluted Zhang Jinxiong, speaking, "Zhang *daren* , this official is acting under orders to arrest a criminal. Would *daren* please facilitate matters?"

Zhang Jinxiong's expression was tranquil as he inquired, "Although this

junior apprentice brother of mine acts willfully and causes trouble, how did he trouble Hu *daren* to come here?"

Hu Wei responded, "Zhang *daren* is unaware but this official is currently tasked with guarding the Marshal household's major, Jiang Zhe, Jiang *daren* . Yesterday, Jiang *daren* was here drinking wine. Coincidentally, a clash occurred between Xia Jinyi and the Guanzhong Alliance. Your junior apprentice brother unexpectedly tried to frame and shift the blame, almost causing conflict between Jiang *daren* and the Guanzhong Alliance. *Daren* gave the order demanding that your junior apprentice brother be captured and delivered to the Guanzhong Alliance. Therefore, would Zhang *daren* please facilitate matters."

Zhang Jinxiong's heart grew heavy. He naturally knew that the major of the household of the Marshal of Heavenly Strategies was one of the highest ranking and most important subordinates of the Prince of Yong. He was only a lowly supervisor of the imperial bodyguards; there was no way that he could stop this from happening. However, looking at his junior apprentice brother's pale complexion, he coldly stated, "Since junior apprentice brother Xia has not violated the law and you are not from the Imperial Capital Magistrate, you do not have the qualifications to arrest him. Besides, if this official were to allow you to take him in my presence, this official would no longer have the face to remain by the Crown Prince's side."

Hu Wei's brows were tight and stern. His Imperial Highness had instructed him to absolutely comply with the commands of the major. If he were to violate such instructions, it was likely that he would be punished. However, Zhang Jinxiong also spoke reasonably. The household of the Prince of Yong and the household of the crown prince were like oil and water. Everyone understood this. If Zhang Jinxiong allowed him to take this Xia Jinyi away, then he would have severely harmed the crown prince's face. If this were to happen, the Prince of Yong would likely be unhappy with his behavior. After thinking it over and unable to find a way, he glanced at Zhang Jinxiong. Although Zhang Jinxiong's temperament was upright and proper, he was not a fool. He could also see Hu Wei's difficulties. After thinking it over, Zhang Jinxiong spoke, "Fine, how about this … Allow me to

bring this junior apprentice brother of mine back. I will absolutely not allow him to leave Chang'an. After a few days, I will personally go to the Guanzhong Alliance to resolve this matter and also apologize to Jiang *daren* . However, today, I absolutely cannot allow you to take him away."

Thinking it through, Hu Wei understood that this was the only way to resolve this problem and thus said, "Since Zhang *daren* is serving as the guarantor, this official will allow him to go free while I go back and report to the major and make new plans."

Finished speaking, he saluted and bade his farewell. Zhang Jinxiong personally escorted him off. After all was said and done, the Prince of Yong and the crown prince had not yet fully fallen out. It was best that full consideration be given to each side's face. In addition, Zhang Jinxiong himself was not someone lacking in manners.

After seeing off Hu Wei, Zhang Jinxiong glowered at Xia Jinyi and said, "This is good … Last time you spoke vaguely … So you actually severely offended the Prince of Yong's household. How can this matter be resolved?"

Note :

In China, there are multiple ways of saluting. In *jianghu* and common usage, a typical salute involves making a fist with the right hand, while either using the left hand to wrap around the right fist or the right fist is held against the open left palm . Females switch this around. It's also switched around to denote the start of an argument or fight. In polite society, salutes were made holding the two palms forward together, the fingers overlapping somewhat .

Footnotes :

狼吞虎咽, langtunhuyan – idiom, lit. to wolf down one's food; to devour ravenously; to gorge oneself
改弦易辙, gaixianyizhe – idiom, lit. change of string, move out rut; dramatic change of direction, to dance to a different tune
垂头丧**气**, chuitousangqi – idiom, lit. hanging one's head dispiritedly; dejectedly, crestfallen
梦寐以求, mengmeiyiqiu – idiom, lit. to yearn for something even in one's

dreams; to long for something day and night

吃喝嫖赌, chihepiaodu – idiom, lit. to go dining, wining, whoring, and gambling; to lead a life of dissipation

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 7: Bright Future Prospects

Volume 2, Chapter 7: Bright Future Prospects

Xia Jinyi repeatedly begged bitterly, clearly explaining the entire situation to his senior apprentice brother. After Zhang Jinxiong had calmed down, he said, “Fine…. It seems that we need to first settle the Guanzhong Alliance. However, although I am the Supervisor of the Crown Prince’s imperial bodyguards, I am unable to mollify the Guanzhong Alliance. Only if the Crown Prince personally steps in ... However, how can we have the Crown Prince be involved in this small matter?”

Xia Jinyi watched his senior apprentice brother anxiously. Zhang Jinxiong glared at him, pissed off and angry. Finally, he sighed and said, “You were originally talented. Even if you couldn’t surpass others, you would not be inferior to them. For a single woman, you would abandon yourself to despair …”

Xia Jinyi’s complexion became increasingly pale, no longer making any sound as he sat in a corner of the room, his expression stupefied.

At this moment, one of the imperial bodyguards suddenly said, “Supervisor, you shouldn’t be too worried. We should carefully investigate the matters that Brother Xia just brought up a moment ago. If there really are problems, we should report to the Crown Prince. If Brother Xia is able to perform great service, Supervisor can ask the crown prince to help. This matter is very easy to resolve. The problem related to the household of the Prince of Yong isn’t major. As long as Brother Xia’s dispute with the Guanzhong Alliance is resolved, it isn’t likely that they will continue to stick their nose in other people’s business. When the time comes, Brother Xia need only beg forgiveness.”

Zhang Jinxiong’s expression flickered as he spoke, “I almost forgot. Fine. Jinyi, let’s see if you are lucky enough.”

Xia Jinyi stared back blankly and asked, “What’s happened? Eldest

apprentice brother, what meritorious service can this little brother perform?"

Zhang Jinxiong smiled and responded, "Let's go. It's too long a story to tell.[1] When the moment comes, you will understand."

The control that His Imperial Highness, the crown prince, exerted over Chang'an and his surroundings was quite vigorous. Over a period of a single night, Li An received a detailed report. Looking at his confidant and think tank, Junior Mentor Lu Jingzhong, Li An asked, "Lu *daren* , how do you think we should handle this situation?"

Lu Jingzhong twirled his beard and leisurely expounded, "Your Imperial Highness, the situation is clear. The Embroidered Union are the remnants of the Kingdom of Shu. Their former area of operation was in Shu and Southern Chu. Therefore, our Great Yong turned a blind eye to their activities. Now that the state of affairs in Southern Chu is in complete disorder, they seized the opportunity to increase their operations in Great Yong. In this subordinate's view, they will not really be able to do anything. They only know how to plot and assassinate, coercing the poor, in addition to trafficking human beings. Originally, there was no need for Your Imperial Highness to be anxious about dealing with them. We may even have a use for them. After all, it was the Prince of Yong who destroyed the Kingdom of Shu.

"However, since they aren't satisfied with acting in Southern Chu, then they will eventually cause difficulties in Great Yong. In this subject's view, it will soon be the New Year sacrifices. Isn't Your Imperial Highness striving to substitute for the Emperor during those sacrifices at the Imperial Ancestral Shrine? The Emperor has yet to make his decision. It would be better for Your Imperial Highness to make preparations and eliminate them in one stroke. Afterwards, petition the Emperor to request recognition. Then have Noble Consort Ji say a few words into the Emperor's ears. If that were to happen, then Your Imperial Highness's desires will definitely be realized."

Li An celebrated when he heard Lu Jingzhong's words and lauded, "Junior Mentor, as expected, is my think tank. This matter must be handled nimbly, preventing the Prince of Yong from learning of it and taking advantage. If we

can substitute for the Emperor to sacrifice at the Imperial Ancestral Shrine, when that happens, who will dare suggest that our position as heir apparent isn't stable?"

Lu Jingzhong smiled and stated, "If that's the case, this subject preemptively congratulates Your Imperial Highness."

Li An laughed and replied, "Oh, Li Zhi, Li Zhi … Who cares if you pacified Southern Chu and were promoted to the Marshal of Heavenly Strategies? As long as Our position as the heir apparent is stable, after all is said and done, you will only be a subject." Towards the end, Li An was fuming with rage between gritted teeth.

Lu Jingzhong gazed at the crown prince who had lost self-control, contempt flashing in his eyes.

Under Lu Jingzhong's meticulous arrangements, the Embroidered Union's Chang'an branch was swept clean three days later. All of its members were captured in one fell swoop. Some lower level officials were implicated. This was a successful encirclement and annihilation. After interrogation, it was learned that in the short term, the Embroidered Union was focused on gaining benefits from the chaos in Southern Chu to restore the Kingdom of Shu, and had no plans targeting Great Yong. However, under the heavy torture to extort a confession ordered by Lu Jingzhong, they quickly were able to attain the confession that the Embroidered Union was planning on assassinating the children of the Great Yong imperial household and important civil and military officials during the New Year. It was natural that after having attained his goal, Lu Jingzhong meticulously forged a detailed plan of assassination for the Embroidered Union. For a period of time, news of the elimination of the Embroidered Union and the thwarting of the Shu remnants' conspiracy left the capital abuzz, adding some lustrous color right before the grand occasion of the New Year.

Setting aside first the reactions of all the various factions, I seized the opportunity to have Han Wuji offer shelter to the former acquaintance who had threatened him and dispatch an envoy from the main branch of the Embroidered Union. To the best of my knowledge, this envoy was a trusted confidant of the Head of the Embroidered Union, Huo Jicheng. Through him,

I could establish a relationship with the Embroidered Union. From the information that I had collected, Huo Jicheng was the son of an important Shu minister. His natural disposition was cold-hearted and callous. He was abundantly resourceful. However, his temperament was somewhat arrogant, petty and narrow-minded. He lacked the talent for military tactics and strategies. Otherwise, the Embroidered Union would not have flourished in Great Yong, while experiencing only difficulties in Southern Chu. Originally, I had no intention of involving myself with matters relating to the Embroidered Union. However, Roulan was already my daughter. I really did not want her to one day risk her life and take vengeance. It was better for me to take care of matters.

Receiving the crown prince's petition, Li Yuan was extremely happy. Although he had persisted in naming his eldest son as the heir apparent, Li An's mediocrity had left him somewhat dissatisfied. This time, Li An had acted swiftly and unwaveringly, eliminating this malignant tumor. Li Yuan put down the petition and said to Prime Minister Wei Guan, "Beloved subject Wei, it seems that the Crown Prince is capable. It is merely that he previously had no opportunity to manifest it."

Wei Guan bowed and responded, "Your Imperial Majesty speaks true."

Li Yuan smiled and replied, "Beloved subject, there have been many ministers who have petitioned that the Crown Prince be allowed to follow us to perform sacrifices at the Imperial Ancestral Shrine together. What do you think?"

Wei Guan properly analyzed, "The Crown Prince has already been anointed as the heir apparent for several years and has received the Mandate of Heaven. For the sake of the empire, he should be allowed to sacrifice to the heavens and the earth with the Son of Heaven. This subject also thinks that it should be so. With the Prince of Yong was enfeoffed as the Marshal of Heavenly Strategies, the grace granted him already reached the extremes. Your Imperial Majesty should steady the Crown Prince's position, preventing future turmoil."

Li Yuan nodded his head and replied, "Your suggestion is quite appropriate. How about this? This time, have the Crown Prince substitute

for us and go to the Imperial Ancestral Shrine to offer sacrifices. Then allow him to accept the customary deference of all of officialdom in the Hall of Magnificent Culture.[2] Prepare an edict for us."

When the Prince of Yong learned of this edict, his face was as heavy as lead. Without consulting with anyone, he walked towards the Cold Courtyard on the west side of his manor. Jiang Zhe disliked the Perched Phoenix Courtyard as being too luxurious. After taking a look through the entire outer residence, he selected the most remote courtyard. After putting everything in order, he moved in. Nearing the courtyard, Li Zhi could see the imperial bodyguards hidden in concealed positions. Satisfied, he nodded his head. He had intentionally ordered that the defenses here be reinforced. Walking through the entrance of the courtyard, Li Zhi could see that the courtyard—originally filled with weeds and a jumbled mess of vegetation—had already been quite elegantly tidied up. He nodded his head in satisfaction. This courtyard was originally a guest courtyard. However, because its position was remote, no one paid much attention to this courtyard aside from the two or three servants and maids and the guards patrolling at night. As a result, the courtyard gradually became neglected.

At some point, Jiang Zhe had a stroll throughout the outer residence. When he saw this courtyard, Supervisor Chang was initially extremely ashamed, intending to heavily criticize those servants attending to this courtyard, but was tactfully persuaded otherwise by Jiang Zhe. Jiang Zhe was fond of this courtyard's tranquility and decided to move in. His temperament was calm and harmonious. As long as there weren't too many people walking about, he would be content. Li Zhi was very attentive, specially asking Supervisor Chang to learn Jiang Zhe's preferences from Li Shun, so as to allow Jiang Zhe to reside here comfortably. Therefore, although Li Zhi was anxious, when he saw these elegant surroundings and the well-trained servants, he smiled slightly.

Entering the building where Jiang Zhe spent his everyday life, Li Zhi caught sight of Jiang Zhe presently sitting before a chessboard considering a scenario. Jiang Zhe had a leisurely temperament. This quite spacious room was laid out with a living room at the front and sleeping quarters in the

back. In between was a folding screen that served as a partition. One could barely discern an elegant and pure bed and curtains. The small front living room wasn't too big, but it was fully furnished, including a chess platform, a zither platform, a couch, bookshelves, and a desk. It was extremely cozy and stylish, evoking a dense scholarly taste.

Seeing Li Zhi enter, my opponent, Xiaoshunzi, stood and bowed in greeting. I was still racking my brains thinking about my next move. Alas, I was the one who taught him how to play *weiqi* , but now when I played him, I would lose more than I won. At this moment, I heard Xiaoshunzi announce, "Young master, His Imperial Highness has come."

I raised my head and saw Li Zhi's countenance filled with worry. Surprised, I inquired, "Your Imperial Highness, what has happened?"

Li Zhi sat opposite me and in a pained voice responded, "Imperial Father has issued a decree. This year, the Crown Prince will substitute for the Emperor and offer sacrifices at the Imperial Ancestral Shrine. If this happens, the Crown Prince's position as heir will be stabilized. Sir, tell me what should this Prince do about this? Alas … Sir, the Crown Prince eradicated the Embroidered Union's strength in Chang'an. It would have been great if we had been able to take action sooner."

I smiled and replied, "Has Your Imperial Highness forgotten? Our original plan was to lay low. Now that the Crown Prince's position as heir has been stabilized, this will allow him to become pleased with himself, whetting his desire. Since this has happened, isn't this for the best? Your Imperial Highness need not worry. After the New Year, Shi Yu will be dispatched to escort the heir to Youzhou. This way, the Emperor and everyone else will all be under the impression that Your Imperial Highness is preparing an escape route. In this way, the Crown Prince will feel free to coerce Your Imperial Highness, while the Emperor will consider Your Imperial Highness's meritorious service and begin to protect Your Imperial Highness. If this happens then Your Imperial Highness will be safe and secure. As a result, the Crown Prince's patience and fortitude will decrease so much so that resentment and loathing will be generated towards the Emperor."

Li Zhi was an intelligent person. He immediately understood and said, "So

these were already within Sir's grasp. This Prince actually was excessively anxious. Sir, has the person you mentioned already been appropriately arranged?"

I softly reminded, "Your Imperial Highness please remember, we have never arranged any one. Your Imperial Highness is a vassal, while the Crown Prince is a liege. How can a vassal arrange to plant someone beside the Crown Prince?"

Li Zhi knowingly smiled and asked, "Sir, in the New Year, Imperial Father will certainly host a banquet with all of officialdom. Sir is already a major in the household of the Marshal of Heavenly Strategies, a fourth-rated official. You have the rank to be granted an audience with the Emperor. In addition, Imperial Father has mentioned meeting you. I wonder what Sir thinks."

I was originally disinterested. However, I wanted to take the opportunity to meet the crown prince and all the officials. As far as I was concerned, this was extremely useful. As such, I nodded my head and replied, "This subject also wishes to meet the outstanding talents of the court."

Within a secret chamber in the manor inside the city were two middle-aged men with gloomy complexions. One was seated, while the other was lying down. The looks on their faces were filled with anxiety and melancholy. The seated middle-aged man looked at the dim light of the oil lamp. Suddenly, he spoke, "Boss Gong, is that friend of yours trustworthy?"

The middle-aged man lying down smiled and replied, "Leader Liu, you can be at ease. The one surnamed Han was formerly a secret operative within the army. He was an assassin who treated human life as grass.[3] Although I am unaware of how he got rich, you can see that he has not disclosed our presence. Without this secret chamber, we would have entered Great Yong's dungeons long ago."

The seated middle-aged man heaved a sigh and said, "Be that as it may … look at our current situation. We are in a precarious state, while he is a rich person. I cannot be at ease with his enthusiasm."

Just as Boss Gong was about to retort, the door to the secret chamber opened. A clear and bright voice could be heard to say, "Commander Liu,

your suspicions are really not small. I am now rich. If it weren't from consideration that we are subjects of the Kingdom of Shu, who would bother to worry about your business? You must know that if my master knew of this, then even if I wouldn't die, I would still lose a layer of skin."

"It was a slip of little brother's tongue. I apologize," said Commander Liu as he promptly rose to his feet before he asked, "I wonder which person is Brother Han's superior?"

Han Wuji smiled and stated, "This isn't a secret. I am currently the Chief Manager of the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets. Our pavilion master does not have any pleasures aside from gold, silver, and other valuables. Therefore, regardless of location, regardless of who, as long as there is money to be made, there will be other influences."

Commander Liu's eyes lit up as he replied, "So it is the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets. Who doesn't know that the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets is a latent power in Southern Chu? Of Southern Chu's major merchants, out of ten, three or four are members of the Heavenly Secrets Trade Association. Surprisingly, Brother Han has such a respectable position in the pavilion. Quite admirable."

Han Wuji indifferently stated, "There's nothing to it. To tell you the truth, the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets is difficult to fully comprehend. Although I am the Chief Manager, in reality I am only someone who appears personally to handle affairs. The real power and authority aren't in my hands. Aside from matters relating to money, little brother can make few decisions. In fact, little brother is of mind to do business with your noble union."

Commander Liu's expression jumped as he asked, "Brother Han please speak. So long as it is of benefit to our Embroidered Union, once little brother goes back, I will facilitate it at all costs."

Han Wuji's expression became somewhat furtive, as he considered. "Your noble union wishes to rebel. It probably urgently requires weapons and provisions. If little brother can help, what do you say?"

Commander Liu was greatly surprised as he exclaimed, "What? Can you really help? If so, our union head will certainly give his profound thanks. In

the future, if we are successful, there will be benefits for brother Han."

Han Wuji smiled and replied, "You must know of the strength that our Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets has in Southern Chu. Recently, those Southern Chu ministers have already determined that the third prince, Zhao Long, will become King. At the beginning of next year, he will ascend to the throne. At present, Southern Chu has a thousand things it needs to do.[4] The Yong army wreaked havoc for almost half a year and also plundered Jianye. To speak something unpleasant to hear, the Southern Chu treasury has been emptied, while they have also lost much military equipment and supplies. They are incapable of replenishing these losses. However, Southern Chu is a land of milk and honey[5] after all. This year's foodstuff production is still fairly good. At present, Southern Chu is short of money. Great Yong prevailed and acquired plentiful spoils of war. However, Great Yong has suffered a drought and is short of food supplies. If you are courageous enough and make the right connections, you could steal and resell Great Yong's military equipment and horses to Southern Chu, exchanging them for foodstuffs and cotton, and bring them back to Great Yong. Not only can we satisfy your own needs, you can also make a killing."

Commander Liu's frowned and stated, "I fear that this won't be that easy. At present, we just suffered losses in Great Yong. I'm afraid that we don't have the ability."

Han Wuji smiled understandingly. "Who doesn't know that the Crown Prince's actions are directed for the Prince of Yong? This business deal will result in tenfold to twentyfold profits. You only need to dispatch someone to the Crown Prince, saying that they are willing to pledge allegiance to the Crown Prince, begging him to let you off. As long as the Crown Prince doesn't pursue the matter, no one will continue to pay attention to you. At present, the Ministry of Revenue is in the hands of the Crown Prince. You can say that Great Yong's military logistics are controlled by the Crown Prince. So long as the Crown Prince approves, this business will be extremely easy. After a few days have passed, after the Crown Prince has tampered with the Ministry of Revenue, wouldn't these missing items be made up for? When the time comes, over a million shiningly white taels of

silver will enter the Crown Prince's pocket. Why would he be dissatisfied?"

Still frowning, Commander Liu replied, "Great Yong is already his. Would he really attach such importance to this amount of money?"

Han Wuji sneered, "Who doesn't know that right now, the Crown Prince is being watched above by the Emperor and is eyed covetously below by the Prince of Yong? You shouldn't consider his identity as respectable. I'm afraid that his enjoyment and pleasure cannot even match us merchants. Moreover, don't tell me that he doesn't want to raise and maintain some fearless soldiers and advisers. He has many places where he needs to spend money. To tell the truth, we have plenty of methods in Southern Chu. However, in Great Yong, we will have to rely upon you. Don't conceal anything from me … this time, although some ministers were implicated, the Crown Prince was not vicious. Your real patron is unscathed."[6]

"You wait. I will go back and discuss this with the union head. Although my position is not high, the union head trusts me," said Commander Liu, firmly nodding his head before asking, "However, how will I find you?"

"I will provide you with a way to contact me," answered Han Wuji. "My master only wishes to get rich and doesn't care about any affairs of state. As long as you do not harm our interests, everything can be easily dealt with regardless of whether you're plotting rebellion or restoring the kingdom."

Commander Liu said, "Brother Han be at ease. We are not foolish. Who doesn't love gold, silver, and other valuables? What's more, once this method is connected, it will be of great benefit to us."

The two exchanged glances and laughed, the sound repressed and furtive.

Within the Cold Courtyard of the residence of the Prince of Yong, I was lying down on the soft couch, looking at the scroll in my hand. Because I felt the manor's classified study was too restrictive, I lately only spent half a day there. Afterwards, I would plan and strategize within the Cold Courtyard. Watching me think, Xiaoshunzi suddenly asked, "Young master, is it okay to let the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets get involved?"

Hearing his questioning, I casually replied, "There was no other way. In the future, this matter will most assuredly have problems arise. If someone

from the Prince of Yong's household were to take part, not only would it not be able to fool the Crown Prince's spies, it would also invite disaster. Do you think that the Prince of Yong would allow military equipment to be stolen and sold off?"

Worried, Xiaoshunzi asked, "The Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets will get in touch with Southern Chu merchants, while the Embroidered Union will contact Great Yong's Crown Prince, and afterwards smuggle foodstuffs and military equipment. After this, the pavilion will likely be unable to appear. Moreover, young master's relationship with the pavilion will not be able to be concealed from the Prince of Yong. Would the young master's cousin be implicated?"

I smiled lightly and said, "What are you afraid of? Nominally, the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets will sell off all of the shares that it owns before mishap occurs. I have already had them set it all up, separately dividing the shares to be received by the members of the Secret Camp. Before our contract expires, the profits will continue to be mine. When the contract expires, these properties will be theirs. In this way, I can fulfill the promises that I had made at the time. In any case, the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets was originally only a tool to make money. After this, all of my properties, minus the part distributed to the disciples of the Secret Camp, will be in the millions. At that point, the pavilion will not have a further reason to exist."

"It is young master that is brilliant," said Xiaoshunzi with a smile before stating his worries, "But it is unlikely to be able to conceal the smuggling foodstuffs and military equipment from the Prince of Yong."

I indifferently replied, "When the Prince of Yong discovers this, I will have him endure silently. Without this leverage, how will we be able to depose the Crown Prince?"

Sitting up, I pushed open the window, looking out at the pitch-black sky. I coldly stated, "The strategies that I, Jiang Zhe, employ rely upon the sinister nature of the human heart. If the Crown Prince did not have any selfish motives and was wholeheartedly serving the state, then this stratagem of mine would not work. Xiaoshunzi, you must remember: once a person has been blanketed, it's not that they can't be splashed by the water, but rather

that their intentions are impure. If the Crown Prince is really worthy and virtuous, possessing the bearing of a sovereign, then my plan would be virtually useless. If he were to consequently lose the throne, it is not because I had been vicious, but rather that he did not have the good fortune and magnanimity to become the Son of Heaven.”

Footnotes :

说**来**话长, shuolaihuachang – idiom, lit. start explaining and it’s a long story; complicated and not easy to express succinctly
文华**殿**, wenhua dian – the Hall of Magnificent Culture
杀**人如麻**, sharenruma – idiom, lit. to kill people like scything flax; human life as grass
百废**待**兴, baifeidaixing – idiom, lit. many things waiting to be done; a thousand things to do
鱼**米之**乡, yumizhixiang – idiom, lit. land of fish and rice; fig. fertile region, land of milk and honey
安然无恙, anranwuyang – idiom, lit. safe and sound; to come out unscathed

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 8: The Magnificent Feast at the Start of Spring

Volume 2, Chapter 8: The Magnificent Feast at the Start of Spring

In the twenty-fourth year of Great Yong's Wuwei era, the eleventh year of the sixty-year cycle, the Emperor promulgated an edict, commanding Crown Prince Li An to offer sacrifice on behalf of the emperor at the Imperial Ancestral Shrine, receivinig the customary deference from all of officialdom at the Hall of Magnificent Culture. The Prince of Yong was frightened and in the second month of the same year, he petitioned the Emperor, requesting that he proceed to his fief in Youzhou. The Emperor did not permit it, commanding that the heir act on his behalf. Afterwards, the Prince of Yong reported that he was ill, requesting that he be excused from attending court. The Emperor permitted it….—*Yong Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Emperor Taizong*

In the first year of Tongtai,[1] the eleventh year of the sixty-year cycle, Lu Xin, the Marquis Who Suppresses Distant Lands, led all of officialdom in supporting the third prince, Zhao Long, as King. The regnal era was changed to Tongtai. The distant King Yang was honored as the retired emperor. Consort Shang was honored as the queen mother and ruled in place of the emperor.[2] The affairs of state were entrusted to Marquis Lu. After the new King ascended the throne, he issued a decree enfeoffing Lu Xin as the Duke Who Suppresses Distant Lands and dispatched an envoy to Great Yong, paying tribute and declaring vassalage.—*Southern Chu Dynastic Records* , *Biography of King Min of Chu* [3]

Amidst the songs of praise and scenes of prosperity,[4] New Year's Day arrived at last. This day was truly bustling. First was a full court assembly where all of officialdom came to bow and pay their deference to Yong Emperor Li Yuan at the Hall of the Supreme Ultimate.[5] Then the ministers traveled to the Hall of Magnificent Culture in the Eastern Palace[6] to bow and pay their deference to the crown prince. Although the crown prince had his own residence in the Imperial City, he had never been able to move into and

reside in the symbol of the authority of the heir apparent, the Eastern Palace. Eventually this year, due to various reasons, Li An was finally permitted to formally enter and become the master of the Eastern Palace, ultimately ensuring the stability of his position as the heir apparent. When the Prince of Yong, at the head of all the ministers, arrived at the Eastern Palace to pay their deference to the crown prince, when they performed the great ceremony of kneeling twice and kowtowing six times, Li An had become the heir apparent in the eyes of the people of the world in both name and reality. Upon seeing the Prince of Yong, towards whom he had always felt inferior, debasing himself before him, an overflowing joy filled Li An.

Afterwards, Li An substituted for the emperor in the major ceremony of offering sacrifices at the Imperial Ancestral Shrine. At this moment, Li An had become completely intoxicated by the joy of being the center of world, acknowledging their allegiance.

In comparison, the Prince of Yong, Li Zhi had an expression that was inevitably somewhat aloof and detached With the status between a sovereign and his ministers already fixed, one couldn't blame him for feeling this way. No one could think that at this moment, Li Zhi could only exclaim in admiration at Jiang Zhe's stratagem. He could tell that Li An was already smug and conceited. The crown prince's joy at completely overwhelming the Prince of Yong caused the crown prince to practically make several mistakes. In that case, as long as the plan was appropriate, he could consign the crown prince to eternal damnation without any hope of reprieve. It was easy to talk about making concessions for future gains. However, for someone to be capable of planning such a daring strategy, he must surely be someone with outstanding courage. Up until now, Li Zhi did not know what Jiang Zhe was planning, so much so that he couldn't understand Jiang Zhe's intentions. He only felt that Jiang Zhe's plan appeared to be an interlocking and interrelated net. And Li An was the butterfly that was slowly fluttering into the net.

After the sacrifices at the Imperial Ancestral Shrine were completed, Li Yuan issued a decree and arranged a banquet at the Honeydew Hall,[7]

inviting all of the officials. I accompanied the Prince of Yong to the banquet. While I took a seat towards the side with Shi Yu, the Prince of Yong naturally was occupied with drinking toasts with the other ministers. In a low voice, he introduced all of the important personages of the court.

In a low voice, Shi Yu spoke, “In the first seat amongst the civil officials is the Prime Minister and Director of the Imperial Secretariat,[8] Wei Guan. He is the chief assistant to the Emperor. During the period when both the Emperor and the Prince of Yong were away campaigning, the court was nominally supervised by the Crown Prince. However, in reality, the affairs of state were all managed by that person alone. His personal character is one that is deep and profound, and full of schemes. He has completed grasped the meaning of how to serve a ruler. As a result, he has been at the center of government for many years, his glory and favor never weakening. However, as his age has risen these last few years and the disorder in the court stemming from the struggle to become the heir apparent, as a result, he has put his own safety above all else, very rarely expressing his opinions. However, from what we know, he is leaning towards the Crown Prince, because he has worked alongside the Crown Prince for years. But, this person will not really involve himself in the dispute. If one day we are successful, he will not have any objections. His Imperial Highness is of mind that it is sufficient to steady him. However, we cannot use him to help.

“Below him, the official in the fifth seat is Palace Attendant[9] Zheng Xia. This man is loyal and honest, and dares to admonish the Emperor. That year when the Prince of Qing attempted to assassinate Noble Consort Ji, many petitioned the Emperor to have the Prince of Qing executed, arguing that he was guilty of unfilial conduct by attempting to assassinate his mother. This man, in everyone’s presence, directly criticized them, stating that although His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qing, attempting to assassinate the noble consort was inappropriate, however, he was attempting to avenge his birth mother. Regardless of whether this enmity should be avenged, there was no reason to have the Prince of Yong punished. Even if he was guilty, he was not guilty of unfilial conduct, as Noble Consort Ji wasn’t his first mother.[10] As the Emperor had regrets toward the Prince of Qing, he sent away the Prince of Qing to his fief. I’m afraid that this man will likely oppose

us. However, His Imperial Highness has stated that if we are able to use righteousness to persuade him, then this person is a seldom-seen important minister."

I looked at Wei Guan. His appearance was average, graying at both temples. What was rare was his naturally poised bearing. He truly had the presence to command all of officialdom. As for Zheng Xia, he had a square face and large ears. His eyes were like the distant stars. Although he was only thirty-something years old, his each and every movement was filled with a faint awe-inspiring grandeur. Just there two were enough to completely overpower all of Southern Chu's officials. Great Yong becoming the hegemon of the Central Plains was thus inevitable and expected.

Shi Yu continued, "The person beside the Crown Prince is the Junior Mentor of the Crown Prince, Lu Jingzhong. Although this man has an average appearance, he is extremely proficient at essays and the legal system. As a result, he was appointed as the junior mentor. However, although this man's appearance seems to be honest and considerate, his mind is actually treacherous and devious. He is the most important adviser under the Crown Prince. We have suffered many losses because of him."

I looked towards Lu Jingzhong. At present, he was my biggest enemy. Looking, I could see that his appearance was indeed ordinary. However, his skin color was somewhat excessively pale. His pair of eyes were half open and half closed, seemingly as if he had not slept enough. As I was sizing him up, Lu Jingzhong seemed to have sensed something and his eyes opened wide. They were filled with cold electricity as he looked towards me. I hurriedly lowered my head and felt the cold and severe gaze sweep past me.

Shi Yu actually smiled back at him. Seeing that it was Shi Yu, Lu Jingzhong seemed to be at ease. From a distance, he raised his cup and toasted. Shi Yu smiled slightly and also raised his cup. The two drank the contents of their cups in one gulp.

Only after Lu Jingzhong's gaze moved away did I speak softly, "That man is indeed not ordinary. Much thanks to Brother Shi for helping me out of trouble."

“He and I are old opponents. As such, he won’t take note of you,” replied Shi Yu lightly. “Look, that person toasting the Emperor is the Duke of Wei, Cheng Shu. The man once saved the Emperor’s life. Although his military ability is fairly ordinary, he is a lucky general. If he wins, the victory is decisive. If he loses, he is somehow able to withdraw with his entire army. In addition, he cares little about wealth and emphasizes justice and righteousness, and loves to make friends. The individual most respected by Great Yong’s proud soldiers and heroic generals is perhaps the Prince of Yong. However, the most intimate individual is Cheng Shu. If he wishes to do something, he does not require official approval documentation from the Ministry of War, just needing a simple letter. No one would dare to not acknowledge it. He actually deeply regards His Imperial Highness and has previously defended His Imperial Highness on numerous occasions. Although he does not acknowledge the Crown Prince, the Crown Prince can’t do anything about him due to his popularity and the favor and trust of the Emperor. This man is also completely loyal to the Emperor. It will be unlikely to have him help His Imperial Highness. However, if His Imperial Highness ascends to the throne, he will certainly look favorably upon it.”

I looked at that person’s languid and indolent bearing. Although his bearing was somewhat coarse, his body language presented approachability and warmth. Although he had already reached the age of fifty, his hair and beard were still jet-black and there wasn’t a hint of exhaustion in his eyes. Seeing him toast, Li Yuan smiled and raised his cup, the relationship between a sovereign and his subject joyous and harmonious. Sure enough, he was an unusual man.

“At present, our Great Yong military is divided into four factions,” added Shi Yu. “The four hundred fifty thousand troops under the command of His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, is the strongest force. Many of the current, famed generals in the army all serve under His Imperial Highness. Now, for the most part, they are stationed in strategic positions outside of the capital. Therefore, you haven’t met them.

“Apart from this, the Prince of Qi has a force of two hundred thousand troops and the Prince of Qing has one hundred thousand troops. Although

these troops aren't as good as the Prince of Yong's, they are still elite.

"The remaining large faction is the Qin-Cheng clique. Qin Yi, the General Who Pacifies Distant Lands, and Cheng Shu, the Duke of Wei, jointly control one hundred fifty thousand imperial guardsmen and two hundred thousand border troops. In other words, they are the generals most trusted by the Emperor, and are used by the Emperor as a protective talisman to suppress and inhibit all of the princes.

"Currently, of the three princes, the Prince of Qing has no power to contest for the position of heir apparent, while the Prince of Qi and His Imperial Highness are incompatible like oil and water. With Qin and Cheng commanding an army of three hundred fifty thousand, the emperor's position is as steady as Mount Tai."

I looked at the head of the military officials, Qin Yi. His appearance was cultured and handsome, his hair and beard the color of ash. He almost seemed like a cultured scholar. However, upon seeing his hale and hearty vigor, as well as his ability to talk cheerfully and wittily, one could tell that he was an awe-inspiring aged tiger. No wonder he was the general that the emperor relied most heavily upon.

"Suiyun, look over there," said Shi Yu at this time. "Although that person is not famous, you will do well to remember him. He is Attendant Gentleman of the Imperial Secretariat Qin Wuqi. Usually, this man only loyally carries out his duties. However, he has stayed in the Imperial Secretariat for nine years. Of the Emperor's edicts, sixty to seventy percent are composed by him. Moreover, you must remember that the Prince of Qi's wife, Qin Zheng, is his eldest daughter."

I trembled. Looking towards this refined scholar, I lightly asked, "Could it be that this man is related to the Fengyi Sect?"

Shi Yu smiled and responded, "Suiyun is indeed astute. Reportedly, this man received great kindness from the Fengyi Sect Master in his youth. Therefore, he has always been grateful and sought to repay the kindness."

I memorized this man's appearance. Afterwards, I lightly said, "Since I've seen all the people that I needed to see, it's been a worthwhile trip. Brother

Shi, in a moment, when the banquet ends, I will depart first. Tomorrow and the day after, I intend to rest well. What about you?"

"I'm afraid that you won't be able to rest," confessed Shi Yu with a surreptitious expression. "Beginning from the second day of the New Year, there will be good fun."

I stared at him somewhat blankly. He smiled and explained, "This year, the Emperor's spirits good. For after the lunch banquet, he had issued a decree of holding a military skills competition outside the Vermillion Bird Gate. Each and every Great Yong official at or above the fourth rank, or the children of aristocratic families, as long as they are youths under the age of thirty, are permitted to register and participate in the competition. For the one who prevails, the Emperor intends to bestow hefty rewards. I've heard that the competition is divided into three parts—horse racing, archery, and fighting. If you are able to come first in one of the contests, you may be able to bring honor to your ancestors. With this kind of grand occasion, how can you not take a look?"

"So it's that kind of good occasion," I replied with a laugh. "I should definitely go take a look. Unfortunately, I am not adept at horse archery or other martial skills. It is impossible for me to take part in the competition."

"The news of this matter has been spread long ago. It seems like you pay no attention to outside matters," said Shi Yu, also laughing. "This time, all the ministers in the court, high and low, and the common people of Chang'an have begun betting. The list of those who have registered is already known to the entire world. General Cheng, the Duke of Wei, is personally overseeing the betting. That old person is extremely fair. Of course, several of the large casinos in Chang'an have also all opened betting."

I smiled wryly and responded, "Although I can make a bet, I am not proficient at either horse archery or martial skills. Moreover, I am also unfamiliar with the competitors."

"What are you afraid of, me?" asked Shi Yu with a grin, as he continued, "If we consider the ones who best understand these competitors, if the Prince of Yong considers himself second, then there is no one who would dare

consider themselves first. We will ensure that you don't suffer a loss. This time, there are three individuals who are popular candidates. One is the fourth son of Prime Minister Wei, Wei Ying. At present, he holds the position of Gentleman of the Ministry of Personnel. Reportedly, this year, he may be promoted to the position of Attendant Gentleman of the Ministry of Personnel. Although he is a civil official, he is also an expert horseman. Prime Minister Wei has a blood-sweating horse from Ferghana[11] in his possession. Therefore, he is the likeliest candidate to win the horseracing contest.

"Another is the second son of the Grand General Who Pacifies Distant Lands, Qin Qing. He is Great Yong's General of Tiger's Might and carried on his family's horse archery skills. Amongst Great Yong's young high-ranking officers, he is the most outstanding.

"Last is the son of Chief Minister of the Ministry of Rites Xiahou Lan, Xiahou Yuanfeng. The man is considered to be the most handsome man in Chang'an, and is comparable to Pan An and Song Yu.[12] His martial arts are very powerful. At present, he is a second-rank imperial bodyguard and is the Vice Supervisor of the Palace Guard, and is the imperial bodyguard most favored by the emperor. Reportedly, this man's martial arts are profound and mysterious, and he is the most powerful expert amongst the young imperial bodyguards in the palace guards. However, it is unclear who his master is."

I lightly remarked, "As expected, Great Yong has many outstanding talents."

Seeing that I was somewhat displeased, Shi Yu could not make heads or tails of it and stopped talking. After thinking it over, he realized that I must have recalled the indolence of the civil officials and the frivolity of the military officials of Southern Chu. But he also knew that he could not point this out and could only change the topic. He began to introduce some of the other officials to me.

As we were whispering privately, a low voice admonishing us could be heard from the side. I raised my head and looked over, seeing the Prince of Qi walking over with a young official. Shi Yu and I hurriedly rose to our feet.

Walking before us, Li Xian inquired, “All the officials are feasting. Right now, they’re mutually exchanging toasts. Why are the two of you having a private conversation?”

“Your Imperial Highness, Major Jiang has only just recently arrived in Great Yong,” explained Shi Yu calmly. “He is unfamiliar with the matters of the court. Therefore, this subject was making some simple introductions. In addition, our ranks are lowly and inferior. How do we dare be impudent? Wei *daren* , this person is Jiang Zhe, Jiang Suiyun, the new major in the service of the household of the Marshal of Heavenly Strategies … Suiyun, this is Wei Ying, Wei *daren* . He was the *zhuangyuan* of the Great Yong’s imperial examinations in the twenty-first year of Wuwei, the eighth-year of the sixty-cycle. At present, he is the Gentleman of the Ministry of Personnel.”

I slowly bowed and paid my respects. I could see that Wei Ying was about twenty-five or twenty-six years of age, of similar age to me. This man’s looks were delicate and pretty, his countenance elegant and leisurely. Within his mannerisms, a refined bearing could be detected. Although he was the child of a wealthy and exalted family, and was a young nobleman, there was not a single trace of arrogance or haughtiness, causing people to have a favorable impression when meeting him for the first time.

Wei Ying had originally heard from the Prince of Qi that Jiang Zhe, Jiang Suiyun, had already pledged allegiance to Great Yong, and was presently also in the Honeydew Hall. Therefore, he was curious and asked the Prince of Qi to introduce him. When he had passed the imperial examinations as the *zhuangyuan* three years ago, he was naturally wild with joy. But he had frequently heard people say that if one considered literary ability, the best were those people from Jiangnan. And amongst these, the best was the *zhuangyuan* of the sixteenth year of Southern Chu’s Xiande era, the seventeenth year of Great Yong’s Wuwei era, the *zhuangyuan* of the fourth-year of the sixty-year cycle, Jiang Zhe. This man’s literary ability was outstanding and was at the absolute apex of Southern Chu. His poem, *Recollections Under the Moon* , was famous throughout the world. A single song, *Dance of the Cavalry* , was sufficient to force the King of Shu to commit suicide. He had long been considered as the most gifted scholar of Southern

Chu. It was only that he had fallen ill and was confined to bed after the invasion of Sichuan that his poems and essays gradually became rare. Wei Ying had once copied down all of the poems and essays that he was able to collect. Often he would read them with admiration. Today, seeing Jiang Zhe, Wei Ying realized abruptly that this man's reputation was fully justified and well deserved. Although this man, only a year or two older than him, was somewhat skinny and his appearance wasn't as elegant, but from his calm and composed manner, his gentle and yet indifferent temperament, caused Wei Ying to feel appreciation.

Wei Ying stepped forward and bowed in greeting. He said, "I have long heard that Brother Jiang's talent is peerless in the present age. Meeting you today, this is indeed the case. Underclassman, Wei Ying, greets Sir."

I was slightly touched. Surprisingly, this son of the prime minister was as modest and humble as his appearance. I returned his courtesy and replied, "I am only someone negligently living out the rest of my days, I dare not accept Wei *daren* 's courtesy. Since *daren* is Great Yong's *zhuangyuan* , your scholarship is naturally not ordinary. If there is the opportunity, I would like to ask *daren* for guidance."

Wei Ying happily returned, "Wei Ying cannot thank Brother Jiang enough if you are willing to bestow your beneficial teachings. If there is leisure time in the future, Wei Ying will personally come to pay a visit."

As we mutually exchanged modest words, Li Xian became impatient. He originally believed that scholars tended to disparage one another, thinking that Wei Ying had come over with the intention of mocking Jiang Zhe. To his surprise, the two actually acted so familiar with one another. This wasn't good. His mind was keen and he immediately ordered, "Qin Qing, come over here for a moment!"

A young general answered and walked over. I carefully looked over. This young general's appearance somewhat resembled Qin Yi. The only differences were that he had wider shoulders and longer legs, his stature larger. He did not share his father's demeanor of a scholarly general. He seemed to be quite familiar with the Prince of Qi, as he smiled and asked, "Your Imperial Highness, for what reason have you sought me out?"

The Prince of Qi pointed at me and said, “This person is the one who hounded the King of Shu to death, Jiang Zhe, Jiang Suiyun. Didn’t you say you wished to meet him?”

Qin Qing glanced at me, a trace of ridicule flashing across his eyes. Suddenly, he spoke in a loud voice, “In the past, Jiang *daren* ’s song, *Dance of the Cavalry* , forced the King of Shu to commit suicide. You probably didn’t think that today you yourself would bend your knee and surrender, right?”

His voice was loud and clear, causing the entire Honeydew Hall to fall silent. Everyone concentrated on us.

Shi Yu and Wei Ying’s complexions both changed. However, under the gaze of thousands of staring eyes, they had no way to speak up to help me. My expression remained unchanged, completely calm. In a clear voice, I replied, “The King of Shu had lost and mourned his state. It is only natural that he died alongside it. Although Jiang Zhe composed a song to send him off, it required that the King of Shu have a sense of shame. Only then did this become a tale that captured the imagination. The King of Southern Chu is His Imperial Majesty’s beloved son-in-law. Their amicable relationship is as close as that of father and son. I have never heard of a father punishing his son with suicide. Moreover, as a subject, I repeatedly submitted loyal and sincere advice, and instead suffered dismissal from office. In addition, since antiquity till now, the only one who killed himself for the sake of his sovereign and his state is Qu Yuan.[13] However, the King of Southern Chu is currently still alive. If the King were to perish and if Jiang Zhe were to die for him, then it is likely that my name would go down in the annals of history, but my King would be considered as inept and incompetent as King Huai of Chu.[14] As a result, my King being disgraced and humiliated to raise this subject’s prestige is not something that I would do. Moreover, if my King were to be King Huai of Chu, then wouldn’t it mean that the general considers His Imperial Majesty to be King Hui of Qin?[15] The Qin Dynasty fell after only two generations.[16] I wonder how many generations the general wishes for Great Yong to be passed on?”

Hearing my words, Qin Qing’s complexion become ashen, while Wei Ying’s admiration was clearly expressed on his face. Shi Yu lowered his head,

snickering. Li Xian's eyes were filled with jealousy and envy. While we were motionless, there was someone clapping his hands in applause.

When we all turned to look, they saw that it was Li Yuan who was clapping his hands in applause. Immediately, everyone was at ease. At this moment, the Prince of Yong was by the emperor's side. With a laugh, he stated, "Qin Qing, you've got the worst of it. Imperial Father, this is Southern Chu's most gifted scholar, Jiang Zhe. Jiang Zhe, why aren't you paying your respects to His Imperial Majesty?"

I calmly stepped forward and paid the proper respects, neither servile nor overbearing. Li Yuan smiled and said, "Good, We have long heard of your talented name. We are extremely pleased that you were able to renounce the dark and seek the light. I have heard the Prince of Yong say that your health is poor, constantly confined to bed. Were it not for this, we would want you to serve as a secretary in the Imperial Secretariat, helping us draft decrees."

I lightly stated, "From youth, this subject's constitution has been extremely frail and weak. Formerly, during my service in the army, this subject contracted an illness. Although this subject has recovered, the root cause still remains. His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, considers this subject's debility and keeps me by his side to look after me. This is His Imperial Highness's benevolence, and is also this subject's great honor."

Li Yuan became even happier, as he declared, "Good, this is also a tale that captures the imagination. You should not be discouraged by General Qin's words. Carefully and properly perform your duties. My Great Yong will not unfairly treat virtuous talents from throughout the world in the least."

I once again bowed in thanks. Li Yuan waved his hand, gesturing for me to withdraw. The Prince of Yong also took the opportunity to follow me and bid his goodbyes. Pulling me along, the Prince of Yong walked to Qin Qing's side. He spoke, "General Qin, Major Jiang, both of you are young elites. You must not hold any mutual animosity. Allow this Prince to take responsibility and have the two of you conciliate."

Qin Qing was originally flushed with anger, but hearing Li Zhi's

exhortations, he seized the opportunity to disentangle himself, apologizing to me. I returned his politeness with the proper rites.

At this moment, someone behind me laughed and stated, “All right, I finally was able to see Brother Qin apologize.”

We turned and looked. The speaker was a brocade-clad handsome youth. This youth was no more than twenty-two or twenty-three years of age. His appearance was incomparably delicate and handsome, akin to Song Yu and Pan An. Furthermore, he had a lanky stature, making it seem like he was as elegant as a jade tree. The entire person seemed to be as exquisite as a jade statue. This person first laughed before continuing, “What a good Southern Chu gifted scholar, really gaining the admiration of me, Xiahou Yuanfeng.” Finished speaking, he stepped forward and performed a deep bow. Neither servile nor overbearing, I returned his courtesy, smiling, while saying nothing.

At this time, almost all of the attention was gathered upon us. The Prince of Yong, the Prince of Qi, Wei Ying, Qin Qing, and Xiahou Yuanfeng were all individuals capable of attracting everyone’s gaze. Now that they were all standing together, it seemed, in an instant, like all of the brilliance and radiance in the Honeydew Hall were gathered here. What had caused all of these ministers to focus their attentions here was the one standing beside all of these outstanding talents of Great Yong, Jiang Zhe. I did not have status, nor did I have a dazzling appearance, nor did I have a threatening and grand demeanor. Nevertheless, I miraculously left a profound impression within hearts. This impression existed like a pleasant country scene. Regardless of the intensity of the others’ brilliance and radiance, they could not conceal the calm and simple elegance of a clear spring in the middle of a forest.

Footnotes :

同泰, tongtai – lit. together with exultation
垂帘听政, chuiliantingzheng – idiom, lit. to govern from behind the curtain; to rule in place of the emperor
楚愍王, chu minwang – lit. the Pitiful King of Chu
莺歌燕舞, yinggeyanwu – idiom, lit. the warbler sings and the swallow

dances; scenes of prosperity, the coming of spring

太极殿, taiji dian – lit. the Hall of the Supreme Ultimate; this was the name of the main palace hall during the Sui and Tang Dynasties where the emperor held court, as well as a minor palace during the Ming and Qing Dynasties; in Chinese cosmology, the term Taiji (tai chi/t'ai chi) refers to the undifferentiated absolute and infinite potential, the singular from which the yin and the yang originate

东宫, donggong – lit. the Eastern Palace; was used to refer to the crown prince's palace that was separated from the main imperial palace and was positioned in the Imperial City, not in the Palace City

甘露殿, ganlu dian – lit. the Honeydew Hall; a palace hall that served as the main residence of the emperor during the early part of the Tang Dynasty

中书, zhongshu – the Imperial Secretariat pens and issues decrees on the emperor's behalf

侍中, shizhong – the position of palace attendant is a supplementary title awarded to officials chosen by the emperor as their confidential advisers

嫡母, dimu – children of concubines treated the principal wife of their father also as their first mother

汗血宝马, hanxuebaoma – according to tradition, the horses of Ferghana, Central Asia sweated blood when they ran and were much prized by Chinese rulers and ministers; Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty launched several campaigns to acquire these horses

潘安, Pan An and **宋玉**, Song Yu are two of the four men considered the most handsome in Chinese history, and are often used as bywords for handsome men. Pan An was a prominent poet during the Eastern Jin Dynasty, while Song Yu was a writer and poet from the late Warring States period.

屈原, Qu Yuan was a minister of the state of Chu. He was slandered and dismissed from office by King Huai of Chu. Learning that King Huai of Chu had been captured and that the Chu capital of Ying had fallen, Qu Yuan wrote a lengthy poem entitled "Lament for Ying" before wading into the Miluo River holding a rock to commit ritual suicide.

楚怀**王**, King Huai of Chu was a King of the state of Chu during the Warring States Period. In 299 BC, while attending negotiations with the state of Qin, King Huai was captured and held hostage. In the subsequent campaign, Qin

took advantage of the political turmoil in Chu and captured the Chu capital of Ying. While he later managed to escape, he was recaptured, ultimately dying three years later while in captivity.

秦惠王, King Hui of Qin, was the first king of the state of Qin (all previous rulers had been dukes). While he executed Shang Yang, he maintained the reformations that helped make Qin one of the most powerful states in China. During his reign, the Qin army took King Huai of Chu hostage and conquered the Chu capital of Ying.

The Qin Dynasty only had two emperors before it was defeated by rebel forces led by Liu Bang and Xiang Yu.

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 9: Exhibiting Martial Arts and Comparing Skills

Volume 2, Chapter 9: Exhibiting Martial Arts and Comparing Skills

In the first month of the first year of Tongtian, the eleventh-year of the sixty-year cycle, Jiang Zhe, as a subordinate of the Prince of Yong, lined up according to his rank in the Great Yong court. The Yong Emperor summoned all of officialdom to a banquet. On the second day of the New Year, the Emperor decreed that all young elites compare their skills outside the Vermillion Bird Gate. The Emperor indicated that he would bestow rewards to those who made superior displays. In reality, the Emperor was choosing a husband for Princess Changle. Towards these outstanding heroes, the Princess was taciturn and uncommunicative. When the competition ended, the Emperor asked the Princess her intentions. Sobbing, the Princess replied, “This child’s husband is still alive. How can I remarry?” At first, the Emperor was angry and indignant before ultimately becoming sorrowful. Noble Consort Zhangsun was anxious, comforting both sides. The Princess was silent. Afterwards, the Noble Consort secretly questioned the Princess’s palace maids. The palace maids reported that although the Princess was watching the competition from upstairs, she did not pay particular attention to any of the participants. She was only happy and delighted when she saw the Prince of Yong’s Major. The Noble Consort thus understood…. —*Southern Chu Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Jiang Suiyun*

A pair of large black eyes very carefully gazed at that tall figure. He should have fallen asleep, right? The pair of fair and delicate hands dropped to the floor and began to move forward. Drawing support from the knees, she moved forward at lightning speed. Closer, even closer before the small hands reached out and grabbed the target. This quickness was absolutely as fast as lightning. But who would have imagined that there was someone else who was much faster. A flash before the eyes and her objective had been snatched away. “Wah!” the little infant began to cry, shaking the world.

Following, a pair of hands picked up and embraced the baby girl in a fluster, both menacing and amusing her. But the baby girl did not give even a bit of face. It was only until another hand brought over a big headed doll, carved from wood and wrapped in silk and cotton, waving it in front of the baby girl, did she sniffle and begin to laugh. She reached out towards the doll that was almost her size, squeaking to express her delight.

After wiping away the cold sweat from his head, Xiaoshunzi reproached, “Young master, you shouldn’t always be bullying the young miss. If the Princess of Yong finds out, she will definitely rebuke you for lacking in steadiness.”

I subconsciously pulled back my head. Yesterday, I had only deliberately used a toy to lead Roulan to chase me and develop her response ability, and ended up being called before the princess. From behind a curtain, she admonished me. Today if the princess were to find out that I had caused Roulan to cry, wouldn’t the result be even more wretched? I promptly looked to see if the little rascal was present to report on my wrongdoings. Seeing that he was not present, I nodded my head with satisfaction. Because the heir, Li Jun, would soon depart for Youzhou to protect it on the Prince of Yong’s behalf, he had been called over today by the Prince of Yong. This was the result of my reminder to the Prince of Yong. Otherwise, this little rascal would always be off to the side keeping an eye on me. Yesterday, it was him who complained to the princess.

However, there was another obstacle. I looked at Xiaoshunzi and said, “Xiaoshunzi, you should go take a look at the martial arts exhibition and skill competition. Look at how their martial arts are and see who is the most likely to triumph. This matter is of utmost importance.”

Xiaoshunzi indifferently asked, “Hasn’t His Imperial Highness already dispatched people to take a look?”

I was silenced by him but soon retorted, “Isn’t it because I trust you?”

Xiaoshunzi asked profoundly, “Is young master thinking about continuing to bully young miss, Roulan?”

I quickly shook my head and replied, “No, no. Roulan is my treasured

darling, why would I bully her?"

"If that's the case, then this servant will go take look," said Xiaoshunzi with a laugh. "Young master, you must remember that if the Princess gets angry, then I'm afraid that you'll have to suffer."

Looking at Xiaoshunzi's departing figure, I smiled evilly, walking towards the happily playing Roulan. Opening my mouth, I spoke, "Little Rou'er, daddy is coming over to play with you."

The baby girl did not know the dangerous situation she was in. Raising her head, she tossed aside the doll, opening her arms, asking me to embrace her. I stared blankly at her, a warm feeling welling up from the bottom of my heart. I couldn't help but pick her up and embrace her, kissing her little face that was like an apple. After she squeaked for some time, she called out, "Daddy."

I couldn't help but be filled with joy. Holding Roulan in my arms, I spun around several times. The laughter, like the ringing of a silver bell, began to sound. This was Roulan's favorite game.

After snatching some leisure, I walked into the Prince of Yong's study with my mood happy and free of worry. As expected, the Prince of Yong was present going over documents. Although his expression was dull, it carried a hint of displeasure. I stepped forward and bowed, speaking, "Your Imperial Highness, how is the situation outside?"

Li Zhi lifted his head and looked at me. His expression relaxed before he asked, "Suiyun, who do you think is the most suitable to be Changle's husband, the Emperor's son-in-law?"

Pondering, I replied, "From what this subject knows, Wei Ying, Qin Qing, and Xiahou Yuanfeng are the most outstanding of the participants. This subject has not been in Chang'an for long and does not know who is more suitable."

That day, after returning to the Prince of Yong's residence, Li Zhi informed me that the competition had another hidden purpose. As it turned out, Li Yuan was focused on making up for the suffering that the Princess Changle had experienced. Therefore, the emperor was intent on finding a new

husband for her. However, Zhao Jia, the King of Southern Chu, was still present in Chang'an. Li Yuan could not openly go about selecting a new husband and thus borrowed the competition to allow Noble Consort Zhangsun and Princess Changle to look upon the outstanding young talents of Great Yong and pick a son-in-law with both suitable appearance and moral standing. At present, this news was extremely secret. Outside of the members of the harem, no one else knew the truth of the matter. Li Zhi had learned of this from his wife, Lady Gao. These last several years, Noble Consort Zhangsun had no children by her side. Lady Gao had always been virtuous and filial. As Li Zhi was the one who suggested the discord ploy that caused Princess Changle to be married to Southern Chu, therefore he frequently had Lady Gao to enter the palace to call upon the noble consort. Over these years, the relationship between the two was as close as mother and daughter. Therefore, Noble Consort Zhangsun had asked Lady Gao's opinion.

I did not mention this subject to the Prince of Yong. Ever since I had learned the real reason behind this competition, I was extremely angry. This was not because Great Yong did not even worry about the continued existence of Zhao Jia. This was because from start to finish, Princess Changle had never displayed any real feelings towards toward Zhao Jia, so much so that I even suspected that there was something underhanded that caused Princess Changle's miscarriage. However, although I sympathized with Princess Changle's bitter experiences, I did not approve of her behavior. Regardless of all else, the king was still alive. Even if she wished to remarry, she should not be so anxious to do so. At the very least, she should wait to remarry until she no longer had any official relationship with the king. In reality, I had always been extremely angry. If it weren't for the existence of Roulan, comforting my spirits, I was afraid that I would have exploded in anger long ago. After I had calmed down, I thought that it was better to let it pass. Princess Changle was a pride of the Heavens. Why should I put her on a pedestal and consider her to be too perfect? Perhaps it was because of her secret tears during her wedding, and her sweet temperament and agreeable personality during the audience with her at the temporary palace, that caused me to engender feelings of sympathy and a favorable impression

towards her.

Since the Prince of Yong was now asking me, I would use an objective manner as much as possible to comment on this matter's effect.

Shooting a glance at the Prince of Yong, I replied, "In the eyes of those people who use their heads, the Emperor's doting on the Princess is a connection. If the Princess does not choose a suitable person, not only will this be detrimental for Your Imperial Highness, but this will also inevitably injure the Princess's heart. If this happens then I'm afraid that Your Imperial Highness will forever be unable to obtain the Emperor's and the Noble Consort's forgiveness and understanding. The best outcome would certainly be the Princess marrying Your Imperial Highness's choice. The next best would be to have her marry a neutral party. Although this subject is unclear about these individuals' real inclinations, Grand General Qin's neutrality is definite. If the Princess were to marry Qin Qing that would probably be the best outcome."

Li Zhi revealed a happy expression. However, he instead said, "This Prince admires your disregard for Qin Qing's insults towards you, impartially expressing your opinion. However, I'm afraid that it's impossible for Qin Qing to become the choice. Originally, he and Changle grew up together as childhood friends.[1] If it weren't for Changle being married off to Southern Chu, Qin Qing would probably have been the Emperor's son-in-law. When I had my wife ask the Noble Consort for her desire, the Noble Consort stated that before Changle departed for Southern Chu, Qin Qing once asked Changle to elope. However, Changle refused.

"At the time, Changle said, 'I am the honored daughter of the imperial clan and have received the grace and kindness of the common people. How could I ignore the empire and the affairs of state? If I were to selfishly run away, not only would this harm the imperial clan's reputation, it would also hurt the feelings of her Imperial Father and Mother. Even if Imperial Father dispatched another member of the imperial clan to Southern Chu, Great Yong would inevitably have lost its sincerity and cause Southern Chu to become unhappy. As a result, the marriage alliance would fail, leaving behind boundless repercussions. Although I, Changle, am a only a weak

woman, I dare not commit such a disloyal, unvirtuous, and unfilial act.'

"In reality, Imperial Father and the Noble Consort were both aware of this. But caring for the face of Grand General Qin and also taking pity on Changle, they therefore did not charge Qin Qing with a crime. Nowadays, Qin Qing has also thought of expressing his interest in taking Changle as his bride to the Noble Consort, but Changle was firm in her refusal. Therefore, this competition was set up to choose her husband. Outsiders do not yet know of this matter. However, I'm afraid that Qin Qing's efforts will be for naught."

Although I did not know why Princess Changle had rejected Qin Qing, I did not have any choice but to carefully consider the present outcome. Thinking carefully, I said, "Xiahou Yuanfeng has appearance and talent that surpasses others. I'm afraid that he would not show the proper considerations[2] towards the Princess. In addition, his father is part of the Crown Prince's faction. Although Wei Guan is inclined towards the Crown Prince, he will not go so far as to openly express his support. Wei Ying's character is out of the ordinary. If the Princess is able to acquire such a good match, we can expect her be happy."

The Prince of Yong sighed and replied, "This Prince feels that way as well. However, rumor has it that the Crown Prince is supporting Xiahou Yuanfeng. He has even persuaded the Empress, saying that Xiahou Yuanfeng is talented and good-looking, and does not participate in the court battles. He will be suitable to take good care of the Princess. He even said that Xiahou Yuanfeng fell in love with the Princess at first sight and will certainly not raise marital strife due to past events. In comparison, Wei Ying is a dragon amongst men, his future career prospects inevitably illustrious. If he one day turns his back upon the Princess, an otherwise happy thing will unavoidably become disastrous. The Empress was persuaded and seems interested in Xiahou Yuanfeng. The Emperor also greatly favors Xiahou Yuanfeng and seems to be of mind to permit this union."

"Could it be that the Crown Prince is intentionally trying to obtain the Princess's support and strength?" I inquired with a heavy face before I continued, "The entire world knows that the Princess is doted upon. If Xiahou Yuanfeng borrows the Princess's strength, I'm afraid that this person

will be impossible to control."

Li Zhi smiled wryly and responded, "I have also dispatched people to participate. However, although I have as many fierce subordinate generals as the number of clouds, this kind of well-rounded character with exquisite looks is difficult to find. Even if there are several, their family backgrounds are not illustrious. To say nothing of the fact that if I dispatched people, I'm afraid Qin Qing would bear the brunt of it. Regardless of success, it will offend Qin Qing. What's more …"

Li Zhi seemed to want to say something more, but hesitated. I took the opportunity to carry on what he was saying, "What's more, this will cause people to believe that Your Imperial Highness covets the Princess's strength and does not care about the relationship between brother and sister."

Li Zhi continued to smile wryly. Looking at me, he spoke, "Although I have no wish to hinder Changle's happiness, it would be detrimental to me if she were to marry Xiahou Yuanfeng. What do you think this Prince should do?"

I bowed my head and thought it over, suggesting, "Your Imperial Highness should not be overly worried. Regardless of what the Emperor and the Empress think, the one making the decision is still the Princess herself. The Noble Consort's opinion will also influence the Princess. Why doesn't Your Imperial Highness invite the Princess of Yong to advise and persuade the Noble Consort? I believe that the Noble Consort would not be at ease with the Princess marrying Xiahou Yuanfeng. When all is said and done, he is too young and is insufficiently stable. The Princess will once again experience suffering. She requires a considerate and tender, steady and upright individual to take care of her."

Li Zhi happily replied, "That's right! In fairness, if we don't consider anything else, I also would not feel at ease if Changle were to marry Xiahou Yuanfeng. He is too young and too unsteady."

On the fourth day of the New Year, outside of the Vermillion Bird Gate, the martial arts exhibition reached the climax. After the preliminary competition ended yesterday, today became the day when first place was determined. In the wide expanse before the gate, a fierce battle between

giants occurred. Seated on a platform on the west side of the competition grounds were the emperor, the empress, and Noble Consort Zhangsun accompanying Princess Changle watching the competition. The other consorts and concubines were seated behind them. These members of the harem were rarely permitted to come out. As a result, all of them were in high spirits.

The last horse race was occurring at this moment. Of the competitors, the greatest shouts were for Wei Ying and Xiahou Yuanfeng. Wei Ying's Ferghana horse and Xiahou Yuanfeng's good colt from Great Wan[3] were both excellent horses. While Xiahou Yuanfeng's Great Wan horse was a bit inferior, his horsemanship surpassed Wei Ying. Therefore, the race was even. After the red flag signaled, the two took the lead and charged out, leaving all the other horses far behind. As they reached the end of the racetrack, the two turned their horses around to race back. Relying upon his superior horsemanship, Xiahou Yuanfeng was a bit faster. However, Wei Ying was not lacking. Using the formidable strength of the Ferghana horse, he was able to catch up. During the last sprinting stage, the two used all of their endurance. Ultimately, it was Wei Ying who prevailed, becoming the winner of the first part of the competition.

Noble Consort Zhangsun happily said, "As expected, Gentleman Wei is well-rounded. I, your servant, still feel that he is the most suitable for Zhen'er."

The empress said instead, "In reality, Yuanfeng, this child, is also not bad. If it weren't because his horse was somewhat inferior, he probably would have beaten Wei Ying. In addition, he's participating in all three parts of the competition. Even if he takes second in all three, that in itself is not easy."

Li Yuan also nodded his head and said, "Xiahou is indeed a young outstanding hero. However, Wei Ying's character is serious and proper, and he is a master of both brush and sword. He is also a fairly good choice."

Noble Consort Zhangsun was somewhat concerned. She looked at Princess Changle, but saw that there was not a hint of happiness on her face, merely looking out silently upon the competition grounds. At this moment, Noble Consort Yan suddenly said, "Your Imperial Majesty, His Imperial Highness,

the Crown Prince, and His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, have both arrived."

Noble Consort Zhangsun looked around, only seeing Crown Prince Li An and Prince Li Zhi of Yong in casual dress. There were specially provided seats below the spectator platform that were for them. The previous two days, they had not personally come. Today, they by chance had come.

Hearing that the Prince of Yong had arrived, Princess Changle could not help but look over. Sure enough, she caught sight of that person beside the Prince of Yong. He was as always dressed in a set of unadorned azure robes, filled with outstanding literary grace. He was seated beside second brother, speaking and laughing. Behind him stood a handsome, but feminine youth. He seemed to sense her gaze and coldly looked over. The icy gaze of those eyes caused Princess Changle's heart to tremble. It seemed as if she had once seen this pair of frigid eyes and person with such temperament before. At this moment, that youth stepped forward and poured tea for that person. Although they were downstairs and she was upstairs, the distance was not that far. Princess Changle could clearly see that the fair pair of hands were somewhat pale. Princess Changle's heart almost leaped out of her chest. Was it him … was it him? She once again looked towards the handsome appearance of her memories. Can it really be him? The mysterious person who had made Liang Wan insane, who forced over a dozen spies to commit suicide, and who had let her go…. If it really was him, then Princess Changle no longer found it strange why he had left her off. She still remembered their only meeting. She also remembered the poetry that he had delivered to the palace. She could faintly discern that this refined and distinguished youth had understood her own worries and sorrow long ago. He would not blame her for departing Southern Chu. Her face revealed an incomparably tender and happy smile, but suddenly Princess Changle was unexpectedly filled with sorrow. It was impossible for him and her to have a future. She lowered her head; she almost wanted to leave immediately. At this moment, Emperor Li Yuan happily exclaimed, "Excellent archery!"

The second competition was archery. Qin Qing shot with great precision, his arrows hitting the center of the target. Xiahou Yuanfeng did not show

any weakness, matching him arrow after arrow. At the end, the two were tied for first. Qin Qing did not accept this result. If they were on the battlefield, the situation would not be this ideal. However, since the emperor had already judged this a tie, he could only helplessly accept this result.

Li Zhi shook his head slightly. Having spent many years in the army, he understood how easy it was to shoot at targets like this. However, if this were horse archery, then it wouldn't be this easy. However, this was an exhibition and not a grand competition within the army. Naturally, he had no alternative. Turning to Jiang Zhe, he said, "If you are having an archery competition, it is better if it is a horse archery one. In my army, scouts reporting back with military intelligence use bow and arrow to report. At a distance of five hundred paces, they must ride their horse at full gallop and shoot their bows, and are required to shoot their whistling arrows to the targets outside of the encampments. This kind of archery competition is rather useless."

I was speechless. No wonder the Prince of Yong's troops were so elite and famous throughout the world. When the emperor and empress saw the taciturn Princess Changle, they were somewhat concerned. In a low voice, the empress asked, "Changle, we think that this child, Xiahou, is not bad. Is he not to your liking?"

Noble Consort Zhangsun promptly said, "Zhen'er, if you aren't impressed by him … regardless of who you fancy, be he Wei Ying, Qin Qing, or any of the other young talents, your Imperial Father will not block it."

Seeing Princess Changle remain silent, Li Yuan smiled and said, "There's still another competition. Maybe there is a candidate that Changle will take a fancy to." However, his smile was somewhat forced, presumably sensing the opposition in Princess Changle's silence.

At this moment, in the competition grounds below, Xiahou Yuanfeng and a blacked-clothed youth were standing facing one another. This black-clothed youth had distinct edges to his face and was calm and composed. His figure was similar to that of Xiahou Yuanfeng's, but his body was not as slender and he was not as handsome. From top to bottom, his entire body revealed a

sturdy and fierce aura, as if his body contained an explosive force. His movements were as graceful as a black panther. I looked at the black-clothed youth, my thoughts filled with praise and admiration. I asked, “Your Imperial Highness, who is this person?”

Li Zhi answered, “He is called Pei Yun and was originally the fierce frontline general under the Prince of Qi. He is a layman disciple of the Shaolin Temple. Reportedly the man’s martial arts are extraordinary. Several years ago, after his two older brothers died in battle, his father, Attendant Gentleman of the Imperial Secretariat Pei Jing petitioned the Emperor to request that he be transferred back to the capital. Imperial Father empathized with the fact that the Pei family had only this son left and thus issued an edict, recalling him. At present, he is the Commander of the Northern Barracks of the Imperial Guard. The man is loyal and brave, greatly favored by both the emperor and Grand General Qin. However, his temperament is somewhat strange and he does not like to associate himself with others. Were it not for this, he would likely be someone that Imperial Father considers as a candidate to be his son-in-law. Purportedly, he’s only taking part in this competition because of Xiahou Yuanfeng. This man is considered as the foremost expert in the Imperial Guard. There is much dispute over who is the greatest young expert between him and Xiahou Yuanfeng. Ordinarily, they are restricted by their status and cannot compete. This time, he has come to take advantage and fight.”

Glancing at Xiaoshunzi, I inquired, “You’ve seen their previous spars. Who do you think will win?”

Xiaoshunzi impartially responded, “Pei Yun is an expert from the Shaolin Temple. I believe the martial art that he trains in is the one of the Seventy-Two Consummate Arts, the Divine Diamond (Vajra) Force. Moreover, he has grasped seventy percent of its power. In another ten years, Xiahou Yuanfeng will definitely not be his equal.”

Hearing what he said, Li Zhi asked, “Then is he currently inferior to Xiahou Yuanfeng?”

Xiaoshunzi replied, “Reporting to Your Highness … the martial arts route taken by Xiahou Yuanfeng is soft and yin-principled. As a result, his

advancement has been swift. However, during the later stages, he will inevitably experience several setbacks. If he does not have ability, wisdom, and perseverance surpassing that of a normal person, I'm afraid that he will not reach great heights. Therefore, at present, his martial arts are stronger than Pei Yun's. However, it will also not be easy for him to win, as there are other factors in hand-to-hand combat. Since Pei Yun is a valiant general who has fought in battle, his calm and resolve exceed that of an ordinary person. Therefore, the result should be forty to sixty. Pei Yun still has a chance."

The two men were presently exchanging greetings before they began to fight. Xiahou Yuanfeng used a sword, while Pei Yun used a saber. Although I did not understand martial arts, I could sense the agile and leisurely nature of the sword in Xiahou Yuanfeng's hand, which caused the entire stage to be filled with the dancing light of snow. In comparison, Pei Yun's bladesmanship was steady, its defense extremely tight. Its style was strict, noble and ancient, filled with the ambiance of a great expert.

Xiaoshunzi watched this competition conscientiously, his gaze extremely passionate. I could not help but ask, "How about it? At present, who holds the advantage?"

Xiaoshunzi answered, "Pei Yun is using the form of the Six Harmonies Blade, directly handed down from the Shaolin Temple. This is very different from the sword style that has been circulated outside. He has trained this sword style to the point of perfection. Xiahou Yuanfeng's swordsmanship is the Sword of the Yue Maiden. According to legend, this swordsmanship has been passed down since the Spring and Autumn Period. This style is broad and deep. Although Pei Yun's defense is firm, if he is unable to strike back, then it's useless. I can see that Xiahou Yuanfeng's internal energy is pure. It is unlikely that he will run out of stamina."

At this moment, Pei Yun suddenly let out a muted shout, his bladesmanship changing, becoming sharp and fierce. However, it still maintained an undertone of mercy. This kind of contradiction left the spectators thinking pensively. Astonished, Xiaoshunzi said, "This is the secretly transmitted Shaolin martial art, the Asura Blade Art. It uses the methods of an asura, while bringing out the mercy in one's heart. As

expected, it is not ordinary."

For a moment, the light of the sword and saber on the stage were gorgeous and splendid. An intense smell of blood emerged. At this moment, Xiahou Yuanfeng's figure became vertical, jumping into the air. Following, he flipped high up in the sky, chopping down with his sword. Pei Yun raised his saber, forcibly receiving the sword strike. Although Xiahou Yuanfeng was towering above, he was unable to take the slightest bit of advantage. He once again shot up, his figure as vigorous as a hawk, bobbing up and down as if at the edge of the sea. He was like a goshawk hunting a rabbit, like a spring sparrow flitting back and forth, causing all the spectators to cheer in loud voices. Pei Yun was forced to use both hands, becoming flustered. At this moment, Xiahou Yuanfeng had become extremely angry that he had yet to win, suddenly uniting his sword with his body, piercing towards Pei Yun like lightning. Pei Yun held his saber horizontally and accepted Xiahou Yuanfeng's strike. This strike contained the entirety of Xiahou Yuanfeng's strength. Pei Yun was left at a disadvantage, shouting clearly and loudly. The saber in his hand broke. As Xiahou Yuanfeng flitted past Pei Yun, his body somehow strangely turned back, striking with his sword. The sword was like a streak of lightning as it directly pierced towards Pei Yun's heart. Pei Yun's hand only held a broken saber. All of the spectators cried out in alarm. Pei Yun's complexion was grave. Throwing down the saber, he greeted Xiahou Yuanfeng with his two fists. One could hear the sounds of metal and steel. As the two figures separated, Xiahou Yuanfeng's face was gloomy and cold, causing his peerlessly handsome appearance to lose color. In comparison, Pei Yun's sleeves were fluttering in the air like butterflies. On the skin of his hands and arms, one could faintly discern a golden color. He was completely unharmed.

The sound of a gong could be heard from atop the platform. Not a moment later, a eunuch hurried down with an edict, proclaiming that the emperor commanded that with his weapon broken, Pei Yun had lost. Both were outstanding talents of the court and should not fight to the death.

Although Xiahou Yuanfeng had prevailed, his expression was slightly unhappy. He stepped forward to accept the decree and to give thanks for

the emperor’s favor. Pei Yun looked indifferent. After accepting the decree, he withdrew.

With this, the martial arts exhibition concluded. Coming in first in two of the events and second in the third, Xiahou Yuanfeng shone the brightest. Wei Ying and Qin Qing both took first in an event, leaving them satisfied. However, this was beyond the Prince of Yong and mine expectations. The emperor did not announce the selection of a new son-in-law. He didn’t even issue any rewards. What was going on?

Footnotes :

青梅竹马, qingmeizhuma – idiom, lit. green plums and hobby-horse; innocent children’s games, childhood sweethearts, a couple who grew up as children

体贴**入微**, titieruwei – idiom, to show every possible consideration; meticulous care

大宛马 is a horse from Great Wan, an ancient kingdom in Central Asia. In the histories, the horse is considered a type of blood-sweating horse.

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 10: Heart Belongs to Another

Volume 2, Chapter 10: Heart Belongs to Another

After the end of the exhibition, Yong Emperor Li Yuan smiled and asked, “Changle, what do you think of Xiahou Yuanfeng?”

Princess Changle indifferently replied, “Not bad.”

Pleased, Li Yuan continued to ask, “If he were to become your husband, what does Changle think?”

Princess Changle disinterestedly responded, “Although this person is good … it is to no avail, this child is at peace.”

Li Yuan once again asked, “Since this person is not to your liking, then of these many outstanding civil and military talents, is there someone that Changle fancies?”

Princess Changle suddenly began to shed tears. She stepped forward and kneeled on the ground, saying, “Imperial Father, although this child is Imperial Father’s offspring, I am still the Queen of Southern Chu. Its King is still alive. Even if this child lacks honor and shame, what reason is there for me to leave my husband and remarry?”

Li Yuan became indignant and cried out, “We have wholeheartedly made preparations to help you select a fine husband. How can you be so obstinate?”

Furiously, he rose to his feet. Just as he was about to speak stern words of reprimand, he saw Princess Changle kneeling on the ground, shedding heavy tears. Although her jade countenance was not as wan and sallow as when she first returned to Chang’an, she was completely lacking in the splendor and radiance of a youthful married woman. Li Yuan sat down disappointed. It was a good while before he spoke again. “We should not be forcing you. Child, be at ease, We will never again make things difficult for you.”

When this matter was transmitted to me, I did not know why, but my

heart was happy. Princess Changle remained as my impressions of her, virtuous and well-mannered. Regardless of how she treated the king, she had nevertheless fulfilled her responsibilities. Even if she were to remarry in the future, I would not look down on her.

This matter, however, was not so easily settled. Although Li Yuan had temporarily abandoned his intentions to have Princess Changle remarry, however, others did not give up. Empress Dou, Noble Consort Yan, and Noble Consort Ji all went to try to persuade Princess Changle. The princess couldn't drive them off, but at the same time she wasn't willing to change her mind.

On one day, the Princess of Yong, Lady Gao, entered the palace. Hearing of this, she tried to persuade Noble Consort Zhangsun to allow Princess Changle to live for a few days in the Prince of Yong's residence, returning to the palace on the fifteenth day of the New Year.

Noble Consort Zhangsun did not immediately agree. With hesitation, she glanced at Lady Gao. There were some things that only she knew. Even if others did not show an interest in matters involving Princess Changle, she would still have to get involved. The day of the competition, after she had returned to her chambers, she questioned her maids, wondering if they had noticed if princess had expressed an interest in anyone. Against her expectations, the maid, Lü'e,[1] reported, "The Princess remained cold and indifferent, but when the Prince of Yong arrived, this servant saw the Princess look intently at the man beside the Prince. In addition, she smiled with great happiness. However, she instantly returned to normal again."

Noble Consort Zhangsun knew who that man was—Jiang Zhe, Jiang Suiyun. When she went to the Jade Phoenix Hall, she would frequently see her daughter holding a book of poetry, filled with Jiang Zhe's poetry. Included among these was a part that was her daughter's handwriting. The rest were the handwriting of a stranger. She had once asked her daughter about it. This book had been sent into the palace by Jiang Zhe while they were both in Southern Chu. So the one her daughter admired was a surrendered subject of Southern Chu. However, when she once interrogated the maids attending to her daughter, all of them reported that her daughter

had scrupulously abided by the marriage tenets and court rules, never rebelling against the proper rites. Those poems were demanded by Liang Wan of Jiang Zhe before they were delivered into the palace. She only knew that her daughter was fond of that man's poems. But now, it seemed likely that her daughter's heart long ago belonged to someone, but was only hindered by her previous status, and thus was never revealed. Of course, it was possible that her daughter originally did not have this inclination. But now with the recent matter of selecting a husband did she have this inclination. If her daughter was allowed to go to the Prince of Yong's residence, it was possible to allow her daughter to meet with that person.

However, Noble Consort Zhangsun's brows furrowed tightly. If he were someone from Great Yong, even if his status was humble, as long as his character was good and her daughter liked him, then she would not mind. But that man was a surrendered subject of Southern Chu. Even if her daughter was willing, then that man may not agree. When all was said and done, her daughter was once the Queen of Southern Chu. Thinking it over, Noble Consort Zhangsun thought, regardless of what, allowing her daughter to temporarily stay at the Prince of Yong's residence would allow her to drive away her worries. As for what her intentions were, the noble consort could investigate matters. With her mind made, Noble Consort Zhangsun replied, "It would be good if Changle could go play at your place. Lü'e, you have always been prudent. Go with the Princess. If anything happens to the Princess, then you will be able to come back to report."

She had made up her mind, having Lü'e take note of Changle's mannerisms and actions, taking a good look at what her daughter's intentions exactly were.

Princess Changle was also very happy that she could temporarily leave the palace to play. When she arrived at the Prince of Yong's residence, the Princess of Yong accompanied Princess Changle to enjoy the gardens. The residence's gardens were divided from the lake into inner and outer gardens. The middle was separated using flowers and trees. With dividing screens removed, the boundaries between the inner and outer gardens weren't extremely clear. However, there was a clear distinction between

inner and outer. On this day, the sky was sunny and fair. Within the pavilion of the inner residence's gardens, the Princess of Yong had servants arrange superior grade fruits, having servants and wet nurses bring over the heir, Li Jun, the two daughters born of concubines, and Roulan. While they frolicked outside the pavilion, she personally led the two concubines in accompanying Princess Changle to watch them from within the pavilion. Not far was the lake. As this moment, the weather was sunny and cloudless, the water of the lake clear, as bright and clean as a piece of jade. The several children giggled as they played around, their innocence fascinating. After Princess Changle watched for a while, she felt her mood improve greatly. With a smile, she wondered, "Sister-in-law, I remember that when I left, brother did not have any children. Surprisingly, he already has one son and three daughters."

The Princess of Yong laughed and replied, "Princess has guessed wrong. Your brother has few children. Aside from Jun'er, he only has two daughters. The smallest one is called Roulan, the daughter of Jiang Zhe, Major Jiang."

Princess Changle's hand trembled. With a cool and collected voice, she asked, "Oh! Major Jiang is already married?"

The Princess of Yong did not sense the restlessness in Changle's voice, and explained, "This is Major Jiang's adopted daughter. She is absolutely adorable. From what the Prince has said, the major is alone by himself. Worried that he wouldn't be able to take care of his daughter, he therefore had her delivered to the inner residence to allow me to take care of her. I've spoken to the Prince, mentioning that Major Jiang is already twenty-six or twenty-seven years of age, and should take a wife. However, the Prince stated that Major Jiang was unwilling. It seems as if it is because his former fiancée met with misfortune and died. Alas, this kind of loving man is truly rare."

While Princess Changle felt sorrow, she was also partly delighted. Thinking it over, she knew that it was impossible for her and that man to be together. Although this man seemed to be free, at ease, and outstanding from his poems, but no matter how one looked, he was not someone to depart from established practices. If this man was to made to take a lord's

daughter as a subject, it was probably extremely unlikely. Thinking of this, Princess Changle felt greater sorrow.

This man that she had silently loved was someone who had did not have the slightest bit of destiny with her. Recalling that day when she had read his poetry for the first time, she had greatly admired him for his talent. That day when Liang Wan brought him to have an audience with her, she had fallen deeper in love with him. However, there was a separation between the royal-imperial family and a subject. She had never dared to reveal the slightest bit of her intentions. Later when he had been dismissed, she was secretly happy, believing that she had no need to be anxious about him being judged guilty of a crime by Great Yong after Southern Chu was destroyed. Who would have thought that he had still been taken captive by her older brother and brought back to Great Yong? She had spent the entire journey back filled with anxiety, worried that he would be unwilling to surrender and would end up being put to death by her brother. But now that he had already become an official in Great Yong, she was further worried that he would be implicated if something were to happen to her second brother. But regardless of what her own thoughts were, after all was said and done, then it would never be possible for her to be with him. She could not reveal any of her affection towards him. Thinking of this, Princess Changle forced a smile and spoke, “Sister-in-law, have Roulan be brought over here. Allow me to take a look at her.”

The Princess of Yong ordered a servant to bring Roulan over. Princess Changle looked at this young baby girl. The more she looked, the more she liked her, and couldn’t help pulling Roulan into her embrace. Roulan had yet to learn how to walk and had just now been playing on top of a felt rug underneath the tree. Seeing the beautiful, elegant Princess Changle, Roulan was filled with inquisitiveness as she extended her hands to grab onto the princess’s hair that was tied up into a bun. In a short while, Roulan completely disheveled Princess Changle’s fine black hair. Yet, Princess Changle did not get angry, instead beginning to laugh, continuing to tease this adorable little girl. Her hearty laughter caused the Princess of Yong to become extremely joyous. Lü’e standing on the side understood the princess’s mind.

At the moment when everyone was joyous and happy, barely audible music could be heard from the other side of the lake. Although this sound did not come from the silk thread of a zither nor from a bamboo flute, it nevertheless tugged at one's heartstrings. This was a tune popular in Southern Chu. Every year at this time, companionships were formed to appreciate the beauty of the flowering of plum trees. This tune would always be heard during this time. This tune was called, *The Cold Plum Flower* . Although this tune had a simple and lively melody, and there was nothing about the skill and technique of the person playing the instrument, however the tune allowed its listeners to feel as if they were being cleansed by the blue skies, the cold plum flowers blossoming, opening up one's heart. Princess Changle was enthralled. After a short period of time, the sound of the melody ended. She murmured to herself, "Is it Major Jiang? Is he thinking of Southern Chu?"

The Princess of Yong's heart was moved. Glancing at Princess Changle, she said, "It is Major Jiang who played the tune. I do not know what instrument he is using, but whenever I hear it, its sound always feels noble and ancient. Younger sister came here opportunely today. Major Jiang should be taking in the scenery at the Overlooking Wave Pavilion. When this Major Jiang has free time, if he is not appreciating the scenery at the lakeside, he is in the guest courtyard reading or playing *weiqi* , always contented. He is not as busy as the other retainers and advisers."

At this moment, an azure-clothed youth approached from a distance. This man was no more than twenty years of age. His appearance was delicate and handsome. However, he carried with him a trace of soft yin-principle. All of the maids recognized him and did not obstruct him. The youth walked to the front of the pavilion. Respectfully, he stated, "Princess of Yong, my master has had this servant come to receive and bring back young Miss Roulan."

Just as the Princess of Yong was about to accept, she glanced at Princess Changle and suddenly said, "Sir Jiang is too polite. He has been in the Prince's residence for quite some time now; there is no need for him to feel constrained. Today, Princess Changle is here. She is quite fond of Roulan and would hate to part with her. If he doesn't think askance, please have Sir

Jiang come over. The Prince will also come soon. It won't be a hindrance."

Xiaoshunzi stared back blankly, glancing at the Princess of Yong and at Princess Changle, a hint of hesitation flashing across his face. However, he still replied, "This servant will do as you command."

At this moment, Prince Li Zhi of Yong approached from a distance. Seeing Xiaoshunzi, he smiled and inquired, "What? You've come to take back Roulan again? Your master will always amuse his daughter whenever he is free."

Xiaoshunzi responded, "Reporting to Your Highness, the Princess of Yong has stated that Princess Changle is fond of the young miss, indicating the young master should come over and not treat himself as an outsider."

Li Zhi stared back blankly. However, he knew that the Princess of Yong would inevitably have her own calculations. And so, he replied, "She speaks rightly. Go and invite your young master to come over."

Xiaoshunzi was even more amazed. His gaze rapidly moved, looking at everyone and seeing no abnormalities. At this moment, his gaze fell upon Princess Changle. He only saw Princess Changle holding Roulan in her embrace, beaming with happiness. His heart could not but be touched, but after thinking it over, he felt that he was allowing his imagination to run wild. However, he no longer hesitated. He hurriedly returned to the Overlooking Wave Pavilion.

At that moment, I was at the Overlooking Wave Pavilion drinking wine with Gou Lian. Seeing Xiaoshunzi, I smiled and asked, "Where's Roulan? Why haven't you brought her back? Brother Gou wants to take a look at my obedient and well-behaved daughter."

"Today, Princess Changle arrived at the residence to drive away her worries," responded Xiaoshunzi. "She is extremely fond of the young miss and is unwilling to let her go. The Princess of Yong has stated that young master is not an outsider. If young master is willing, then you should go over. The Prince is also present."

My brow furrowed and I declined, "This isn't good, is it? Forget it…. Let's take a rain check."

Hearing this, Gou Lian said, “Suiyun, since the Princess of Yong has already spoken, you should make the trip. Otherwise, the Princess of Yong would blame you.”

Thinking it over, I realized that this was true. If the Princess of Yong had not spoken, then it was of no matter. If she had spoken, then it wouldn’t be good if I did not go. Looking at Xiaoshunzi and seeing that he also nodded his head, I spoke to Gou Lian, “If that’s the case, I’ll go. Brother Gou, please drink a few more cups.”

Gou Lian smiled and gestured with his hand, as he acknowledged, “Go quickly. In a while, Brother Dong will come. I will explain everything to him.”

Li Zhi sat down, gazing at Princess Changle. With a smile, he spoke, “Changle, it was correct for you to come out to drive away your worries. The palace is extremely oppressive. If you like, come back often in the future.”

At this moment, Roulan suddenly began to struggle, seemingly eager to urgently return to amuse herself. Princess Changle smiled slightly, handing Roulan over to a maid, allowing the maid to embrace her back. With a smile, she said, “In reality, the palace isn’t oppressive. I was able to meet several younger brothers and sisters that were born after I departed. They are all adorable. It’s only that there are too many restrictions in the palace and is not as uncomplicated and relaxing as the outside. Older brother, I have heard that Jun’er will soon go to Youzhou. For such a young child to leave his parents, older brother is too heartless.”

Li Zhi smiled and replied, “This is because there is no other way. Jun’er is heir to the Principality of Yong. He has to fulfill his duties. Changle, do not take pity on him. Of those in our imperial clan, how many are capable of making their own decisions?”

Princess Changle’s gaze was somewhat gloomy. Just as she was about to speak, a youth walked over from a distance. He was clad in white scholarly robes the color of the moon. The kind of unfettered mannerism and aura that he had caused everyone who saw him to feel happy and merry, while the azure-robed youth following behind him seemed like his shadow. He was obviously underneath the sunlight and yet caused everyone to ignore

him.[2] Everyone's eyes were gathered on this master and servant pair, almost as if they also sensed the joy and delight in their hearts.

After walking closer, I stepped forward and greeted everyone. "This subject pays his respects to Your Imperial Highness and the Princess of Yong."

Li Zhi smiled and spoke, "There is nothing to do today. Suiyun should not be a stickler for formalities. Come join us and sit down."

My eyes glanced at Princess Changle. Smiling, I said, "Excuse me, may I ask … should this subject call thee Queen or Your Imperial Highness, the Princess Changle?"

Princess Changle half rose out of her seat politely and apologized, "Jiang *daren* , this one knows that I have let down Southern Chu. Would *daren* please forgive me?"

I originally did not have any resentments or grudges towards her. Seeing her act this way, I returned the favor and stated, "Your Imperial Highness need not be like this. Regardless of whether Your Imperial Highness is the former queen or the present princess, Your Imperial Highness is still this subject's lord. This subject can only be reverent and respectful. What reason is there for me to complain and reproach?"

Seeing that I was speaking completely sincerely, Princess Changle's expression leaped with joy, breaking out into smiles. This smile was like the blossoming of spring flowers, immediately adding a bit of radiance. Seeing this, Li Zhi's heart also jumped. Could it be possible that the Princess of Yong's intentions … Just as he was allowing his imagination run wild, I had already addressed, "Today, Your Imperial Highness and the Princess of Yong are entertaining Princess Changle. This subject cannot be a bother and will thus take my leave. Would Your Imperial Highness please forgive me?"

So speaking, I did not wait for them to respond, gesturing for Xiaoshunzi to pick up Roulan, before turning to leave.

Just as Li Zhi was about to urge me stay, he could sight of one of the palace maids was watching attentively. He thus swallowed his words, watching Jiang Zhe's departing figure. Princess Changle was filled with both delight

and with worry. Today, she finally had learned that he did not blame her. Although she was joyous, when she remembered that from this day forward, she would be confined to the depths of the palace and would never have the opportunity to meet him again, she became filled with grief and sorrow. He had spoken the truth. The two of them were lord and subject. There was no chance of anything happening. Just as Changle was feeling sorrow, she remembered that she was still a married woman. How could she fall in love with another man? She thus forced herself to smile, hoping to prevent anyone from seeing any mistakes. However, both the Prince and Princess of Yong were observant individuals. How could they not notice these clues? The Princess of Yong could be ignored. However, Li Zhi sank into deep contemplation. According to his understanding, Jiang Zhe would definitely not agree to this marriage. Moreover, no one would agree. No wonder Princess Changle refused to divulge a word from beginning to end. Presumably even Jiang Zhe himself was unaware that the princess was in love with him. To not speak of others, he himself would not agree to this relationship. If this matter were to spread, the crown prince would definitely make things difficult. If this matter was stirred up before the emperor, when that time came, Jiang Zhe's life would be difficult to protect. After he were to ascend to the throne and Zhao Jia were to die, would this relationship be possible? The more Li Zhi thought, the bigger his headache became. For a subject to take a lady of the imperial family as his wife, then it was naturally offending one's superiors. Although Jiang Zhe had already surrendered and pledged allegiance to Great Yong, if he were permitted to take the Queen of Southern Chu as his wife, it would only be possible if Jiang Zhe completely disregarded his reputation. This was probably impossible.

While Li Zhi was occupied by these many thoughts, the Princess of Yong had another way of looking at this matter. In her mind, she thought, *If Princess Changle is married to Jiang Zhe, then Jiang Zhe would become one of us* . She knew that her husband attached great importance to Jiang Zhe and had once racked his brains to subdue him. Although she was not clear how Jiang Zhe ultimately pledged his allegiance, she knew that her husband had previously found it difficult to sleep at night. If she was able to facilitate this matter, then her husband would gain a capable assistant. In addition,

Princess Changle would have someone to be entrusted to. From her female intuition, the Princess of Yong knew that this person who was currently respectfully considering himself as a subject before her husband, in reality, had the temperament of someone who was detached from the vulgar world. If he were not grasped tightly, he would one day fly away. If that were to happen, then her husband would find it difficult to sleep and eat.

I did not perceive in the slightest any of the things that had occurred. Holding Roulan in my embrace, I spoke towards Xiaoshunzi, “Do you think I should take a wife to take care of Roulan?”

Xiaoshunzi indifferently replied, “It is a good matter if young master wishes to take a wife. However, if young master takes a wife that is not to your liking, what’s to be done then? If there is someone you like, then that is naturally well and good. If there is none, then there is no need to force yourself. It’s not like young Miss Roulan doesn’t have anyone to take care of her.”

I smiled and stated, “The world does not have another woman like Piaoxiang. It doesn’t matter if I were to marry an ordinary, virtuous woman. However, you speak the truth. If the pairing is tasteless, then there is only suffering. Forget about it….”

“What does young master think of Princess Changle?” asked Xiaoshunzi suddenly.

I stared at him blankly for a moment before I smiled and answered, “What nonsense are you saying? Her Imperial Highness, the Princess Changle, has a respected and honorable status. She was also once the mother of a nation. How could I have any ulterior thoughts about her? If this were to spread, wouldn’t this be a joke? At present, there are several candidates to be the Emperor’s son-in-law. I fear that even before the King returns to Southern Chu, Princess Changle’s husband will have already been selected.” Heaving a sigh, I continued, “In reality, of those people, I look most favorably upon Wei Ying. He should be able to provide the Princess with happiness.”

Xiaoshunzi’s mouth twitched and he did not say any more. He was disinclined to speak to this master beside him who was extremely muddled

about these little matters. However, his complexion became heavy as he reminded himself to be mindful of this matter. The princess had affection towards the young master. This matter could be large and could be small. If there were individuals jealous of young master because of this matter, then it would jeopardize young master's safety. In addition, it would be troublesome if he was near Princess Changle. Thinking of this, Xiaoshunzi could not help but feel regret over agreeing to the young master's decision to let off the princess. He knew that women would often have perceptions that exceeded rational thought. At the time, he had been extremely close to the princess. If she realized that he had kidnapped her, it was likely that the young master would face grave dangers. Alas, how could he not realize that he would meet the princess again? This was a serious oversight.

Footnotes :

绿娥, lü'e – lit. green beauty

视而不见, shi'erbujian – idiom, lit. to turn a blind eye; to ignore

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 11: Moving According to One's Benefit

Volume 2, Chapter 11: Moving According to One's Benefit

During the New Year, prosperity abounded within the city of Chang'an. On the surface, everything was peaceful. However, there were hidden undercurrents.

Vice Minister of Revenue Cui Yang descended from his carriage, fed up with the crowds' bustling activity in front of the door. His elder sister was Crown Prince Li An's proper wife. Although she was not as favored as the second wife, the crown prince's heir was born of his older sister. As a result, the relationship between the couple was nevertheless filled with respect. Originally, during the period when the Prince of Yong's arrogance was unbridled, although he was the crown prince's younger brother-in-law, he had few to no visitors, so much so that there were those who made trouble for him to win the Prince of Yong's favor. This time, with the crown prince's position as heir apparent solidified, those who had come this year to pay a New Year call had almost trampled flat his threshold. Ignoring the social climbing vile characters, upright and unafraid, he entered the entrance of his residence.

Entering his study, the housekeeper handed over a large pile of calling cards. Cui Yang, in passing, looked over them one by one. When all was said and done, regardless of how he despised these people, power and influence needed others' support. Without these opportunists, with what would the crown prince use to administer the world? And how would he improve his station in life? After flipping through these calling cards, Cui Yang was suddenly attracted by one of them. This was an exquisite calling card. Upon it was a name that he had never before heard of: Ji Cheng. He was a merchant from the Hanzhong region. Originally, Cui Yang was not in the frame of mind to meet this ordinary merchant. However, attached to this calling card was a list of gifts. On top were astonishingly ten thousand taels of silver and a white jade disc. This was a very heavy gift. For the sake of

these gifts, he couldn't not meet this Ji Cheng. He instructed his housekeeper to invite Ji Cheng to come over. Cui Yang sat behind the desk, drinking tea and mulling over what requests this person would have. For someone to present such gifts, there must be something they want.[1] Would he be able to safely accept this gift?

After a short while had passed, a man about thirty years of age entered the study under the guidance of the housekeeper. This man's appearance was rather quite elegant. Although his facial features seemed to be upright and proper, however, his eyes were somewhat long and narrow, and his nose looked like the hooked beak of a hawk. This combination unavoidably marred his form. However, his manner was outstanding. Standing before the desk, his hands were behind his back. With one glance, it was clear that he was used to being a person above others. Cui Yang's heart shook, knowing immediately that this man was definitely not just an ordinary merchant. For Cui Yang to be able to serve as the Vice Minister of Revenue, naturally he was not an ordinary person. He lightly asked, "Sire, please sit. Although this official's position is not high, there are still some things that I can take care. For your distinguished self to present such heavy gifts, what matters do you have? If there are no legal ramifications, this official will naturally consider them."

This man smiled and replied, "This commoner has come, naturally, because I have something to beg of *daren* . This commoner has a business proposition. I wish to collaborate with the Crown Prince. However, given His Imperial Highness's status, how are we commoners able to approach him? *Daren* is the Crown Prince's honored relative. Therefore, this commoner has come to ask you for your help. If *daren* feels like this commoner's business proposition is feasible, please convey this commoner's sincerity to the Crown Prince."

Cui Yang's brow furrowed and he coldly refused, "The Crown Prince is the heir apparent. Under the heavens, nothing isn't the ruler's land. There is no need to be involved with you lowly merchants. If this is the matter, this official is powerless."

The man sneered and questioned, "If His Imperial Highness, the Crown

Prince, is disinterested in becoming wealthy, then for what purpose does the Crown Prince have for those manors on the outskirts of Chang'an? Who is the behind-the-scenes proprietor of Chang'an's largest casino in the slave market's Golden Jade Pavilion? Who is it that has violated the law to privately mine gold outside of Chang'an?"

Hearing these questions, Cui Yang's heart almost leapt out of his chest. How could this man have so thoroughly investigated the crown prince's financial resources so clearly? He himself had helped the crown prince manage these businesses. If this news were revealed, the crown prince would at most be reprimanded, while he himself would probably lose his position. A killing aura flashed across his eyes. He believed that this man needed to be captured and thoroughly questioned about his past and ancestors before eliminating him completely. As a result, Cui Yang deliberately stated in an amicable manner, "Actually, this matter may not necessarily not be discussed. Please take a seat. Serve tea. Let us slowly discuss this."

The housekeeper promptly served tea, inviting the man to take a seat on the chair at the side before he walked out to be the gatekeeper.

Cui Yang waited for the man to be seated before he inquired, "I wonder what business proposition your distinguished self has to collaborate with His Imperial Highness? This official will report to the Crown Prince if I consider it workable."

This man leisurely replied, "This business proposition cannot be considered too great. This year, Great Yong has suffered a drought, causing the harvest to be poor. At present, the market price of rice and flour is three times that of previous years, while the silk that is manufactured in Jiangnan has a high price but no supply. Now that the grievances between Southern Chu and Great Yong are as deep as the seas, trade between the two states has been disrupted. This commoner has some connections in Southern Chu and supplies foodstuffs, silk, tea, and other regional specialties. I wonder what *daren* thinks?"

Cui Yang's brow again furrowed, thinking that this was a pretty good business proposition. However, this proposition was somewhat

troublesome. Although His Highness, the crown prince, had some income, his expenditures were also enormous—bribing officials, planting spies, maintaining assassins and killers—all required money be spent. Even the yearly tribute to the Fengyi Sect was not a small figure. Glancing at this man, the killing aura in Cui Yang's eyes weakened. He wanted to speak up, but hesitated. He couldn't reveal that they were lacking in funds.

This man was extremely adept at discerning one's thoughts from one's body language. He continued to speak, "In reality, we don't require His Imperial Highness to invest any money. As long as we are able to be taken care of by His Imperial Highness and *daren* , this business will go off without a hitch. You must know that this kind of smuggling operation will sooner or later slip up without the support of His Imperial Highness."

Cui Yang nodded his head and asked, "If that is the case, then this matter is easy. However, are you prepared to divide the profits?"

This man smiled and replied, "This lowly one is willing to present His Imperial Highness with thirty percent of the profits."

Cui Yang furrowed his brows. He was well aware of the huge profits of this kind of business. If they were only willing to offer thirty percent of the profits, then wasn't this too little? However, his side could not furnish any capital. He could not open his mouth to ask for a larger share of the profits. That man seemed to have read his mind and said mysteriously, "In fact, this commoner has another plan. If *daren* has sufficient courage, this lowly one is willing to offer sixty percent of the profits."

Cui Yang's entire body shook, as he questioned, "What's the plan? Speak and let me listen."

"*Daren* wields power in the Ministry of Revenue," began the man before he continued, "The provisions and wages for the over a million men in the Great Yong army are administered by the Ministry of Revenue. At present, the biggest shortage that Southern Chu faces is military equipment. If His Imperial Highness is willing to use the stored military equipment to exchange for Southern Chu goods, not only will this not cost His Imperial Highness in the least, it will also be possible to swap for even more goods.

The profits will likely at least double. After His Imperial Highness receives the gold and silver, then he can order a batch of equipment made to make up for the shortfall. I'm sure that *daren* should know the price difference. Making one exchange will earn at least five hundred thousand taels of silver."

Hearing this, Cui Yang was unable to take it anymore. Furiously, he hollered, "Preposterous! Surprisingly, you actually dare to incite this official to support the enemy? Are you a spy from Southern Chu? You would actually come to this official's home to rave crazily."

"*Daren* is mistaken. This commoner is not a spy from Southern Chu," responded that person with a smile, remaining calm and unruffled. "This commoner is Huo Jicheng, ashamed to be the Head of the Embroidered Union." Finished speaking, the man moved his hand, shooting forth a white light. It flew past Cui Yang's neck, piercing through the bookshelf behind Cui Yang and embedding itself into the wall. Cui Yang was scared out of his wits.[2] The door to the study was kicked open, the housekeeper standing in the doorway, cold light flashing across his eyes. He held a dagger in his hand.

Huo Jicheng laughed, as his figure suddenly pounced in the direction of the doorway. The housekeeper saw flashes in front of his eyes as the dagger was taken from his hands. When Cui Yang looked over, Huo Jicheng was already back in his sea, beaming while looking at him. Cui Yang had already calmed down. Glancing at Huo Jicheng, he realized that this man would not have taken risks and come here if he didn't have assurances. To speak of nothing else, if he was offended, Cui Yang knew his life would be lost. He wiped off a layer of cold sweat and expressed, "Please sit, please sit. Presumably the union head is not here to condemn me. His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, has rooted out the Embroidered Union's branch in Chang'an for the sake of the country. Union Head Huo intends to revive the Kingdom of Shu. The two of us are enemies. This is something that we are helpless to change. If Union Head Huo desires to take revenge, this lowly official cannot blindly agree."

Huo Jicheng indifferently replied, "You've spoken the truth. To you, my Embroidered Union are rebels. The matter in Chang'an is something that

was unavoidable. But these are only trivial matters. They can be considered to have displayed their utter loyal to Shu. However, as the saying goes, 'there are no perpetual enemies.'[3] Currently, we suffer restrictions and exclusion everywhere. If this continues, I fear that not only will there be no hope of reviving our state, but we will also not be able to keep our lives. If His Imperial Highness is willing to collaborate with us, we will not necessarily have to revive our fallen kingdom. To be able to become rich isn't a bad course. Although His Imperial Highness has already stabilized his position as heir apparent, however, the Prince of Yong continues to eye it covetously. As a result, the Crown Prince has many people on whom he needs to spend money. To speak the truth, we are the only candidates who can collaborate with His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince. At present, the Prince of Yong is the one most desiring the Crown Prince to make mistakes. If others were serving His Imperial Highness, if they fell into the Prince of Yong's hands, they could very easily and comprehensively confess all of the Crown Prince's doings. Our Embroidered Union and the Prince of Yong have grievances as deep and profound as the seas. The hate of a vanquished nation can never be forgotten. We will never support the Prince of Yong. We also know that if it weren't for the Prince of Yong's stratagems, Great Yong and the Kingdom of Shu would not necessarily have gone to war. Therefore, there are no deep grievances between us and His Imperial Highness. If we are able to help the Crown Prince eradicate the Prince of Yong, then we would have made the greatest effort in avenging our late king. Moreover, even if someone exposes the collaboration between the Embroidered Union and the Crown Prince, would anyone believe this? Who would believe that the Crown Prince would work together with us rebels? In addition, the Crown Prince had just recently crushed our Embroidered Union's branch in Chang'an."

The more Cui Yang listened, the more he felt that Huo Jicheng's words were reasonable. Although he felt that this man was cold and reserved, feeling no distress at the loss of his comrades, he still felt that this man's words were correct. After hesitating, he inquired, "There are still a few noble brothers of your Embroidered Union in the imperial dungeons. I wonder if your distinguished self has any intentions."

Huo Jicheng smiled faintly and responded, “If His Imperial Highness feels that this doesn’t matter, then they can be released. If His Imperial Highness finds it difficult, then they can be executed so as to prevent others from suspecting the relationship between the Crown Prince and the Embroidered Union.”

Cui Yang was frightened. This man was truly vicious and merciless. He closed his eyes. It was some time before he suggested, “This official cannot make a decision on this matter. How about this? Let’s talk after I have reported this matter to the Crown Prince. Sire, come back tomorrow to hear the reply.”

Huo Jicheng smiled slightly and remarked, “This is the way it should be. However, Cui *daren* , the concubine that you are keeping in the city is pregnant. Why haven’t you brought her home? Could it be that your wife is jealous?”

Hearing this, Cui Yang’s hands began to shake. He almost dropped the teacup he had just picked up. He looked at Huo Jicheng’s handsome features, seeing what seemed like a devil.

Huo Jicheng respectfully bowed and stated, “This commoner will take my leave. If *daren* is not anxious, it would be better if your concubine not be moved before childbirth.”

Listening to Huo Jicheng’s casual threats, Cui Yang waved his hand weakly and without strength before he replied, “Union Head Huo be at ease. This official will not use deceit. Regardless of what, this official will not arrange a trap to set up the union head.”

Huo Jicheng departed from Cui Yang’s residence. Taking a breath of the icy air, he felt carefree. This time, he had taken a giant risk. However, this was too attractive, having enormous benefits. How could it not be seized? In comparison, what did lives matter? As long as he lived, then the Embroidered Union would never be destroyed. Once he had obtained the necessary provisions and military equipment, as well as over a million taels of silver, at that moment, they would be able to raise the banner of the heir of the Kingdom of Shu, reviving the Kingdom. If he one day was able to

ensure that the heir ascended to the throne, then he would become entirely worthy[4] of becoming the regent. At that moment, who would be able to compare with his magnificent glory?

When a cold burst of wind blew over, Huo Jicheng's boiling mind calmed down. He thought to himself that he needed to meet again with the people of the Pavilion of Heavenly Strategies. If their side were not successful, this business proposition would not be successful.

After walking through several avenues and small alleys, ascertaining that no one was following him, Huo Jicheng stealthily entered into a home. When its aged owner saw him, he did not make any sound, leading Huo Jicheng to the sleeping chambers. The old man pressed against a couple of places on the wall several times. The wall quietly began to move. Flourishing his sleeves, Huo Jicheng entered. Behind him, the door closed without making a sound.

Under the dim light, Han Wuji leisurely and contentedly sat in a chair, watching Huo Jicheng walk in. He stood, clasping his hands together in greeting and asked, "Union Head Huo, you've come. How did the discussion go?"

Huo Jicheng smiled faintly and replied, "It's still unclear and is dependent on whether their master is convinced. Brother Han, how is the situation on your side?"

Han Wuji smiled and answered, "I have already gotten a letter via homing pigeon. That side has already consented. Moreover, they have agreed to cooperate long-term. They urgently need these things. In addition, their treasury was practically emptied by the Prince of Yong. In the future, they hope to acquire gold, silver, and supplies through us from Great Yong. The trust of our Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets is still there. If this side is settled, then we can partner up to get rich."

Huo Jicheng poured a cup of tea for himself, drinking it in one gulp. He said, "Although our Embroidered Union's strength in Great Yong was not small, after the Crown Prince's thunder-like anger, from now on our progress will inevitably be extremely challenging. If we are unable to bribe

the Crown Prince, then this proposition will not come to fruition. However, you should be at ease, we have private ties to many officials. The majority of them have ties to the Crown Prince's faction. As the saying goes, 'like attracts like,'[5] and I can see that the Crown Prince isn't a good person. This kind of continual fighting and scheming is not difficult for me."

Han Wuji bowed and replied, "Then I will have to trouble the union head. Our power and influence still cannot penetrate deeply into Great Yong. Therefore, we will have to completely rely upon the union head's help. However, Union Head can be at ease with our operations in Southern Chu."

A greedy look suddenly flashed across Huo Jicheng's face before he spoke, "We know of the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets's power in Southern Chu. If your noble pavilion master is willing, we will be willing to further our cooperation."

Han Wuji smiled slightly. He was aware that Marquis Lu was stationed in Sichuan, splintering the Embroidered Union with his attacks. When the Prince of De controlled the general situation in Southern Chu, the Embroidered Union could never have been able to have an effect. In comparison, in Great Yong, because their present objectives were not targeted at Great Yong, they were therefore allowed to develop and expand. However, with the Prince of De dead, it seemed like Huo Jicheng wished to expand towards Southern Chu. Han Wuji tactfully responded, "We understand Union Head's intentions. However, at present, we are doing this business. If Union Head excessively and hurriedly moves forward, then it would inevitably harm the business. In reality, there is no need for the union head to be overly anxious. In any case, this business will only continue for a few years. By the time it concludes, Union Head will be well prepared. Then, the union head can do as he pleases."

Huo Jicheng glanced at Han Wuji, his expression shaking strongly before he replied, "Brother Han is indeed resourceful. I wonder if you are willing to refer me to the pavilion master to discuss the matters relating to our collaboration."

"Our pavilion master has handed the entirety of this matter to me to take care of," declared Han Wuji unyieldingly. "Union Head should not seek the

distant and neglect what's close at hand."

Afterwards, his expression became mysterious, as he continued, "Moreover, the pavilion master does not meet with outsiders. Even I have only met the pavilion master once, and even then, did not see the pavilion master's real face. However, pavilion master has spies beside every single one of his subordinates. Union Head should be careful."

Huo Jicheng looked somewhat unhappy. But after thinking it over, he remembered that the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets had always been a mysterious organization. No wonder this was the case. As a result, he warmly stated, "Brother Han is also a remnant subject of the Kingdom of Shu. For the sake of the great cause of reviving our kingdom, you should do your utmost. This matter will have to further trouble the supervisor. Do put in a good word to the pavilion master."

Huo Jicheng was of mind to win over Han Wuji, thereupon his speech became gentle and filled with sincerity. Han Wuji became apprehensive, thinking in his head that this man was indeed temperamental. He would need to be careful and not reveal any inconsistencies. Deliberately making his expression fill with sadness, he took a good while before he responded, "I am also someone from Shu. How can I not think about reviving our kingdom? It is only that the pavilion master is not fond of getting involved in affairs of state. As a result, he restricts us extremely strictly. If the profits weren't so ample this time, the pavilion master would not have agreed to this business."

Huo Jicheng realized that it was imperative that he not be too hasty with this matter. He spoke, "Many thanks for the supervisor's good intentions. I still need to arrange matters and will take my leave right now. After this matter is successful, I will return to discuss the particulars with Brother Han."

Han Wuji promptly rose to his feet and stated, "This matter is extremely urgent. I won't detain Union Head any further. Allow me to see Union Head off."

"There is no need to see me off," replied Huo Jicheng, "So as to avoid

attracting attention."

Han Wuji still respectfully escorted Huo Jicheng to the entrance of the room. In order to fool everyone, he did not see him off out of the door.

After Huo Jicheng had departed, the aged owner of the house suddenly straightened, pulling a mask off his face, revealing the face of an elegant youth. Han Wuji smiled and said, "Daoli, you must remember, if a person becomes greedy, it will hasten their death. This Huo Jicheng is indeed vicious and merciless. When he is trying to rope others, he is filled with fervor. If I did not know of his conduct and deeds, I fear that I would have been fooled. If one's conduct is duplicitous and filled with empty words,[6] one may be able to fool someone for a while, but one will never be to conceal things for the entirety of one's life."

The youth respectfully replied, "Daoli benefits from this advice."

Han Wuji smiled and continued, "'Jostling and joyous, the whole world comes after profit; racing and rioting, after profit the whole world goes.'[7] The way that the young master employs stratagems is beyond our expectations. Although I do not know the young master's intentions, this matter will definitely not be good."

At this moment within the crown prince's residence, a private discussion was also being held. Cui Yang waited until Huo Jicheng had departed before he immediately left his home and hurried to the crown prince's residence. He was the crown prince's younger brother-in-law and was the crown prince's confidant. No one made any effort to obstruct him as he headed straight for the crown prince's accommodations. When he entered the gorgeous Great Hall, he saw the crown prince wearing informal dress, in the middle of watching singing and dancing. Cui Yang could not help but take a few peeks. With this one glance, Cui Yang's eyes were glued to these dancers. Primarily these dancers wore skirts made from lotus leaves with lotuses covering their silky bosoms. Their exposed skin was as light as snow. Their posture and movements were graceful, their lithe movements touching and exciting. While it was clear that their attire was revealing, the tune of the dance was not lascivious. These women's movements were not affected in the least bit by shyness or embarrassment, and did not have any

overtones of obscenity or coarseness, causing the body and mind of any spectator to be entirely free from worry.

Seeing Cui Yang entranced, Li An taunted, “Cui Yang, why have you come? What are you doing standing there?” Finished speaking, he waved his hand. Those dancers withdrew. At this moment, Cui Yang saw that Lu Jingzhong was also present, sitting off to the side. In addition, beside the crown prince stood a handsome imperial bodyguard.

Cui Yang calmed his heart and replied, “Your Imperial Highness, this subject has a secret matter to report.”

The crown prince’s brows furrowed. Before he opened his mouth, the imperial bodyguard piped up, “Your Imperial Highness, this subordinate has another dance that requires me to consult with the musicians and the dancers. How about this subordinate first depart? When it is completed, I can allow Your Imperial Highness to appreciate it.”

The crown prince replied, “You can go. This Prince is awaiting your new tune. Have your senior apprentice brother keep an eye outside and prevent anyone from entering without permission.” After the imperial bodyguard had withdrawn, Li An glanced at Cui Yang and inquired, “What’s the situation? Speak.”

Footnotes :

礼下于人，必有所求, lixiayuren, biyousuoqiu – idiom, lit. when somebody humbles himself before you, he must have some request to make of you
魂不附体, hunbufuti – idiom, lit. body and soul separated; fig. scared out of one’s wits
This is from a speech that British Prime Minister Henry Temple, the Lord Palmerston, gave in the House of Commons in 1848: ‘We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow.’
当之无愧, dangzhiwukui – idiom, lit. fully deserving, without reservations; entirely worthy of
物以类聚，人以群分, wuyileiju, renyiqunfen – idiom, lit. birds of a feather flock together, people of a kind group together; similar things come

together, like attracts like

口是心非, koushixinfei – idiom, lit. mouth says yes, heart no; duplicity, empty words

This is a quote from the *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji*) by Sima Qian in the *Biographies of Usurers* .

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 12: Plotting a Trap

Volume 2, Chapter 12: Plotting a Trap

Cui Yang comprehensively explained everything that had happened. Indignantly, Li An stated, “These rebels, they have such gall! Junior Mentor, what do you think we should do?”

Lu Jingzhong squinted his eyes as he mulled this matter over for a moment before he asked, “Cui *daren* , you said that this person did not ask for his subordinates back?”

Cui Yang respectfully replied, “Yes, that’s right. Huo Jicheng not only was not anxious to rescue his people, but it seemed like he wanted them all killed to avoid anyone from becoming suspicious of our relationship.”

Lu Jingzhong sneered. “That man indeed possesses a fierce and vicious heart. However, this also illustrates that he is exactly Huo Jicheng. I know something of this Huo Jicheng. From the statements of the disciples of the Embroidered Union, we have learned that the person hails from a family of generals and is a member of an ancillary branch of the Li Family.[1] At the time, the Li Family was battling with the Tang Sect over control of Sichuan, concluding with the Li Family’s crushing defeat and the Tang Sect enfeebled. When Great Yong attacked the Kingdom of Shu, both parties were powerless to help. Otherwise, even if we had conquered the Kingdom of Shu, it’s likely that many of our ranking officers would have been assassinated. Neither the Tang Sect’s concealed weapons nor the Li Family’s Great Soul Scouring Hand are honorable and aboveboard martial arts; instead they are most suitable for assassinations. Later when Great Yong occupied the Hanzhong region, while a large part of Sichuan ended up in the hands of Southern Chu, the Tang Sect pledged its allegiance to Great Yong, while the Li Family pledged itself to Southern Chu. It was precisely this Huo Jicheng who was exceedingly queer, instead breaking away and establishing the Embroidered Union, declaring that he wishes to restore the Kingdom of Shu.

“Over these last few years, he has indeed had some accomplishments.

Unfortunately, this man's temperament is narrow-minded and Marquis Lu who is stationed at Sichuan has the ability of a great general. Therefore, he has suffered repeated setbacks. But although this man is incompetent, he has one good aspect. He is vicious and merciless, making decisions when it's time to decide. As a result, although the Embroidered Union has repeatedly suffered terrible and crushing defeats, it still has managed to preserve its strength. With the recent chaos in Southern Chu, presumably he has been able to take many advantages. Recently, he suffered a great setback at the hands of the Crown Prince. It's rare that he would think of this kind of idea. In this subject's view, he has come with sincerity.

"Regardless of what happens in the future, this business proposition is worth considering. He spoke a sentence that was correct. In the future if he were to make this matter public, who would believe that the Crown Prince would collaborate with them? If the Crown Prince wants to do this business, then you must immediately execute all of the rebels of the Embroidered Union in the imperial dungeons before collaborating with Huo Jicheng. Even if one day the Embroidered Union becomes powerful, would they dare to make things difficult for our Great Yong? Even if he were to raise an army to rebel, the matter would only affect the Princes of Yong and Qi, while also reducing the strength of their army. Further, these last several years, Your Imperial Highness's income practically does not cover our expenditures. This business is worth it. Even if there is a mishap in the future, Your Imperial Highness can excuse what happened as the actions of some officials colluding with the Embroidered Union. Afterwards, everything will be resolved once a few heads have been chopped off."

Li An pondered over this matter deeply for a bit. Glancing at Cui Yang, he spoke, "This matter's implications are too great. If it is divulged, I'm afraid that the Ministry of Revenue will fall into chaos. Wouldn't subject Cui be forced to take responsibility? This won't do, this won't do."

Cui Yang's ashen complexion gradually relaxed. Gratefully, he looked at Li An. However, although Li An said these words, his expression was filled with extreme reluctance. Lu Jingzhong callously laughed and said, "Although the Minister of Revenue Liang Jinqian seems to be Your Imperial Highness's

confidant, in reality he has different ambitions. Even though he is highly deferential to Your Imperial Highness, he has secretly recorded an account of the public funds that Your Imperial Highness has embezzled from the Ministry of Revenue. I'm afraid that Your Imperial Highness does not yet know of this."

Li An's entire body trembled with shock, urgently inquiring, "Do you speak the truth? How did you learn this?"

Pleased with himself, Lu Jingzhong responded, "Your Imperial Highness, as the saying goes, 'old men and young wives are the most restless.' Liang Jinqian has been cautious his entire life. Pitifully, he is already fifty and yet has taken a woman just over twenty as a concubine. Inevitably, he found her difficult to handle. That woman is loose and lascivious, and has been having an affair with Liang *daren* 's younger brother-in-law. Unfortunately, their conduct was insufficiently secretive as they were caught in the act by Liang *daren* . Influenced by anger, Liang *daren* had the woman beaten to death. As for his brother-in-law, he could only drive him out and refuse to permit him to come back. Unexpectedly, this concubine attached to this adulterous relationship was passionate and actually told her lover that Liang *daren* was keeping a private set of accounts. That little fellow harbored resentment. By lucky coincidence, he and I are acquaintances, and he ended up coming to my home to report this secret. I was originally planning on informing Your Imperial Highness today. However, Your Imperial Highness was in the middle of appreciating this song and dance. As a result, I had not yet had the time to report this."

Li An's face was grave, as he asked, "Do you have proof?"

Lu Jingzhong rose to his feet, stepping forward and presenting a piece of paper. Li An accepted the paper and took a look. On the paper was really an account of the money and grain that he had embezzled from the Ministry of Revenue, including the date used and the date returned, both extremely clear. Li An stood, angrily uttering, "What a good old flunky. This Prince is determined to take his life."

Lu Jingzhong smiled and replied, "This is only what that little fellow stealthily copied down to serve as proof. Originally, this subject would have

easily taken care of that Liang Jinqian. So long as Your Highness puts your mind to it, we will be able to easily steal the accounts and kill him to prevent him from divulging these secrets. However, this subject feels that this lets him off too lightly. Now this is a good opportunity. We will let Cui *daren* handle this matter, but secretly change things. If this business goes off without a hitch, then that is for the best. We can have a reckoning with him when all this is over. If something unfortunate happens, then we can have him take the blame. When that time comes, Your Imperial Highness needs only to make suitable arrangements. I can guarantee that he won't be able to reveal the truth. Afterwards, Cui *daren* will be by proper rights promoted to Minister of Revenue. By then, the Ministry of Revenue will be Your Imperial Highness's personal treasury."

Hearing to this point, Li An laughed heartily and stated, "A good plan. Subject Lu, you are indeed our think tank." An ominous glint flashed in Li An's eyes before he coldly said, "However, keep a strict eye on him. He must not perceive our intentions nor allow him to give his accounts to someone else."

Li Jingzhong straightforwardly asked, "Your Imperial Highness be at ease. Are you not comfortable with this subject's handling of matters?"

Li An suddenly remembered something and asked, "Where is that informant?"

Lu Jingzhong indifferently responded, "That person would always be a scourge left alive. This subject has taken the initiative and has already taken care of him."

Pleased, Li An nodded his head and replied, "Not bad. That person had learned this Prince's secrets, so how can he be allowed to continue to remain alive in this world?"

Hearing that he himself would become the Minister of Revenue, Cui Yang's face was originally lit up with delight. But when he heard the two talk about entrapping and killing Liang Jinqian, his state of mind did not have the slightest bit of fluctuation. However, he could not help but grow cold. In his heart, he realized that he should no longer continue listening. If he had

learned any secrets, then it wouldn't be worth it if he was killed to be prevented from divulging a secret. Thinking of this, he promptly spoke, "Your Imperial Highness, Lu *daren* , the hour is already quite late, this subject should withdraw. If Your Imperial Highness approves of this matter, this subject will go back and wait for Huo Jicheng to come calling."

Lu Jingzhong thought to himself, *There are some important matters that need to be discussed, it would be better if he departed* . Therefore, he said, "Your Imperial Highness, it is also good if Cui *daren* goes back, so as to avoid the questioning from the people of the Embroidered Union. Your Imperial Highness, how about we first allow Cui *daren* to agree to this matter? With regards to the specific arrangements, this subject will go discuss them with Cui *daren* ." At the same time he spoke, he shot the crown prince a meaningful glance.

Once he saw Lu Jingzhong's glance, Li An immediately knew that he had some private secrets to discuss that would be inconvenient for Cui Yang to know about. Smiling, he said, "All right, Cui Yang, you go back first. After we've discussed this, Lu *daren* will go speak to you in detail. However, this Prince has already agreed to this matter in principle. You should properly think over how to start out on this task."

Cui Yang accepted the order before he withdrew. Li An looked at Lu Jingzhong. He inquired with a smile, "Are there any other matters? Speak … Is there any need to conceal it from Cui Yang? Is it important?"

Using a finger to twirl his whiskers, Lu Jingzhong sneered, "Your Imperial Highness, although the Ministry of Revenue belongs to you, more than half of the military is in the hands of the Prince of Yong. It is because of this that we cannot do this business on our own and must allow the Embroidered Union to run errands for us. However, if the military pays attention to this matter, no matter how ferocious the Embroidered Union, are they capable of struggling against the Prince of Yong?"

Li An frowned and inquired, "Does this mean that this business cannot be done, then?"

Lu Jingzhong shook his head and responded, "How would this do? This

subject has an idea that would cause the Prince of Yong to be too busy to worry about Your Imperial Highness's affairs. When that happens, wouldn't Your Imperial Highness be as steady as Mount Tai? Although we have a scapegoat in case something happens, we will inevitably lose money."

Listening to this point, Li An's eyes lit up, as he replied, "What idea such that the Prince of Yong won't have the time to worry about others? If that is the case, even if we aren't able to do this business, then we will still be perfectly satisfied."

Lu Jingzhong smiled and stated, "This is also a coincidence. Your Imperial Highness wishes for Xiahou Yuanfeng to become the husband of Princess Changle. However, the Princess has yet to agree. Therefore, this subject has asked Concubine Lan to have Noble Consort Ji question the Princess about the matters of her heart. Yesterday, when this subject came to this residence, Concubine Lan transmitted a message from the Noble Consort, stating that Princess Changle seems to have no intention of remarrying. This subject originally thought it would be fine even if the Princess refused to remarry. In any case, no one would have received any benefit or advantage. Therefore, this subject did not take this matter to heart. Concubine Lan also took the opportunity to speak a few more words. First, Princess Changle usually does not have any hobbies and is only fond of reading poetry. Moreover, she is most fond of the poetry of Southern Chu's foremost gifted scholar, Jiang Zhe, a scroll always in her hand on a daily basis. Second, yesterday, Princess Changle went to the Prince of Yong's residence to drive away her worries. When she returned to the palace, her mood was extremely good."

Li An's brow furrowed and asked, "Are you saying that Princess Changle and that surrendered subject from Southern Chu have personal connections? Don't talk nonsense! You know about this younger sister of mine. She is extremely virtuous, and would definitely not have a love affair with anyone."

Lu Jingzhong smiled and answered, "This subject also knows that this is a matter where shadows cannot even be caught. However, as long as we embellish the details,[2] naturally, there will be those who will accept this as

true.”

Li An’s eyes widened and his eyebrows rose, and he said, “You’re saying …”

With a smile, Lu Jingzhong replied, “Naturally, I’m talking about Qin Qing, General Qin. General Qin is deeply in love with the Princess, unwavering to this day. However, the Princess has been frigid[3] towards the general ever since she returned, completely disregarding the feelings engendered from being childhood friends. General Qin has been extremely annoyed. Consequently, he has been very haughty when treating the surrendered subject from Southern Chu, going so far as to insult Jiang Zhe in front of everyone at the Honeydew Hall. It is said that the Prince of Yong highly values this Jiang Zhe. Over this matter, Qin Qing has already heavily offended the Prince of Yong. This presents us with an opportunity. We can send some people to whisper a few choice words into General Qin’s ears, saying that the Princess had conducted a love affair with Jiang Zhe in Southern Chu, and this was the reason why she took no notice of General Qin….”

Speaking to here, Li An exploded in anger and exclaimed, “Shut your mouth! For Great Yong, my Imperial Sister married to the distant Southern Chu. Now that she was finally able to return with great difficulty, regardless of whether she had a love affair, we cannot permit you to disgrace the Princess’s reputation.”

Lu Jingzhong shivered like a cicada in winter, promptly falling to his knees to apologize. Only when Li An calmed down, did he voice, “Your Imperial Highness be at ease. Even if this subject had enormous nerves, I would not dare harm the Princess’s reputation. This matter will not be leaked out. Even if Qin Qing learned of this matter, would he dare to propagate it? No matter how hot-headed General Qin is, he will never do such a thing. If this subject guesses correctly, General Qin will inevitably look for an opportunity to interrogate Jiang Zhe. We can dispatch assassins to secretly follow. Since this matter is no more than groundless accusations,[4] that Jiang Zhe should certainly be capable of explaining this thoroughly. When General Qin has been satisfied and departs, we will act and kill Jiang Zhe. This ploy will benefit us greatly. First, regardless of whether that Jiang Zhe has talent,

killing him now will cause the Prince of Yong to be grieved. Second, the Prince of Yong will inevitably suspect that Qin Qing killed Jiang Zhe. If this happens then even if Grand General Qin Yi is able to explain everything, the Prince of Yong will certainly bear a grudge in his heart. Thus, the Prince of Yong will be occupied with demanding justice from Grand General Qin Yi. How would he be able to consider us?"

Li An's complexion was heavy and grave, wavering. Lu Jingzhong continued, "The people involved in this matter all have high status and great authority. Who would spread this gossip? What's more, to speak something that is punishable by death. Although the Princess is someone who has performed meritorious service, she is after all, the Queen of Southern Chu. With Southern Chu's fall, the Princess became the Queen of a destroyed nation. In the past, Xi Shi had performed meritorious service to the state of Yue and yet was thrown into the lake to drown by the Queen of Yue. What's so bad about the Princess only suffering a few words of idle gossip? Additionally, the Princess and Noble Consort Zhangsun lean towards the Prince of Yong. Your Imperial Highness must not be unaware of this, otherwise why would you think about having Xiahou Yuanfeng to become the Princess's husband?"

Li An was silent and did not speak a word. His eyes brimming with tears of excitement, Lu Jingzhong added, "Your Imperial Highness is an enlightened sage. At most, after Your Imperial Highness ascends to the throne, it will be sufficient for Your Imperial Highness to greatly comfort the Princess. If we do not eliminate the Prince of Yong, Your Imperial Highness will never be at peace."

Thinking it over, Li An finally heaved a deep sigh and replied, "You have to be careful and ensure that this matter is not spread. If Imperial Father or Imperial Sister hears this gossip, We will absolutely not spare you."

Lu Jingzhong knocked his head against the ground and replied, "Your Imperial Highness be at ease. This subject will absolutely not allow this gossip to be disseminated."

After hesitating for a moment, Li An said, "However, that person is presumably is in the Prince of Yong's residence. How can assassins infiltrate

it?”

Lu Jingzhong smiled and replied, “Your Imperial Highness be at ease. After the fifteenth, the Prince of Yong will call a feast to see off the heir. According to custom, he must inevitably invite to the feast all of officialdom. Your Imperial Highness be at ease. This subject will definitely have Qin Qing be the scapegoat. As for that Jiang Zhe, he can only blame fate for being unkind. Who let him pledge allegiance to the Prince of Yong?”

Li An nodded his head slightly. Seeing that they had finished discussing these affairs, he called out in a loud voice, “Xing Song! Xing Song!”

The door to the hall was pushed open and a gloomy looking middle-aged man came in. Dropping to one knee, he greeted the crown prince. Li An casually inquired, “Did that Xia Jinyi go anywhere? Has he communicated with anyone?”

Xing Song respectfully responded, “Reporting to Your Imperial Highness, Xia Jinyi conversed with the musicians and dancers for a little while. Afterwards …” Speaking to this point, Li An’s brows furrowed and began to exude a killing aura from his eyes.

Xing Song continued, “Afterwards, that person went to the inner gardens to have a private meeting with Xiu Chun,[5] one of the maids that attend to the Crown Princess.”

Li An’s heart first lightened. This Xia Jinyi had been allowed to stay as an imperial bodyguard because he had performed great service and due to his senior apprentice brother’s face. Originally, he had only treated Xia Jinyi as a malingerer. Unexpectedly, this man was humorous and witty, possessing the gift of gab and adept at song and dance and romance. It wasn’t long before he became fond of Xia Jinyi. However, he could not randomly keep a person by his side. Just now, when Cui Yang came to report so mysteriously, if Xia Jinyi was a spy, he would certainly have exhausted all methods to eavesdrop. Standing outside guarding the entrance was Zhang Jinxiong. Xia Jinyi would have easily been able to find an excuse to remain behind.

Unexpectedly, Xia Jinyi had no intentions of eavesdropping, instead occupying himself with an illicit relationship with a maid. If he were a spy,

then he was the stupidest spy in the world. If he were even a little bit qualified, then he wouldn't be doing these kinds of things. The harshest punishment for someone having an illicit relationship with a maid would be being beaten to death with staves. Pleased with him, he thought to himself that this Xia Jinyi would from now on be allowed to stay by his side. Xia Jinyi was a good flunky, loyal and amusing. He was so much better than his senior apprentice brother. As for having an illicit relationship with a maid, although Li An was somewhat dissatisfied, this wasn't a major issue. Although this maid attended to the crown princess, Xiu Chun's appearance was not bad, though not outstanding. Li An had never paid any attention to this girl. A few days earlier, the crown princess had even spoken with him about marrying off some of her attendant maids.

At this moment, within the inner gardens of the crown prince's residence, Xia Jinyi was embracing a beautiful maid, speaking sweet and honeyed words. He was speaking of his wanderings in high spirits, enthralling this young lady who had never even taken a step out of the prince's residence. While he spoke, he began to grope her. He was experienced with matters of the heart, and would not be impulsive and terrify this young girl. He tenderly kissed Xiu Chun's powdered neck, and also began to nibble on her blushing red earlobe. His pair of hands stopped behaving, roaming all over Xiu Chun's delicate body. It wasn't long before he easily caused this unlearned young girl to become completely distracted. Seeing that he was successful, Xia Jinyi embraced the young girl's trembling and pampered body, hiding behind the rock garden. Just as Xia Jinyi was about to undress, just as he was about to get what he wanted, suddenly an inhospitable shout rang out. Xia Jinyi was frightened and begin to tremble. His lustful heart immediately vanished, and he promptly tidied his clothes. After some time, noticing that there was no activity outside, Xia Jinyi stuck his head out, catching sight of his immediate superior, Vice Supervisor Xing Song standing outside with his heads behind his back. Under the moonlight, his entire face was cold and frosted. At once, Xiu Chun had become clear-headed, hurriedly arranging her clothes. With her head lowered, she left the rock garden. With a plop, she kneeled on the ground, her entire face filled with shame, weeping without end. Xia Jinyi also hurriedly kneeled on the side. Pitifully, he

implored, “Supervisor *daren* , please spare this little one this once.”

Xing Song coldly replied, “You, little fellow, have the impertinence to engage in an illicit relationship with one of the Crown Princess’s maids. Quickly come with me to see His Imperial Highness.”

Xia Jinyi was so frightened that his complexion became wan, as he begged, “This little one implores *daren* to grant me a favor. This little one is no more than a wastrel. What does life and death matter? Xiu Chun is young. I beg the supervisor to spare her this offense. Afterwards, this little one will absolutely dare not come again to seduce her.”

Xing Song smiled and replied, “You little one, rise. Afterwards, you must not repeat this crime. Go back. If you let me catch you again, I will flay your skin.”

Hearing this, Xia Jinyi was filled with joy, repeatedly kowtowing in thanks until Xing Song’s figure had disappeared. He perceived that his entire body was already covered in cold sweat.

After Cui Yang returned to his residence, he hurriedly and casually ate some food. Then he stared blankly into the distance under the lamplight. He knew that his fate was closely linked,[6] especially if the crown prince fell. However, he felt increasingly scared out of his wits while following the crown prince. As for the Prince of Yong, Cui Yang recalled when he had delivered army provisions to the Prince of Yong’s army and the audience that he had been granted. At the time, the Prince of Yong wore a set of light armor and a brocade gown. When he handled matters, he was swift and decisive, while in private, he was easygoing and amiable, causing one to feel that he was being cleansed by the spring wind. Although the crown prince was the heir apparent and was his brother-in-law, he was nevertheless arrogant and haughty, often causing Cui Yang’s back to be covered with cold sweat. Inevitably there was the feeling that he was skating on thin ice. Thinking of this, Cui Yang was practically thinking about betraying the crown prince. However, he quickly had second thoughts. The crown princess was his own elder sister. The crown prince’s heir was his own nephew. Fame and fortune ultimately transcended his conscience and fear. Cui Yang rose to his feet, thinking to himself, and realized that he had no

way to turn back.

Looking at the color of the sky, Cui Yang saw that dawn was already breaking. He had spent much time coming and going from the crown prince's residence, and had been in deep contemplation for some time. Cui Yang pushed open the window. Last night, he did not know that a light snow had fallen overnight. Outside the window, the radiance of the snow was splendid. Cui Yang walked out the door, taking a deep breath of the frigid atmosphere. At this moment, the housekeeper came forward to report, "Reporting to *daren* , that guest from yesterday has come again."

Cui Yang smiled slightly before he replied, "Invite the guest to see me in the study. It's still early. Presumably, the guest has yet to eat breakfast. Deliver two portions to the study."

A clear and bright laugh could be heard from outside before a voice said, "This commoner has come again to disturb *daren* ."

Cui Yang raised his head and looked over, catching sight of Huo Jicheng dressed entirely in gray. He carried with him a graceful elegance as he stood against the wind. Stepping forward, Cui Yang cupped his hands in greeting and spoke, "Brother Huo, no … Brother Ji, please come to the study to speak."

Huo Jicheng saw that although Cui Yang seemed to be somewhat exhausted, he was unable to conceal his happiness. Huo Jicheng knew that the proposition was successful. As such, he returned the greeting and replied, "Good, then I'll have to trouble *daren* ."

Finished speaking, the two exchanged looks and laughed, almost as if they were old friends. Amidst the laughter, Huo Jicheng's mind had fallen far away. If he were able to obtain sufficient army provisions and military equipment, then he would be able to advantage of the war between Great Yong and Southern Chu, thus the revival the fallen Kingdom of Shu would be just around the corner.[7] He had to rely upon the help of the Pavilion of Heavenly Strategies, otherwise he would be in an extremely difficult situation[8] in Southern Chu. He would wait until their association had deepened and then he would think of a plan to annex the Pavilion of

Heavenly Strategies, pocketing the countless assets of the Heavenly Secrets Trade Association. Even if he were unable to revive the fallen kingdom, he would still be filthy rich.

Cui Yang's thoughts were a lot simpler. If this business were successful, not only would he be able to skim a generous amount of the profits, he would also be able to advance the crown prince's trust and regard for him. His future would be bright.

Footnotes :

历, li – different character from the surname of the Great Yong imperial family (**李**, Li) meaning strict or severe
添油加醋, tianyoujiacu – idiom, lit. to add oil and vinegar; fig. adding details while telling a story to make it more interesting, to embellish details
冷若冰霜, lengruobingshuang – idiom, lit. as cold as ice and frost; icy manner, frigid
捕风**捉影**, bufengzhuoying – idiom, lit. chasing the wind and clutching at shadows; fig. groundless accusations; to act on hearsay evidence
绣**春**, xiuchun – lit. embroidered spring
一条线**拴**俩蚂**蚱**, yitiaoxianshangdemazha – idiom, lit. grasshoppers on the same line; fig. the dooms of the two are closely linked
指日可待, zhirikedai – idiom, lit. be able to count the days until; just around the corner
寸步难**行**, cunbunanxing – idiom, lit. unable to move a single step; to be in an extremely difficult situation

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 13: Guests Come to the Cold Courtyard

Volume 2, Chapter 13: Guests Come to the Cold Courtyard

On the sixteenth day of the first month of the first year of Southern Chu's Tongtian era, the eleventh year of the sixty-year cycle, the heir of the Prince of Yong prepared to journey far from home. A banquet with all of officialdom was held to see him off. Jiang Zhe did not participate. During the banquet, the General of Tiger Might, Qin Qing, requested a private meeting, listening to rumors and blaming Jiang Zhe. Jiang Zhe persuaded him otherwise and Qin Qing withdrew…."—*Southern Chu Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Jiang Suiyun*

I comfortably stretched my body. These past few days, I had received the news that the crown prince had already taken the bait. As such, I could temporarily set aside these troublesome matters. Today, the entire Prince of Yong's residence was extremely busy, as Li Zhi's heir was preparing to go administer his father's fief in Youzhou. According to custom, His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, must hold a banquet with all of officialdom. I was not interested in these kinds of events. As a result, I asked for the day off from His Imperial Highness, preparing to stay in the Cold Courtyard and take a look at the several out-of-print books that Li Zhi had gifted me. His Highness was awfully understanding of my mood that disliked the hustle and bustle of banquets. The Prince of Yong's outer residence would be chaotic today as there were numerous nobles and aristocrats coming to attend. After all, many of them had the qualifications to wander about the residence. There was nothing to be concerned about as long as they did not approach any of the restricted areas. In order to prevent these individuals from disturbing me, His Imperial Highness specifically dispatched several men to guard the entrance to my courtyard, not permitting anyone entry without permission. His Imperial Highness originally believed that there would be no harm for me to go hide in the inner residence. However, to prevent suspicion,[1] I declined his offer. In any case, with men outside guarding the Cold Courtyard, what did I have to fear?

Xiaoshunzi knew best my temperament. When he rose in the morning, he opened the doors and windows, releasing the turbid atmosphere accrued overnight. Afterwards, he ignited a furnace of sweet fragrance. After I had changed into a set of comfortable robes, I drank a cup of fragrant tea steeped for me by Xiaoshunzi. This was truly the life of the immortals! As I was reading, I unintentionally raised my head, catching sight of Xiaoshunzi carving white jade using a silver knife. He had picked up this habit recently after I had forced him to whittle a wooden doll for Roulan. After that, he had suddenly become fond of carving. When he had nothing to do, he would frequently hold a knife and carve. I once had asked him why he had abruptly become so fond of carving. He mysteriously told me that this was a good way for him to train martial arts. A while ago, he had always felt that his martial arts weren't improving. Surprisingly, while whittling a wooden doll, he discovered that his martial art techniques' flow and naturalness had improved. Through this, he found a new way of training. Although I did not understand the link between carving and training martial arts, I still comprehended how performing analogous tasks would help. Watching Xiaoshunzi's skill with the knife improve from a stiff and chaotic mess to become flowing and uninterrupted, I could feel that he was seemingly making progress. At the very least, his carvings were becoming increasingly lifelike. Therefore, I decided to purchase for him a pile of ordinary pieces of jade for him to practice with. As a matter of fact, he had carved the paper weight on my desk a few days ago.

Watching him, I suddenly began to laugh and spoke, "Xiaoshunzi, although you are fond of carving, is there really a need for you to practice daily? Today, His Imperial Highness is holding a feast. In the front courtyard, there are juggling, acrobatics, and music. You should go take a break and relieve your boredom."

Xiaoshunzi indifferently replied, "There are too many people outside. I won't feel easy leaving you here by yourself."

I smiled and said, "You are being too careful. This is the residence of the Prince of Yong. I am no more than a lowly surrendered subject. Who would come to assassinate me? All right, go enjoy yourself. Don't forget, you're only

twenty years old. Don't always be like an old man. That would be my sin if that continues."

Xiaoshunzi glared at me for a moment. However, he was still young after all. The juggling and acrobatics were extremely attractive for him. But he didn't feel comfortable leaving me here alone. I smiled and stated, "How about this? Call Hu Wei in here and have him substitute for you and guard me. You should feel at ease with that arrangement, right?"

Xiaoshunzi glanced at the teacup on the desk and replied, "But there has to be somewhere here to attend upon you with tea and water."

I helplessly remarked, "Xiaoshunzi, don't forget that it was I who taught you how to steep tea. All right, go enjoy yourself. Today, you are not permitted to follow me. The Lantern Festival lasts for three days.[2] It's enough that you guarded me last night. Today, go take a stroll and take in the sights. You are not permitted to spend all of your time within the residence. I don't go out, so there are unlikely to be any dangers."

At last, Xiaoshunzi nodded his head before he agreed, "Fine, I'll go. Young master, be at ease and continue reading. I will arrange everything."

I watched his receding figure, smiling with gratification. This was the way it should be. Why did a kid who had just turned twenty have to always be so mature? He should by all rights take the time to have fun and enjoy himself. Although when I was twenty years old, my money had been stolen by this little fellow and I had no choice but to take the examinations, he did not necessarily have to mistreat himself.

After seeing Xiaoshunzi off, I continued to be engrossed with these out-of-print books. When Hu Wei entered, kneeling and greeting me, he saw that I did not make any response. Having followed me for some time now, he knew that I would sometimes become so engrossed in reading and forget everything else. He thus quietly withdrew outside and did not disturb me. At this moment, I did not yet know that the closest point I ever got to death in my life was swiftly approaching.

***

At the same time he was dealing with his colleagues next him, Qin Qing also

had a load on his mind. Today, he had come on his father's behalf to attend the banquet. However, he wasn't interested in chatting with these old foxes. Therefore, after he had promptly congratulated the Prince of Yong, he left the banquet chambers and walked outside. Although he was watching the juggling and acrobatics performance on the stage, his mind was not into it, entirely consumed by the shadows of Princess Changle and Jiang Zhe.

Years ago, he had invited the princess to elope, but had been forcibly rejected. At the time, his youthful recklessness caused him to talk irresponsibly, denouncing the princess for her ingratitude, coveting the honor and glory that came with being the Queen of Southern Chu. After the princess tearfully departed, watching her still proud figure caused him to be painfully filled with regret. Unfortunately, he did not have the opportunity to apologize. Afterwards, he had been heavily criticized by his father before being tossed into the army. He had fought with blade and spear to rise to his current position as a fourth-ranked General of Tiger Might. It was a pity, but he never had the opportunity to fight and quench the grudge that he harbored against Southern Chu. When he learned the news of the princess's return, he was both happy and sad. He had most dearly wished to be able to lead an army to defeat Southern Chu before personally kneeling before the princess to beg for her forgiveness. But now, he did not have the opportunity anymore.

After the princess returned, he had at once asked his mother to enter the palace to pass on his intentions. However, all he received was a bowl of cold water in the face. Unexpectedly, the princess did not have a shred of affection left for him. He felt such pain in his heart that it was killing him. Embracing the last thread of hope, he participated in the exhibition, but only fought to a draw with that pretty boy. Although he knew that this didn't represent that he was inferior to Xiahou Yuanfeng, Qin Qing understood that he had completely lost any hope of reconciling with the princess. Furthermore, after the competition, he had been punished by his father by being locked into the family ancestral hall to kneel, because of the dispute that he had gotten into with that surrendered subject from Southern Chu. Qin Qing loathed Southern Chu, also transferring his hate to the people of Southern Chu. This person, Jiang Zhe, had an undeserved reputation, having

kneeled and surrendered, and yet still argued with the courage of his convictions.[3] What was the big deal about mocking him? However, his father had unexpectedly used family regulations and punished him seriously. Even right now, Qin Qing could still remember his father's ashen face and reprimands.

"Bastard! I don't blame you for your past misbehavior and I don't blame you for taking out your anger for no reason on someone who doesn't deserve it. However, you unexpectedly insulted a virtuous person in front of everyone. If this continues, what future does our Qin family have to speak of? Do you understand how big of a mistake you've made? That man, Jiang Zhe, is not a mediocrity. He was an adviser to the Prince of De, permitting Southern Chu to gain an easy victory in Sichuan. With a single tune, he took the life of the King of Shu. With one essay, he caused all the lofty individuals of Great Yong to feel fear and trepidation.[4] This man is worthy of becoming a great minister of the state. You would lightly disparage him just because he is a surrendered subject. You must know that if this man's character were even just a bit narrow-minded, then your life would be lost to his hand."

Although he was unconvinced, he could only bow his head and acknowledge his mistake towards his father's violent rage. It was only yesterday that his father finally released him. Sighing, his father stated, "Little flunky, tomorrow, the Prince of Yong is hosting a banquet. You will go on my behalf to congratulate the prince's heir on departing for his father's fief. Remember, you must find the opportunity to meet Major Jiang and apologize to him. If this man bears a grudge against you, I'm afraid that this will be a calamity after all is said and done. I made inquiries. His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, regards this man as one of his confidants. Even the Prince of Qi regards this man highly. Neither of the two Imperial Highnesses are mediocre individuals. It can be clearly seen that this man is difficult to deal with. If you cannot obtain his understanding and forgiveness, then even your younger brothers and sisters will likely be implicated."

As a result, he had gone to the Prince of Yong's residence filled with resentment and indignation. Originally, he had thought it would be sufficient

if he randomly acknowledged his mistake. However, just a moment ago, he had learned news that nearly caused him to faint from anger. Unexpectedly, Princess Changle had had a love affair with that shameless surrendered subject.

It was a coincidence that he learned this information. After meeting the Prince of Yong and expressing congratulations on behalf of his father, Qin Qing raised the matter of going to apologize to Jiang Zhe no matter how uncomfortable he felt. The Prince of Yong cheerfully agreed, but had stated that Major Jiang was usually ill and weak, and probably would not be able to greet visitors until *sishi* ,[5] as he had to first relax. He could only helplessly agree, silently cursing the useless scholar and looking with pleasure at the landscape within the Prince of Yong's residence. But before he had gone far, he found a pair of eunuchs whispering behind some pine trees. He originally had no intention of eavesdropping, but he heard something that immediately left him dumbfounded.

One of the eunuchs proclaimed proudly to his colleague that when Princess Changle had come to this residence, she had a secret rendezvous with Major Jiang. It seemed that the two had a love affair while both were in Southern Chu. Were it not for this eunuch attending to Major Jiang under orders, it was likely that this enormous matter wouldn't have been known. The eunuch had stated that Major Jiang had given him a thousand taels of silver and promised him the position of supervisor when Major Jiang had become the emperor's son-in-law as long as he was willing to keep this secret.[6]

Listening to this point, Qin Qing was so angry that his head spun. It was quite a while before he became clear-headed. Just as he was about to go forward to question, the two eunuchs had already departed. Qin Qing foolishly remained where he was, considering repeatedly. If the princess married Wei Ying or Xiahou Yuanfeng, even though he would feel sad, he would still accept this. But if the princess really had a love affair with that feeble scholar, then he would definitely not conciliate with this fact. After thinking it over, as the princess was virtuous and tender since youth, it surely must be that surrendered subject who seduced the princess. Were it

not for the words the Prince of Yong had spoken previously, Qin Qing would probably have immediately hurried to interrogate Jiang Zhe. As a result, during the following period of time, regardless if it was watching the juggling and acrobatics or doing other things, Qin Qing was preoccupied with other matters. When the time had come and seeing that the low-and mid-ranked officials had basically all arrived, Qin Qing found one of the imperial bodyguards to guide him to meet Jiang Zhe. These imperial bodyguards had long ago received the Prince of Yong's instructions, so this particular guard led Qin Qing to the Cold Courtyard.

Although Qin Qing was filled with hot anger, he was after all a descendant from a distinguished martial family. The entire trip, he was full of curiosity. With this Jiang Zhe being the major in the household of the Marshal of Heavenly Strategies and with Chief Clerk Shi Yu departing for Youzhou to assist the heir, then wouldn't Jiang Zhe's position in the Prince of Yong's residence be second only to the prince? However, as he walked, the path became increasingly lonely as if this guest courtyard was exceedingly remote. Qin Qing could not help but ask his guide, "Why does Major Jiang live in such a remote place?"

The imperial bodyguard smiled and replied, "Qin Qing is not aware, but Major Jiang is fond of tranquility. Therefore, he specially chose to reside at this Cold Courtyard. He rarely leaves this courtyard."

As he was filled with suspicion and jealousy, Qin Qing inevitably let his imagination run wild. This man lived so remotely … could it be possible that this was to facilitate his private assignations with the princess? Arriving at the Cold Courtyard, Qin Qing discovered that this location was heavily guarded as expected. He could see over a dozen imperial bodyguards out in the open. His guiding imperial bodyguard stepped forward to report the situation to those stationed at the door. One of the imperial bodyguards entered into the courtyard to deliver the message. After a moment, the man returned and reported, "The Major invites General Qin."

Qin Qing entered the Cold Courtyard, discovering that the inside was indeed beautiful, secluded and desolate. It seemed that this Jiang Zhe was truly fond of tranquility. With one glance, he saw Hu Wei standing at the

entrance of an elegant pavilion. Qin Qing was extremely clear that Hu Wei was one of the Prince of Yong's trusted subordinates. It seemed that the Prince of Yong attached extreme importance to Jiang Zhe as expected. It was even possible that the matter between Jiang Zhe and Princess Changle was supported by the Prince of Yong. The rage within Qin Qing's heart blazed even hotter.

I was in the middle of reading when Hu Wei abruptly entered and reported that Qin Qing, General Qin, had come to request a meeting. I stared back blankly. This man had been rude to me in front of everyone. Why had he come to see me today? At first, I considered refusing to meet him, but I realized that he would not have come if there wasn't something important. But why would the Prince of Yong arrange for him to come meet me? I could only lower the book. I was too lazy to change my clothes, since this was not an official matter. Since this wouldn't be for long, it was not worthwhile troubling myself.

After a moment, Qin Qing entered. When he entered, he stared blankly at me. I was baffled, gesturing to have Hu Wei to withdraw. I asked, "General, why have you come today? Please forgive this lowly official for my casual garb. I am accustomed to doing as I wish within my chambers. General, please sit."

Qin Qing silently sat down, looking at the youth sitting opposite him. This youth was wearing a cozy and relaxed set of azure colored robes. His hair had not been bound and was only drawn together with a hairpin. This youth's expression was leisurely and serene. Qin Qing had an intense feeling that this youth opposite him was fundamentally someone not of this vulgar world. Qin Qing thought in his mind, *Did this youth really have a love affair with Princess Changle* ?

Watching this big and handsome general staying silent and not speaking, I could not help but feel somewhat vexed. I impersonally asked, "What matter does the general have? If there is nothing, then please forgive my infirmities. I cannot be seated for long."

Finished speaking, I picked up my teacup, taking a sip of top-quality Mengding Ganlu tea. This was a top-quality tribute. Even His Imperial

Highness, the Prince of Yong, only had a few taels.[7] The prince had given me half of what he had received. This was my favorite. I would only steep this tea during these kinds of leisurely days. Who knew that I would only have the opportunity to take one sip before I heard Qin Qing coldly inquire, “Did you really have an affair with Princess Changle?”

PUCHI ! The tea in my mouth completely spewed out. I stared blankly at Qin Qing. Somewhat stuttering, I asked, “General Qin, what … what did you say?”

Qin Qing coldly looked at me and said, “I asked you whether you had a love affair with Princess Changle.”

I subconsciously employed my senses. Right, Hu Wei was far from here, he should not be able to listen. Why was there such a question? I looked at Qin Qing and asked, “General Qin, forgive me for speaking so bluntly, but do you have a relationship with the Princess?”

Hearing this, Qin Qing’s face blushed deep red as he replied, “There is none.”

I could feel goosebumps all over my body, knowing that this man’s killing intent had been stirred. However, after thinking it over, I could not allow Hu Wei to come in. If this kind of rumor-mongering were spread, then even the Prince of Yong would be unable to protect me. I calmly stated, “Since General does not have any relationship with the princess, isn’t it inappropriate to investigate the princess’s love affairs? However, since the general has asked, if I do not respond, then unavoidably it would appear that I have a guilty conscience. However, this matter can happen once and only once. I hope that the general will use his brains first before he asks.”

I looked at Qin Qing’s green complexion, feeling that there was still some leeway. I therefore continued, “Jiang Zhe is a surrendered subject from Southern Chu. That General disdains me is understandable. However, the sole good aspect of Jiang Zhe’s life is that I keep my nose clean. Aside from my deceased wife, I have never had relations with any other woman. If General reprimands Jiang Zhe for bending my knee and surrendering, no matter how much offense I take, I must still listen. However, with this kind

of filthy speech, as far as I'm concerned, although I treat it as floating smoke and allow it to pass, I still cannot allow you talk nonsense."

Qin Qing's complexion changed several times before he coldly replied, "Do you dare swear?"

I laughed scornfully, indifferently stating, "General, Jiang Zhe, in this life, can swear above to the firmaments and gods and below to the common people that I have never done this kind of thing. However, there is no harm for me to speak bluntly. I have only met and spoken with the Princess on two occasions. The first was in Southern Chu, as I was granted an audience. The second time was the other day, a chance encounter here in the Prince of Yong's residence. The Princess is blue-blooded nobility and was once the Queen of Southern Chu. We are separated as liege and vassal. If General Qin considers these matters as a love affair, then there is no innocence left in this world."

Qin Qing calmed down. He could hear that although my words were fierce and forceful, they contained no falsehoods. Thinking of how he had come to interrogate after listening to gossip and ended up being badly bruised, and had not acted in accordance with his father's wishes in apologizing to Jiang Zhe, Qin Qing clasped his hands together and apologized, "This is my mistake. This is what I had overheard from two eunuchs in this residence. Would the major please forgive me?"

I grew cold, immediately raising my voice and calling, "Hu Wei."

Hu Wei immediately pushed open the door and entered. In a stony voice, I said, "There is someone babbling nonsense, angering General Qin. You will immediately go and bring them to see me. General Qin, what did those two look like? Where did you meet them?"

Qin Qing originally did not intend to speak, but seeing the icy coldness in Jiang Zhe's eyes, his heart actually trembled and he indeed revealed those two eunuchs' age and appearance. Hearing this, Hu Wei thought it over before he spoke, "*Daren* , this subordinate knows who those two are. They are eunuchs that have come here from the palace. May I ask *daren* , should I bring them here?"

Thinking it over, I replied, “Today, His Imperial Highness is hosting a banquet. We cannot alarm any of the guests. Capture those two and have them imprisoned, allowing His Imperial Highness to handle it.”

After Hu Wei departed, I looked at Qin Qing and said indifferently, “General Qin, listen to my advice. The reason why your esteemed father has received glory and favor to this day is not because he relied upon his power and influence to intimidate others. I have heard that the personal character of the Grand General Who Pacifies Remote Lands is reserved. He will act according to his words, and if he acts, there will be results. He is most deserving of admiration. Grand General handles affairs fairly and firmly. If there are no offenses, he does not even mistreat a mere soldier. If there are offenses, he does not yield even to imperial kinsmen. General should consider your behavior these last few days. Is there anything for you to brag about? It is not that I am having an intimate conversation when we are only acquaintances,[8] but I cannot bear for the Grand General’s descendants to disappear.”

Qin Qing originally should have been indignant, but he felt that Jiang Zhe’s words seemed to share similar intent with the words spoken on a daily basis by his father, and did not dare refute them. Thinking back to how he had been eaten up by anger and jealousy, the more Qin Qing thought, the more he became ashamed. He was originally a descendant of a martial family and had received the earnest guidance from his stern father. Although he was momentarily muddled, this was not his true nature. Having thought this through, he felt leisurely and bright. Respectfully, he kneeled on the ground and acknowledged, “Many thanks for Sir’s guidance. That day, Qin Qing offended Sir. Would Sir please forgive me?”

I was greatly surprised. Remarkably, this man was capable of acknowledging his mistakes and changing. I could not but help him rise to his feet, and respond, “For the general to give such great courtesy, this lowly official does not dare to accept. If there are points where I have offended you, would General please forgive me?”

Qin Qing calmly replied, “Sir, originally Qin Qing wished to listen to Sir’s guidance. However, I have come to offer my congratulations. The banquet

will soon start and Qin Qing will have no choice but to go congratulate His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong. Someday in the future, if there is the opportunity, would Sir please grant me your guidance?”

I could not help but rejoice that our hostility had unexpectedly transformed into friendship. I personally saw Qin Qing out of the Cold Courtyard. After seeing him walk off into the distance, I suddenly heard a voice excoriate, “Who dares trespass into the Cold Courtyard? Quickly surrender and be bound!”

Footnotes :

瓜田不納履, 李下不整冠, guatianbunalü, lixiabuzhengguan – idiom, lit. don’t tie your shoelaces in a melon patch, and don’t adjust your hat under a plum tree; fig. don’t do anything that might arouse suspicion, innocent acts may be misconstrued

The lantern displays of the Lantern Festival (元宵节), marking the end of the Chinese New Year celebrations, typically last three days.

振振有辞, zhenzhenyouci – idiom, lit. to speak forcefully and with justice; to argue with the courage of one’s convictions

心惊肉跳, xinjingroutiao – idiom, lit. heart alarmed, body leaping; fear and trepidation in the face of disaster

巳时, sishi – 9-11AM

守口如瓶, shoukouruping – idiom, lit. to guard one’s mouth like a closed bottle; tight-lipped, reticent, not breathing a word

A unit of weight measurement that is about 50 grams.

交浅言深, jiaoqianyanshen – idiom, lit. to talk intimately while being comparative strangers

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 14: Breaking a Destined Marriage

Volume 2, Chapter 14: Breaking a Destined Marriage

On the sixteenth day of the first month of the first year of Southern Chu's Tongtian era, the Commander of Great Yong's Imperial Guard, Pei Yun mistakenly arrived at the Cold Courtyard. Jiang Zhe, fond of his outspoken and straightforward nature, kept him company and shared a few drinks. After privately discussing for a long time, before long, the topic turned to Pei Yun's annulment of his engagement and wish to marry another. At the time, everyone laughed at him for turning his back on righteousness and being fickle. Subsequently, many thought Pei Yun was sensible and unwavering. As for Jiang Zhe, he broke a destined marriage, truly deserving the contempt of wise men….—*Southern Chu Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Jiang Suiyun*

When I turned my head to look, I saw a youth in gray with a peculiar appearance and calm features being barred by a pair of guards. There was a look of confusion on his face, seemingly not understanding why such a remote location would be so heavily guarded. Those two imperial bodyguards had even drawn their blades. The situation was extremely tense and on a hair's trigger. Although he did not consider these two guards to be much of an opponent, he had no intention of being a real assassin. Therefore, he made no attempt to resist. When I looked over, he was speaking in a grave tone, "Come, the two brothers, this one is Commander Pei Yun of the Imperial Guard. I have come to the Prince's residence to attend the banquet, but as I dislike the ruckus, I began to wander all over. I really had no intention of trespassing here. Please forgive this one for not knowing that this location is off-limits."

The two imperial bodyguards exchanged looks, both half believing, half doubting. If they considered this man's manner, it was really like that of a general. However, the aura that he was emitting was not only extraordinarily fierce and doughty, but each and every one of his movements carried with them the demeanor of an expert. If this man really

had evil intent, then what face did these guards have to report to His Imperial Highness?

I had already recognized Pei Yun. Who could have thought that the person that the Prince of Yong wished to rope in was so formidable? Pei Yun was a commander of the Northern Barracks of the Imperial Guard. He was only a fourth-ranked general. Although he had the heavy responsibility of protecting the capital, he did not have the qualifications to attend a banquet within the Prince of Yong's residence. With his status, he would at best be allowed to deliver some congratulatory gifts. It was likely that he wouldn't even have the qualifications to take a seat in the banquet. For him to shockingly appear in the prince's residence, the Prince of Yong must have specifically sent him an invitation. Thinking of this, I smiled slightly, intending to give His Imperial Highness a helping hand. Rather than having Pei Yun attend the banquet in a side hall, where he could not even have the chance to see the Prince of Yong, he would be better off staying here. So thinking, I commanded, "Do not be rude! This must be Pei Yun, General Pei, correct? This lowly official is the major in the household of the Marshal of the Heavenly Strategies, Jiang Zhe."

Seeing me speak, the two imperial bodyguards saluted and retreated. Pei Yun walked over and saluted me, stating, "Much thanks to Jiang *daren* for helping this general out of trouble."

His gaze towards me was calm and reserved. This was something new and odd. Ever since I had arrived in Great Yong, each and every official that I had met either had looks of curiosity and evaluation or scorn. This man was actually looking at me as if I was an ordinary person. This caused me to be increasingly curious. Consequently, I smiled and said, "It seems like the general does not like the ruckus out in front, therefore has walked towards the back. This lowly official is also this way, thus chose to reside in the Cold Courtyard. Since we have met here by chance, then we were brought together by fate. How about General takes a seat inside?"

"His Imperial Highness's banquet will soon begin," replied Pei Yun, hesitating. "I'm afraid that it is inconvenient for this general to stay here."

I smiled indifferently and replied, "It is not lacking in manners even if

General does not take part in the banquet. There's no point in taking a seat outside of the main hall. How about this? If General is willing, Suiyun is about to eat. Would the general be willing to stay and eat with me? Suiyun will personally explain to His Imperial Highness."

Pei Yun was moved. After he had received His Imperial Highness's invitation, although it was a glory and an honor, he was not comfortable being among those officials, let alone the fact that with his status, he would only have the privilege of attending the banquet in the outer hall. Truly there was no point. If it weren't for the Prince of Yong's invitation, he would only need to deliver some gifts. This man before his eyes was a lot more straightforward than those court officials. For his residence to be so heavily guarded, it seemed like the Prince of Yong regarded him extremely highly. If that were the case, he would not be lacking in manners towards the Prince of Yong. Comparatively, it was actually quite a good idea to stay in the Cold Courtyard.

From Pei Yun's expression, I knew that he had already consented tacitly and thus I spoke in a clear and bright voice, "Someone go and report to His Imperial Highness that I am keeping General Pei here."

One of the imperial bodyguards bowed and acknowledged the order. I stepped forward and grabbed Pei Yun's arm, saying, "Please come in quickly, General Pei. Jiang Zhe deeply admires General's martial arts."

Pei Yun was somewhat shyly pulled by me into the reception hall. The time was approaching noon and two servants were delivering food and drink. As per custom, I had them withdraw. Picking up my chopsticks, I pointed at the table filled with food and said, "General Pei, Jiang Zhe is a southerner, therefore His Imperial Highness deliberately and specially found a Southern Chu chef to cook for me. Please taste it and see if you're used to the food."

Pei Yun looked at the table filled with side dishes, all of which appeared to be light dishes that seemed to smell, look, and taste great. After tasting a few bites, he could not stop praising the cuisine. Although he was someone who ate meat with every meal, because these were all specialty dishes from Southern Chu, I saw Pei Yun eat with relish. I poured another cup of wine for him and said, "This is a famous wine from Southern Chu named "Peach

Blossom," fermented each autumn using the highest-quality, sweet honey peaches. I had never expected that I would be able to drink this wine here. This was specially brought back from Southern Chu by an old friend. He only delivered it yesterday."

Taking a sip, Pei Yun felt as if he was tasting honeydew, a fragrant and good wine. However, his temperament was resolute and upright, and he did not like this kind of weak, velvety wine. His brows could not help but furrow. Taking all of this in, I smiled lightly and said, "It seems like General Pei does not like this wine. I have heard that in the border regions of Great Yong there is a kind of *shao daozi* [1] that is incomparably spicy. Does General like it?"

Pei Yun's face immediately filled with delight, replying, "*Daren* has *shao daozi* here? It is rarely seen here in Chang'an."

I walked to the corner of the room where there was a yellow poplar cabinet. From the bottom shelf, I took out a small wine pot. Although this jar wasn't big, it contained at least ten catties of wine.[2] While it would not have been too difficult for me to bring it over, it was still not easy. Pei Yun promptly came over to take the wine pot, placing it next to the table. He could not help but glance at the cabinet. Inside, it was filled with wine pots and boxes of food.

After removing the seal, Pei Yun could immediately smell the blazing wine fragrance that he could never forget. He took a deep breath and then impatiently poured the wine into a large bowl that I handed him. He very earnestly took a deep gulp, the familiar throat-prickling spiciness causing him to feel as if he had returned to the border regions. Powerlessly, he sat in his chair, once again raising the bowl to his mouth, allowing the liquid to slide down his throat. It almost seemed like tears were falling from his eyes as he thought back to the bloody battles on the border. Those days were filled with happiness and freedom. Now in the capital, although he had high position and great wealth, there was no one that he could pour his heart out to. He yearned to return to the border, but recalling his father's aged figure, Pei Yun closed his eyes, resisting with great difficulty the misery and suffering in his heart.

I did not expect Pei Yun to be so moved, however I quickly understood his heartfelt emotions. It seemed that the greatest wish of this commander of the Imperial Guard was to once again return to the battlefield. Unfortunately, I was at a loss at what to do. Not only could he not abandon his father still mourning the loss of two of his sons, but wasn't he himself in a difficult situation as well? But seeing him suffering, I suddenly remembered some matters. If he had children, then it wouldn't be difficult for him to return to the battlefield. Thus, I inquired, "General Pei, may I know how old you are?"

Pei Yun was after all a descendant of a prestigious house. He calmed down very quickly. Raising his head, he responded, "Troubled *daren* to ask. This general is twenty-three this year."

I continued to question, "Has General Pei gotten married?"

Pei Yun blushed with shame and shook his head, replying, "My father has arranged a marriage for me. However, I have always been unwilling. Therefore, I am still a bachelor to this day."

I suspiciously asked, "Why is this? Your esteemed father presumably is impatiently hoping for a grandson. Since General is obedient to his parents, you should take a wife as early as possible."

Pei Yun glanced at me. Although he felt as if he was speaking of intimate matters with a comparative stranger, he did not why, but he had an indescribable favorable impression of this youth before him. Although he couldn't discount the pot of *shao daozi* , his state of mind was extremely relaxed. Moreover, these matters had been smothered in his heart for a long time. He also wanted to find someone to talk to. Thus, he opened his mouth and said, "*Daren* does not know, but before I have attained a measure of success in my martial arts, I cannot take a wife. However, at the beginning of this year, my master stated that I am able to take a wife. However, this is not the main reason. Most importantly, my fiancée's status is special, causing my master and the sect extreme dissatisfaction."

I was moved and asked, "May I ask which family the general's fiancée is from?"

Pei Yun smiled wryly and responded, “She is the daughter of Xue Ju, the Vice Minister of Works. Originally, our two families were close throughout the ages. She and I were betrothed when the two of us were still in the womb and we grew up together from childhood. Our regard for one another can be considered to be congenial affection. However, at the age of nine, I ascended Mount Song[3] to learn martial arts. When I descended the mountain at the age of sixteen, I learned that she had entered the Fengyi Sect. When my sect learned of this, they immediately summoned me personally back to Mount Song. The First Seat of the Discipline Hall, Martial Uncle Compassionate Ocean personally told me that while the Shaolin Temple could not prevent me from marrying her, I would then lose the opportunity to learn the secret arts of the Shaolin Temple. He wanted me to think it over carefully. As a result, I have been unwilling to this day to complete the marriage. I have tried several times to cancel the engagement, but that side has refused to consent. My father-in-law stated that his daughter had not lost virtue. If I were to cancel the engagement without reason, he would bring me before the emperor to judge innocence or guilt. My father has recently been pressing me. If I weren’t using my life to resist, I fear that I would have been forced to complete the marriage long ago.”

Thinking to myself, I realized that it seemed that the Shaolin Temple really had a deep grudge against the Fengyi Sect. His Highness’s information was correct. Moreover, for Pei Yun to so easily reveal this, it seemed like the Shaolin Temple did not mind falling out with the Fengyi Sect. However, I verbally asked, “This subject does not understand this matter. Doesn’t the matter of marriage follow the dictates of one’s parents and the matchmakers’ words? General, if you were to be married, wouldn’t it be the proper course of action? Why has your honored sect forcibly obstructed this? Isn’t this contrary to human relations? Could it be that General considers your sect’s secret arts to be that important?”

Pei Yun lowered his head and replied, “Although this general is obsessed with martial arts, I am not someone unruffled by sentiment and forgetful of righteousness. If she were an ordinary woman, I would rather my sect reclaim all the martial arts that I have learned than turn my back. It is only that when I first returned to Chang’an seven years ago to pay my respects to

my father-in-law, I met her. She had become very formidable, completely different from her childhood innocence and sincerity. Although at present, the combination of her appearance and temperament are ten thousand in one, also trained in martial arts, however I felt that she was some distance away from me. Although her smiles are still sweet, they are no longer able to touch my heart. Moreover, she is always together with those women of similar statuses. If she isn't going out hunting or touring, she is acting wantonly to her heart's content inside Chang'an. Although I am not someone who cannot bear his wife to be outstanding, I nevertheless hope that she is capable of performing the traditional roles of a good wife and attending to the needs of my parents. As a matter of fact, two years ago, when I returned from the border, I originally no longer considered improving my martial arts and decided to promptly get married, so that my parents could enjoy their old age and play with a grandchild.[4] But when I met her again, the dissatisfaction in my heart did not diminish in the slightest. She was indeed outstandingly beautiful and had talent surpassing others. However, what I want is a good wife who is willing to share meager resources. When we are married, she must attend to my parents on my behalf while I return to the battlefield to serve the state. But it is impossible for her to do so. Every time that I've met her, she is either discussing major events of the world or the situation of *jianghu* . I really do not want to take such a woman as my wife."

I silently gazed at Pei Yun, knowing that every single one of his words came from the bottom of his heart. With regards to a fierce general from a battlefield, what he needed was not a woman as beautiful as a picture. What he needed was a good wife who could keep house for him. The Fengyi Sect probably did not anticipate this. Not all men were so fond of a wife who was remarkably beautiful, exceptionally talented, and yet incapable of handling life's daily necessities.[5] Thinking of this, I smiled faintly and stated, "In reality, General is overthinking it. There are no parents in this world who are not biased towards their children. If the general explains to your parents the principle of marrying a virtuous wife, your parents will surely understand. If you are hindered by your parents-in-law, then there is no harm for the general to take a concubine on the outside. When you have gotten a son, don't tell me that your parents would be angry when they see

their grandson."

Pei Yun was moved. When that moment comes, it was likely that he could not use the need to practice martial arts as an excuse to delay the marriage. Seeing his expression, I understood that he was already willing, although it was still somewhat inconvenient. And so, I said, "General has repeatedly tried to cancel the engagement. It's only the opposite party who has refused. Presumably, the reason that the general gave to cancel the engagement was inadequate and insufficient. Moreover, you have no wish to offend your parents-in-law. When the time comes, there is no harm for General to explain that you had unintentionally formed a relationship with another woman on the outside, and cannot abandon and not care for her. Even if the opposite party has a greater background and justification, they won't be able to prevent the general from taking concubines, right? If they angrily cancel the engagement, then wouldn't this be in accordance with the general's wishes? If they persist in wanting to marry their daughter over, can an outsider query about the matters between husband and wife? So long as the general only dotes on the concubine and your parents dearly love their grandson, it's likely that it won't be long before your esteemed wife will propose a divorce."

Somewhat unable to bear it, Pei Yun lamented, "Although the plan is good, I'm afraid that it is too hurtful."

I unsympathetically replied, "Although it will harm another for a while, presumably the general's fiancée has many pursuing her. If the general reluctantly takes a wife who you do not like, when in the future, husband and wife become estranged, not only will you not be able to display filial piety to your parents, you will also not be able to properly educate your children. This would truly be contrary to human relations. If that Miss Xue is a good and virtuous woman, then for this subject to speak thus is to break a marriage that was destined by fate, an unpardonable crime. However, presumably Miss Xue …"

I did not speak any further, but seeing Pei Yun's complexion become red and white, surely my words were correct. How many of the disciples of the Fengyi Sect liked showing their face in public? Moreover, it was common

practice in Great Yong to be open and unrestrained. Even commoner women from the sect did not leave the entrance of the home, nor step out from within the inner residence, not to mention the women from distinguished and powerful families.

After a while, Pei Yun's expression calmed down. His face still somewhat red, he turned to me to express his thanks. I smiled and said, "All of the general's worries have disappeared today. How about we drink some more?" Pei Yun toasted me respectfully. I poured a cup of the Peach Blossom wine for myself. I couldn't tolerate drinking the *shao daozi* .

The complete trust just now caused the two of us to begin to become friendly. Therefore, our conversation gradually stopped being restrained. This Pei Yun displayed keen interest and pleasure discussing military matters. He was once a valiant commander under the Prince of Qi. Therefore, many of his stories were related to the Prince of Qi. Although the Prince of Qi was not a famous general, he was intrepid and fearless. Moreover, he was willing to listen to the advice of his retainers. As a result, he was highly esteemed by the officers and soldiers in his army. Pei Yun was also extremely respectful when he spoke of the Prince of Qi. It seemed like I couldn't scorn the Prince of Qi. His previous two attacks on Xiangyang failed because of Xiangyang's tight defenses and because the army did not have clear strategies and objectives. I had heard the Prince of Yong explain that these campaigns had been promoted by the crown prince alone. It may be assumed that I scorned the Prince of Qi for these failed invasions. It seems that I truly treated him unjustly. As long as several capable retainers were dispatched to help the Prince of Qi, then he would be capable of assuming personal responsibility to guard a region.

Just as our discussion was getting extremely friendly, I heard music sound from out front, signaling the start of the banquet. Although the banquet hall was some distance away, one could still vaguely hear it. Becoming aware that the banquet had already started, I laughed and said, "Today, I have stopped you from taking part in His Imperial Highness's feast, however, you shouldn't be considered to have lost out. The wine that I have here should surely leave you satisfied."

Pei Yun smiled and replied, “Many thanks for Jiang *daren* ’s *shao daozi* . Were it not excessively rude, I would want to take a pot of wine away with me.”

Just as I was about to respond, the sound of a soft groan arrived at my ears. I shivered internally, perking my ears to listen carefully. I heard another urgent breath, followed by the sound of bones breaking. Oh Heavens! There was someone attacking and killing the imperial bodyguards defending the Cold Courtyard. I forcefully calmed myself down. I knew the approximate locations of all of the guards. From the sounds, the position of the two recently killed imperial bodyguards should be quite close. The rest of the guards were over a hundred paces away and I would not be able to hear the sounds they made. I glanced at Pei Yun and saw that he had not yet become aware of what was happening. Afterwards, I heard the sound of someone pushing open the gate to the courtyard. This sound should also have been taken note of by Pei Yun, however he didn’t seem to pay any special attention to it. I glanced at his expression, noticing no abnormalities. It seems that he assumed it was one of the Cold Courtyard’s servants. I set down my cup and wondered why there was someone killing the guards around the Cold Courtyard. I determined that the other imperial bodyguards had already been killed; otherwise one of the guards would have noticed that someone was entering the Cold Courtyard without permission. Looking at the time, it was right when everyone was becoming intoxicated. The majority of the imperial bodyguards were out up front. Therefore, this man was able to easily penetrate this far. I did not even have the strength to truss a chicken. I glanced at Pei Yun. Was he reliable? After all, he was once a subordinate of the Prince of Qi.

Pei Yun looked at Jiang Zhe with a strange expression on his face. Why did Jiang Zhe suddenly fall silent? Moreover, his expression was somewhat queer. Pei Yun could not help but begin to gather his strength to prepare for any eventualities. Just at this moment, he caught the sound of soft footsteps, of feet stepping on the accumulated snow in the courtyard. Pei Yun’s heart trembled. He could tell from the sound that the person coming had exceedingly brilliant *qinggong* . From the sound, that person was probably only leaving small holes in the snow. Was it an expert from within the

prince's household? Pei Yun almost immediately dismissed this thought because this man's caution and care did not resemble someone from the prince's household. Checking his body, he remembered that he had not brought any weapons. Although he was adept with his limbs, it was still good if he had a weapon at hand. He immediately spoke in a low voice to Jiang Zhe, "Jiang *daren* , there's someone coming from outside. He does not seem to be someone from the Prince's household. Do you have any weapons here?"

I glanced at Pei Yun. He seemed like he could be trusted. My safety would temporarily have to rely upon him. The person coming probably harbored malicious intentions. However, I did not have anything on hand that could summon the imperial bodyguards on duty out at the front of the residence. Those imperial bodyguards who had been killed did have copper whistles on their person. However, there was no way for me to get them. I did not know if Pei Yun was able to block the incoming foe. If no one arrived in time, I feared that my life would end.

I did not hesitate, retrieving a dagger from the cabinet. This was the only weapon in these chambers. Although the hairpin in my hair was incomparably sharp, I was not counting on Pei Yun using it.

Pei Yun frowned, pushing the dagger back to me and said, "You should keep it to protect yourself."

I smiled wryly and looked at the exquisite dagger. This was a small knife that was originally used to cut meat. In the hands of an expert, it would be able to take lives. What use did it have in the hands of someone like me? However, I still took the dagger. Since Pei Yun's boxing skills were formidable, it wouldn't be much use given to him. At this moment, a quiet voice came from outside the door. "Sir Jiang, His Imperial Highness knows that Sir is unwilling to attend the banquet, and has specially dispatched this subordinate to deliver some imperial wine."

Pei Yun's expression relaxed, glancing awkwardly at me, seemingly feeling as if he was too sensitive. I stopped him, shaking my head. It wasn't possible that this man had been dispatched by the Prince of Yong. His Imperial Highness knew my habits; he would absolutely not dispatch a stranger to

deliver wine. If he had sent Xiaoshunzi, it would have been reasonable. However, it was impossible for him to have sent a stranger.

I indifferently stated, “Who is outside the door? Please come in to speak.”

The door was sorrowfully pushed open. Entering the room was a middle-aged man dressed in the garb of an imperial bodyguard. His appearance was so average that he would be lost in a crowd. With one glance I could tell that he was not someone from the prince’s household. Moreover, I could smell two odors from his body: one was the scent of the fumes from the kitchen; the other was the faint reek of blood. Looking at him, I coldly asked, “Are you the recently arrived chef from Southern Chu?”

The middle-aged man stared back blankly, while Pei Yun also looked at me with a strange look. I ignored their bewilderment and coldly continued questioning, “Why have you come to kill me? Who sent you?”

Pei Yun immediately fixed his attention closely on the middle-aged man, his eyes filled with wariness. That middle-aged man’s expression suddenly transformed from gentle into grim and sinister. In an instant, the seemingly mediocre imperial bodyguard disappeared, replaced by a cold-blooded killer. Pei Yun took a step forward to stand in front of me. The middle-aged man suddenly laughed and he asked, “How did Jiang *zhuangyuan* know that I was a killer?”

My expression became intensely grim and severe. I callously replied, “I know who you are. You are Vicious Killer, the greatest assassin in the Southern Chu army. Previously, you obeyed the orders of Prince Zhao Jue of De. At present, you probably follow Rong Yuan’s orders, correct?”

The middle-aged man’s expression became grave as he callously responded, “No wonder the Prince’s dying command was that if Jiang Zhe surrendered to the enemy, we must by necessity spare no effort to kill you.”

Hearing this, I could not help but dribble a mouthful of blood from the corner of my mouth. I slowly sat down, closing my eyes.

Footnotes :

烧刀子, shao daozi – aka sorghum wine is a strong distilled liquor (*baijiu* , *shaojiu*) that is fermented from sorghum that originates near Tianjin. It is

also a brand name today.
Roughly 5 kilograms
嵩山, songshan – Mount Song is the central mountain of the five Great Mountains of China. Although it is one of the sacred Taoist mountains of China, it also is home to a significant Buddhist presence as it contains the Shaolin Temple, birthplace of Zen Buddhism
含饴弄孙, hanyinongsun – idiom, lit. with malt sugar in one's mouth and dallying with one's grandson; to live a life of leisure at old age while playing with grandchildren
柴米油盐, chaimiyouyan – idiom, lit. firewood, rice, oil, and salt; fig. life's daily necessities

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 15: Unaware of the Oriole Behind

Volume 2, Chapter 15: Unaware of the Oriole Behind[1]

On the same day, assassins from Southern Chu suddenly arrived, killing all of Jiang Zhe's guards. Jiang Zhe was injured by an arrow, nearly losing his life, and was only saved by the presence of General Pei Yun….—*Southern Chu Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Jiang Suiyun*

Pei Yun was greatly alarmed. Although he did not turn around to look at me, he could still detect the changes in my breathing. Speaking, he asked, "Jiang *daren* , are you okay?"

From my bosom, I removed a jade bottle, taking one of the pills inside. The roiling *qi* and blood in my chest gradually calmed down. Lifting my head, I indifferently stated, "I've known that you've always served the Prince of De. That day, if you weren't acting under orders to protect Sir Rong in Xiangyang, it would be very likely that His Highness may not necessarily have been attacked by an assassin and died from his wounds."

That middle-aged man's head bowed slightly, glistening teardrops appearing at the corners of his eyes. He coldly replied, "Jiang *daren* formerly held a deep and profound regard for His Highness, going to the trouble of traveling a long distance to try to save His Highness's life. Unfortunately, His Highness's fortune was meager. As His Highness was approaching his end, he once privately told me that if Jiang *daren* pledged allegiance to Great Yong, Southern Chu would be in grave danger. He had me vow if something like this were to happen that I must take *daren* 's life. His Highness stated that *daren* would understand. For Southern Chu, His Highness believed there was no other choice than to assassinate *daren* . He asked that *daren* forgive someone who is already dead."

I neutrally accepted, "I will not blame His Highness. Even in death, His Highness is loyal and devoted to Southern Chu. In comparison, I did not have even a shred of loyalty. In life, His Highness's tolerance for Suiyun's existence had garnered Suiyun's extreme appreciation. Your distinguished

self be at ease. Today, if I were to survive, that which His Highness entrusted me on that day, Suiyun will never forget. If there is the opportunity, I will not betray that trust."

That middle-aged man was startled. Afterwards, he recovered his normalcy and faintly divulged, "Jiang Suiyun truly possesses an extraordinary bearing. This assassination was my own idea. When the fate of a nation hangs in the balance, everyone bears responsibility.[2] I cannot bear to watch Southern Chu fall. On that day, His Highness would often sigh before me, stating that if Jiang *daren* were willing to wholeheartedly serve Southern Chu, then the nation would forever be safe. If *daren* were to pledge allegiance to Great Yong, then Southern Chu could only perish. In this way, Southern Chu will be in chaos both within and without. If you are not killed, Southern Chu will inevitably come to regret it."

I glanced at him. Just as I was about to speak to stall for time, he seemed to have seen through my intent. His figure pounced towards me, met by Pei Yun. In a flash, the two exchanged several blows, the violent and fierce gale-force killing aura forcing me to retreat into the corner.

Watching them fight bitterly, my mind had actually turned to my memories. At the time, when I returned to Jianye from Sichuan, I had encountered huge changes. During my convalescence, Xiaoshunzi had long ago discovered that the Prince of De had dispatched people to monitor me. Although I knew that temporarily there would not be any changes, I knew that I had to prepare for the exigencies. Therefore, after I had established the Secret Camp, I immediately had Xiaoshunzi thoroughly investigate those by the Prince of De's side. This Vicious Killer was one of the prince's most trusted confidants. This man always stayed hidden and was adept at assassination. Although based upon the Prince of De's temperament, the assassin was not used often, I already had classified this man as a threat long ago. Now, he had appeared here while I was being careless. Who would have expected that he would try to assassinate me, an ordinary surrendered subject, in the heavily-guarded residence of the Prince of Yong? Alas, I had known the Prince of De's wholehearted loyalty.[3] Who could have thought that at death's door he would leave such a command to have me dealt with?

Although I was able to understand, I was still bitterly and frigidly disappointed.

I smiled bitterly as I looked forward. Pei Yun had a grave complexion as he fought with Vicious Killer. Although his moves seemed to be clear and simple, they were like an impenetrable defense as he obstructed the quicksilver and insidious killing blows of Vicious Killer. Although the fight was still even, I could see the heaviness in Pei Yun's expression and knew that he was probably losing. Examining the room, there was only one window. The door was being completely blocked by the two fighting. Dragging my tired and feeble body, I walked before the window, sparing no effort to push the window open, looking regretfully at the cluster of roses outside. As for this courtyard of mine, although it had been tidied up, after all it was not yet spring, therefore there were plenty of miscellaneous flowers and weeds, including the wild roses outside the window. Although they had not bloomed, there were plenty of thorns on the stalks. If I were to jump out, I would likely be covered by cuts and bruises. Trembling for a moment, I decided that I would only jump out the window as a last resort.[4]

At this moment, Vicious Killer was already somewhat anxious. It had not been easy for him to sneak into the Prince of Yong's residence. Moreover, although he had stayed in the residence for a couple of days now, the rules here were strict and rigorous. He had no way of approaching Jiang Zhe. Usually, Jiang Zhe had numerous guards by his side. In addition, every several minutes, there was a patrol squad passing through. If they were disturbed, even if he had three heads and six arms,[5] he would not be able to escape. Moreover, although he did not know how formidable Xiaoshunzi's martial arts were, the assassin knew what it represented when a top-quality expert such as himself could not tell the depths of Xiaoshunzi's martial arts. Today, the rare opportunity had come. Xiaoshunzi was not present in the Cold Courtyard and the residence was hosting a large banquet. Most of the imperial bodyguards were out up front, causing the defenses around the Cold Courtyard to be greatly relaxed. According to his observations, a patrol would pass in an hour. Therefore, he had boldly killed all of the imperial bodyguards around the Cold Courtyard and hid their bodies. In this way, he would have plenty of time to assassinate Jiang Zhe. The only thing he had

not accounted for was that Jiang Zhe actually had an expert from the Shaolin Temple by his side who had mastered Arhat Boxing to perfection. This set of Shaolin fighting techniques that had tight defenses was unexpectedly able to block him. There wasn't much time left and Vicious Killer steeled his heart and let out a severe shout. His complexion became blood red as blood seeped from the corner of his mouth. His fighting style suddenly changed, its power doubling and adding several degrees of strangeness. With a bang, the two men's palm and fists exchanged blows. Pei Yun paled, retreating a step. Not even giving the opportunity to retaliate, Vicious Killer had already followed him relentlessly, pouncing upon him once again.

Bang , *bang* , *bang* , three successive blows. Pei Yun was forced to retreat three steps, almost touching the table. Under the wind pressure of the exchanges, the pot of *shao daozi* had been affected, shattering and spilling wine everywhere in a split second. Struck by a spark of inspiration,[6] Pei Yun retreated a step and with one leg, he lifted the wine pot into midair and then sent the shattered bottle flying out with a palm. The entire room now was filled with alcohol, drops blending with Pei Yun's *qi* . Vicious Killer had no choice but to use both of his hands to draw out the image of multitudinous palms before him, blocking the oncoming shards. At this moment, Pei Yun rushed to my side, grabbing and raising me onto his shoulder before charging out the window. My entire face was in extreme pain from being struck with the shattered pieces of wood. The leather shoes on Pei Yun's feet did not hesitate to land on the dried rose stalks. Only then did I, in my confusion, realize that we were outside in the courtyard.

Behind us, we could hear a cry of fury, as Vicious Killer had already dashed out, his figure as fast as lightning, striking to kill me. Pei Yun closely protected me. Although the circumstances were extremely dangerous, and Vicious Killer's martial arts were originally adept at attacking in all directions and caused Pei Yun to be unable to defend, there were benefits to this wide open space. Pei Yun continued to protect me as we hid from place to place, temporarily preserving my life. However, it wouldn't do if this kind of situation was to continue. I had just been hit by another bout of my illness. At this moment, my hands and feet were weak. Just from this hiding, I was already gasping for breath. It was likely that it would take no more

than ten paces before I would collapse.

Pei Yun could also see this danger, thinking that he could only fight with his life on the line. His complexion suddenly became solemn and serene, the color of his skin having a faint golden color. He no longer continued to dodge; setting me down, he leapt towards Vicious Killer. Seeing the color of Pei Yun's skin, Vicious Killer gasped in alarm, "Divine Diamond (Vajra) Force!" He did not dare to be neglectful. The two figures merged before suddenly separating. Almost as if he hadn't felt anything, Pei Yun turned and attacked again. Vicious Killer's complexion was somewhat wan. This was the first time that he had lost when contesting internal energy with Pei Yun. He did not know that Pei Yun himself was also finding it hard to take. Pei Yun had only mastered seventy percent of the Divine Diamond Force. For him to put his life on the line to employ this technique, he would receive severe internal injuries if he used it longer than the time it took for a stick of incense to burn. Even if he wouldn't die, he would not be able to improve his martial arts. Although this was risky, he still decided to stride ahead without any second thoughts. This was not because of Jiang Zhe's kind treatment nor because he wished to curry favor with the Prince of Yong, and definitely not because of the benefits that Great Yong would attain from him protecting a surrendered Southern Chu subject. He did not have any second thoughts about performing any meritorious deeds. At this moment, all he could think about was the instructions that his master had given him when he was accepted as a disciple of the Shaolin Temple—protect the kindhearted and innocent. He had never felt that there was any disloyalty in Jiang Zhe's surrender to Great Yong.

Although I did not understand martial arts, I knew that the more common sense was transcended, the greater the subsequent consequences. Although Pei Yun's martial arts had suddenly skyrocketed, he definitely would not be able to sustain it for long. Seeing that he had tangled Vicious Killer up, I took to my heels and ran towards the entrance to the courtyard. The remains of the imperial bodyguards should be there. As long as I was able to find a copper whistle, I would be able to call for help. Those copper whistles were exquisitely manufactured. The entire residence would be able to hear it even if I were the one blowing.

Vicious Killer had tried to chase and kill me several times, but was blocked by Pei Yun. His killing intent was set ablaze as his complexion became blood red again, his power increasing once more. This time, he could not help but vomit a mouthful of blood. Vigorously, he shot forth a palm that beat back Pei Yun. Just as Vicious Killer was about to pounce on me, he was once again obstructed by Pei Yun. At this moment, he began to hesitate. If he used the Demonic Dissection Skill more than three times, he would then bleed from all seven apertures.[7] Although this skill could triple his power, then he would have to convalesce for several years afterwards. Thinking it over, his power and martial art techniques were all above this youth, and could kill him in ten or so exchanges. When that moment came, there was still time for him to chase after and kill Jiang Zhe.

When I arrived at the entrance to the courtyard, I found the remains of the imperial bodyguards in the grass. However, I immediately grew frightened. All of the copper whistles had been gathered and tossed at the side of these corpses, all of them destroyed. Vicious Killer's conduct was indeed thorough. I blankly looked around. What was to be done? What was to be done? It was likely that I would not be able to escape. Gritting my teeth, I examined my surroundings. Where could I hide? It wasn't that I wished to run away from the battle. If I were to get away, Pei Yun would be able to disengage himself. If I did not go, Pei Yun could only die. Suddenly, I recalled that there were some poisons used for self-protection hidden in my chambers. I hurriedly went back into the courtyard, limping as I ran towards my chambers.

When the two fighting saw that I had come back, Vicious Killer relaxed. With Jiang Zhe's return, he could focus on killing Pei Yun. As he slowed down his pace, the pressure on Pei Yun was greatly reduced. However, Pei Yun remained extremely anxious. Why had Jiang Zhe come back?

Both men had questions in their minds. After they exchanged several more blows, Pei Yun was already finding it difficult to continue. In his head, he thought, *I didn't expect that I wouldn't die on the battlefield, but rather in the Cold Courtyard in the Prince of Yong's residence* . The assassin's hands were resolved, firm, and determined, refusing to relax. Vicious Killer was not in a

rush. After a short while, he would be able to complete his assignment. At this moment, I had picked up a circular steel cylinder and hastily walked out. Looking towards where the two were fighting bitterly, I yelled out in a loud voice, “General Pei be reassured, although this poison of mine is formidable, it will not be immediately fatal. I will give you the antidote.”

So shouting, I activated the mechanism in the direction of the two, a red pellet shooting out of the cylinder, exploding in the air above the two men’s heads. A pink vapor immediately enveloped the two men. Vicious Killer was greatly alarmed; he knew that Jiang Zhe was a master of medicine. It would be normal if he had some poison on hand for self-protection. He promptly tried to escape, but was firmly held up by Pei Yun who had had his courage stirred. The assassin could only hold his breath. He unexpectedly felt his four limbs become numb when the vapor contacted his skin. Although Pei Yun had the same feeling, the martial arts that he had trained in were genuine Buddhist divine arts. Therefore, he was able to endure a dozen or so breathes. As a result, his palm struck out and landed on Vicious Killer’s lower abdomen. The assassin’s figure shook before collapsing to the ground. However, he had been pushed by the power of the palm out of the vapor. Meanwhile, Pei Yun’s body was on the verge of collapse, falling to the ground.

I was overjoyed at this unexpected outcome, promptly rushing over, taking an antidote from a jade bottle, and shoving it in Pei Yun’s mouth. After a short moment, he sat up. Hoarsely, he said, “The poison has already been detoxified. *Daren* be at ease, Pei Yun will escort *daren* to a safe place.”

I helped Pei Yun up, gratefully replying, “Many thanks to General for saving my life. We should leave quickly. It would be a disaster if there are more assassins.”

Pei Yun shared my thoughts. If there were more assassins, he would have no strength to protect me. The two of us walked towards the entrance of the courtyard, mutually supporting one another. Both of us were extremely tired. Just as we exited the courtyard, I immediately felt a distant killing aura. Just as my ears heard the faint sound of a bowstring being released, a white feathered arrow flew through and slammed into my chest near my

heart. I stared blankly at the arrow in my chest and the blood that immediately began to seep out. Surprisingly, I would lose my life just like this. Strangely, I did not have the least bit of fear in my heart nor was there any enmity. I did not blame the man who had killed me. Life on earth was governed by the law of the jungle where the strong preyed on the weak. He naturally had his reasons. Looking in the direction from where the arrow had been shot from, that hidden assassin was also coldly looking back at me, his hands holding a bow and arrow. He was dressed in blue garb, a white headscarf covering his face. His eyes, clear as the waters of spring, carried with them a shred of regret as he watched me. I could feel my life drain away and hear Pei Yun cry out in alarm. However, I already did not have the energy to think more of it. At death's door, the beautiful image of Piaoxiang appeared in my heart. Then I saw Roulan's small figure. Lastly, I saw the figure of the handsome youth who had always been by my side. My sight was already becoming cloudy. Amidst the haziness, I could see Xiaoshunzi fly towards me, his entire face filled with shock and heartbreak. Oh, truly regretful ... I didn't have the opportunity to entrust Roulan into his care. However, I believed that he knew this. With a faint smile and filled with regret, I finally closed my eyes, my consciousness sinking into the bottomless abyss, sinking….

As a result, I did not hear the mournful lamentations filled with despair.

***

In the great hall, Li Zhi was smiling as he toasted his honored guests, his eyes sweeping over everyone. Not long after the banquet had begun, Qin Qing said his goodbyes. Li Zhi already knew that he had gone to the Cold Courtyard and had some dispute with Jiang Zhe. The bygone enmity should have already been resolved. Although there should still be some ill-feelings, it should not be too serious. Oh! Both father and son, Xiahou Lan and Xiahou Yuanfeng had come to attend the banquet. As Xiahou Yuanfeng's status was comparatively low, he was attending the banquet in a side chamber. This man could not be underestimated. It was not an easy thing to be able to gain Imperial Father's favor for so many years without end. If this man was not already supporting the crown prince and wished to get a share of the action on his Imperial Sister, it was likely that Li Zhi would have tried to recruit

him. Adept with both brush and sword, Xiahou Yuanfeng was worthy of being considered the number one young expert in Great Yong. After his defeat of Pei Yun, Xiahou Yuanfeng had already taken the position as the brightest and the best.

Alas, Pei Yun was not present. The one that Li Zhi looked most highly upon was Pei Yun. Although he was once a subordinate of the Prince of Yong, this man was also a layman disciple of the Shaolin Temple. Moreover, he held some resentment against the Fengyi Sect. It should be possible to recruit him. Although it was a pity that Pei Yun was not present, there would be other opportunities.

Just as his eyes were sweeping past, Li Zhi caught sight of Xiaoshunzi in the garb of a servant standing in the corner of the hall, the eunuch's frosty eyes observing the officials in the hall. This Xiaoshunzi was only loyal to Jiang Zhe. Although no one knew how high his martial arts were, it should be lower than Pei Yun and Xiahou Yuanfeng. He was a capable subordinate. From his request to observe these guests who could potentially be enemies, one could see that he did not lack for brains. If he weren't this loyal, Li Zhi would have arranged a plan for him to enter the palace.

At this moment, Li Zhi saw one of the imperial bodyguards hurriedly enter the hall and walk to Gou Lian's side, speaking to him in a low voice. Gou Lian, responsible for organizing this feast, furrowed his brows. After replying a few words, Gou Lian stood and walked to Xiaoshunzi's side. Xiaoshunzi's countenance immediately changed, as he quietly withdrew from the hall. Gou Lian then turned and walked towards Li Zhi. However, at this moment, all of the distinguished personages of the court had also come forth to encircle Li Zhi and he could not disengage himself. It was some time before Gou Lian was finally able to find the opportunity to get close to Li Zhi. In a low voice, Gou Lian reported, "You Imperial Highness, something has happened. Vice Supervisor Hu Wei and two of the bodyguards assigned to protect Suiyun were killed in the inner residence. On the side there were also the corpses of two eunuchs. I have already dispatched men to protect Major Jiang."

Li Zhi was greatly alarmed, promptly stating, "This Prince must go take a

look.”

Gou Lian replied, “At present, I’m afraid that Your Imperial Highness won’t be able to disengage yourself.”

Just at this moment, a clear cry of lamentation could be heard from the direction of the Cold Courtyard. The lament sounded with keening mourning, filled with the grief and hatred of losing one’s closest kin. The sound was sharp and mournful. Although it was distant, it still caused everyone to feel an almost unbearable pain. The wine cup in Li Zhi’s hand fell onto the ground, shattering into pieces. He was filled with an ominous premonition. This direction, this sound! He knew that it could have been caused by only one situation. Fiercely, he sprang to his feet. In an angry voice, he roared, “Everyone listen to my command! Guard the entire residence! Regardless of noble or low status, no one is allowed to enter and exit without permission! Come with this Prince!”

Finished speaking, Li Zhi shook his brocade gown, immediately rushing towards the Cold Courtyard. The anxiety in his heart had surpassed the feeling when Jiang Zhe had used stern words to refuse him. As he walked, he silently prayed to the Heavens. If the Heavens were able to bless and protect Jiang Zhe, he was willing to give up years of his life as replacement.

Finally reaching the Cold Courtyard, Li Zhi saw that it had already been protected by the previously dispatched imperial bodyguards and personal soldiers. After he had charged into the courtyard, Li Zhi immediately came to a halt and stared blankly at the scene before him. The ground of the entire courtyard was covered with dark red blood and signs of a bloody battle. Outside of the bodyguards that had been dispatched, there was no sign of Jiang Zhe and Xiaoshunzi. Imperial bodyguards were mournfully standing before the entrance to the living chambers. In a trance, Li Zhi entered. On the soft couch, Li Zhi caught sight of Jiang Zhe’s body peacefully resting, his complexion wan. In his chest was a broken arrow. Xiaoshunzi was kneeling beside the couch, tightly clutching Jiang Zhe’s right hand.

Li Zhi felt stabbing pains in his heart, and he almost fainted, unable to utter even a single word.

Footnotes :

Is the last part of an idiom that originates from the *Zhuangzi* (螳螂捕蝉，黄雀在后, tanglangbuchan, huangquezaihou) – lit. the mantis stalks the cicada, unaware of the oriole behind; fig. to pursue a narrow gain while neglecting a greater danger

国家兴亡，匹夫有责, guojiaxingwang, pifuyouze – idiom, lit. the rise and fall of the nation concerns everyone; everyone bears responsibility for the prosperity of society

赤胆忠心, chidanzhongxin – idiom, lit. red-bellied devotion; wholehearted loyalty, to serve somebody/something with body and soul

万不得已, wanbudeyi – idiom, only when absolutely essential; as a last resort

三头六臂, santouliubi – idiom, lit. to have three heads and six arms; fig. to possess remarkable abilities, a being of formidable power

灵机一动, lingjiyidong – idiom, lit. a bright idea suddenly occurs; to hit upon an inspiration, to be struck by a brainwave

Two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, and mouth

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 16: Hanging in the Balance

Volume 2, Chapter 16: Hanging in the Balance

Jiang Zhe was close to death. The Prince of Yong used Ningpo figwort to keep a sliver of Jiang Zhe's spirit within his body. Both the Prince of Qi and Princess Changle sent medicine to assist. For half a month, Suiyun's life hung in the balance. The Prince of Yong never left his side, eating and sleeping in the Cold Courtyard. Those who heard this all gasped with admiration…."—*Southern Chu Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Jiang Suiyun*

With difficulty, he opened his mouth, asking, "How is Suiyun?"

Xiaoshunzi turned his head. At this moment, his handsome facial features were filled with an abnormal malevolence. His bloodshot eyes would cause anyone to be intimidated. He answered, "I do not know why, but young master still has a hint of breath. This servant has used his *qi* to prolong young master's life. Just now, the imperial bodyguards went to invite the imperial physicians."

Li Zhi slightly relaxed, promptly stating, "Go to the Princess of Yong and retrieve the millennium-old Ningpo figwort that Imperial Father bestowed upon me last year. Also bring over some top-quality ginseng. First brew some ginseng broth to help prolong Sir Jiang's life. If the imperial physician feels it suitable, also have that Ningpo figwort brewed also."

Gratefulness was revealed in Xiaoshunzi's eyes. However, he did not have the strength to be distracted by idle chatter. It wasn't long before the imperial bodyguards brought—seized, rather—several imperial physicians. The imperial physicians had already learned of the state of the injury while on the way. Entering the room, they didn't care about paying their respects to Li Zhi, instead immediately moving to the couch, treating Jiang Zhe's injuries. They bustled, removing the arrow and tending to the wound. One bowl after another of bloody water was carried out. The brewed ginseng broth was promptly delivered and a bowl was fed to Jiang Zhe. As expected, Jiang Zhe's breathing gradually deepened. However, if it were not for the

support of Xiaoshunzi's internal energy, Jiang Zhe would likely have lost his life at some moment and gone to the yellow springs.

After the imperial physicians had discussed with each other, they stepped forward and spoke to Li Zhi, "Your Imperial Highness, the medicinal properties of that Ningpo figwort root is too powerful. Your Imperial Highness, please divide it in three to brew into medicine and feed it to the patient every eight hours. Afterwards, he cannot stop taking medication and can only be fed with top-quality ginseng to prolong his life. In this way, no one will have to worry about this *daren* 's life over the next half a month. This *daren* was quite lucky. The position of his heart was slightly off-center. As a result, although the arrow injured his heart, it did not immediately take his life. However, we are really powerless afterwards."

Li Zhi sadly plopped into a chair. Gesturing with his hand, he ordered, "Immediately do as they said." As someone accepted and went to execute the order, Li Zhi racked his brains for a solution. Suddenly, he inquired, "Does anyone know where the Medical Sage, Sir Sang currently is?"

Everyone looked at one another in dismay. The medical sage's whereabouts were indiscernible, appearing one moment and disappearing the next.[1] Who would know where he was? In despair, Li Zhi directed, "There is a chance for survival if we can find the Medical Sage. Immediately dispatch people to find him."

Xiaoshunzi suddenly yelled out, "Your Imperial Highness, the young master is the disciple of the Medical Sage and is also adept in the art of healing. Can we allow the young master to wake up temporarily and have him devise a prescription? At the very least, we can help prolong the young master's life."

"Is this true?" asked Li Zhi, pleasantly surprised. "Suiyun is actually a disciple of the Medical Sage?"

Xiaoshunzi nodded his head and replied, "During his youth, Suiyun once studied medicine under the Medical Sage. Although the time spent wasn't long, the young master's medical expertise is really outstanding."

Li Zhi looked at the several imperial physicians. After they had finished

discussing, one of them said, “Your Imperial Highness, we can use a sharp medication to allow Jiang *daren* to regain consciousness for a short period of time. However, after this, it will aggravate Jiang *daren* ’s condition.”

Li Zhi resolutely declared, “The Medical Sage’s whereabouts cannot be determined. If we cannot preserve Sir Jiang’s life for a month, I’m afraid that he won’t be able to survive until the Medical Sage arrives. Go first prepare the medicine and await my orders. Over these next few days, I will have to trouble you and prohibit you from leaving here even for a moment. If something unexpected happens to Sir Jiang, I will absolutely take your lives.”

The several imperial physicians could only voice their agreement.

At this time, Dong Zhi hurriedly rushed over. Stepping forward, he reported in, “Your Imperial Highness, at present, the situation up front is extremely chaotic. Those guests are all restless. Ziyou has asked for Your Imperial Highness to issue an order. How should we handle all of them?”

Li Zhi knitted his brows, walking out of the room. He did not wish to disturb Jiang Zhe’s treatment. When he exited, he caught sight of imperial bodyguards standing at the entrance to another room. Seeing the prince glance over, Gou Lian immediately advanced and relayed, “Your imperial Highness, when the imperial bodyguards arrived, they also discovered that Imperial Guard Commander Pei Yun was in the Cold Courtyard as well. Because Xiaoshunzi only said to find someplace to have him settle down, I therefore dispatched several bodyguards to place him under house arrest there. I have also arranged for an imperial physician to treat his injuries. Reportedly, his entire body was covered with wounds. It is likely that he was protecting Suiyun.”

Bewildered, Li Zhi asked, “Why was Pei Yun here in the Cold Courtyard?” So speaking, he turned and entered that room.

This room was where Xiaoshunzi lived. The furnishings and arrangements were extremely sparse. Pei Yun was seated in a chair. His upper garments had been removed upon arrival. His entire body was covered with purple bruises that came from fists. An imperial physician was in the middle of dabbing medicine on his injuries. When the two saw Li Zhi enter, they both

kneeled down to pay their respects.

Li Zhi gestured with his hands and said, “Continue, please.” It wasn’t long before the imperial physician had finished. Gathering up his medical chest, he withdrew.

Li Zhi gazed upon the extremely uneasy Pei Yun. Heaving a sigh, he questioned, “Why is General Pei here in the Cold Courtyard?”

Pei Yun frowned. Was the imperial bodyguard sent by Jiang *daren* to inform the Prince of Yong that he had been retained at the Cold Courtyard also killed? He didn’t inquire further, only comprehensively going over what had happened. At the time when Jiang Zhe had been hit by an arrow, Pei Yun was also shocked and did not know how to respond. Just as he was about to lend an arm to support, Pei Yun heard Xiaoshunzi’s lament, observing his figure speed over as if illusory and as fast as electricity. Instantly, Xiaoshunzi had arrived beside the two. Having followed Suiyun for years, Xiaoshunzi was somewhat familiar with how to treat external injuries. He knew that the arrow could not be rashly removed. Ultimately, he could only hit Jiang Zhe’s pressure points to stem the bleeding. Afterwards, Xiaoshunzi had used internal energy to prolong Jiang Zhe’s life. Glancing at Pei Yun, Xiaoshunzi’s expression was aloof and severe. With only one look, Pei Yun could tell that this youth’s martial arts were far above his own, and he succinctly explained the situation at once. Xiaoshunzi picked Suiyun up and carried him into the Cold Courtyard, seeing that Vicious Killer had already fled. The only things left were bloodstains.

It wasn’t long before the imperial bodyguards arrived. Xiaoshunzi had them immediately invite imperial physicians before instructing them to take care of Pei Yun. He himself entered the room to look after Jiang Zhe. Pei Yun naturally understood that he was temporarily being placed under house arrest, but he was straightforward and upright, and did not have any fear.

After listening to Pei Yun’s words, Li Zhi rose to his feet and bowed deeply. “General Pei, you were willing to give your life to save Major Jiang. Whether he lives or dies, this Prince considers your actions as a personal favor to me. It is only that the current situation isn’t clear; this Prince would have to ask for you to temporarily stay for a few days in this residence. In addition,

General's injuries are this severe. It is not convenient for you to go back to worry your esteemed father. I am unaware of something though. Does General know if any members of the older generation from your sect are present in the capital? With their help, General's injuries will be easily treated."

Pei Yun hurriedly replied, "Your Imperial Highness is taking this too seriously. Pei Yun is willing to comply with Your Imperial Highness's command. This general has two martial uncles that are at the Floating Clouds Temple outside of Chang'an, cultivating in secret. Your Highness can dispatch men over there. The two martial uncles both treat Pei Yun with extreme care and concern. They would certainly come immediately."

Li Zhi nodded his head. The majority of his bodyguards were selected from amongst the best soldiers in the army. Even though there were plenty who had substantial martial arts skills, they were all more skilled in external style than in internal styles. At present, he greatly lacked internal martial arts. With two senior monks from the Shaolin Temple, he could be reassured with Jiang Zhe's safety.

At this moment, Gou Lian swiftly walked over and reported, "Your Imperial Highness, we have investigated the matter. All of the imperial bodyguards assigned to protect the Cold Courtyard have been killed. One of them died on the path. It seems that he was coming out front. Furthermore, aside from Hu Wei and his subordinates, the chef from Southern Chu is also missing. Everyone else is at their positions and can mutually serve as witnesses. We can basically conclude that none of them took part in this incident."

Li Zhi coldly inquired, "What about those guests?"

Gou Lian glanced at Li Zhi's expression before responding, "At that time, Your Imperial Highness had already opened the banquet. Therefore, almost all of the guests were within the hall. However, there were a few exceptions. According to the servants, all these people were not in their seats when the incident occurred. I'm afraid that only Your Imperial Highness can question them." So speaking, Gou Lian handed a list of names over.

Li Zhi accepted the list. On it were five names: Duke Cheng Shu of Wei, the Princess Li Hanyou of Jingjiang, General of Tiger Might, Qin Qing, Commander Pei Yun of the Imperial Guard, and Vice Supervisor Xiahou Yuanfeng of the Palace Guard. Li Zhi's complexion became gloomy. Gou Lian continued, "Outside of the Cold Courtyard, we found a strong bow and a pouch of arrows. It seems that it was discarded by the assassin."

Pei Yun suddenly interrupted, "Your Imperial Highness, Pei Yun actually caught a glimpse of the assassin. The man's height was slightly shorter than mine and he wore a set of blue robes. His face was masked by a headscarf. As for everything else, please forgive Pei Yun for not being able to see clearly."

Li Zhi only felt his heart jump. He casually asked, "Gou Lian, if I remember accurately, Qin Qing was wearing blue, correct?"

Gou Lian answered, "Your Highness cannot jump to unfounded conclusions. General Qin is from a prestigious house; how could he assassinate someone?" As he spoke, Gou Lian shot a glance at Pei Yun.

Understanding, Pei Yun tactfully stated, "Pei Yun's injuries aren't light. May I ask if it is possible for Your Imperial Highness to let me be temporarily excuse me?"

Li Zhi acknowledged, "There are several other guest rooms in the Cold Courtyard. All of them have been tidied. General Pei, please select one yourself. When General's two martial uncles arrive, please have them stay temporarily in the Cold Courtyard as well. This Prince still has matters to take care. General Pei, please rest well." Finished speaking, Li Zhi walked out of the room.

Gou Lian quickly caught up. Li Zhi calculatedly said, "If there were no discrepancies in what Pei Yun saw, the suspicions on Qin Qing are the greatest."

Gou Lian disagreed, "We can't say that. Although Qin Qing is a suspect, however …"

Walking out the door, Li Zhi looked at Gou Lian who calmly analyzed, "Xiahou Yuanfeng's stature is similar to Qin Qing's. Moreover, his archery

skill is equally brilliant. This could be his doing. In addition, although Li Hanyou, the daughter of the Prince of Jingjiang, is a member of the imperial clan, she is also a disciple of the Fengyi Sect. Rumor has it she is the ninth-ranked personal disciple of the Fengyi Sect Master. The master of the Fengyi Sect is an expert at assassination. If Li Hanyou were wearing men's attire, she could have been the one seen by General Pei."

Li Zhi stamped his foot and stated, "Regardless of who it is, I will definitely not let him off. In a while, thoroughly question Pei Yun, and find out all of the particulars. This Prince will meet those persons. First have Ziyou end the banquet, announcing that this Prince's major has been attacked by an assassin and I am in no mood to feast. Immediately dispatch men to the army barracks outside of the city. Have Sima Xiong bring a thousand men of the Imperial Guard into the city to assume responsibility for the defense of the Prince of Yong's residence. Have Dong Zhi temporarily take charge of military matters."

Gou Lian hesitated before replying, "Your Imperial Highness, I'm afraid that it won't be possible to forcibly detain the Duke of Wei. In addition, I'm afraid that Your Imperial Highness will be accused of misconduct if you mobilize troops and have them enter the city without permission."

"There is no need to forcibly detain the Duke of Wei," responded Li Zhi coldly. "I do not believe that he would do such a thing. As for mobilizing soldiers, there is no need for you to worry. This Prince will immediately enter the palace to report to Imperial Father. *Humph* ! For an assassin to be so aggressive in the Imperial City of Chang'an, the Imperial Capital Magistrate should be punished."

Gou Lian promptly stated, "Your Imperial Highness has made careful deliberations. This subject will go immediately to handle things."

After two hours, after the first bowl of ginseng broth from the Ningpo figwort had been consumed, Jiang Zhe's breathing deepened and steadied. He no longer needed Xiaoshunzi to inject his internal energy to sustain his life. Xiaoshunzi immediately and silently began to cultivate and restore his internal energy. At present, he had already calmed down. Before Jiang Zhe was saved, he absolutely could not be impetuous. It wasn't long before the

Elders Compassionate Hardship and Compassionate Distance of the Shaolin Temple's Damo Hall arrived. They stopped worrying after taking a look at the injuries of their martial nephew. Prince Li Zhi of Yong requested that the two temporarily take charge of the protection of the Cold Courtyard. At first, the two seemed to hesitate, but after Pei Yun blushingly and stealthily whispered into Elder Compassionate Distance's ear, Elder Compassionate Distance cheerfully agreed. Although he did not know how Pei Yun had convinced the two elders, Li Zhi still gratefully expressed his thanks. Then, he immediately left his residence, galloping towards the imperial palace.

At the time of the incident, Li Yuan was playing *weiqi* in the harem with Noble Consort Zhangsun. Princess Changle was watching the game at their side. The three were enjoying domestic bliss, joyous and harmonious. Although the news that something had happened in the Prince of Yong's residence had already spread throughout the Imperial City, it had yet to reach Li Yuan. Just as Li Yuan was racking his brains, a racket suddenly broke out outside of the hall. Li Yuan angrily inquired, "What's going on? Who is it raising a commotion outside?"

Before Li Yuan could even dispatch anyone to go out to look, Li Zhi had already charged into the hall. His expression was furious and his clothes were in disarray. Charging to Li Yuan's side, he dropped to his knees and began to wail.

Li Yuan was greatly alarmed. This son of his was always tough and durable. Since the age of ten, Li Yuan had never seen Li Zhi shed any tears. Why was he like this today? Forgetting his anger, Li Yuan promptly rose to his feet and inquired, "Zhi'er, what has happened? Speak slowly, Imperial Father will give you justice."

Li Zhi refused to rise. Sobbing, he responded, "Imperial Father, this child hosted a banquet to see off Jun'er. However, someone took the opportunity to infiltrate my residence, killing twenty-one imperial bodyguards, two eunuchs, and seriously injuring Major Jiang of the marshal's household. At present, Major Jiang has suffered a life-threatening injury. At this moment, his life cannot be guaranteed. Imperial Father, this child has been willing to endure silently, and yet still incurred such a disaster. How can this child

continue to reside in Chang'an? If Imperial Father gives the nod of approval, this child will depart Chang'an and go to the fief in Youzhou."

Hearing this, Li Yuan's rage erupted. Angrily, he commanded, "Come! Immediately summon the Imperial Capital Magistrate and the chief commander of the Imperial Guard into the palace. How are they performing their duties by allowing someone to be assassinated in the Prince of Yong's residence?"

Li Zhi laughed grimly inwardly, knowing immediately that his Imperial Father fundamentally had no intention of responsibly investigating this incident. When all was said and done, it was very likely the work of the crown prince. He could only let it be for now and stated, "Imperial Father, please quell your anger. This child believes that the assassin was a preeminent expert, therefore the Imperial Capital Magistrate would be powerless. It is only that this child is greatly worried about the security of my residence. This child beseeches Imperial Father to permit this child to mobilize a thousand imperial guardsmen to augment the protection of the Prince of Yong's residence. Furthermore, there are several guests suspected of being involved in the assassination. Would Imperial Father please permit this child to investigate this matter?"

Calming down, Li Yuan acquiesced, "Fine, a thousand imperial guardsmen aren't much. You have to properly organize them. You cannot allow them to break military regulations or the law. As for the suspects amongst the guests, you can handle this matter yourself. But if you wish to execute those above the third rank or imperial clansmen and aristocrats, that will require our decree. How are Major Jiang's injuries? He is a *zhuangyuan* of Southern Chu. If he dies in such a manner, it is likely that someone will seize the opportunity to spread rumors that my Great Yong is powerless to protect surrendered subjects. When that time comes, who will be willing to surrender?"

In distress, Li Zhi related, "An arrow hit Major Jiang in the heart. If his heart weren't slightly off-center, I'm afraid that he would have been killed immediately. Right now, his life hangs in the balance. This child has already used the Ningpo figwort bestowed by Imperial Father to prolong his life.

Moreover, this child has dispatched men to look for the Medical Sage, Sir Sang. If we cannot find this man, then I'm afraid that Major Jiang's life cannot be guaranteed."

Li Yuan heaved a sigh. "We will issue a decree ordering that all the prefectures of the world look for Sir Sang. You can be at ease."

Li Zhi lowered his head to the ground in thanks. "The matters in this child's residence are still numerous and disorderly, requiring my return to handle."

Li Yuan nodded his head. "You may go."

Li Zhi rose to his feet. Just as he was about to leave, Princess Changle stood and spoke up, "Imperial Father, please allow this child to see second brother off."

Li Yuan only motioned with a hand, signaling his consent. Li Zhi glanced over, seeing that Princess Changle's complexion was pale, her expression extremely worried. After the two walked out of the hall, Princess Changle inquired in a whisper, "Second brother, is Major Jiang's life truly in desperate straits?"

Li Zhi sighed and answered, "If Ningpo figwort is used to prolong his life, it is possible to ensure that he lives for half a month. However, in order to temporarily wake him up to diagnose his own illness, I'm afraid that he'll only be able to survive for ten days."

Princess Changle became deathly pale. In a low voice, she murmured, "Ten days … Sir Sang's whereabouts are unknown. I'm afraid that he won't arrive in time."

Suddenly, she grabbed hold of Li Zhi. "Brother, I also have a stump of Ningpo figwort bestowed upon me by Imperial Father. I am setting aside half of it for mother. Her health is not good and I have to be careful. The other half, I'll bring to you. Furthermore, Imperial Father bestowed upon me a bear gallbladder the other day. I haven't used it yet, keeping it cold storage with a cube of ice. Take it along as well, brother."

Li Zhi was overjoyed. Ningpo figwort and bear gallbladder were both elements of traditional Chinese medicine that could only be found by

accident. Only Imperial Father would occasionally receive it as tribute. Surprisingly, Imperial Father had bestowed these precious medicinal ingredients to Imperial Sister. Bowing deeply, Li Zhi said, “On behalf of Major Jiang, this Prince thanks Imperial Sister for this life-saving grace.”

Princess Changle pulled Li Zhi towards her Jade Phoenix Hall. As they walked, she implored, “Imperial Brother, if Major Jiang has the opportunity to wake up, please speak a word of thanks on my behalf. He will understand.” Although Li Zhi could not understand the deeper meaning in Princess Changle’s words, he was wild with joy at unexpectedly obtaining such precious medicines and did not think much of it.

Returning to his residence, Li Zhi did not stop at all and directly went to see Jiang Zhe. Entering Jiang Zhe’s living quarters in the Cold Courtyard, he only saw Xiaoshunzi seated by Jiang Zhe’s side, concentrating on the state of Jiang Zhe’s injuries. Li Zhi stepped forward and took a glimpse. On the side, the attending imperial physician stepped forward and muttered, “Just now, Jiang *daren* once almost stopped breathing. Fortunately, this eunuch, Shun, brought him back to from the abyss. However, there is already no need to continuously to help Jiang *daren* breath.”

“This Prince has brought half a stump’s worth of Ningpo figwort and the gallbladder of a bear,” replied Li Zhi quietly. “Do you have the confidence that you can prolong his life a few more days?”

This imperial physician joyfully answered, “If that is the case, this lowly doctor dares to guarantee that I can prolong his life for ten more days.”

Li Zhi nodded his head gladly. “This Prince will transfer the medicine to you. You have to spare no effort. If Major Jiang can be saved, this Prince will reward you all handsomely.”

The imperial physician repeatedly expressed his thanks. Xiaoshunzi seemed to not have heard a word, still gazing at Jiang Zhe. There was limitless anguish in his heart, regretting leaving Jiang Zhe’s side. He was filled with killing intent, hating that he could not chop his enemy into mincemeat.

The following days were like a nightmare. Jiang Zhe became critically ill on

several occasions. The imperial physicians could only prolong his life with great difficulty. Twenty-seven days after Suiyun had been attacked by assassins, Li Zhi finally made the decision to allow the imperial physicians to use sharp medicine to wake Jiang Zhe up. When Jiang Zhe opened his eyes, he saw Xiaoshunzi and Li Zhi's faces, completely devoid of color. Xiaoshunzi quickly spoke, "Young master, your life is in a critical state. If we cannot prolong it until the Medical Sage arrives, I'm afraid that you won't survive. Does young master have any methods to delay this for a few days? Right now, the residence still has three taels of Ningpo figwort and a bear gallbladder sent by the Prince of Qi. What should we do, young master?"

Understanding the situation, I instructed weakly, "Bring my acupuncture needles. Do you remember the acupuncture method that I taught you?"

Xiaoshunzi nodded his head as if his life depended on it. "I remember, I remember clearly."

With difficulty, I continued, "In my study is a handwritten copy of acupuncture techniques, containing the 'Seizing Spirit Acupuncture' technique that I personally created. There are thirteen techniques. The first twelve are methods used for torture. The last technique is able to draw out the entirety of a person's potential, a method of saving someone by hounding them to death. When used for torture, this technique can cause a person boundless suffering without death. The greater your martial arts, the more you would surely feel as if going through hell. I originally intended on teaching you the last technique. If you are in danger, you will be able to use it to save your life. Therefore, I have already taught you the acupuncture methods over the years. This acupuncture technique can forcibly draw out the entirety of my biological potential. At the very least, it can protect my life for nine days. Only this method can be used, as there are no other ways. Since there is still some Ningpo figwort and a bear gallbladder remaining, let me make a prescription. After you've performed the acupuncture, help me take it. It will be able to help further prolong my life."

After hearing Jiang Zhe finish speaking the prescription and seeing the imperial physicians write it down, tears coursed down Xiaoshunzi's face. Jiang Zhe was always thinking about him, and yet he was not at Jiang Zhe's

side when his master was so seriously injured. I reached out with my hand to wipe away his tears. Softly, I consoled, “There is no need for you to worry. If I am unfortunate to die, then you shall report all of my plans to His Imperial Highness and have His Imperial Highness make the decisions, so as to prevent the entire enterprise from being ruined at the last moment. You must also not take revenge for me. Bring Roulan with you back to Southern Chu and live in seclusion. Remember, bring my ashes to be buried with my wife.”

Seeing that Jiang Zhe’s face already began to slacken, Xiaoshunzi suddenly screamed out, “Young master, you must wake up again. Don’t you remember that the late mistress’s murderer is still at large?[2] The young miss is still growing. if you were to die, I could only stake my life on taking vengeance for you. But I’m afraid that that task is dangerous. If I were to die, who would take care of the lonely and helpless young miss? Young master, this won’t do. Without you, I really don’t know how to take revenge for you. You have to live on for the late mistress and for the young miss!”

Jiang Zhe’s expression concentrated as he slightly nodded his head. Afterwards, he fainted once again.

Xiaoshunzi absentmindedly wiped the tears from his face. Seeing that Jiang Zhe would temporarily be okay, he hastily left the room to retrieve the book. Then, after using the acupuncture technique, Xiaoshunzi could detect that Jiang Zhe’s skin was trembling. This technique was not perfected. As a result, the person receiving the acupuncture would feel tremendous pain. After feeding Jiang Zhe the prescription he personally designed, Xiaoshunzi could see that Jiang Zhe’s breathing was already even. Only then did he relax. Suddenly, he thought of something. An ominous glint could be seen in Xiaoshunzi’s eyes, as he looked at the imperial physicians. Just now, the conversation that he had with Jiang Zhe was completely classified. If outsiders were to hear this information, it would likely cause problems.

Although Li Zhi was continuously mulling over the master-servant conversation, he did not have any inkling as to what was going on, not understanding why Jiang Zhe had never mentioned the matter of his wife being murdered and their enemy. However, his thinking was profound,

grasping that he could pursue this matter. Seeing the killing intent in Xiaoshunzi's eyes, how could Li Zhi not understand his intentions? He spoke up, "Xiaoshunzi, don't worry. This Imperial Physician Jia is someone this Prince trusts. He will not reveal anything."

Xiaoshunzi glanced at Li Zhi. These past several days, after having witnessed Li Zhi focused on saving Jiang Zhe's life, Xiaoshunzi knew that the prince also shared the same feelings as himself. He had to consider the prince's face and thus Xiaoshunzi callously stated, "Imperial physician, if you reveal even half a word, don't blame me for refusing to consider sentiment and face."

Finished speaking, he pressed a finger down onto the desk, immediately leaving an inch-deep hole in the solid red pine. Imperial Physician Jia burst into a bout of uncontrollable convulsions, frantically gasping, "This lowly doctor will not breathe a word[3] of this."

The following period was even more difficult to bear. Throughout, Jiang Zhe's breathing was thin as gossamer. Xiaoshunzi attended by his side every day, his expression icy, almost as if he had nothing to do with anything. As for the Prince of Yong and the others, they were full of misgivings and anxiety. One day, an imperial physician reported that Jiang Zhe's life would likely end that night. Utterly dejected, Li Zhi sat down, unable to speak even a single word. His heir, Li Jun, had already departed for his fief in Youzhou. Shi Yu had also followed him there. If Jiang Zhe were to pass away…. A chill permeated Li Zhi's being. What could he do? Just as woe and alarm began to set in, Gou Lian suddenly ran into the room, accompanied by an air of pleasant surprise and yelled, "Your Imperial Highness! Your Imperial Highness! Sir Sang has arrived!"

Li Zhi was overjoyed. Just as he was about to rise to his feet, he felt his legs weaken. Curiously, he couldn't even stand.

Footnotes :

神龙见首不见尾, shenlongjianshoubujianwei – idiom, lit. you can see the head of a dragon but not its tail; fig. a person quite mysterious as to his whereabouts, appearing one moment and disappearing the next

逍遥法外, xiaoyaofawai – idiom, lit. unfettered and beyond the law; evading retribution, still at large
守口如瓶, shoukouruping – idiom, lit. to guard one's mouth like a closed bottle; tight-lipped, reticent, not breathing a word

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 17: Disturbances Behind the Scenes

Volume 2, Chapter 17: Disturbances Behind the Scenes

At the time, Medical Sage Sang Chen was picking medicinal ingredients deep in the mountains. A few days after he had left the mountains, he caught sight of the imperial announcement from the Yong Emperor. Learning that Suiyun was close to death, Sang Chen rushed to Chang'an, traveling over a thousand *li* in three days. When he arrived at the Prince of Yong's residence, Suiyun's life was hanging by a single thread. The Medical Sage was able to work a miracle,[1] bringing Jiang Zhe back to life. However, from henceforth, Jiang Zhe's body was greatly weakened….—*Southern Chu Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Jiang Suiyun*

When he arrived at the Prince of Yong's residence, Sang Chen made a beeline for the Cold Courtyard, bringing along the several imperial physicians and Xiaoshunzi to serve as his assistants. The door to the room was closed and barred, voices only occasionally issuing different kinds of instructions.

Li Zhi waited outside the door, filled with incomparable anxiety. Pei Yun's injuries had completely healed. Hearing of Sang Chen's arrival at the Prince of Yong's residence, he also rushed over and joined Li Zhi waiting at the door. Pei Yun was extremely grateful towards Jiang Zhe. Using the method Jiang Zhe had devised, Pei Yun had discussed his plans with his two martial uncles, receiving their tacit approval. Even though it went against the Buddhist tenet of compassion, at this point, they weren't worrying about that. Pei Yun was a disciple that the Shaolin Temple had painstakingly nurtured, thus he absolutely could not be allowed to have any association with the Fengyi Sect. For this reason, the two martial uncles were willing to give one of the two "Little Return Pills" on their persons to Jiang Zhe.

Everyone waited outside for a whole day. Only on the evening of the second day did they see Sang Chen and company walk out, exhausted. The medical sage was already close to seventy. Although he was aged, and his

hair and beard white, his body was quite healthy and vigorous. These last two days, the imperial physicians could and had taken turns. However, for the entire duration, Sang Chen never took one step out the door.

Walking out the door, Sang Chen immediately caught sight of Li Zhi, stepping forward to greet him politely. “This decrepit old man thanks Your Imperial Highness for your strenuous and painstaking efforts. If it weren’t for Your Imperial Highness using precious medicines to prolong his life, I’m afraid that Suiyun could not have survived until this old man arrived to treat him.”

Li Zhi finally breathed a sigh of relief, weakly collapsing into a chair that had been brought over by an imperial bodyguard. Tiredly, he replied, “Sir Sang, it is this Prince who should be thanking you for saving Sir Jiang….”

Sang Chen smiled slightly before replying, “Suiyun and I are like grandfather and grandson. It is proper and expected that I save him. However, although he is now safe and sound, his recovery will require great effort. This decrepit old man can only impose on Your Imperial Highness’s hospitality.”

Li Zhi promptly rose to his feet, resolutely saying, “Even if Sir Sang did not ask, this Prince would have requested Sir Sang to temporarily stay in this residence. Sir, please tell this Prince if you have any needs or requirements. I will not definitely not leave Sir disappointed.”

Sang Chen nodded his head. “This decrepit old man is tired, please prepare someplace for me to rest. Tomorrow, I will treat Suiyun again. It would be best if this decrepit old man could stay here in the Cold Courtyard, permitting me to attend to Suiyun at all times.”

Li Zhi repeatedly voiced his agreement. He had ordered servants to prepare chambers for Sang Chen in the Cold Courtyard long ago.

At this moment, the Princess of Yong dispatched someone to persuade Li Zhi to return to the inner residence to rest. Over the past few days, Li Zhi essentially lived in the Cold Courtyard and practically never went back to the inner residence. He only returned to his own quarters now with the load finally eased off his mind. In the inner residence, the Princess of Yong led the

two concubines and the maids to wait upon Li Zhi as he bathed and changed. After eating a hearty meal, Li Zhi could finally lie down in bed and fell asleep without any worries.

When he woke up, it was already late in the morning.[2] As Li Zhi rose from bed, two maids came over to help him get dressed. With a smile, Li Zhi asked, “Where’s the Princess?”

The Princess of Yong walked in from outside. Beaming, she relayed, “Your Imperial Highness, great news! Just now, someone came from the Cold Courtyard to report that Major Jiang has woken.”

Li Zhi was overjoyed and replied, “The Medical Sage’s reputation is well-deserved. Only one night and Suiyun was able to awaken.”

The Princess of Yong smiled and corrected, “Your Imperial Highness, it has already been two days. When you fell asleep, we couldn’t wake you back up. Sir Sang came over to take a look and determined that Your Imperial Highness was worn out. You would wake up as long as you got enough sleep.”

Li Zhi smiled wryly and said, “No wonder this Prince’s stomach is rumbling with hunger. Quickly bring some food. This Prince intends to go to the Cold Courtyard to see Sir Jiang.”

The princess accompanied Li Zhi to the outer room to eat. As they walked, she said, “Your Imperial Highness, you should bring Roulan over in a while. These days, no one has dared tell her what has happened to Major Jiang. She has already cried several times.”

Li Zhi nodded his head, agreeing. “That’s fine. You should come with me. Afterwards, enter the palace to inform Changle.”

The Princess of Yong was astonished as she gazed at Li Zhi, questioning, “Didn’t Your Imperial Highness say this matter was inappropriate?”

Li Zhi smiled wryly and responded, “When Changle heard that Major Jiang had been seriously injured, she immediately sent over half of the root of the Ningpo figwort bestowed by Imperial Father. The previous few days, she dispatched people to inquire whether the other half was also needed. If the Medical Sage had not yet arrived, I would probably have gone to borrow the

remaining part of the Ningpo figwort in her possession. It seems like Changle's feelings for Major Jiang are quite deep. Even if I am unable to fulfill her desires, I am unwilling to have her continue worrying."

The Princess of Yong nodded her head and replied, "That's fine. How about this? Let me bring Roulan with me when I enter the palace, saying that I intend for Noble Consort Zhangsun to take a look. As this child is young, she is witty and adorable. Changle is quite fond of her."

Li Zhi nodded his head in agreement. The Princess of Yong added, "Your Imperial Highness, although you have released General Qin and company, you have had men keep an eye on them these several days. Moreover, the surveillance has been open and without fear. Yesterday, Qin *daren* personally came to pay a visit, telling your servant that the assassination was not General Qin's doing. However, the Grand General still locked up and interrogated General Qin."

Li Zhi callously replied, "We will speak when I've discussed it with Suiyun. If it is his doing, this Prince will definitely not spare him."

The princess hesitatingly ventured, "Your Imperial Highness, the current relationship between you and the Crown Prince is like that of oil and water. Your servant will be quite worried if you offend Grand General Qin. Moreover, the Xiahou clan is greatly favored by His Imperial Majesty, and the Princess of Jingjiang was ordered by Imperial Father to come. No matter who is offended, it is highly problematic."

Li Zhi paused for a moment before indifferently stating, "It doesn't matter. There are some things that have to be settled sooner or later. But if Qin Qing really performed such a deed, it would be an insult to his family's social status."

The Princess of Yong very carefully expressed, "I don't believe that the child would do such a thing. The upbringing of the Grand General's family is quite strict and rigorous. That child's natural disposition is good and honest. Although he is somewhat impulsive, he is unable to injure someone through a sneak attack."

Li Zhi hesitated for a while, not saying a word. He had already personally

gone to question Qin Qing. Qin Qing did not conceal anything, explaining what had happened that day. Li Zhi was certain that there was someone sowing discord between him and Qin Qing. However, he was not certain that Qin Qing had not fallen into a trap. After all, no one else aside from Jiang Zhe knew what had happened that day. Even if what Qin Qing said was true, it was still possible that he took advantage of someone attempting an assassination to kick a man when he was down. As this matter was of great significance, Li Zhi was unwilling to inform the Princess of Yong. Therefore, he only neutrally said, “This Prince will impartially judge this.”

In any case, the Prince of Yong’s residence finally became temporarily tranquil. During that time, the entire residence was a complete mess. Now, everything had finally calmed down.[3] Of course, the roaring seas underneath the surface were not something that an ordinary person could sense.

***

Within the crown prince’s residence, Lu Jingzhong was in a daze as he looked at the information in his hands. Suddenly, he furiously tore the paper to shreds. After a moment, he rose to his feet and left the room, walking to the entrance of the hall. He heard the intoxicating sounds of song and dance coming from within. Lu Jingzhong shook his head as he quietly entered the hall. He caught sight of Crown Prince Li An seated in the seat of honor, leisurely watching the beautiful movements of the dancers. Seeing Lu Jingzhong enter with his expression ugly, Li An waved his hand, dismissing the dancers and musicians. He inquired, “Why does Junior Mentor look so worried? It is only that Jiang Zhe’s life was saved. Our original objective was not to take his life.”

Deeply worried, Lu Jingzhong responded, “Your Imperial Highness, these last few days, this subject has carefully read over the information, discovering that we have made a grave mistake.”

Li An stared back blankly. Straightening in his seat, he asked, “Why does the Junior Mentor say such a thing?”

Lu Jingzhong answered, “Your Imperial Highness, previously, although I believed Jiang Zhe to potentially be a great minister, to speak the truth, we don’t lack civil and military talents. Therefore, although his talent for

military strategies and administration were both exceptional, this subject did not pay him much attention. As long as Your Imperial Highness ascends to the throne, if he is willing to serve, it would not be too late to employ him. In any case, since Your Imperial Highness is not yet the emperor, there is no need to impatiently recruit talented individuals to invite the Emperor's suspicions. This subject even snickered at the Prince of Yong's failure to understand this fact. No matter how talented Jiang Zhe is, as long as he does not enter the central administration, what's the use? Originally, this subject recommended that we assassinate Jiang Zhe for the sole purpose of creating conflict between the Prince of Yong and Grand General Qin. Unexpectedly, the situation that day was quite strange and there was another assassin who attacked first. Although he failed within sight of success, allowing our man to succeed, the subsequent reaction by the Prince of Yong has been seen by the Crown Prince. Could it be possible that we've stepped on a crucial part of the Prince of Yong?"

"What you say is reasonable," replied Li An, nodding his head, "Over these last several years, we have frequently bothered second brother, but when did we ever see him take such a hard line? He first went to complain tearfully to Imperial Father before mobilizing the Imperial Guard and entering the city. He was even willing to use the Ningpo figwort that was bestowed by Imperial Father, and borrowed another root from Princess Changle. Even sixth brother went to curry favor. We get angry just thinking of this. How can sixth brother be so muddled? He has not yet taken us seriously."

"It is these that has caused this subject to become suspicious," agreed Lu Jingzhong. "Only after carefully reading over the available information did this subject realize that I have failed my duties. In the beginning, this subject only believed that this Jiang Zhe had the talent to bear heavy responsibilities. However, after this subject carefully considered, I realized that the man is actually a genius adept at plotting and scheming."

Li An raised his eyebrows, indicating for Lu Jingzhong to continue. Lu Jingzhong did so. "That man became famous through his literary talent. He once served as an adviser in Southern Chu to the Prince of De. At first, this

subject did not find anything odd about it, considering him only as someone riding another's coattails.[4] Moreover, from the intelligence that we've acquired, although we knew that the Prince of De trusted him, we could not ascertain any stratagems that he had presented. Although we knew that he handled military matters fairly well, we felt that such skill was insignificant. These days, this subject has collected all of the Prince of De's battle records, discovering that while Jiang Zhe was serving the Prince of De, the Prince's tactics became extremely strange and sinister. Furthermore, with one song, Jiang Zhe forced the King of Shu to commit suicide. Although this became an anecdote told with approbation, everyone was under the impression that this resulted from the Prince of De and Jiang Zhe was only following orders. But now, thinking it over, it is possible that it was Jiang Zhe's own intentions. Because he was bedridden for several years, no one paid him any attention. Were it not for this subject personally inspecting all of Southern Chu's intelligence, then I'm afraid that this information would not have been discovered."

Li An smiled and inquired, "Is Junior Mentor worrying too much? There is no evidence to back up these conjectures."

"There is indeed no evidence," rebutted Lu Jingzhong. "However, Your Imperial Highness, why would the Prince of Qi wish to vie over this man with the Prince of Yong? Why would he also try to curry favor and deliver such precious medicines? Didn't Your Imperial Highness say that Liang Wan once reported that both the Prince of Yong and the Prince of Qi had her pay attention to Jiang Zhe? We only believed that the Prince of Yong simply appreciated Jiang Zhe's talent. Your Imperial Highness knows that the Prince of Yong has a habit of recruiting talented individuals. As for the Prince of Qi, he is always acting willfully and making a scene. Therefore, Your Imperial Highness did not take this matter seriously. Now, it seems that both the Prince of Yong and the Prince of Qi likely know how formidable this man is. Only Your Imperial Highness and this subject considers Jiang Zhe to merely be a brilliant scholar. As the proverb says, 'one cloud is enough to eclipse all the sun,'[5] the Prince of Yong used his high regard for him to cause us to believe that Jiang Zhe was a famous scholar in the mode of Qu Yuan and Jia Yi,[6, 7] causing us to overlook that this man is a exceptional strategist

comparable to Zhang Liang and Chen Ping."[8]

"We understand Junior Mentor's wariness," said Li An, "However, aren't you being excessively anxious about this matter? The man hasn't made any contributions to speak of since pledging allegiance to the Prince of Yong."

Lu Jingzhong suddenly grew vigilant, as he replied, "This is what causes the most concern for this subject. It is said that those skilled in battle do not display their outstanding achievements. In addition, if this subject guesses correctly, the stratagems that this man employs should be sinister and secretive, not sticking to a particular pattern. I'm afraid that we have already been trapped. Therefore, this subject hoped he would die. However, I didn't expect that he would survive after suffering such a grave injury."

"Junior Mentor's ability and wisdom are outstanding," consoled Li An, "He is not Junior Mentor's match no matter how capable that man is. If worst comes to worst, we can dispatch another assassin."

A look of pride first flashed across Lu Jingzhong's eyes before he shook his head and responded, "This was something else that I overlooked. He has an expert that is hidden by his side, called Li Shun. Reportedly, he was once a eunuch in the Southern Chu palace. When Jianye fell, he sought refuge with Jiang Zhe. That eunuch was also brought back by the Prince of Yong. In retrospect, I looked through all of the available intelligence on the man, discovering that the information was extremely limited, because that man is practically inseparable from Jiang Zhe like a person and his shadow. Jiang Zhe lives in deep seclusion and rarely comes out. That man is the same. Your Imperial Highness knows that the Prince of Yong's residence is tightly watched and difficult to infiltrate. In particular, Jiang Zhe has many guards by his side. Our spies basically did not pay attention to that man. According to Xiahou Yuanfeng, this Li Shun's martial arts have already reached the 'Skin Deep Realm.' Unless it's an expert of the same realm or an expert at evaluation, it is extremely difficult to ascertain the depths of that man's martial arts. In this aspect, our spies are quite lacking and did not specially pay attention, thus overlooking the man. According to Xiahou Yuanfeng, that man's martial arts are definitely far above his. If we dispatch more assassins, it is unlikely to succeed."

Li An's grew worried as he inquired, "Junior Mentor, tell me, what's to be done?"

"It is said that foot soldiers are countered by generals,"[9] answered Lu Jingzhong. "There is no need for Your Imperial Highness to be excessively worried. We only need to be extra careful. Once Your Imperial Highness ascends to the throne, we will no longer need to worry. If the situation is urgent, at worst, we can dispatch some formidable assassins. No matter how great Li Shun's martial arts, can it be better than that person?"

"Junior Mentor speaks the truth," agreed Li An, nodding his head before asking, "Then should we delay our business?"

Lu Jingzhong replied, "There is no need. Xiahou Yuanfeng has said it is extremely likely that the assassin was dispatched from Southern Chu. No matter what, I do not believe that a surrendered subject of Southern Chu would have any ties to the Embroidered Union. Moreover, I also do not believe that Jiang Zhe would have any power to speak of in this difficult situation. At present, the Prince of Yong is under heavy pressure. We can seize the opportunity to do several runs. When the Prince of Yong detects what is going on, we will have already finished the business. As for Your Imperial Highness, this subject still advises Your Imperial Highness to keep your distance from Xia Jinyi. He only entered Your Imperial Highness's household after he had conflicted with Jiang Zhe. I'm worried he will be disloyal."

Li An impatiently lectured, "Junior Mentor, you must know that although Xia Jinyi had a conflict with Jiang Zhe, it all arose because of the Guanzhong Alliance. Moreover, if we were Jiang Zhe, we would not have Xia Jinyi act in such a fashion. What's more, this Prince has dispatched men to monitor Xia Jinyi. Aside from whispering sweet nothings[10] to Xiu Chun, he is occupied with rehearsing song and dance. This time when Jiang Zhe was seriously injured, the Prince of Yong's household was torn asunder. If Xia Jinyi was a spy, even if he wasn't especially concerned, then he shouldn't be feigning complete indifference. However, you must know that although he was curious, Xia Jinyi did not display a shred of sympathy, even ridiculing the Prince of Yong's household. Apart from this, he is only intent on getting his

hands on Xiu Chun. If he really was a spy from the Prince of Yong, wouldn't he be busying himself with gathering intelligence? Further, for someone so addicted to carnal pleasures, it's likely that second brother would despise him. Don't worry, this Prince will not let him learn any classified information. The little fellow isn't that capable."

Lu Jingzhong furrowed his brows, no longer admonishing the crown prince. After all, he could not say that His Imperial Highness had become seduced by Xia Jinyi to enjoy the carnal pleasures to his heart's content, already causing discontent and dissatisfaction in some people. No one could convince His Imperial Highness of this matter.

"All right," said Li An, gesturing with his hand. "It's enough for Junior Mentor to increase the surveillance on the Prince of Yong's residence. There is no need to be anxious."

Lu Jingzhong could only express his agreement. At this moment, Li An's expression changed and he questioned, "There is one matter that leaves me extremely uneasy. The Prince of Qi did not warn us about the matter relating to Jiang Zhe. Now that he is currying favor, is it possible that the Prince of Qi is having disloyal thoughts?"

Lu Jingzhong answered, "Your Imperial Highness, who in this world doesn't have selfish motives? This subject believes that the Prince of Qi is merely fond of a talented person. There is no need for Your Imperial Highness to worry about this tiny bit of selfishness."

Li An shot Lu Jingzhong a discontented glance before he stated, "Since you've spoken, we will leave it be. However, you have to pay close attention to the Prince of Qi. We do not wish to find ourselves utterly isolated."[11]

Lu Jingzhong's expression did not change as he complied, "This subject will definitely pay attention to the Prince of Qi's activities. If Your Imperial Highness is worried, there is no harm to ask Concubine Lan. She and the Princess of Qi hail from the same sect. She will surely know some things."

Li An distantly stated, "We have already asked Lady Xiao. She said that the Princess of Qi told her that the Prince of Qi was only repaying Jiang Zhe for once saving his life from a poisoned wound. I already knew of this matter,

therefore did not take it to heart. However, hearing your words today, sixth brother's words are definitely not entirely true. It is better if you pay attention on our behalf. We definitely will not allow another Prince of Yong to appear."

Lu Jingzhong respectfully consented, "This subject will do as you bid."

Within a courtyard in Chang'an, Xiahou Yuanfeng was standing, appreciating and playing with the recently bloomed plum blossoms. It was already the second month; several plum trees had already begun to bloom. At this moment, an azure-robed manservant swiftly walked over from behind him. Catching sight of a young master with such an elegant appearance like that of plum blossoms under the spring sunshine, the manservant could not help but stare foolishly for a moment. Afterwards, he announced, "Young master, the guest wishes to meet you."

Xiahou Yuanfeng smiled slightly before saying, "I'm already done." Finished speaking, he picked a plum blossom, sticking it in the vase. Just like this, he held the vase and walked towards the guest room. Entering the guest room, he placed the vase on the table. The faint aroma of the plum blossom immediately permeated the entire room. Towards the middle-aged man resting in bed, he casually asked, "Vicious Killer, have you already recovered from your injuries?"

Vicious Killer stonily looked at the handsome young man who had saved him that day. In a thick voice, he replied, "My injuries are already recovered. You can finally speak your conditions for rescuing me, right?"

Xiahou Yuanfeng smiled and answered, "There is a matter I have to tell you. Unfortunately, Jiang Zhe, Jiang Suiyun has already escaped from danger."

Vicious Killer tensed mentally, though he continued to speak emotionlessly, "Then you, the oriole behind, failed to gain any advantage?"

Xiahou Yuanfeng impartially remarked, "According to practice, because you are a spy from Southern Chu, I should kill you. However, I am quite unwilling to kill you. After all, our objectives do not clash. If you are willing, I can give you another assassination opportunity. Are you willing?"

Vicious Killer coldly refused. “Do you consider me an idiot? Not only is the guard around Jiang Zhe extremely tight, Eunuch Shun will also not leave his side.”

Xiahou Yuanfeng’s eyes brightened as he inquired, “Are you familiar with Li Shun?”

Vicious Killer immediately saw through Xiahou Yuanfeng’s intentions before he impersonally responded, “I don’t know him that well. However, I once monitored Jiang Zhe for a period of time, seeing him frequently come and go from Jiang Zhe’s home. I did not anticipate his martial arts to be so superb. This time, were it not for his absence, I fear that I would have thrown my life away.”

Xiahou Yuanfeng indifferently spoke, “These days, the roadblocks in the capital have been relaxed. If you are willing, I can send you out of the city.”

Vicious Killer callously asked, “What really are your motives?”

Xiahou Yuanfeng smiled. “My motives are quite simple. I want you to draw attention away from the Prince of Yong’s residence. While they are chasing you, I hope you will make them believe it was Qin Qing who conspired with you to assassinate Jiang Zhe. Of course, I will help you as best as I can in escaping back to Southern Chu. If this out of the question, then I ask that you take your own life. You must clearly understand what type of person Qin Qing is. I wish for disagreement to happen between the Prince of Yong and Grand General Qin. This will also be of benefit to your Southern Chu.”

Vicious Killer knew this mission was extremely dangerous and uncaringly replied, “At most, I will give my life back to you. However, you must do something for me. You must kill Jiang Zhe within two years.”

Xiahou Yuanfeng smiled slightly, raising his hand to make a solemn vow, “Xiahou Yuanfeng vows to kill Jiang Zhe within two years. If I violate this oath, I will be destroyed by heaven and earth.”

Vicious Killer scoffed, “Although I do not believe your oath, I know that you have to kill Jiang Zhe. Unless you can prevent him from learning who had shot him with an arrow, otherwise, you will definitely die by his hands.”

Xiahou Yuanfeng smiled silently. That day, he had seen Xiaoshunzi’s

unimaginable and freakish *qinggong* , immediately realizing that the crown prince had offended an extremely fearsome and formidable enemy. Therefore, he devised a plan on the spot, rescuing the assassin who had sought to kill Jiang Zhe, hoping that this assassin would be able to fulfill his objective. However, he was not the archer. Unless Vicious Killer believed this was the case, how would he adhere to his arrangements? Thinking of that assassin who was the oriole behind, Xiahou Yuanfeng wickedly wondered if the assassin knew that he was being also being targeted with bow and arrow. There truly were curious coincidences in this world. Who would have expected that there were three waves of assassins simultaneously arriving at the Cold Courtyard?

Footnotes :

妙手回春, miaoshouhuichun – idiom, lit. magical hands bringing the dying back to life; miracle cure, brilliant doctor

日上三竿, rishangsangan – idiom, lit. the sun has risen three poles high; the sun is riding high, it's already late in the morning

风**平浪静**, fengpinglangjing – idiom, lit. breeze is still, waves are quiet; tranquil environment, all is quiet, a dead calm

附骥, fuji – idiom, lit. riding on somebody's coattails to success; shine by reflected glory

一叶障目，不见**泰山**, yiyezhangmu, bujian taishan – idiom, lit. eyes obscured by a single leaf, unable to see Mount Tai; fig. not seeing the wider picture, can't see the wood/forest for the trees, one cloud is enough to eclipse all the sun

贾谊, Jia Yi was a Chinese scholar and official during the Han Dynasty, famous for rhapsodies and for an essay expounding on the reasons for the Qin Dynasty's collapse.

Lu Jingzhong is stating that Jiang Zhe is as loyal as Qu Yuan and as incisive as Jia Yi.

张**良**, Zhang Liang and 陈**平**, Chen Ping were top strategists who helped Liu Bang found the Han Dynasty.

兵来将挡, binglaijiangdang – part of the idiom '**兵来将**挡，**水来土掩**'(binglai jiangdang, shuilai tuyan), lit. to counter foot soldiers with generals, water with earthworks; different situations call for different action, to adopt

measures appropriate to the actual situation
卿卿我我, qingqingwowo – idiom, lit. to bill and coo; to whisper sweet nothings to one another
众叛亲离, zhongpanqinli – idiom, lit. people rebelling and friends deserting; fig. to find oneself utterly isolated

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 18: Snatched from the Jaws of Death

Volume 2, Chapter 18: Snatched from the Jaws of Death

After Suiyun had recovered somewhat, Sang Chen left Chang'an. Before he departed, the Prince of Yong bestowed upon Sang Chen five hundred kilograms of gold. Sir Sang declined. Jiang Zhe persuaded him, saying that gold and silk were not repayment for Sang Chen's meritorious service, but rather as financial assistance for his profession. Moreover, Jiang Zhe pointed out that there were many poor patients in the world, requiring Sang Chen's benevolent rescue….—*Southern Chu Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Jiang Suiyun*

How did it feel to be snatched from the jaws of death? This probably could only be understood by those who have experienced it. Therefore, when I opened my eyes, although my entire body felt numb and the pain in my chest was difficult to bear, I could not help but reveal a faint smile. With difficulty, I moved my four limbs, once again inducing a spell of pain, even more confirmation that I was still alive and had not gone to the underworld. I groaned. Just as my hoarse voice left my lips, someone had already come over to pull aside the bed's thin silk brocade drapes. Looking carefully, I noticed that it was an imperial physician about forty years of age. With difficulty, I revealed the slightest of smiles. Pleasantly surprised, the imperial physician turned and called out, "*Daren* Jiang has woken! Quickly report to Sir Sang!"

Subsequently, the sound of steady and calm footsteps traveled to my ear. Afterwards, I saw that familiar face above me.

Although we had not seen each for many years, there were not many changes to Sir Sang's appearance—his hair was the color of ash, his appearance thin, his eyes always possessing that concentration and stolidness. That's right, emotionless. In the eyes of the world, Sir Sang was a heaven-sent doctor able to work miracles, frequently bearing hardships to treat the illnesses of the poor. However, he was actually an inhospitable and

emotionless individual. I had already seen this in the past. In his eyes, a patient was vague and indistinct. While he was single-mindedly focused when treating patients, understanding all the intricacies and changes of an illness, once the patient had recovered, then to Sang Chen they no longer had any relationship. If the patient were unfortunate and passed away, Sang Chen would not have a shred of sadness or grief. In Sang Chen's eyes, the only divisions were between patients and the healthy. To him, patients were only the tool by which his medical expertise was measured by. If there were any exceptions, then that would be me.

I still remember when we first met years in the past. My father had asked Sang Chen to treat him. Sang Chen only took one look and informed Father that his illness was incurable; at most the treatment would extend his life by a few years. Originally, Father despaired, even going so far as to consider not getting treatment. It was I who convinced him otherwise, saying, "Although to an ordinary person several years are brief, to us father and son, it is essential. This child is still young, if I do not have a father, I would inevitably be left in dire straits. If Father goes like this, how would you be comfortable leaving the child like this? Would it not be better that father and son are interdependent and spend several more years together? If Father is in pain and suffering, this child would naturally not insist, but as long as this child is able to carefully tend to you, Father should not experience too much suffering."

Father had only momentarily despaired. Hearing my earnest words, he decided to seek medical treatment. When Sang Chen heard my words, he only offhandedly remarked, "This child is considerate and shows good sense." Finished speaking, he stayed to treat my father. During his months-long stay, he frequently taught me medicine. I had once heard him say that he never had any aspirations of practicing medicine to save people. To him, practicing medicine was a way to make a living. Although he said this in a cold and unfeeling manner, I was actually fond of his straightforwardness. Moreover, Sang Chen could not stand patients. Luckily, he was a man of few words, otherwise if the public knew that this medical sage of the apricot forest[1] had such a mindset, it is likely that everyone would turn pale with great fear.

Seeing Sir Sang, I could not help but begin to weep. This was my only senior left on this earth. Sir Sang understood my thoughts. Walking over to take my pulse, he faintly said, “Suiyun, your injury is no longer serious. These days, you’ve taken many precious restorative medicines. Although they saved your life, they were unavoidably too vigorous. You will first have to slowly nourish. Once your injury is fully healed, I will carefully nurse you back to health.”

I questioningly gazed Sir Sang. He smiled slightly and stated, “You are wondering about the Prince of Yong and that little fellow who continuously used his internal energy to prolong your life? The Prince of Yong has been worn out these last few days. I’ve already had him go back to rest. Reportedly, His Imperial Highness has not yet woken from his sleep. That attendant of yours is truly loyal. However, seeing that he had exhausted his internal energy and yet still refused to go rest, I gave him a pill to have him rest obediently. When he wakes up, it’ll be the perfect opportunity for him to advance his cultivation. I will properly supervise him as he goes into seclusion to cultivate. You, child, have a congenital deficiency that prevents you from attaining any success in martial arts development. He, however, is a martial arts cultivating genius. Although the martial arts that he trains in are truly exquisite and extraordinary, to attain such a high level is due to his outstanding innate gifts. My martial arts do not yet have an inheritor, so how about I teach him? You are a half-disciple of mine. He is loyal and devoted to you. It would be the same if I taught my skills to him.”

I could not help but be overjoyed. Although I did not know the depths of Sir Sang’s martial arts, from his tone, one could clearly understand that they were not ordinary. As I was thinking it over, I realized that the Prince of Yong must have been exhausted, otherwise he would not be sleeping for so long. I could not help but feel somewhat anxious. Promptly, I reached out to grasp Sir Sang’s hand. In the palm of his hand, I wrote the word, “prince.” Sir Sang smiled slightly and observed, “No wonder His Imperial Highness treats you so intimately and generously. I’ve already gone to take a look. Do not be worried.”

Only then did I relax. At this moment, a maid brought over a bowl of

medicine, carefully helping me consume it. After taking the medicine, I felt sleepy and lost consciousness soon after. For the next several days, I spent the time sleeping and drinking medicine. Only after seven days passed did I no longer require that kind of fortified medicinal broth, and I could I finally lie in bed clear-headed and awake.

I touched my somewhat stiff pair of legs, wishing that I could get out of bed to walk. However, I was prevented from doing so by Sir Sang. Xiaoshunzi had originally intended to come to attend to me but who could have imagined he was blocked by Sang Chen with one sentence: “There are plenty of martial arts experts in the world, do you wish for your young master to suffer this kind of injury again?” At present, Xiaoshunzi was in seclusion cultivating. It seemed that although Sang Chen’s internal energy cultivation methods were poles apart from the methods developed by Xiaoshunzi, Sang Chen’s study of martial art techniques were more profound than Xiaoshunzi’s. As a result, he was not present to nag me. At least there was no one causing a disturbance by begging for forgiveness.

The Prince and Princess of Yong brought over Roulan to see me once. After that, Sir Sang banned them from coming to see me again, stating that I needed to rest properly and avoid being vexed by external matters. From that point on, aside from dispatching someone over to check on my condition, the Prince of Yong did not come again. From Sir Sang, I learned that the Prince of Yong was personally reorganizing the residence’s defense, as the previous defenses had too many gaps for experts from *jianghu* to exploit. Although taking the time to convalesce had benefits to my health, it was unavoidably quite gloomy. I was not even allowed to touch my beloved books. Sir Sang only gave me several Taoist scriptures, filled with tranquility and the concept of non-doing,[2] for me to peruse with the purpose of ensuring that my mind was serene. They did have benefits; otherwise how would the worries in my mind greatly lessen? Having experienced life and death, I began to view many affairs with serenity. Even Piaoxiang’s shadow no longer constantly lingered in my heart. Even when she came to mind, it was mostly sweet happy thoughts, not brokenhearted suffering.

After another six days had passed, Sir Sang finally allowed me to get out of

bed. Xiaoshunzi had at this point also returned to my side. With his support, I lightly took my first step since my recovery, feeling as soft and weak as cotton. I could barely walk a circle around the room before I had begun to gasp for breath. It was already the middle of the third month and some of the flowers in the garden began to blossom. Although there was a hint of chilliness in the spring breeze, the wind was already no longer piercing. Xiaoshunzi had servants surround a pavilion in the courtyard on three sides with thick brocade curtains to block the spring breeze. Within the pavilion, Xiaoshunzi laid down a thick Persian rug and placed a soft couch, table, and chair. I comfortably lay down on the soft couch, wrapped in the silver foxskin coat that had been bestowed upon me by the Prince of Yong last winter. Sir Sang sat in the chair, his eyes partly closed. Xiaoshunzi was off to the side, steeping tea. I downed in one gulp the cups of hot tea he frequently delivered into my hands, my entire body feeling comfortable from my limbs to my bones.

Also draining his cup in one swallow, Sir Sang smiled faintly and said, “The tea sent by His Imperial Highness is indeed quite good. Suiyun, the Prince of Yong treats you as a minister of state. It seems that you are unwilling to follow me into a life of seclusion.”

I stared back confused, inquiring, “Why does Sir speak thusly? Can it be that you do not agree with Jiang Zhe for serving the Prince of Yong?”

“I deign not take notice of these mundane matters of the world,” responded Sang Chen with a slight smile. “The Prince of Yong is not someone muddleheaded. There’s nothing wrong with you serving him. It is only out of consideration for your health that I wish for you to resign from your post and live a life of seclusion.”

I tranquilly asked, “From now on, can my body no longer endure toil and hard work?”

“Suiyun, although your injury was serious, as long as you are carefully nursed, you will be revitalized in a few years,” replied Sir Sang, shaking his head. “Over these next few years, as long as you are a little bit careful, there shouldn’t be any major problems. It is only that diseases of the heart are difficult to treat. The arteries and veins of your heart have been damaged by

the seven emotional states.[3] If you cannot maintain the tranquility in your heart, submerging yourself in your convalescence, I'm afraid that after ten years your situation will become hopeless. If I have diagnosed it correctly, you must have experienced great joy and terrible sadness while you were physically and mentally exhausted. As a result, you have injured your heart. Furthermore, you have never stopped feeling aggrieved and sorrowful, thereby acquiring this chronic ailment. Although your medical expertise is not bad, even the best doctors cannot treat themselves, leading to your present condition."

Hearing this, Xiaoshunzi's complexion paled. Not saying a word, he gazed at Sang Chen. Sang Chen shook his head slightly, heaving a sigh, speaking no more.

Having walked out of a life and death crisis, and now hearing this news, I, strangely enough, didn't feel the slightest bit of sadness in my heart. I smiled serenely and said, "This is Jiang Zhe's destiny. Even if I, Jiang Zhe, once thought about living in seclusion, now that I have received such kindness and grace from the Prince of Yong, if I cannot repay it, it would leave me anxious for the rest of my life. Moreover, if my mind is unsettled, what's the use of cultivating deep in the mountains? This disciple dares not conceal that I bear the burden of taking revenge for my murdered wife. If this hate is not wiped clean, I will not rest peaceful. How can I live a life of seclusion? However, ten years' time is sufficient. This disciple is confident that I have my vengeance and help the Prince of Yong ascend to the throne. After that moment comes, I will lead a wandering existence, facing life and death with serenity, regarding riches and honor as transient. Wouldn't that be gratifying? To live such a life, what regret would I have, were I to die?"

At first, Xiaoshunzi was pale and wan. But when he listened to the end, his expression became tranquil and placid. Sang Chen glanced at him, inquiring, "Are you going to also allow your master to mess about?"

Xiaoshunzi respectfully replied, "The young master is fond of this. This servant can only act according to his wishes. At most, this servant can follow him to the underworld. Presumably, it will be unlikely for the young master to be lonely."

Although he spoke thusly, I was not moved. After undergoing a near-death experience, my way of thinking had changed. If Xiaoshunzi were to die for me, then I only felt that I would have a friend and companion in the underworld. Moreover, with my methods, it wouldn't be difficult for me to ensure that he remained alive. Therefore, I only glanced at him, smiling slightly, acknowledging the pains he was taking. For him to speak in such a fashion was merely his way of making me try hard to live a few years longer.

"Fine. I'll follow your line of reasoning," said Sang Chen with a slightly wry smile. "However, I will take charge of your health during this period. Afterwards, everything will rely upon you."

"What? Does Sir still wish to wander?" I asked suspiciously. "Sir is already so old. Is there really a need for Sir to wander the four corners of the world?"

Sang Chen indifferently replied, "Although I am getting old, I am unwilling to become involved in the disputes of the mundane world. This place here is like the roaring seas. I cannot compare to you youngsters and am unable to stand these stormy seas. However, my age is getting up there. This time, I intend to return to my homeland to live in seclusion. If you have any matters in the future, you can come find me at Penglai[4] on the Eastern Sea."[5]

I nodded my head and agreed, "Sir speaks correctly. After the situation is stabilized, I also wish to sail the seas to gaze upon the glorious landscape of the mountain of immortals."

Sang Chen hesitated for a moment before speaking, "Suiyun, is your foe the Fengyi Sect?"

I trembled, as I softly inquired, "Why does Sir speak so? The Fengyi Sect is the leader of *wulin* , the spiritual leader of the orthodox sects, and a founder of Great Yong. How could I become enemies with them?"

"There is no need for you to be anxious," replied Sang Chen uncaringly. "I do not have any relationship with the Fengyi Sect. When the master of the Fengyi Sect became famous, I was already forty years old. Although she sought to invite me as her guest several times, I never agreed. This time, she came calling to seek my help in treating a patient. I took a look and

immediately knew that that Liang Wan was affected by a poison made from the ‘Severed Grace Grass.’ There is no cure for the Severed Grace Grass. In addition, the only people in this world who know about this medicinal ingredient are only you and I, the two of us. Therefore, I knew that it was your doing. However, you have never done anything without reason. As a result, I did not tell them, only stating that they could only take care of Liang Wan, who one day would return to normal, only losing her memories of the past.”

Still somewhat worried, I asked, “Sir won’t blame me for being so cruel?”

Sang Chen smiled faintly before he replied, “I have never shown an interest in the everyday affairs of the world. It is only that this Severed Grace Grass is too unavoidably sinister and vicious. You should not use it again from now on.”

I continued to question him, “How does Sir regard the Fengyi Sect?”

Sang Chen looked at me deeply before he answered, “The master of the Fengyi Sect is a pitiable person. Those wicked persons all have a piteous side. It is understandable if you are forced to act, however you cannot harm your own body. If there is enmity, you only need to remember who your enemy is. As for that enmity, it is better forgotten. It will only burn out your heart and destroy your bones. Only by forgetting will you be treating yourself well.”

Relieved, I gave a short bow. “Many thanks for Sir’s teachings.” The only person in this world capable of causing me to capitulate had already shown clearly that he would not get involved in my affairs. In that case, there was really nothing for me to worry about. Although I did not know the past between Sir Sang and the Fengyi Sect Master, it was presently inconsequential.

Sang Chen heaved a sigh. Whenever he saw this child, he would feel as if their temperaments were agreeable. Although their ages were akin to a grandfather and his grandson, and he really treated this child as his own grandson, he also knew that he could change this child’s intentions. Fengyi Sect Master Fan Huiyao had held long discussions with him while drinking

wine. That woman was a lofty and radiant existence. Although he was used to living alone, his heart had once been stirred by her, even going so far as to gift her the extant fragment of the *Moon Heart Sutra* . If he had not given her that fragment, then it was likely that she would not have her present accomplishments. At the very least, her rise would be slowed by at least ten years. He had never regretted his decision, because to him, martial arts weren't important. In order to protect this child who would confront the Fengyi Sect sooner or later, he had transmitted all of his martial arts to Li Shun. Presumably, this would allow Li Shun to better protect Jiang Zhe.

"I am going to take my leave," stated Sang Chen indifferently, glancing at Jiang Zhe. "You must properly take care of yourself."

I promptly replied, "It was too rushed today. It would be better if Sir stayed a few more days, so that I can send Sir off for a distance."

Sang Chen smiled slightly, saying, "There is no need. Your health is poor. There is no need to send me off."

At this moment, from a distance, a lively voice rang out, "What? Who is going?"

Raising my head, I looked over. It was actually the Prince of Yong, leading Sima Xiong over. I thus spoke, "Your Imperial Highness, Sir Sang is getting ready to leave."

Li Zhi quickly said, "How can Sir be so hurried? This Prince has yet to repay Sir for saving my life last time. This time, you've saved Major Jiang. If you do not stay for a few days, I'm afraid that everyone will say that this Prince's hospitality was inconsiderate and dissatisfactory."

"There is no benefit to staying longer," replied Sang Chen unconcerned. "Suiyun no longer has any major issues. This decrepit old man has matters waiting to be handled. Therefore, I have no alternative but to take my leave."

Seeing that Sang Chen was firm and determined, Li Zhi knew that he could not force him to stay. He thus ordered a servant to bring a gold jewel that was worth five hundred kilograms of gold, declaring, "This Prince does not dare to forcibly detain Sir. Would Sir please accept this gold jewel? This is not to express my gratitude, but rather to serve as Sir's traveling expenses."

Sang Chen lightly refused, “Suiyun is an old friend of mine. If it weren’t for Your Imperial Highness not stinting on precious medicines, I’m afraid that he would have died long ago. I cannot thank Your Imperial Highness enough. How dare I accept this?”

With this, the Prince of Yong refused to let him go, repeatedly beseeching Sir Sang to accept it. I knew Sir Sang’s temperament. Unwilling to see them stay deadlocked, I thus urged, “Sir, you should accept this money. I’m afraid that it won’t be good if it is disseminated that His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, refuses to even give traveling expenses. Moreover, Sir frequently treats poor patients. They don’t have money to purchase medicine, causing Sir to generously[6] help others. Sir should accept this money from His Imperial Highness on their behalf.”

My words hit the nail on the head. Although Sir Sang’s heart was as cold as ice, he would nevertheless still treat patients whenever he ran across them. It was only natural and unavoidable that he had to foot the bill on occasion. Therefore, his purse was always empty. Fortunately, the people he had saved numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Wherever he went, there were people who would willingly accommodate him. However, these people probably didn’t realize that Sir Sang completely did not remember who they were.

Sang Chen felt that Jiang Zhe’s words were reasonable, thus accepting the money before he took his leave. The Prince of Yong personally saw him off, while I was prohibited from tagging along and could only look on helplessly as Sir Sang walked out of the Cold Courtyard. Alas, I had only this senior left on earth. We were together for only a few days and already had to separate. The emotional pain of parting inevitably burst forth into my thoughts. Those overwhelmed by the sorrow of parting could only carry on.

After seeing Sang Chen off on my behalf, Xiaoshunzi quickly returned. With a look of hesitation, he said, “Young master, is there a need to investigate the association between Sir Sang and the Fengyi Sect? I don’t recall seeing this matter in the intelligence reports.”

“There is no need,” I replied collectedly. “I am clear about Sir Sang’s personal character. Since he said that he won’t get involved, he won’t get

involved. If we kill the Fengyi Sect Master, Sir Sang will not take offense so long as we do not employ excessive methods against the Fengyi Sect. What's more, what kind of person is the Fengyi Sect Master? Even if we were able to completely destroy the Fengyi Sect, we may not necessarily be able to harm her."

Xiaoshunzi's expression changed, as he asked, "If the Fengyi Sect Master were to escape in the future, then wouldn't there be no end to the trouble? We have to figure out a way to tie her down."

I looked at Xiaoshunzi, smiling slightly. I spoke, "I have a way, however, everything depends on you. If you can defend against one hundred moves from the Fengyi Sect Naster without being defeated, then I will have the chance of success."

With unswerving determination, Xiaoshunzi promised, "Do not worry, young master. I will accomplish it."

I smiled, nodding my head. "Why hasn't His Imperial Highness returned? He surely came over today because he had something to discuss with me."

Xiaoshunzi's expression immediately became extremely odd. It was quite some time before he responded, "Just a moment ago, His Imperial Highness received some news. Therefore, he did not come back. Presumably, he will come over shortly."

Just as he finished speaking, I had already caught sight of Li Zhi's figure, preventing me from questioning Xiaoshunzi closely as to why his expression was so uneasy.

Footnotes :

杏林, xinglin – lit. forest of apricot trees; a reference to the 3rd Century Chinese physician, Dong Feng (董奉) who in lieu of payments asked that his patients plant apricot trees, later generations came to describe the medical profession and doctors poetically as 'those of the apricot forest'
无为, wuwei – is the Taoist concept of non-action or non-doing, the idea of letting things take their own course
七情, qiqing – lit. seven emotional states: joy (喜), anger (怒), anxiety (忧), rumination (思), grief (悲), fear (恐), and fright (惊)

蓬莱, Penglai – named after the legendary island of the Eight Immortals, it is a prefecture city in Shandong; purportedly Qin Shi Huang sent off Xu Fu with five hundred matching pairs of boys and girls to search for the land of immortals

东海, Donghai – lit. the East(ern) Sea; refers to sea east of Mainland China, the East China Sea and the Sea of Bohai

解囊, jienang – lit. to loosen one's purse; fig. to give generously to help others

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 19: Secret Discussions in the Pavilion

Volume 2, Chapter 19: Secret Discussions in the Pavilion

Li Zhi walked over, looking slightly worried. I knew he felt that he was being too demanding by disturbing me so soon after my recovery from a serious wound when it was still inconvenient for me to handle affairs. However, after thinking it over, having been in a coma for a month and a half, and these past several days had been prohibited from receiving guests by Sang Chen, the Prince of Yong must surely have many things to discuss with me. Therefore, I stood up with the support of Xiaoshunzi. In a clear and bright voice, I stated, “Your Imperial Highness, please come into the pavilion. Please forgive Jiang Zhe for being unable to welcome you.”

Li Zhi promptly walked over. “Suiyun, don’t come out. It’s windy outside.”

So speaking, he entered the pavilion. With a smile, he said, “This method isn’t bad, not only being able to taste tea and appreciate the flowers, but also not having to worry about the cold wind. Quickly sit down.”

The movements just now had already caused beads of sweat to appear on my head. Thus, I did not stand on ceremony, sitting down. Weakly, I said, “Your Imperial Highness, please drink a cup of tea before speaking.”

Li Zhi wanted to speak, but hesitated. He only spoke after drinking a cup of the fragrant tea handed him by Xiaoshunzi, “Suiyun, although I’m somewhat apologetic for bothering you, tell me, what should this Prince do right now?”

I smiled slightly and replied, “Your Imperial Highness has done well, seizing the opportunity to augment the protection of your household, obtaining the sympathy of His Imperial Majesty. Qin Qing, Xiahou Yuanfeng, and the Princess of Jingjiang all are suspicious. Over these days, Your Imperial Highness has likely been able to gain quite a bit of relief. It is likely that Grand General Qin will consequently become a bit partial towards Your Imperial Highness. After all, the suspicions against Qin Qing are the heaviest. What further matters have left Your Imperial Highness dissatisfied?”

Li Zhi blushed before he asked, “This Prince is just being anxious about how this matter should be concluded. In addition, this Prince does not know who the assassin was. Does Suiyun have any thoughts?”

“Although I saw the man who shot me with an arrow,” I calmly answered, “However, the distance was too great and I do not know his identity. Nevertheless, Your Imperial Highness, regardless of who it is, you cannot despair because of Suiyun. Your Imperial Highness should still find an opportunity to reconcile with Grand General Qin.”

Frowning, Li Zhi inquired, “You speak correctly, however if this was perpetrated by Qin Qing, how can this Prince allow him to remain alive? If we cannot investigate until the truth comes to light,[1] this Prince will absolutely not let this matter go. Suiyun, you previously said that you had made some arrangements. How is the current situation?”

I glanced at Xiaoshunzi. During the days when Sang Chen was by my side, Xiaoshunzi had secretly gone out to meet with Chen Zhen once. Yesterday, he had reported to me. During this almost two monthslong time span, the crown prince had already made two transactions with the Embroidered Union. We had also earned quite a bit of money. Naturally, we did not forget to record the persons and process involved in the crown prince’s smuggling operation. This information had reached my hands yesterday. Nonetheless, at present, I had no intentions of using this chess piece, waiting to move only once the crown prince had returned to his bad habits.[2]

Thinking it over, I softly responded, “This matter will harm Your Imperial Highness’s clean reputation. It is better if Your Imperial Highness pretends that you don’t know anything.”

Li Zhi stared at me blankly. Hesitating, he said, “Suiyun, it’s not that this Prince is pretentious, but your conduct must not be too excessive. If it harms the empire and the common people, this Prince would rather give up on the position of heir apparent.”

I smiled slightly before reassuring, “Don’t worry, Your Imperial Highness. This subject will not do those kinds of things.” There was something that I did not say—if the Crown Prince wanted to do this, how does it involve me?

There shouldn't be anyone who was going to have me assume responsibility for the Crown Prince's crimes, right? At most, I was the instigator. However, the Crown Prince was the one committing that heinous crime.

With relief, Li Zhi replied, "If that's the case, then good. Suiyun, these are the intelligence reports from these last few days. Slowly look them over."

I accepted the intelligence dispatches handed over by the Prince of Yong, beginning to carefully study them.

These days, the crown prince's side had been quiet.[3] After all, he was the arch-enemy of the Prince of Yong. At this moment, even if he were kick someone who was down, he couldn't do so too brazenly, as the emperor was still alive. This time, the emperor was also very suspicious of the crown prince. Therefore, there were inevitably some warnings. As a result, the crown prince endured silently, staying in his residence to satisfy his carnal pleasures, enjoying himself immensely. The man helping the crown prince satisfy his urges was a newly favored imperial bodyguard named Xia Jinyi. Although Xia Jinyi was licentious, he was a real genius in this field, training the songstresses and dancers of the crown prince's household to become extremely outstanding—their songs enrapturing the soul, their dances seductive. The crown prince was left captivated,[4] spending every day ensnared by the intoxication of rouge and powder. Were it not for the concubine, Xiao Lan, on the inside and Junior Mentor Lu Jingzhong without, it was likely that the crown prince's residence would have become a chaotic mess. Reading this, I could not help but smile slightly. This was a small beginning that would have profound effects. Even before he had ascended to the throne, the crown prince was enjoying the pleasures of life. It seemed like my goal had been achieved.

However, the crown prince's attitude was a puzzle. The intelligence reports sent by Chen Zhen stated that the crown prince was occupied with smuggling military equipment. The two transactions had given the crown prince a taste and he was preparing a third transaction. The Embroidered Union was also extremely satisfied. However, all good things must end. Although the benefits were moving, so long as we tampered with the transaction, we could cause them to begin to fight amongst themselves. It's

likely that the crown prince had handed control of this smuggling operation to Lu Jingzhong to handle. In this way, it can be assumed that the crown prince's scheming was not ordinary. If something were to happen, even if the investigation reached Lu Jingzhong, it would at most be the crown prince failing to strictly control his subordinates. The crown prince could submit a memorial stating that he was indulging in feminine charms and had been deceived by his subordinates. With merely this level of scheming, no matter how deep it was, the crown prince was no more than an ambitious and ruthless character. To want to become the ruler of all the people, how could he shift responsibility to others?

There were also intelligence on the several suspects involved in my assassination. Qin Qing had been locked by Grand General Qin in their family's residence, prohibited from coming out. Reportedly, Grand General Qin had used family discipline, beating Qin Qing so badly that he could not get out of bed.

Every aspect about Xiahou Yuanfeng was the same as always. This in itself was abnormal. His residence had strict protections. In addition, it was inappropriate for the Prince of Yong to disturb the emperor's most favored imperial bodyguard without proof. Therefore, we had no idea what he was doing in secret.

The Princess of Jingjiang, Li Hanyou, was sent to have an audience with the emperor by her father. As her father, the Prince of Jingjiang, did not have any sons, his daughter was permitted entrance to the capital to extend congratulations on his behalf. However, Li Hanyou's identity as a disciple of the Fengyi Sect was somewhat bothersome. Moreover, the Princess of Jingjiang was always accompanying the empress. Reportedly, it was because the Prince of Jingjiang wished to find a good husband for his daughter, thereby entrusting this matter to the empress. Supposedly, the empress intended to marry Li Hanyou to Qin Qing. Reading to this point, I trembled. If the Fengyi Sect sunk their claws into Qin Yi, then this would be too terrifying. It seemed that regardless of whether or not Qin Qing took part in the assassination, there was no way that we could punish him. I carefully recalled to mind that day's assassin, remembering everything about him.

Suddenly, everything became clear.[5] Regardless of who this assassin was, he was definitely not Qin Qing. Reminded of that day's situation, I finally understood that someone was first trying to sow dissension before assassinating me, then shifting the blame onto Qin Qing. It was coincidence that Vicious Killer was first. I did not even have to think to know who was trying to sow dissension.

Finally confirming the opponent, I looked towards Lu Jingzhong's name. This man was truly formidable. It was likely that their goal was to form a grudge between the Prince of Yong and Qin Yi. I was likely the target because I was the Prince of Yong's newest trusted aide. Could I be considered as an innocent victim of the calamity that I suffered this time? However, for the Prince of Yong to be so anxious, it seemed like there was no way for me to hide myself. That man's scheming was truly formidable. However, his shortcomings were very obvious. If I were the one employing stratagems, it would not be as simple as merely inciting discord. Instead I would have the opponent voluntarily jump into the trap. It was likely that Qin Yi and Qin Qing absolutely hated the one stirring up conflict. However, I found it odd that in order to sow strife, they would utilize the fake rumor about there being a relationship between Princess Changle and myself.

These reports were not especially detailed, presumably because the original intelligence was all in the Prince of Yong's study. After all, the Prince of Yong was unwilling to tire me out. As a result, the majority of these reports only had a few lines. I did not waste any further time thinking. These reports were all related to the investigation of the assassination attempt on me. I had the patience to wait for the details of something that had happened already. Currently, it was sufficient for me to only know the present situation.

Laying these reports down, I smoothly stated, "Your Imperial Highness, this subject now understands what happened. There is no need for Your Imperial Highness to worry. These next few days, there is no harm for Your Imperial Highness to visit the palace. Only with Your Imperial Highness relaxing a little would this subject have the opportunity to act. The assassination attempt was not because of some personal grudges; therefore,

this subject will not retaliate. As long as Your Imperial Highness prevails, this subject's hatred will naturally be avenged."

"Suiyun already knows?" Li Zhi happily inquired, "Then who was it that attempted to assassinate you? This Prince will definitely not let him off easily."

I smiled placidly and replied, "Your Imperial Highness, this subject does not have any proof and as such cannot be sure who it is. However, it is enough to know that I don't plan on letting them off lightly. Your Imperial Highness should briefly not relent, delaying the Grand General for a period of time. If this matter is resolved now, then I'm afraid that the Grand General will not be able to obstruct the marriage between the Princess of Jingjiang and General Qin. If there are suspicions on Qin Qing, then the Grand General can tactfully and politely refuse."

Finally able to take a tremendous weight off his mind, Li Zhi rejoiced, "It's good as long as it wasn't Qin Qing."

I promptly added, "Your Imperial Highness cannot disclose this, even going so far as to express hostility to the Grand General. Only by doing so can we cause our enemies to relax their vigilance. The Grand General will not blame Your Imperial Highness because of this."

Li Zhi nodded his head. "Since we've finished discussing business, there are two other matters that this Prince must inform you about. The first is that Imperial Father permitted me to augment the security of this residence. I already had Sima Xiong go select carefully from the army. Originally, this Prince had always believed that warriors should display their might on the battlefield. Therefore, the guards of this residence were not specially selected, causing Suiyun to suffer a serious injury. This time, this Prince decreed that a large competition be held in the army, selecting a thousand men to serve as the residence's guards. This Prince has already split eight hundred men out of the thousand into eight companies named after the eight trigrams, assigning them the security of the residence. From now on, the Prince of Yong's residence will be governed by military law. Anyone caught shirking his responsibilities will be punished with death. In addition, the remaining two hundred men are the best among them. I have already

arranged fifty of them to serve as your personal guards. Many of them are *jianghu* disciples with fairly good internal energy cultivation, absolutely capable of blocking an assassination attempt by an accomplished expert. You will govern the rewards and punishments of these individuals. There is no need to ask this Prince for approval."

I warmed. A competition held in the Yong army was an extremely solemn and grand occasion. It was split into three contests: horse archery, cavalry combat, and hand-to-hand combat. A victor needed to win all three contests. To win this kind of grand competition required innumerable bloody battles before success. For the Prince of Yong to use the grand competition to select bodyguards meant that those selected were all warriors who were one in a thousand. Moreover, surprisingly, more than half of those assigned to me were from *jianghu* . It seemed like this time the Prince of Yong had spent quite a bit of blood and sweat.

I immediately expressed my thanks to the Prince of Yong. During this time, the look on Xiaoshunzi's face changed and changed again. Finally, he could not bear it any longer, stepping forward and bowing. "This servant spoke rudely earlier, offending Your Imperial Highness. Would Your Imperial Highness please forgive me?"

I was startled. Although I had noticed long ago that something was amiss, I did not realize that he had somehow inexplicably offended the prince. I directly inquired, "Xiaoshunzi, what's going on? How did you offend His Imperial Highness?"

Xiaoshunzi blushed with shame. "Just now His Imperial Highness received a report that the Vicious Killer has finally revealed tracks. Moreover, he has already fought his way out of encirclements twice. I wish to go and kill that man to avenge young master. However, I was simultaneously worried about young master's safety and could not help but mock His Imperial Highness, 'If it weren't for General Pei being a guest at the Cold Courtyard, it's likely that young master's life would have been lost already. Vicious Killer was only a mere assassin and yet was able to come and go as he pleased in the Prince of Yong's residence. Now he was being unbridled outside. Truly thoroughly discrediting[6] the warriors of Great Yong.'"

Hearing this, I could not help breaking out in a cold sweat. I promptly rose to my feet and apologized, “Xiaoshunzi is ignorant and offended Your Imperial Highness. Would Your Imperial Highness please forgive him?”

Li Zhi waved his hand, gesturing for me to return to my seat. Smiling wryly, he stated, “This Prince has let down you master and servant pair. The imperial bodyguards handpicked this time by this Prince will definitely be able to ensure Suiyun’s safety. Moreover, this Prince has already issued a command: Henceforth, a grand competition will be held every three months. Those ranking in the last ten must compete with the newly selected imperial bodyguards. If they cannot win, they will be dismissed from their post. Suiyun, although how you handle your personal guards is your own affair, candidate replacement cannot be decided by you. Xiaoshunzi, your martial arts are exemplary, far surpassing this Prince’s reckoning. From now on, you have the authority to dismiss anyone from Suiyun’s personal guards as long as you find them unsuitable. You must not act according to Suiyun’s temperament. At times, he is too kindhearted. Even if someone is unqualified, he still is likely unwilling to speak up.”

Xiaoshunzi repeatedly nodded his head. A few days earlier, he had once suggested that I should bring some of the men from the Secret Camp in. However, the strong point of the Secret Camp was secrecy. In the face of a pitched battle, it was likely that they were no match for these experts from the army. Moreover, it was not suitable for the Secret Camp to be exposed. Therefore, I did not agree. At this moment, seeing that my safety was ensured, Xiaoshunzi beamed with happiness. “This servant would boldly like to request permission to personally select young master’s bodyguards.”

“Okay. In the future these people will most likely listen to your orders,” consented Li Zhi, nodding his head. “There won’t be any problems if you selected them. These couple of days, Sima Xiong is distributing assignments to them. There is no harm for you to go take a look.”

Xiaoshunzi quickly nodded his head, eyeing me for instructions. I knew that after he had ensured my safety, he would immediately go off to chase and kill Vicious Killer, and thus I did nothing to obstruct him. On the contrary, I said, “Go handle this matter quickly. So much time has passed

without a trace of Vicious Killer's movements. For him to suddenly reappear now that my life has been saved, I really want you to interrogate him thoroughly."

Xiaoshunzi nodded his head at once in agreement, swiftly walking off. It seems that he was already anxious and impatient.

Watching Xiaoshunzi walk away, Li Zhi sighed and observed, "What a faithful and true servant. Suiyun, you are truly fortunate."

I smiled. "Before Your Imperial Highness, he is only being obedient because of Your Imperial Highness's face. He is usually quite impudent."

Seeing that Xiaoshunzi's figure had disappeared, Li Zhi changed his countenance and said, "Suiyun, I know that you are keeping some things from me. I am unwilling to investigate because I believe that you won't harm me. However, if I do not ask, then I cannot trust you completely."

Although I knew that the Prince of Yong could not be completely ignorant of my affairs, I was still uneasy when things came to a head. The thought of him having a reckoning with me crossed my mind. Anxiously, I stole a glance at him. Li Zhi had already continued, "For this Prince to uncover this matter, it's not for anything else. If you have any trusted confidants, there is no harm in having them come serve by your side. If another assassination were to happen, I'm afraid that Suiyun would not be so fortunate. I know that you once had several attendants with fairly good martial arts by your side. However, I have never seen them with you. I do not blame you for concealing them from me. If you weren't careful in all respects, how would you able to defend yourself in these troubled times? It is only that your safety is of paramount importance. You should not conceal things from me so that they can't be at your side to protect you."

Somewhat ashamed, I lowered my head. If the Prince of Yong had not raised this subject, then the relationship between us lord and vassal would naturally have been harmonious. But I did not expect that the Prince of Yong would piece things together and would rather cause me to misunderstand to ensure my safety. The gratefulness in my heart almost caused me to tear up. Remembering how the Prince of De had not forgotten his suspicions

towards me even onto death, although I greatly esteemed his loyalty and righteousness, I could not help but feel bitterly disappointed. In comparison, the Prince of Yong treated me in such a manner, so if I was not able to have him ascend to the Imperial Throne, how could I be at ease? I needed to do more. At worst, if my achievements were only so great as to worry him, then I simply needed to depart and go into seclusion.

However, although we had come to a tacit understanding, I did not say anything too much, only stating, “This subject will solemnly respect Your Imperial Highness’s admonishments.”

Seeing that I had grasped the meaning of his words, Li Zhi cheerfully responded, “This time, after learning that you sustained a heavy wound, both Princess Changle and the Prince of Qi showed great concern and care for you. Imperial Sister sent over the Ningpo figwort and bear gallbladder bestowed upon her by Imperial Father, while the Prince of Qi also sent over a bear gallbladder. If it weren’t for these medicines, it is likely that this Prince would not have been able to preserve your life. Oh, that’s right! Roulan returned from the palace two days ago. Changle is extremely fond of Roulan, frequently wanting to bring your daughter to the palace to keep her company.”

Somewhat puzzled, I inquired, “This subject is aware of the Prince of Qi’s intentions. I do not know why Princess Changle treats this subject with such deep affection. Furthermore, why has Roulan entered the palace again?”

Li Zhi cast a glance at me. “Imperial Sister is fond of your poetry. As for Roulan, it was the Princess of Yong who brought her into the palace. After suffering this injury, it was Imperial Sister who bestowed medicine to help prolong your life. Since your life has been preserved, then you should thank her for this great favor. The Princess of Yong saw that your injuries were severe, thinking that it would be best if she brought Roulan into the palace to thank Changle on your behalf. Roulan is your adopted daughter. Expressing gratitude on your behalf is in accordance with etiquette.”

Bewildered, I nodded my head. Why was Princess Changle treating me so generously and kindly? Was my poetry really that great?

Li Zhi glanced at me, laughing before he continued, “Oh, that’s right! In addition, Changle has had me tell you, ‘thank you.’ However, I don’t know the intent of these words.”

I shivered inside. Thanking me? Could it be possible that she knew that I had let her off that day? Impossible. If that was the case, wouldn’t the affair involving Liang Wan be known by everyone? Comforting myself, I said, “This subject is not entirely clear about the deeper meaning behind Her Imperial Highness’s words.”

Seeing that I looked somewhat tired, Li Zhi said, “All right, this Prince will not delay your rest. Be sure to not exhaust yourself.”

I was truly getting tired and thus saw off Li Zhi without moving. Two maids came over to help me up. These two maids had been attending and caring for me for some time now. Although I did not like being attended to by maids, I did not drive them away. After I had laid down in bed, I gradually entered the land of dreams. However, my sleep wasn’t that peaceful, the memory of that assassin shooting an arrow into my chest frequently playing in my mind, leaving me anxious and frightened. As a result, I tossed and turned. I had a dream that Xiaoshunzi had captured and brought Vicious Killer before me, allowing me to personally kill him. Afterwards, the assassin from that day would appear, still possessing those clear and lucid eyes, still having those fair white hands, notching and arrow and pulling back the bowstring. Suddenly, I would be startled awake. In the darkness, I indifferently stated, “I know who you are. It’s impossible to be anyone else. Li Hanyou, *humph* !”

Footnotes :

水落石出, shuiluoshichu – idiom, lit. as the water recedes, the rocks appear; fig. the truth comes to light
积**重**难**返**, jizhongnanfan – idiom, lit. ingrained habits are hard to overcome; fig. bad habits die hard
偃旗息鼓, yanqixigu – idiom, lit. lay down the flag and still the drums; fig. to cease, to stop
神魂颠**倒**, shenhundiandao – idiom, lit. spirit and soul upside down; infatuated, head over heels in love, captivated

豁然开朗, hourankailang – idiom, lit. suddenly opens up to a wide panorama; fig. everything becomes clear at once
颜面扫地, yanmiansaodi – idiom, lit. for one's face to reach rock bottom; to be thoroughly discredited

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 20: Chasing Over a Thousand Li to Kill

Volume 2, Chapter 20: Chasing Over a Thousand *Li* to Kill

Before Suiyun fully recovered, the Prince of Qi paid a personal visit. At this time, a clear distinction had been made between the Crown Prince and the Prince of Yong. Many were left puzzled by the Prince of Qi's behavior, later learning that the Prince of Qi was adept at self-preservation….—*Southern Chu Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Jiang Suiyun*

On the morning of the second day, while I was still half-asleep, I could faintly sense that someone was covering me with a blanket. The person's movements were extremely unfamiliar. I suddenly woke up. To tell the truth, after gaining a new lease on life, I was no longer so apathetic about the affairs around me. I opened my eyes slightly, catching sight of Prince Li Xian of Qi sitting beside the bed, a fearful look in his eyes. Xiaoshunzi was nearby, glaring at him like a tiger stalking its prey. I was moved. From what the Prince of Yong told me, while I was struggling on the border between life and death, the Prince of Qi learned that I needed a bear gallbladder to prolong my life. Disregarding suspicions that could be engendered, he delivered the bear gallbladder in his possession. Princess Changle sending Ningpo figwort and bear gallbladder was already outside my expectations. The Prince of Qi's actions were even more shocking. Why would he do this, knowing that it would anger the crown prince? However, I did not fully open my eyes. What could I say? I had already made my choice. Even if I did not serve the Prince of Yong, it was unlikely that I would follow the Prince of Qi. This being the case, it was preordained that our relationship would never be that of a liege and vassal, so why should I incite something additional to worry about?

The Prince of Qi heaved a sigh, turning to leave. As he walked out, he was stopped. Xiaoshunzi followed him out, closing the door behind him. Pricking my ears, I heard the Prince of Qi softly speak to Xiaoshunzi, "I know that you are not an ordinary individual. Remember to ask your master the point of

getting mixed up in this situation. He is someone who does not cherish fame and money. The Fengyi Sect cannot be provoked lightly. Even if they don't act, do you think that the Crown Prince does not have experts by his side? Suiyun is only a weak scholar. He was able to luckily preserve his life this time, but what about next time? Urge him to leave Chang'an."

I could hear Xiaoshunzi's impersonal and placid reply, "Your Imperial Highness lectures correctly. This servant will naturally pass this message on to the young master."

After a while, Xiaoshunzi pushed open the door and walked in. He radiated an icy killing aura. I looked at him strangely and asked, "What's going on? Do you greatly dislike the Prince of Qi?"

Xiaoshunzi angrily answered, "Who wanted him to come cry crocodile tears?[1] Don't tell me that he believes that we are aware of the role that he plays?"

I raised my eyebrows, signaling my lack of understanding. Xiaoshunzi calmed down and stated, "These days, His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, and I have both been occupied with young master's recovery. Responsibility for interrogating and investigating of this residence was assigned to General Sima. General Sima discovered that the bow and arrows abandoned by the assassin came from the army. However, it is easier said than done to bring arrows and a bow into this residence. The security screening of guests for the banquet on the sixteenth day was extremely tight. On that day, there was absolutely no way for anyone to bring in a bow and arrow. The only possibility is if there was a traitor inside the prince's household who hid the bow and arrows. However, General Sima's investigation did not turn up any clues. Afterwards, we remembered that the Princess of Qi had come to pay a visit to the Princess of Yong on the fifteenth. We definitely could not carefully search the Princess of Qi's carriage. Therefore, General Sima suspects that the bow and arrows were brought in by the Princess of Qi to be used by the assassin."

I calmly replied, "This kind of thing cannot be confirmed. The only thing that can be done is reorganizing the defenses of the prince's residence. Although His Imperial Highness previously repeatedly suffered dangers, at

the time, the Fengyi Sect had not yet formally supported the Crown Prince. Therefore, the defenses were sufficient. However, these defenses were naturally unsuitable faced with assassins from the Fengyi Sect."

Xiaoshunzi neutrally inquired, "Young master, can you confirm that the assassin was from the Fengyi Sect?"

Seeing the fire in his eyes, I was afraid that he would recklessly go out to kill if I answered in the affirmative. Thus, I could only shake my head and respond, "I only say that the assassin's level should not be below that of the Fengyi Sect. However, I did say that this was perpetrated by the Fengyi Sect. That day, I only caught a glimpse of the assassin. If I were to see that person again, I would be able to recognize the assassin. It is sufficient as long as I can affirm that Qin Qing was not involved."

Xiaoshunzi frowned and replied, "Apart from him, there is only Xiahou Yuanfeng and Li Hanyou. General Pei was by young master's side. The Duke of Wei's identity should preclude him from committing such a deed."

I lightly explained, "Xiahou Yuanfeng stated that he went out to relieve himself. Li Hanyou said that she did not like the raucous noise of the banquet; therefore after extending her congratulations, she went to the inner residence to see the Princess of Yong. These two individuals are both possible suspects. However, we cannot eliminate the possibility that someone else snuck in. We all know that those skilled enough to directly head towards the Cold Courtyard to assassinate have to either be that day's guests or traitors within the prince's household. However, this cannot be used as proof. Therefore, although those two are the most suspicious, the Prince of Yong cannot have them arrested." I could not say that the act was perpetrated by Li Hanyou. After all, I had never even seen her before. It was better to not utter such a conjecture without proof.

Xiaoshunzi calculatedly remarked, "Matters that the Prince of Yong cannot handle, I can handle. As long as young master permits it, I will go immediately to kill them."

I smiled. "Don't cause trouble. How can we not be reasonable? If this was perpetrated by them, they will make things difficult for us in the future. Do

you believe that you won't have the opportunity to deal with them? All right, it's better if you go chase and kill Vicious Killer. Whatever happens, we cannot allow him to get away and cause trouble in the future."

Xiaoshunzi coolly voiced, "Do not worry, young master. I have already rearranged the defenses of the Cold Courtyard. Previously, young master did not like having the guards too close. This time, we cannot do as young master wishes."

I awkwardly conveyed, "This … I won't drive them off."

Seeing that I was this way, Xiaoshunzi said, "Once I have returned, we will do as you wish. If I am not present, young master cannot have nobody waiting by your side."

I repeatedly nodded my head. Because of this assassination, Xiaoshunzi felt extremely guilty, constantly feeling that he had not properly protected me. However, he was not a remorseful individual. Therefore, from now on, he would absolutely not allow me to do as I pleased. Although I was fond of being free and unrestrained, I valued my life more. Previously, they did not know of my importance and yet I had almost lost my life. Now, it was likely that every step I took was dangerous. How could I dare to act willfully? In any case, it was only more guards around me. I only needed to ignore them.

Xiaoshunzi hurriedly departed. I knew that he was chasing after Vicious Killer to kill him. Apparently, this was because the assassin had escaped several attempts to capture him. If Xiaoshunzi did not chase after him, it was likely that he would escape back to Southern Chu. If he could not personally participate in killing the assassin, then Xiaoshunzi could not forgive himself.

I comfortably lay out. My most important mission right now was to recover. Thinking of Sang Chen's warnings, I did not wish to live only ten more years. I needed to start practicing the abandoned nourishing methods again. Life was so richly colorful; wouldn't it be a pity if I were to die before my time? Narrowly escaping death this time, I viewed many things with tranquility. Even when thinking of Piaoxiang, my heart no longer dwelled on the pain and suffering, instead remembering her beauty and the happiness we once shared.

***

Leaving the Prince of Yong's residence, Prince Li Xian of Qi casually returned to his own residence. When he arrived at the entrance of the Golden Valley Courtyard that only he could enter, Li Xian saw Qin Zheng waiting with several maids. The Golden Valley Courtyard was Li Xian's own chambers. Without permission, no one was permitted to enter. Even the Princess of Qi, Qin Zheng, was not permitted entry. Therefore, she waited by the entrance.

Seeing Qin Zheng, Li Xian revealed a mocking smile as he said, "*Aiyah* ! The Princess is pregnant, why are you standing here? This Prince cannot afford to take responsibility if something untoward were to happen. I wonder if the Princess has any admonishments?"

Qin Zheng trembled before she replied, "Your Imperial Highness, I, your servant, do not understand why Your Imperial Highness so treats this servant's good intentions. The Crown Prince and you are in the same boat. However, days earlier you not only sent precious medicines, but also made inquiries, causing the Crown Prince to feel unhappy. Doesn't your visit just now completely disregard the existence of the Crown Prince? I, your servant, am only giving consideration to Your Imperial Highness. Why does Your Imperial Highness …"

"Shut your mouth," hollered Li Xian coldly, grim and heartless. "Princess, do I need to speak of what you have done? Why did the Fengyi Sect suddenly think to assassinate Jiang Zhe? How was that bow and arrows brought into my brother's residence? Do you really think this Prince is an idiot? Jiang Zhe once saved this Prince's life. Although this Prince did not have the fortune to attain his service, who allowed you to exceed your place and meddle in these affairs,[2] inviting your sect to kill him?"

Qin Zheng' grew frenetic. Although Li Xian was temperamental in the past, he was never in such a violent rage as today. She could not help but try to justify herself. "This wasn't your servant's idea. I, your servant, only mentioned that both Your Imperial Highness and the Prince of Yong both greatly valued Jiang Zhe. The order was issued by the Inner Hall. Your servant was only following orders."

When she finished speaking, Qin Zheng paled. She only just realized that she had admitted to keeping a close eye on Li Xian. Moreover, she had admitted to participating in the assassination attempt on the major of the household of the Marshal of Heavenly Strategies.

Li Xian callously glared at Qin Zheng, unsympathetically replying, “If you weren’t my wife, why would I go to the trouble of trying to remedying this situation? Zheng’er, you are truly stupid, not knowing who really treats you well. Fine…. Go and rest well. For the time being, you must not go out. Properly nurture the baby at home.”

Finished speaking, Li Xian turned and entered the Golden Valley Courtyard. Watching his departing aloof and distant figure, Qin Zheng wanted to catch up, but she could only watch as that painted black door closed. Qin Zheng felt her heart grow increasingly cold. She did not know why, but her vision blurred and she felt faint, weakly collapsing into the arms of her maids.

***

Under the bright moonlight and the dim stars, the black-robed Vicious Killer stood on the riverbank, looking at the cluster of reeds on the opposite bank under the misty moonlight. He was joyous. This place was on the outskirts of Yongning County in Qizhou Prefecture[3] and the Tian Family Town of Guangji County.[4] Although the small ferry crossing here was obscure, this was someplace he was quite familiar with. This place was located on the remote boundaries of three counties. The surging Yangtze River flowed between the two shores here. The layers of unbroken chains of mountain peaks served as obstacles. The vegetation was verdant and lush. The river here was also very narrow. This ferry crossing was most frequently used by spies from Southern Chu and Great Yong. He looked at the precipice on the shore, espying the four large characters, “*Jiang Nan* Strategic Place.” However, there wasn’t the slightest hint of relaxation in his countenance. Although this place was only known to certain individuals as the optimal location to steal across the river, those chasing after him weren’t only operatives from the army, but also experts from *wulin* . They would definitely set an ambush here. Although he would be safe after crossing that

narrow strip of water, it was easier said than done.

Over the course of the entire journey, he had felt as if skating on thin ice. The Prince of Yong's order had spread to all the checkpoints within the borders of Great Yong. Although he had disguised himself and moved in secret, his trail had been discovered several times. Fortunately, his martial arts were outstanding and he was adept at moving in secret, and thus was fortunate enough to escape. Most dreadfully, even the members of Great Yong's *jianghu* , unconstrained by the authorities, had set him as their target. One reason was because the Prince of Yong had a majestic status in their minds. The other reason caused him to not know whether to laugh or cry. The only reason why Xiahou Yuanfeng was acknowledged as the greatest young expert of Great Yong was because he was able to defeat the commander of the Imperial Guard, Pei Yun, in the competition. However, many believed that if the fight had continued, the outcome of the battle would still be in doubt. Therefore, when those youthful experts of *jianghu* learned that he had fought Pei Yun to a draw, they believed that as long as they were able to defeat Vicious Killer, they would have the qualifications to challenge Xiahou Yuanfeng. Thus, these various youthful experts began to also chase after the assassin. After he had broken through several encirclements and obstacles, these youthful experts felt that had lost face. Unexpectedly, rumors spread that if Vicious Killer were to successfully escape back to Southern Chu, then the experts of Great Yong's *jianghu* would be thoroughly discredited.[5] When this happened, Vicious Killer truly found himself surrounded by enemies on all sides. Although he had luckily reached this location, it was extremely likely that there were enemies waiting ahead for him. The assassin smiled slightly, arranging his clothes, before walking towards the river bank.

When he was about a hundred paces from the river bank, Vicious Killer heard the twang of a bowstring. Like lightning, a silver arrow flew past his face, disappearing into the night. He immediately stood still, leisurely turning his head. Under the dim light of night, he caught sight of a white-robed youth carrying a silver bow proudly gazing at him. By the youth's side was a red-robed woman, smiling sweetly. Vicious Killer's expression changed. Callously, he remarked, "Good. So it is the Silver Bowed Wastrel

Duanmu Qiu and the Red Clothed Luocha Qiao Yan'er. That day, if it weren't for your assassination attempt, how could the Prince of De be wounded? If I can kill you two today, then this journey to Great Yong will not have been in vain."

At this moment, someone lightly laughed from behind him and stated, "*Aiyah* ! Duanmu, your glorious achievement is still remembered by others. Pity. It would have been better if you were successful that day."

Following that clear and bright laughter, a small boat floated over from the center of the river. On it stood a thin, young Daoist priest. His two arms were longer than those of an ordinary person, matching his distinctly strange appearance, seemingly an immortal. However, his eyes were nimble and lively. It could be clearly seen that his temperament was cheerful.

When Duanmu Qiu heard the priest's words, he could not help but flash a slight, wry smile, as he replied, "Priest Bitter Bamboo,[6] truly no good words are to be expected from a scoundrel."[7]

At this moment, several individuals walked out from the left and right. On the left were two young women who were as beautiful as immortals—one looked like an alluring immortal, while the other looked innocent and pure. On the right were three young men with exactly the same appearances. The two young women had swords tied to their waists. The three young men each carried different weapons, a sword, a saber, and a bullwhip.

Vicious Killer smiled slightly and stated, "As expected, it is only you lot that have been able to catch up. Isn't it strange that even though the Prince of Yong's household isn't anxious, the Crown Prince, the Prince of Qi, and the Fengyi are actually quite anxious?"

These words were like a sharp sword penetrating into the hearts of these individuals. Aside from the youth on the boat, the expressions of everyone present changed. In passing, Vicious Killer took a leather canteen from his waist, slowly taking a drink of the fine liquor within. He declared, "Everything is good about Great Yong. The only blemish is that its wine cannot compare with that of Southern Chu. Alas, I can only endure it for now. Once I've crossed the river, I'll go to a wineshop to drink some fine

liquor. Which of you will come first today? Is it the Silver Bow and Luocha in the service of the Prince of Qi? Or the Three Stalwarts from the Crown Prince's household? Or the Third and Seventh Misses from the Fengyi Sect? Or is it possible that you are waiting for the Dragon Roaming the Waves, Daoist Priest Bitter Bamboo to make the first move?"

The three young men advanced one step. The sword-carrying youth coldly said, "Vicious Killer, it's enough that you ran amok in the Prince of Yong's residence. And yet, you also caused the Crown Prince to be implicated. His Imperial Highness has ordered that you be brought back to the Prince of Yong's residence to be punished for your crimes. It will be fine if you are willing to surrender. If you are unwilling, then don't blame us for being merciless."

The assassin smiled, unconcerned. "That's fine. Let me first experience your combined moves. I have heard that you three were born of the same parents, sharing a connection. Our fight, the day before yesterday, was rushed and I did not have the opportunity to experience your skills. Since we have the opportunity today, let's begin."

The three young men moved forward as one. Although they stepped simultaneously, there were slight differences in their strides. The sword-carrying young man took the lead, while the other two were half a step behind him. The three advanced like so. The jagged and yet harmonious cadence caused people to feel gloomy for no reason. After they had taken several steps, the three youth's figures shimmered and surrounded Vicious Killer. The glint and flash of cold steel combined with the river dragon-like bullwhip to encircle him. These three were connected mentally, their combination flawless. Vicious Killer had long ago experienced their ferociousness. In order to handle these three, he had already thought of a method beforehand. Just as their formation was about to completely surround him, he used his full strength to throw himself at the whip user. He knew that of the triplets, the whip user had wisdom surpassing others. Intelligent people were often the most likely to show timidity. Sure enough, that youth involuntarily retreated half a step. If the formation was fully formed, then his two brothers would have seized the opportunity to attack

from both sides. However, right now, his two brothers were slightly off. This slight variation was the difference between life and death. When Vicious Killer's body swept past the whip-using youth, blood spurted from the youth's throat. However, he was also not having an easy time. The sword and saber slashed across his back, blood spraying forth. The two youths did not chase after the Southern Chu assassin, gazing at the corpse of their deceased brother. They were left dumbfounded.

At this moment, the two young women blocked Vicious Killer; they were the Red Clothed Luocha and the Fengyi Sect's Seventh Miss. Although the Red Clothed Luocha was a woman, she was valiant and formidable looking. In comparison, the Seventh Miss's face was childish and innocent, her appearance sweet. However, both women were vicious and fierce. Of the two, one was fierce and ruthless, while the other although gorgeous, had a greater killing aura. The assassin only exchanged a few blows before he was drenched in sweat. At this moment, Duanmu Qiu notched an arrow to his bow. A silvery light shot towards Vicious Killer. Although he was able to dodge to the side, Qiao Yan'er took advantage of the distraction to use several sword techniques to place him in an even more dangerous situation. The Seventh Miss's swordsmanship became increasingly gorgeous. The two women were becoming fiercer the longer they fought. At this time, the two remaining young men of the Three Stalwarts had already pounced on Vicious Killer from behind. The four combatants surrounded him, causing the Southern Chu assassin's situation to become increasingly precarious.

To the side, the expression of the simple and yet elegant fairy, the Third Miss of the Fengyi Sect, was somewhat uneasy. In a loud voice, she called out, "Seventh Sister, be careful! That man is crafty and cunning![8] Defend yourself against his tricks."

The four combatants became vigilant at the same time. They knew that not only did Vicious Killer have excellent martial arts, he was also extremely wily. Otherwise, how would he have been able to escape to this place? But at this moment, the assassin abruptly laughed heartily. "It's too late! Hahahahaha!"

Suddenly all felt dizzy, and everyone weakly collapsed to the ground.

Third Miss was baffled, wondering when she had fallen into the trap. Suddenly, she could feel the river breeze gently begin to puff. Looking towards Priest Bitter Bamboo, she sighed and said, “Who would have thought that Priest Bitter Bamboo, famous throughout all over China, is actually a Southern Chu spy. Truly unexpected.”

Priest Bitter Bamboo smiled slightly, putting away the silver cylinder in his hands. Rowing hard, his boat swiftly reached the shore. With a smile, he said, “The Pavilion of Heavenly Strategies’ ‘Secret Floating Fragrance’ is good as expected, colorless and odorless. I only need to spread it using the breeze and yet its power is not diminished. Unfortunately, I can only use this silver cylinder once. To cost a thousand taels of gold is truly too expensive.”

Vicious Killer smiled and replied, “If I had not asked His Highness to purchase a cylinder, you wouldn’t have the opportunity to get your hands on it.”

Turning to the collapsed experts, he continued, “Clearly you do not know that younger brother, Priest Bitter Bamboo, is a descendant of a prestigious family of Southern Chu. Although he became a priest at a young age, he has remained loyal to Southern Chu, surpassing those who sell their soul for gain.[9] He should not be blamed for the calamity you lot will suffer.”

Finished speaking, he walked towards the remaining two brothers of the Three Stalwarts. He picked up and tested a sword. Just as he was about to stab down, a clear, cold, and sinister voice rang out. “Wouldn’t it be a shame to kill them and leave no spectators for the following performance?”

Vicious Killer trembled. Raising his head, he glanced over, catching sight of an azure-robed young man standing not too distant. He was no more than twenty years of age, his appearance delicate and handsome, and yet he carried with him a sinister aura. Under the dusky moonlight, he stood with his hands clasped behind his back, looking white as snow.

Footnotes :

猫哭耗子, maokuhaozi – idiom, lit. the cat weeps for dead mice; hypocritical pretense of condolences, crocodile tears
越俎代庖, yuezudaipao – idiom, lit. to go beyond the sacrificial altar and take

over the kitchen; fig. to exceed one's place and meddle in other people's affairs

蕲州, Qizhou – a prefecture that centers on modern-day Qichun County (蕲春县) in Hubei Province

广济县, Guangji Xian – Guangji County is now the modern-day county-level city of Wuxue (武穴)

颜面扫地, yanmiansaodi – idiom, lit. for one's face to reach rock bottom; fig. to be thoroughly discredited

苦竹子, kuzhuzi – lit. priest/master bitter bamboo

狗嘴里吐不出象牙, gouzuilitubuchuxiangya – idiom, lit. no ivory comes from the mouth of a dog; no good words are to be expected from a scoundrel

诡计多端, guijiduoduan – idiom, lit. deceitful in many ways; wily and mischievous, full of craft and cunning

见利忘义, jianliwangyi – idiom, lit. to see profit and forget morality; to act from mercenary considerations, to sell one's soul for gain

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 21: Bloody Battle Beside the River

Volume 2, Chapter 21: Bloody Battle Beside the River

On the nineteenth day of the third month of the first year of Southern Chu's Tongtai era, Jiang Zhe's close attendant, Li Shun, chased the assassin for a thousand *li* , beheading him at the crossing of the Yangtze River. When this news was spread, all those who heard it were scared into submission. In the following several years, no one dared to copy Nie Zheng[1] and Jing Ke[2] …. —*Southern Chu Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Jiang Suiyun*

Vicious Killer's expression changed, as he coldly stated, "Li Shun, I thought you would have stayed by your master to attend to him. Interestingly, you have the courage to chase me here."

Xiaoshunzi smiled slightly. "Lord Black, although we have never met, I know that the Prince of De has such an individual by his side. You must also know of my existence at the side of my young master. By trying to assassinate my young master, you are my mortal enemy. Even if I am not your equal, I must come here to send you off. Besides, I'm afraid that you are not my match."

Vicious Killer shivered. He had already not used his name for years. Even the Prince of De did not know his name. Who would have thought that this Xiaoshunzi would know this information? However, his expression did not change, only smoothly replying, "Li Shun, you can be considered a subject of Southern Chu. For years you served at the side of the sovereign and received profound favors. Why have you betrayed your homeland? Could it be that you really place such heavy importance on status and wealth? Even if there are riches and honor, you won't receive any of it. You had once served in the army and went off to battle, and once accompanied and attended to the King. Don't tell me that you don't understand the meaning of loyalty and righteousness."

His speech caused everyone, even those collapsed to the ground, to turn scornful.

Xiaoshunzi calmly responded, his tone neither servile nor overbearing, “This servant is of humble origins and was also castrated. At best, in the palace, even cats and dogs are more respectable than us eunuchs. Lord Black, you are no more than an assassin, but haven’t you also despised this servant?” Speaking to this point, Xiaoshunzi’s expression became solemn and dignified, his eyes becoming radiant. Slowly and deliberately, enunciating every syllable, he said, “In this world, there is only one person who has never looked down on me. He regards me as a person and not as a servant. When we first met in the palace, the young master was a newly appointed official of Southern Chu. I was only a negligible court eunuch, yet he still regarded me quite highly. After several years of interactions, I would have seen through it if there was even a hint of hypocrisy. However, the young master has been unswerving from start to finish, treating me as he would his own flesh and blood, teaching me to read and to understand the proper rites. He treats me as a confidant and blood relation. In all my life, only young master is deserving of my loyalty and devotion. Southern Chu has not treated me with any grace or favor.

“Lord Black, you reproach me using righteousness. However, I must ask you a question. It could be said that young master has a clear conscience towards Southern Chu. However, has Southern Chu treated young master fairly?”

Vicious Killer was left speechless. How could he not know of Jiang Zhe’s meritorious service? And yet, Jiang Zhe’s ultimate fate was to be dismissed from office. For whatever reason, it was unreasonable for him to attempt to assassinate Jiang Zhe.

Xiaoshunzi did not interrogate him further, instead coldly stating, “I know Lord Black is acting upon the orders of the late Prince of De. Each side serves their own master. Young master does not hate the Prince of De for being heartless, however we cannot permit you to return alive to Southern Chu. Therefore, I’m sorry. You must die here in Great Yong.”

At this moment, the immobile Qiao Yan’er angrily shouted out, “What gall! You don’t know the immensity of the universe!”

When these words were spoken, everyone, including Vicious Killer, looked

at her with strange expressions. In the present situation, it was obvious that Xiaoshunzi was standing on the side of these youths. If Xiaoshunzi could not win, then it was likely that all of them would die. Why would Qiao Yan'er contrarily say these words? Actually, Qiao Yan'er knew that she had misspoken as soon as the words flew out of her mouth. However, her natural disposition was headstrong and competitive. For her to inexplicably be poisoned, and for Xiaoshunzi to arrive so suddenly and save everyone, instead caused to feel discontent and resentment. Seeing everyone gazing upon her, she could not help angrily yell, "What is it? Can I not speak thusly?"

Everyone looked away, trying to avoid laughing aloud. Xiaoshunzi's expression was still as icy as before. He did not have a favorable impression of Qiao Yan'er and company. In any case, they were all the young master's enemies. It would be great if he could kill all of them. Were it not for the obstacle that his appearance would inevitably become known by everyone, he could not hit a person who was down. It was likely that he would have to kill these people one day. Glancing at Priest Bitter Bamboo, Xiaoshunzi's gaze became somewhat gentle. Opening his mouth, he spoke, "Priest Bitter Bamboo, I originally should also kill you today. However, my young master has some words for someone to bring back to Southern Chu. Since your identity has already been revealed, this matter will be handed to you."

Priest Bitter Bamboo did not mock Xiaoshunzi's words. From the moment Xiaoshunzi appeared, he had begun to search for a hole in Xiaoshunzi's defenses. However, even though Xiaoshunzi was simply standing there, he could not detect a single flaw on his entire body.

Glancing at the sky for the time, Xiaoshunzi sighed and rued, "The mist enfolds the tower and pavilion, the moon shines dimly on the ferry. Such enchanting scenery. Alas, Lord Black, you won't be able to see this again."

Finished speaking, his figure—like the void, like an illusion—pounced towards Vicious Killer. Already knowing that his life hung in the balance, Vicious Killer straightened and met Xiaoshunzi's attack, his figure like an eagle spreading its wings. The two men clashed. Everyone witnessed the two men exchange blows, but there wasn't the slightest sound. Apparently,

the two men's fighting styles were extremely ingenious and sinister. In over a dozen exchanges, each and every one was attacking and required defending. They spun in circles, strangely not truly touching the ground. The two fought ferociously, whirling over and over in the space of one *zhang* ,[3] causing all the spectators to be dazzled. Although there wasn't a single sound, the killing auras in the blasts of wind created by the strikes were increasingly heavy. In this way, the two fought for about one hundred exchanges. Suddenly, the two figures stopped moving, standing and facing one another. Xiaoshunzi's expression was aloof and composed, while Vicious Killer looked ashen. The clothes covering his chest had been ripped to pieces, revealing several claw wounds. With one look, everyone could tell that he was on the back foot. Although the two stood silently, the tension between the two in the air increasingly intensified like a taut bowstring. In the end, Vicious Killer could no longer endure it, letting out a harsh cry, his complexion changing several times. Suddenly, blood burst forth from his seven apertures. His appearance was extremely terrifying.

Seeing this from a distance, the Third Miss cried out in alarm, "This is the 'Third Transformation of the Demonic Dissection Skill!' His power will rise tenfold! Your distinguished self be careful!"

Xiaoshunzi cruelly smiled and observed, "Although the Demonic Dissection Skill increases one's power, it has lasting calamitous effects. By using this skill twice within two months, it seems that even if you return to Southern Chu, you will not live long."

Vicious Killer callously responded, "Although your master has matchless ability and talent, if he does not have your protection, then he is no more than a hawk without wings. Although I could not kill him this time, as long as I am able to kill you, then I will have snapped off one of his arms. In the future, assassinating your master will be much easier."

Xiaoshunzi blanched. It had not occurred to him that Vicious Killer was still thinking about assassinating the young master. His bloodlust swelled. At this moment, Vicious Killer had already bounded towards him. This time, the situation was greatly different. Xiaoshunzi seemed to have no opportunity to retaliate and could only rely upon his strange movements to

defend. After observing for some time, everyone closed their eyes. Curiously, the two combatant's irregular and fluctuating movements caused them to feel dizzy. After a while, Xiaoshunzi suddenly took a deep breath of essential *qi* . Immediately, his body became as light as a feather, nimbly falling back before the gales created by Vicious Killer's attacks. Suddenly, Xiaoshunzi ascended high into the sky and then counterattacked. Vicious Killer urgently tried to resist, immediately raising his two fists to block the attack. To his surprise, Xiaoshunzi's figure flipped over in the air, dropping to the ground behind him. A thin palm pressed against his back. Vicious Killer could only feel an icy and sinister *qi* essence pouring into his body. He used all of his internal energy to block this insidious invasion. That *qi* essence became like a fiery blaze, pouring into his arteries. Vicious Killer could not help but release a blood-curdling scream, his figure staggering as he tried to throw himself forward, falling to the floor.

At this very moment, Priest Bitter Bamboo attacked with the wind from the small boat. Xiaoshunzi had originally exhausted his *qi* , but startlingly it was like he was assisted by a deity, his figure strangely flipping and meeting the Daoist priest's attack. Although Priest Bitter Bamboo's aquatic skills were the greatest in the world, his palm techniques and internal energy were quite lacking. This time, if he hadn't guessed that Vicious Killer would escape by water, then he wouldn't have had the opportunity to be invited to participate in this encirclement. Only using three attacks, Xiaoshunzi had repelled Priest Bitter Bamboo. Retreating to the river bank, Priest Bitter Bamboo was trapped. If he retreated, then he could only watch Vicious Killer perish. Even if he continued fighting, it was clear that he was no match for Xiaoshunzi.

Vicious Killer had already regained his strength. With difficulty, he rose to his feet. Smiling wryly, he said, "As expected, Eunuch Shun possesses outstanding martial arts. How was Jiang Zhe so fortunate in attaining such an expert as his servant?"

Xiaoshunzi smiled faintly and inquired, "Properly, it should be: How was Li Shun so fortunate to receive young master's profound affection and be permitted to follow him? At present, your distinguished self is already at

death's door. Any last words?"

Vicious Killer naturally understood that the arteries and veins of his heart were already broken and was only using his pure essence to stay alive. Without a trace of dread in his heart, he smiled and stated, "I know what Eunuch Shun wishes to know—who rescued me? I will speak forthrightly. That man was Qin Qing. He was the assassin who shot Jiang Zhe with an arrow."

Xiaoshunzi coldly dismissed, "Do you really have no other candidate to impute?"

Vicious Killer's heart jumped, and yet he still said, "I am originally someone from Southern Chu, what reason do I have to lie? Therefore, my words are true. It was Qin Qing."

Xiaoshunzi indifferently replied, "Usually, I should use torture to force you to speak the truth. However, since your life will end at any moment, then forget it. You can die properly. In the underworld, when you see the Prince of De, please extend him my young master's regards."

Finished speaking, Xiaoshunzi bowed. Vicious Killer relaxed, already collapsing weakly to the ground. At this moment, Xiaoshunzi suddenly asked, "Whose martial arts are better, Pei Yun or Xiahou Yuanfeng?"

Vicious Killer subconsciously answered, "Xiahou Yuanfeng …" Suddenly he sobered up, correcting himself, "I have never exchanged blows with Xiahou Yuanfeng. I do not know how skilled his martial arts are."

Xiaoshunzi serenely glanced at him before stating, "Priest Bitter Bamboo, please pass along this message from my young master to Sir Rong and Duke Lu. Previously, although young master did not turn his back upon Southern Chu, due to old affections, he felt guilty in his heart of hearts. Now that young master narrowly escaped death, there is no longer any affection remaining towards Southern Chu. Henceforth, if we meet on the battlefield, then we are only strangers."

Finished speaking, his figure moved in an instant. In the blink of an eye, he was already several *zhang* away. After a short while, he had already completely disappeared into the night.

Priest Bitter Bamboo relaxed. Advancing to check, he discovered that Vicious Killer was already dead and no longer was breathing, tired smile on his face, as if he had finally set down a heavy burden weighing thousands of catties. The Daoist priest picked up Vicious Killer's corpse. He looked at the enemies weak on the ground. Priest Bitter Bamboo knew that if he killed these individuals, then he would have greatly offended Li Shun. Letting out a faint sigh, he boarded his boat. Picking up the oars, he quickly departed. Just as his small boat was concealed by the opposite shore's clustered reeds, the most powerful of the group, the Third Miss of the Fengyi Sect, was able to move. Standing to her feet, she gave everyone her sect's secretly concocted antidote. Although the antidote was not specifically made to treat this particular poison, it was still useful. It wasn't long before everyone could stand once again.

The Seventh Miss exclaimed in surprise, "Third Sister, surprisingly there is such a young expert in the world! Even Big Sister and Ninth Sister cannot easily defeat him!"

Although the expressions of Duanmu Qiu and company were filled with shame, they all nodded their heads in agreement.

The Third Miss's face revealed a look that seemed to bemoan the state of the universe and pity the fate of mankind. She said, "You lot only know that his martial arts are exceptional and yet do not know the grievous price that he had to pay. From their conversation, that man is a eunuch. If that is the case, then there is only one martial art that allows him to be so powerful. It is the long-lost *Sunflower Manual* . We cannot know if he castrated himself to train this martial art or he began to learn this martial art after he became a eunuch. Alas, although this martial art is exquisite and profound, the temperament of those practicing it would inevitably become sinister and cruel. With such a man existing in *jianghu* , I'm afraid that he will ultimately be a calamity."

Although Qiao Yan'er had spoken rudely earlier, she was still grateful to Xiaoshunzi for saving her life. This moment, she opened her mouth and retorted, "Older sister Ming is being too anxious. Since this man came to avenge his master, then he is the servant of Southern Chu's most gifted

scholar, Jiang Zhe. Although I have never met Jiang *daren* , I know that he is magnanimous and refined with talent that surpasses others. How could his servant harm the world?"

The Third Miss sighed and replied, "This is why I am so uneasy. Although this man is formidable, he is only a warrior. That Jiang Zhe is a peerless minister of state. The two complement each other. I'm afraid that all levels of society in Great Yong will not be able to rest easy. I must report to Master when I return. If matters get out of hand in the future, I'm afraid that only she can restore the situation."

Hearing her words, everyone felt this was reasonable. The leaders of the Fengyi Sect were truly capable, possessing profound knowledge and understanding as expected.

After mutually exchanging farewells, they separated and departed. Although information about this battle was spread among the common folk, many in the imperial court knew what had happened. Vicious Killer originally was a top-tier expert from Southern Chu. This time, he had attempted to carry out an assassination in the residence of the Prince of Yong and moreover managed to fight and flee, nearly escaping to Southern Chu. After defeating him in one go, Xiaoshunzi immediately became the focus of everyone's attention. Were it not for his awkward status, it was very likely that he would have had the qualifications to challenge the throne of the greatest young expert in Great Yong. However, the present him was not thinking of this.

He had managed to confirm that Xiahou Yuanfeng's suspicions were the heaviest. However, it was very likely that the young master would not permit him to make a move and kill Xiahou Yuanfeng. If this Xiahou Yuanfeng was let off so lightly, wouldn't he be made to look foolish before the entire world? It would be better if he went first to kill Xiahou Yuanfeng. As long as there were no witnesses, who could know he had killed him? As a result, Xiaoshunzi did not contact the people of the Prince of Yong's residence, traveling night and day back towards Chang'an. After a mere few days, he had already returned. After slightly changing his attire and appearance, he chose one evening to head directly towards Xiahou

Yuanfeng's residence. He knew that Xiahou Yuanfeng should not have any assignments today and thus he intended to directly enter the inner residence. Unexpectedly, just as he was approaching Xiahou Yuanfeng's residence, a figure stopped him. Just as he was about to make his move, the man removed his mask, revealing a slightly childish looking face. That man was Chiji, the head of the eight elite operatives of the Secret Camp. Xiaoshunzi's face grew heavy, about to completely ignore Chiji and walk past.

Chiji promptly said, "This subordinate is here on the young master's orders, waiting here for Lord Li. Young master has said that Lord Li cannot be impetuous and must first return to see him."

The look on Xiaoshunzi's face was icy, not saying a single word. Chiji could only continue, "Young master also said that if Lord Li does not return now, then there is no need for Lord Li to return in the future."

Xiaoshunzi's hands curled into fists. He naturally knew that Jiang Zhe would not casually utter these words. It seems that he really must return. Ferociously glaring in the direction of the Xiahou residence, he turned and departed. Chiji hurriedly pulled down the mask and left, his figure very quickly disappearing into the night.

Quickly returning to the Prince of Yong's residence, Xiaoshunzi made no effort to make himself presentable, directly making for the Cold Courtyard. Seeing that the newly selected imperial bodyguards had made the courtyard impenetrable, he felt somewhat relieved. Entering Jiang Zhe's chambers, Xiaoshunzi saw him reclined on the soft couch. Jiang Zhe's bearing was relaxed, clearly and brightly reciting the *Classics of Poetry* .[4] Roulan was leaning on his side, apparently fascinated with Jiang Zhe's reciting.

Xiaoshunzi felt his entire being calm down. Fine, even if he did not kill Xiahou Yuanfeng right now, it was unlikely that the young master would let him off lightly. Advancing, Xiaoshunzi performed a deep bow before he said, "This servant has returned. I beg for young master's forgiveness. This servant dares not act rashly again in the future."

I set down the scroll, looking at the travel-worn Xiaoshunzi. "Thank you

for your hard work. Sit first. Do you know how I knew you would go to the Xiahou residence?"

Puzzled, Xiaoshunzi inquired, "This servant was just wondering how young master knew my whereabouts. Even if those witnesses had heard my words, there couldn't possibly be enough time for this information to be spread."

A slight, wry smile appeared on my lips, as I replied, "Yesterday, Xiahou Yuanfeng personally came to pay a visit, apologizing humbly, explaining that he had indeed come to the Cold Courtyard that day. However, he stated that he was not the one who shot an arrow at me. He merely took away Vicious Killer. Because of the archer's respected and honored identity, he dared not intervene. He only took away Vicious Killer to learn some inside information. However, the assassin refused to say a word, seizing the opportunity to escape."

Xiaoshunzi stared back confounded. It was quite a while before he asked, "Then doesn't that just leave Li Hanyou?"

"I had originally already suspected that assassin was a woman," I said with a faint smile. "From the eyes as clear as spring water and her slim, white hands. I didn't expect that Xiahou Yuanfeng would go so far as to acknowledge his presence at the scene. In all likelihood, there were three individuals who came to assassinate me on that day. Vicious Killer came because of the Prince of De's orders and does not merit much anxiety. Xiahou Yuanfeng is extremely close to the Crown Prince. I'm sure that the Crown Prince would not trouble the Fengyi Sect over this kind of matter. It's very likely that Xiahou Yuanfeng was dispatched by the Crown Prince. However, by chance, he ran into the Fengyi Sect making a move against me. Li Hanyou personally took action, and therefore, Xiahou Yuanfeng did not act that day. I believe that if Xiahou Yuanfeng was truly the archer, then he would have killed Vicious Killer long ago to silence him. It's just that—why does the Fengyi Sect wish to kill me? Could it be that some traces of that matter have been exposed?"

The look on Xiaoshunzi's face changed several times before he spoke, "Young master, the Fengyi Sect has fixed their attention on you. We need to

be extra careful."

I indifferently shook my head and replied, "There is no harm. They were unsuccessful this time. If the Fengyi Sect is as arrogant as they say, then they will not try again. If they cannot use other channels to deal with me, then it would unavoidably harm their reputation. After all, at present, if I were to die, everyone would know that my death was perpetrated by the Fengyi Sect. I believe that there will be no worries about my safety in the meantime at least. However, we must guard against their other methods. At present, I have recently suffered a serious injury and can avoid their wrath. On the contrary, your reputation is too prominent and conspicuous. You must be careful."

Xiaoshunzi nodded his head and replied, "Young master speaks rightly. However, this servant will be careful."

I stretched leisurely. "You have also spoken reasonably. I'm getting tired. Please carry Roulan back."

Xiaoshunzi promptly said, "Young master, I acted recklessly. You haven't punished me yet."

"Okay, I'll punish you," I idly replied. "Oh, that's right. I really want to eat Osmanthus Cake. I will punish you by having you buy for a box of top-quality Osmanthus Cake. I want the kind that I loved to eat before." I was already half-asleep, completely unaware of what I was saying.

Xiaoshunzi looked at me blankly. Osmanthus Cake was the most famous snack in Southern Chu's capital of Jianye. How could one eat this here in Great Yong? Even if he ran all the way to Jianye to purchase a box, when he returned, then the cake would have already gone stale.

In a daze, he walked out of the door. At this moment, the team leader of the fifty guards, Zhou Wu, walked over. Seeing Xiaoshunzi's baffled expression, Zhou Wu asked, "Lord Li, what's happened? Does *daren* have any orders?"

Vexed, Xiaoshunzi responded, "How can I get Osmanthus Cake?"

Zhou Wu stared blankly at Xiaoshunzi, muttering, "Osmanthus Cake?"

Xiaoshunzi had already left, carrying Roulan in his arms.

Footnotes :

聂政, Nie Zheng was a famous assassin during the Warring States Period. After killing a man, he fled with his mother and sister to the state of Qi, becoming a butcher. Yan Zhongzi (严仲子) arrived in Qi and befriended Nie Zheng, treating him with great kindness. After Nie Zheng's mother died, he volunteered to assassinate Prime Minister Xia Lei (侠累) in order to make a name for himself. Nie Zheng was successful, but realizing that his sister would be implicated, he disfigured his face before committing suicide. Nie Zheng's corpse was exposed in the marketplace and prevented from being buried by the ruler of the state of Han. Learning what had happened, Nie Zheng's sister traveled to Han. To help her brother fulfill his wish of becoming famous, she identified his corpse. Crying loudly to the Heavens three times, she fell dead beside her brother.

荆轲, Jing Ke was a famous assassin during the Warring States Period. Originally from the state of Wei, he eventually became a retainer to Prince Dan of Yan after Wei was conquered by Qin. He was later dispatched to kill Ying Zheng, King of Qin, but failed and was killed himself.

丈, zhang – a measure of length, measuring about 3.3 meters

诗经, shijing – known as the *Classic of Poetry* or the *Book of Songs* or the *Book of Odes* , it is the oldest existing collection of Chinese poetry dating to the 11th to 7th Century BC; it is included as one of the Five Classics (五经) that was said to have been compiled by Confucius.

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 22: Southern Chu Envoy

Volume 2, Chapter 22: Southern Chu Envoy

In the fourth month of the first year of Southern Chu's Tongtian era, the new King of Southern Chu dispatched an envoy to Great Yong, paying tribute and paying homage, taking a circuitous route to sue for peace. They further offered a heavy sum as ransom….—*Southern Chu Dynastic Records* , *Biography of King Yang of Chu*

In the middle of the night, as I was in deep sleep, I was suddenly shaken awake by someone. Just as I resentfully opened my eyes, I caught sight of Xiaoshunzi delightedly and enthusiastically presented a steaming basket of Osmanthus Cake. Astonished, I asked him where he had gotten the snack. After all, this was the specialty from the most famous pastry shop in Southern Chu, Guixiang Square. Picking a piece up, I took a bite. It was fragrant, sweet, and soft, dissolving in my mouth. Content, I asked, "Where did you buy it from? We should frequent that shop from now on."

Xiaoshunzi's complexion changed, his look becoming dark and gloomy. Baffled, I asked, "What's going on?"

Xiaoshunzi hesitated for quite some time before he revealed the truth. At the start, he had pondered for a long time before finally deciding to randomly select a delicacy from Great Yong to serve as the replacement. No one could have imagined that as soon as he walked out of the entrance to the residence, he would learn of a diplomatic mission from Southern Chu that had already arrived in Chang'an. He immediately went to the posthouse to make inquiries, originally intending to see if there was anything detrimental to me. Surprisingly, the diplomatic mission had brought two pastry chefs from Guixiang Square who just so happened to prepare two steaming baskets of their most famous Osmanthus Cake with the intent of delivering it to King Zhao Jia, under house arrest, and Princess Changle. Perhaps they wished to curry favor with Princess Changle in order to ensure the success of the negotiations. However, Xiaoshunzi was able to take advantage. Using

skullduggery,[1] he stole one of the baskets of freshly made Osmanthus Cake.

I nearly fainted, not knowing if the Southern Chu diplomatic mission would report the theft to the local authorities. After thinking it over, it would be better if the evidence was wiped out. Splitting the pastries with Xiaoshunzi, I devoured the cakes ravenously.[2] While this happened, the sky gradually brightened and Xiaoshunzi slipped away. Just as I was about to go back to sleep, Xiaoshunzi returned and reported, “Young master, the primary envoy from Southern Chu, Lu Can, requests a meeting.”

My heart was confused. Why was this former student of mine here to see me? Shouldn’t he view me with contempt? After all, I was a traitor to Southern Chu. With misgivings, I looked at Xiaoshunzi, seeking his advice. Not knowing whether to laugh or cry, Xiaoshunzi stated, “Young master, at present, you are a trusted aide to His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong. His Highness can probably influence forty percent of these negotiations. Isn’t young master the best candidate if they wish to influence His Imperial Highness? Although they are negotiating from a defeated position, they still hope to gain as much as they can from the talks.”

Sitting up, I took the robes proffered by Xiaoshunzi. I thought about how to settle this situation as I got dressed. Originally, I thought it best that we not meet if we were only going to argue, and had no intention of receiving Lu Can. However, if he were here to lobby everywhere for the negotiations, then it would be somewhat excessive if he were not granted the opportunity. Anyways, I was formerly a subject of Southern Chu but now a subordinate of the Prince of Yong. If I were to decline this meeting, then in the eyes of outsiders, His Highness, the Prince of Yong, had no intention of negotiating. Although this matter could either be important or insignificant, I could not handle it as I wished. After moving a bit, I felt that my condition was fairly good and there shouldn’t be any problems if I received a visitor.

I thus said, “Invite General Lu to meet me in the reception pavilion. It’s still early, so have someone serve breakfast. Be sure to prepare extra. Just say that I’m inviting General Lu to breakfast. His Imperial Highness should already know about this. Send someone to query His Imperial Highness’s intentions and ask him whether the Southern Chu envoy should be granted

a meeting. I am not familiar with the negotiations. Conversely, Gou Lian should be knowledgeable about this. If it is inconvenient for His Imperial Highness to come, then invite Brother Gou to help entertain the guest so that we can ascertain Southern Chu's bottom line. Xiaoshunzi, is Lu Can alone?"

Xiaoshunzi answered, "Young master, General Lu is accompanied by a young man. That man has an unusual appearance and should have intelligence and wisdom surpassing others."

I smiled faintly and replied, "That's fine…. After all, Lu Can is still young. If he had come alone, I would have suspected that he came to see me for personal reasons. Since he is accompanied by someone else, then he is here on official business. All right, invite them in."

***

Lu Can serenely stood at the entrance to the Prince of Yong's residence. At twenty-two years old, he was at a young and vigorous age. However, because he spent years in the military, he appeared to be more mature than others of the same age. His appearance was coarse and heroic, somewhat different from persons from Jiangnan. From the soft lively light in his eyes and the refinement present in his heroic and brave temperament, one could tell that this young man was a genius of brush and sword. Standing behind him was another young man about twenty-six or twenty-seven years of age. He wore a cloth Confucian cap on his head, looking delicate and refined. He had a one-of-a-kind bearing and appearance, causing others to be willing to approach him.

This youth looked at the tranquil and calm Lu Can, his heart pounding like the roaring seas. He was called Yang Xiu, originally from the Kingdom of Shu. When Shu fell, he was still studying abroad. When Southern Chu occupied Sichuan, he returned to his homeland. Under Marquis Lu's governance, Sichuan was extremely peaceful. Although the Embroidered Union was wreaking havoc, they did not cause any great waves. Yang Xiu lived comfortably at his home. Two and a half years ago, Yang Xiu was also implicated and imprisoned after one of his cousins was charged with the crime of participating in an assassination attempt on Marquis Lu. The one

responsible for adjudicating his case was the sole son of Marquis Lu, Lu Can. This young general handled matters cleverly and decisively, conforming to reason. Yang Xiu was very quickly judged innocent and released. Seeing that Yang Xiu's bearing and talent were outstanding, Lu Can personally paid a visit, inviting Yang Xiu to serve as his adjutant. Yang Xiu was not a pedantic man. As he had never attained scholarly honors in the Kingdom of Shu, it would not be considered disloyal by serving Southern Chu.

After following Lu Can, Yang Xiu discovered that this young general had aspects that far surpassed others. Although Lu Can was young, his formations and operational planning, stratagems and tactics, were all first class. When the Prince of Yong launched a surprise attack against Southern Chu, the Prince of Qing in Hanzhong took advantage of the situation to pressure the Sichuan borders while Marquis Lu was leading troops to salvage the chaos in Jianye. Lu Can led an army to meet the Prince of Qing. The two armies engaged one another on several occasions. Lu Can's diligently trained elite troops unexpectedly defeated Great Yong's imposing army, forcing the Prince of Qing to retreat and ensuring that Southern Chu would not face enemies on two fronts. Although Lu Can's meritorious service was not made public because of the fall of Jianye, the Southern Chu army had already begun to consider Lu Can as Prince Zhao Jue of De's successor. What caused Yang Xiu to gasp further in admiration was that although Lu Can hailed from a military family and did not know how to compose poetry and write essays, Lu Can had an original understanding of the classics and histories. Oftentimes, when discussions turned to history, Lu Can would show off his familiarity with how commanders and generals attained victory, causing Yang Xiu himself to have no choice but to admire Lu Can's extensive knowledge.

A few days ago, Yang Xiu could not help but ask Lu Can who was capable of educating a descendant of a military family into a master of the classics and histories. Lu Can was actually taciturn and did not say a word. Surprisingly, when they just arrived in Great Yong and delivered their diplomatic credentials, Lu Can brought him along to pay an official visit to the famous Jiang Zhe. Although Yang Xiu knew of this man, Jiang Zhe, he did not consider him to be that important. He was only a gifted scholar of Southern

Chu who had surrendered to Great Yong. If it were not for Chang'an still buzzing about the attempt on Jiang Zhe's life, causing Yang Xiu to pay attention, then Yang Xiu would not have paid much attention to Jiang Zhe's existence. It was only yesterday that he learned that Jiang Zhe was Lu Can's greatly respected teacher. He still could recall vividly last night's events. Under the silvery lamp, with his face partially concealed in shadow, Lu Can softly said, "From youth, I was naughty and mischievous. If I was not climbing walls and trees, I was brandishing spears and sticks. Otherwise, I would scuffle with hooligans on the streets. Father was unwilling to see me remain ignorant and incompetent, and sought a teacher to teach me. Relying on my tough fists, I ran off several teachers. Sir Jiang was my fourth teacher. I originally wanted to deal him a blow at our first encounter. However, when he arrived, he told me that he had only taken this job to make ends meet. If I were to run him off, my father would find and invite a new teacher. If I were willing to compromise with him, then he would ensure that both of us would have an easy time."

Speaking to this point, Lu Can's face revealed a faint smile. Following, he continued, "Sir Jiang stated that as long as I spent every morning in the study, he would allow me to spend my afternoons as I willed. He would not assign excessive amounts of homework and would also help me deceive Father. I agreed at once. However, I regretted it after only a few days had passed. I would sit in the study bored every morning, only able to watch as Sir Jiang read with great interest and not acknowledge my presence. However, if I were to renege on our deal, I would unavoidably lose a great deal of face. Afterwards, I could only ask Sir Jiang to think of a way to help me kill time. Sir Jiang then stated that since this was the case, there was no harm for him to lecture me on these books he was reading. Although I felt this was boring, it was still superior to being bored with nothing to do. However, unexpectedly, Sir Jiang was really a unique talent. He did not have me memorize and recite the Four Books and Five Classics,[3] nor did he have me compose poetry and write essays. He said that it was useless learning these as I was a descendant of an influential family and there was no need for me to take part in the imperial examinations. He first lectured on the *Analects* , transforming what was otherwise a tedious and dreary discourse

into something endlessly interesting. After that, he lectured me on the histories. He did not lecture directly from the text, instead only telling me historical stories, mixing in his own views and understanding, as well as some of the unofficial histories and popular legends. From that point on, I would spend every morning listening to his stories. When he saw that I was fond of the art of war, he lectured me on military strategies and tactics and battles. I do not know how he knew so much, especially as it was obvious that he was only a few years older than me. Unfortunately, at the time, I only wanted to have fun, not understanding how precious Sir's lectures were. It was only afterwards, when I led troops to battle, did I understand the importance of Sir's teachings. Sadly, at that point, I no longer had the opportunity to ask for Sir's guidance.

"Yang Xiu, do you understand what kind of person esteemed teacher is? Now, he has already surrendered and pledged allegiance to Great Yong. In the future, we will inevitably meet on the battlefield. You are a storehouse of stratagems. In the future, he will be your opponent. I, alone, am not enough. You need to grasp the opportunity to properly understand him. If you cannot understand your enemy, then there will be zero chance of victory."

The more he thought, the more Yang Xiu felt his spirits buoyed. He really wished to see the personality of the esteemed teacher of this young general that he himself greatly respected. Therefore, the more time that passed, the more that he worried that Jiang Zhe would refuse to meet them.

Fortunately, after a while, a youthful imperial bodyguard came over and saluted, "General Lu, the major will receive General at the Cold Courtyard. *Daren* only recently recovered from his injuries so it is inconvenient for him to come out to greet you, thus dispatching Huyan Shou to come forward in greeting."

Lu Can glanced at the youthful imperial bodyguard, seeing that although his appearance was plain, his eyes radiated light and his hands were broad and large, having prominent knuckles and a muscular figure. He was definitely someone who practiced an external martial arts style. However, his movements did not disturb the dust as he passed. His martial arts had clearly already been brought to the peak of perfection. From his tall and

straight body, one could detect a faint bloodlust. He was definitely a warrior who had spent an extended period of time in the military. One could see the Prince of Yong's high regard for the teacher from the assignment of this man as an imperial bodyguard. Lu Can smiled and replied, "We'll have to bother Imperial Bodyguard Huyan to lead the way."

Lu Can and Yang Xiu followed Huyan Shou for some time before they finally arrived at a secluded and remote courtyard. Seeing the inscription above the entrance, Lu Can knew that he could finally see Jiang Zhe. Huyan Shou greeted four of his colleagues guarding the entrance to the courtyard before leading the two guests into the courtyard. Immediately when they entered the courtyard, Lu Can was greatly shaken. Although he couldn't see them, he could faintly discern that there were concealed guards stationed at all the crucial points in the courtyard. And though he couldn't see these individuals, from the concentrated killing aura he could sense, the imperial bodyguards here were at the very least of the same standard as Huyan Shou. It seemed like the Prince of Yong truly highly valued this esteemed teacher of his.

The two had followed Huyan Shou for quite some time. After being invited into the reception pavilion, they immediately caught sight of the seated Jiang Zhe and Xiaoshunzi standing behind him.

Yang Xiu boldly looked over, seeing that there was a pale and lean youth seated behind the table. This youth wore a set of pale azure robes, his hair held in place by a hairpin and a snow-white headscarf. He sat there leisurely, his expression placid. If one couldn't discern his wan and sallow appearance, there were no other signs that he had just been brought back from the brink of death. Yang Xiu sighed with admiration in his mind. He had originally believed that Jiang Zhe would inevitably treat Lu Can extremely coldly as he had nearly been assassinated by a Southern Chu assassin. Yang Xiu did not know that someone else was responsible for the near success of the assassination. The truth had already been covered up. To outsiders, even the Prince of Yong stated that the assassin was from Southern Chu. After all, there was no one willing to allow Great Yong's internal strife to disseminate to the outside world. Because of the reality of

what had happened, although Jiang Zhe was extremely disappointed at Southern Chu's actions, he did not completely detest Southern Chu.

I glanced at Lu Can. He appeared to be steadier compared to our last meeting. Presumably, he had matured greatly after taking responsibility for a section of Southern Chu's defenses. I rose to my feet. With a smile, I said, "Young Marquis, you seem to have become more majestic since our previous meeting some time ago."

Lu Can stared blankly at me when he caught sight of me, only returning to his senses when he heard me speak. He promptly stepped forward. Kneeling to the ground, he declared, "Disciple formally pays my respects to respected teacher." His tone surprisingly was choked with emotion. I knew that he grieved for my current appearance. Even I felt that my appearance had greatly changed when I looked at myself in the bronze mirror. This was something that I was helpless to change. I was already greatly fortunate to preserve my life; how could I dare to have extravagant demands? In any case, I should be able to restore my health in a year or so.

I raised my hand and stated, "Please quickly rise, Young Marquis. No, that's not correct. You already are a major commander of Southern Chu. I should call you General Lu, instead. Jiang Zhe was only General's teacher for only a few days, how dare I accept such heavy reverence?"

Lu Can's frame of mind had already calmed down, and he quietly replied, "Back then, this disciple was naughty and mischievous, and did not know the significance of respected teacher's instructions. It is now too late for regrets. I only ask that respected teacher do not decline. This disciple will not use our relationship to force respected teacher to do anything out of ordinary."

With a slight, wry smile, I observed, "You are still so frank. Fine, I don't want to argue with you. Come, rise. I haven't eaten breakfast yet, how about accompanying me?" Turning to regard Yang Xiu, I asked, "This is?"

Lu Can rose to his feet, answering, "This is an adjutant under this disciple, Yang Xiu."

Yang Xiu stepped forward and gave his salutations. "Jiang *daren* 's

reputation has precedes him. This lowly official pays my respects."

When I was about to step forward to raise him from his bow, I felt my heart ache in pain. I could only furrow my brows and speak, "Please forgive this lowly official for being unable to return your courtesy. Adjutant Yang, please take a seat."

Catching sight of beads of sweat appearing on Jiang Zhe's forehead, Yang Xiu promptly replied, "*Daren* 's health is still bothersome. There is no need to be overly courteous."

The three of us all sat down. Xiaoshunzi personally brought three bowls of congee. With a smile, I stated, "This congee is specially and meticulously prepared medicinal cuisine. Inside is added nourishing medicine. How about having a taste?"

Lu Can stood to take the proffered bowl. He was aware of what had happened. A few days ago, this Li Shun had killed Vicious Killer at a ferry crossing along the Yangtze River. Before he had pledged allegiance to the Prince of De and lived in secret, Vicious Killer was one of the top experts of Southern Chu. This time, after nearly successfully assassinating Jiang Zhe in the Prince of Yong's residence and fighting his way for over a thousand *li* to try and escape from Great Yong, his reputation had skyrocketed. Surprisingly, he had been killed by this youth on a moonlit night along the shore of the Yangtze River. In one night, Li Shun's name spread throughout the world. As a result, Lu Can did not dare to slight him.

Yang Xiu also rose to take the proffered bowl of congee. He could not help but glance at Jiang Zhe. What was so special about this thin and weak youth that he actually had this kind of expert willing to serve as his attendant?

Seeing them so awkward, I could not help but smile, inquiring, "This time I have heard that you, Lu Can, are Southern Chu's primary envoy. Presumably, you already have an overall plan? How I can help?"

Lu Can blushed slightly, before his face quickly regained its usual color. Respectfully, he responded, "Although Southern Chu has lost, with the ascension of a new monarch to the throne, everyone is of one mind and our military forces are ready. Therefore, although we are willing to vassalize to

sue for peace, we hope that Great Yong won't be excessive in their demands for gold and silk. Moreover, we hope to ransom our King *Emeritus* and all of our civil and military officials. It is only that this matter requires the approval of the Great Yong's military. His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong is the most important player in this regard. Therefore, this disciple must learn His Imperial Highness's intentions."

I tranquilly replied, "The negotiations will be handled by ministers of court. Who would dare to guess the intentions of His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong? Further, His Imperial Highness has no intention of making things difficult for Southern Chu. You are being overly anxious. I do not pay much attention to these matters. You have come to the wrong place."

Lu Can knew that Jiang Zhe was only making excuses. Just as he was about to continue to speak, a clear and bright voice came from the outside. "How can you say they came to the wrong place? Were it not for General Lu coming here to see you, this Prince would definitely not let Southern Chu off lightly."

So speaking, Li Zhi led Gou Lian into the courtyard. Lu Can and Yang Xiu both rose to their feet to extend their greetings. Li Zhi smiled and said, "General Lu, this Prince had the fortune of meeting your father, Duke Lu, once. I have long heard that Duke Lu had a tiger for a son. Meeting you today, that reputation is fully justified. My third brother wrote me a letter stating that General Lu deploys troops like a god. He respects you highly."

Lu Can calmly replied, "This lowly general is only relying upon Father's prestige. Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, is the true master of warfare. How can the light of a firefly compare with the splendor of the luminous moon?"

Li Zhi sat down and smoothly remarked, "This Prince understands that it is imperative for the relationship between our two countries to be repaired. However, your distinguished country arrogated the title of emperor without regard for the relationship between liege and vassal, causing my Great Yong to send a righteous punitive expedition. Although your distinguished country suffered heavy losses, you should by rights pay reparations and cede territory. As for ransoming captives, this Prince does not have any

opinion. How big of a ransom is your distinguished country willing to pay?”

Properly, Lu Can responded, “Although there are matters in which Southern Chu was in the wrong, your distinguished country’s Prince of Qi also sent troops to violate our borders. Your Imperial Highness captured Jianye, taking captive my King and his ministers, as well as snatching away countless quantities of gold and silk. Now that my entire country is of one mind, if your distinguished country continues to bully and humiliate us, although we are a small and weak country, we will still fight to the bitter end. The relationship between Southern Chu and Great Yong is not only one of subject and lord, but also familial. Your distinguished country has long intended to invade and occupy our lands. Although we have been forced to bend our knees and sue for peace, we will not permit your distinguished country to make endless demands. My country’s new sovereign has already ascended to the throne. The former King is already a commoner. If your distinguished country wishes to keep him, you can do as you please. The former King and your distinguished country’s Princess Changle are still husband and wife. For a son-in-law to rely upon his father-in-law is proper and right.”

Li Zhi brightened. With a smile, he declared, “You speak correctly. Truly a young hero! Southern Chu has so many geniuses. You have this Prince’s respects.” Afterwards, he meaningfully said, “This matter can be discussed. Although this Prince cannot make decisions, I will not make things difficult for General Lu.”

Footnotes :

偷天换日, toutianhuanri – idiom, lit. to engage in fraudulent activities; skullduggery
狼吞虎咽, langtunhuyan – idiom, lit. to wolf down one’s food; to devour ravenously, to gorge oneself
四书五经, sishu wujing – the Four Books, refers to *Great Learning* (大学), *Doctrine of the Mean* (中庸), the *Analects* (论语), and *Mencius* (孟子); the Five Classics refer to the *Classic of Poetry* (诗经), the *Classic of History* (书经), the *Classic of Rites* (礼记), the *Book of Changes* (易经), and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (春秋); these books form the basis of traditional

Confucian canon and the core value and belief system of Confucianism

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 23: Returning Home with Honor

Volume 2, Chapter 23: Returning Home with Honor

With the success of the negotiations, King Yang of Chu was granted a reprieve. In the fifth month, he accompanied the diplomatic mission and returned towards Southern Chu. Just as he entered Southern Chu, he was assassinated and buried at Jianye. The King was on the throne for four years, neglecting court affairs. He was intimate with vile characters and distanced himself from worthy and virtuous subjects, almost causing the country to perish and himself to be imprisoned. Southern Chu's irreversible decline could be traced to this King.—*Southern Chu Dynastic Records* , *Biography of King Yang of Chu*

Lu Can was overjoyed. He knew that as long as the Prince of Yong did not make things difficult for Southern Chu, then everyone else would be comparatively easy to take care of, either through bribes or through other benefits. Lu Can promptly expressed his thanks to the Prince of Yong. However, Lu Can's expression did not change. He knew that the Prince of Yong would inevitably have some conditions. Therefore, he sincerely stated, "Your Imperial Highness is magnanimous. On behalf of everyone in Southern Chu, Lu Can thanks Your Imperial Highness. If you have any instructions, please speak forthrightly. No matter how difficult this matter is, Lu Can will exert all effort to ensure its success."

The Prince of Yong dismissed all this with a laugh. He had obtained wealth from Southern Chu's treasury sufficient to support his army for several years. As a result, he was not greedy. Moreover, in his eyes, Southern Chu's populace would sooner or later become subjects of Great Yong. Therefore, he would not make things worse in this currently bad situation.[1] If the hatred and enmity of Southern Chu's populace was aroused, then it would not be beneficial to the future pacification of Jiangnan. As for ceding territory and paying reparations, those matters were the court's business. He already knew that Imperial Father's bottom line was fifty million taels of

silver, paid over ten years. If this happened then Southern Chu would have no way of expanding their military on a large scale. However, if no other demands were uttered, then inevitably it would cause others to become suspicious, even causing the monarch and ministers of Southern Chu to become uneasy, creating worry that he himself would make things difficult. Glancing at Jiang Zhe, Li Zhi gave him an imploring gaze.

Receiving the Prince of Yong's hint, my heart was stirred and I softly stated, "His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, has long admired Southern Chu's outstanding literary works, expressing extreme envy whenever this lowly official spoke of the Palace of Sublime Culture. If General Lu is able to make decisions, delivering some of the duplicate copies of works in the Palace of Sublime Culture to His Imperial Highness, especially if you can include some works of renowned masters, then that would be great. If your distinguished envoy can fulfill His Imperial Highness's desires, then His Imperial Highness can guarantee that he will not have Southern Chu cede a single inch of its territory."

Lu Can stared back blankly. He was a military man and did not regard these books as especially important. To him, the Prince of Yong's demands were not excessive. Using books, calligraphy, and paintings in exchange for the Prince of Yong's concessions would ensure that Southern Chu would not suffer disastrous losses from these negotiations. It would be worth it if that was the case. It was only that the Palace of Sublime Culture was established by the former king. If this was done, then there would be those who would impeach him. Thinking of this, Lu Can could not help but hesitate.

Seeing through his thoughts, I lightly added, "Currently, the King *Emeritus* is still in Great Yong. If General cannot make the decision, you can ask the King *Emeritus* ."

Lu Can immediately sobered up. This was a great excuse! He was still too inexperienced. As a result, Lu Can cheerfully replied, "This envoy will agree to Your Imperial Highness's desires on behalf of the King *Emeritus* . After this envoy has returned to Southern Chu, I will immediately dispatch people to deliver those works."

Just as Li Zhi was about to agree, I spoke up again, "If that is the case, then

the delay would be too long. Would your distinguished envoy please send a letter back? If these works can be delivered before the negotiations are concluded, then His Imperial Highness will definitely repay this favor."

Lu Can shot a glance at Yang Xiu, questioningly. Yang Xiu was a scholar. He shivered as he glanced at Jiang Zhe. Jiang Zhe's demanded works were all the cream of Southern Chu's culture. This man's foresight was really beyond ordinary. Thinking back to the fall of Chengdu, both Great Yong and Southern Chu scrambled to grab the records from the Ministry of Revenue. These were all the basis of governing a country. Although this time, Jiang Zhe did not demand Southern Chu's household records and maps, the works that he demanded were far more precious. There were inevitably times when China was in a transition period between dynasties. Household records and maps could always be easily investigated. Only these resplendent cultural works would always be treasures that went back to the dim and distant past.[2] However, Yang Xiu also knew that these conditions were not a problem for Southern Chu. At the very least, it was a lot better than ceding territory. After sighing with admiration in his heart, Yang Xiu nodded his head lightly.

Lu Can promptly said, "Do not worry, Major. I will immediately send a letter back."

After seeing off the Southern Chu envoy, I was already exhausted. Li Zhi thus bade his farewell and took his leave. As he walked, Li Zhi pensively said, "Suiyun is indeed astute. If we can obtain Southern Chu's gathered ancient books, it will be of great benefit to Great Yong. After all, our Great Yong is adept at conquering territory and expansion. However, governing the country still requires cultural governance. An empire conquered on horseback cannot be governed on horseback. Suiyun is truly a great minister."

Gou Lian matter-of-factly analyzed, "Your Imperial Highness, that Southern Chu envoy was neither servile nor overbearing. Moreover, he is a master of both brush and sword, and is the leader of the young military officers of Southern Chu. If the man is not eliminated, he will likely cause no end of trouble for Great Yong."

Li Zhi smiled slightly and replied, “There’s no shortage of outstanding talents in the world. If this Prince were to kill each one I meet, I’m afraid that we wouldn’t be able to kill them all. Southern Chu is in decline. How can a single tree hold up the sky? Without a wise monarch, what use is a brave and resourceful general? Gou Lian, speak to Prime Minister Wei on my behalf. We must definitely send back Shang Weijun. No wonder Suiyun had me treat Shang Weijun well. It seems he knew that this would happen long ago. If Shang Weijun were to return to Southern Chu, then Lu Xin would not be able to hold power alone. After some time, the royal in-law, Shang Weijun will be able to control the court. When that moment comes, with a powerful minister within, I wonder who among these young talents can raise great waves.”

Gou Lian trembled inwardly. Although he greatly admired Jiang Zhe, he had not had the opportunity to watch Jiang Zhe’s methods. Now hearing Li Zhi speak, Gou Lian understood that Jiang Zhe planned this far ahead, causing him to completely respect Jiang Zhe. He glanced at the Prince of Yong. However, for His Imperial Highness to be so clever and see through and employ Jiang Zhe’s intentions, this would definitely cause the enemy to be scared out of their wits. No wonder His Imperial Highness spent such painstaking effort on Jiang Zhe. Now, it seemed that all of that effort was worth it. Thinking of this, the last shred of jealousy in his heart completely disappeared. As he cheerfully accepted the order, he advised, “There is no harm for Your Imperial Highness to give some benefits to Southern Chu. By giving Sir Jiang face, even if Sir Jiang doesn’t express his gratitude, he will still feel happy inside.”

“That’s right,” sighed Li Zhi in admiration. “Even if he is completely discouraged by Southern Chu, he still has affection towards his homeland. If this were not the case, then he would not have met the Southern Chu envoy. He is someone who greatly values sentiment. I’m afraid that when we attack Southern Chu one day, he will not willingly participate.”

“Do not worry, Your Imperial Highness,” replied Gou Lian, smiling. “If we cannot conquer a trifling Southern Chu, then wouldn’t it cause others to ridicule us subordinates? Your Imperial Highness has many capable civil

and military subordinates. What is there to worry? However, Your Imperial Highness, both General Zhangsun and General Jing sent letters, stating that they have nothing to do in the army, requesting permission to return to Your Imperial Highness's side. They have lingering fear[3] over what happened days earlier. In addition, Your Imperial Highness does also require several generals by your side to protect you."

"You're right," responded Li Zhi after thinking it over. "At present, I believe that there won't be any changes in the army and should recall them back to my side. These days, without them, this Prince would always feel that although I am willing, I do not have the strength to implement things. Transmit an order on my behalf having them return to the capital. They are both under the jurisdiction of my Marshal's household. No one will be able to say anything."

Although the subsequent negotiations were mired in minor details, there were no obstructions. Southern Chu was eagerly hoping for the success of the negotiations, while Great Yong did not have anyone who wished to delay the talks. Since the Prince of Yong did not interfere, the crown prince was disinclined to show any interest. During this period of time, the Prince of Qi seemed to be in a terrible mood, practically never leaving his residence. Therefore, the negotiations proceeded exceedingly smoothly under the guidance of Prime Minister Wei Guan. The other members of the Southern Chu diplomatic mission were extremely delighted. However, there was a slight worry in Lu Can's mind, feeling that these negotiations should not be proceeding so smoothly. Although everything was going off without a hitch, there were many details that needed to be ironed out, causing the matter to drag for almost a month before reaching an agreement.

According to the results of the negotiations, Southern Chu became a vassal of Great Yong, paying an annual tribute and paying respects at the Great Yong court every year. For the defeat, Southern Chu must pay reparations totaling sixty million taels of silver, payable over twelve years. In addition, the two countries agreed to set up a mutual market city. Because of the nearly yearlong war, both capitals required goods from the other country. However, the tariff on Southern Chu's goods entering Great Yong was

increased by five percent. All of the captive members of the Southern Chu royal family and the civil and military officials were permitted to be ransomed, although each price was different. There was a need for hostages to be left behind. The ultimate choice was Zhao Jia's eldest son, Zhao Xi. His mother was one of Princess Changle's maids. The other hostage was Zhao Jia's young brother, the Prince of Jian, Zhao Yun. As for Zhao Jia's favorite concubines, more than half requested that they be allowed to remain in their homeland. Lu Can did not haggle over this matter. Their future livelihood would naturally be taken care of by Great Yong. Lu Can actually wished that all of these women would return to Great Yong, but two of the Yong concubines wished to follow Zhao Jia back to Southern Chu. Their youth had been left behind in Southern Chu, therefore, they would rather return to a land filled with hostility towards them than refuse to leave their children.

On the twentieth day of the fourth month, several hundred carts filled with the works demanded by the Prince of Yong arrived in Great Yong. The Prince of Yong dispatched two generals to accept those works and had them escort the carts to Chang'an. Of these two generals, one was Zhangsun Ji, known in *jianghu* as Golden Bow Zhangsun, matchless with bow and arrow. He was the best archer in the Yong army. Coming from an impoverished background, he had enlisted in the army at a young age. In the army, he trained his entire body, assiduously training a set of archery skills on the battlefield. It was a cinch[4] for him to take a life beyond five hundred paces. His inseparable golden bow was a reward personally bestowed by the Prince of Yong. Employing specially made arrows, he was able to shoot and kill enemies beyond a thousand paces. The other man was called Jing Chi. This man's temperament was a bit impulsive and reckless, but his ability to kill enemy generals and seize enemy standards were without equal, and was the most valiant general under the Prince of Yong. By having these two men handle such a trivial matter, all those with discerning eyes could see that the Prince of Yong's intention was to have them enter the capital.

On the twenty-fifth day of the fourth month, the Southern Chu diplomatic mission began to journey back south, escorting the King *Emeritus* and the ransomed court officials. Great Yong was extremely deferential, Crown

Prince Li An personally seeing them off for thirty *li* on behalf of the Yong emperor. Princess Changle personally poured wine to see off Zhao Jia at the ten *li* resting pavilion. However, Yong Emperor Li Yuan had issued an edict stating that he wanted to have Princess Changle stay a few more days as she had been away from home for so long. However, all knew that the Yong emperor had no intention of allowing Princess Changle to return to Southern Chu. During the negotiations, the Southern Chu envoys had once mentioned that King Zhao Long would be willing to venerate his father's legal wife[5] as the Queen Mother. This offer was tactfully declined by Wei Guan. However, the Southern Chu diplomatic mission was hung up on this matter. After all, their most important objective this time was to bring back all of the captive Southern Chu ministers.

On the day of departure, there was an additional individual that attracted everyone's attention. He came out with the Prince of Yong to see off the Southern Chu contingent, a subordinate official of the household of the Marshal of Heavenly Strategist, Major Jiang Zhe. Although he had only just recovered from a serious injury and seemed on the verge of collapse as he walked, no one dared to view him with contempt. Everyone knew what one of his attendants, Li Shun, had done. Moreover, everyone in the world knew of the care and affection the Prince of Yong had for him.

I stepped forward. For the last time, I performed the proper ceremony between a liege and his vassal. Zhao Jia stared at me vacantly, seeming to have already completely forgotten who I was. Under the whispered directions of a eunuch, Zhao Jia spoke in a dignified manner, congratulating me for being employed by Great Yong, wishing that I would forget my previous animosity to ensure that the two countries remained on good terms. My mind was completely calm. This man had never been a monarch that I respected. This time, I was only here seeing him to finish things once and for all. When all was said and done, I doubted that he would even be able to return to Southern Chu alive. Were it not for His Imperial Majesty wishing to eliminate this son-in-law of his as early as possible, why would these negotiations terminate so swiftly?

After watching the Southern Chu diplomatic contingent travel off into the

distance, and just as I tiredly wished to return to my carriage, I noticed two individuals watching me attentively. One was Princess Changle. Having not seen her for some time, her expression was placid, and compared to her appearance on the day of the competition, she seemed to be thin and pallid. The other person was a young woman in a bluish-white court dress. She looked to be just over twenty and was an absolute beauty, her features noble and pure. Her build was lanky, her figure graceful. She stood beside Princess Changle. Princess Changle was beautiful and elegant, and could already be said to be a stunning beauty. However, the woman standing beside Princess Changle snatched away all of the radiance with her splendor. What caused me to pay attention wasn't this woman's beauty, but her pair of clear and icy eyes. Those eyes haunted my dreams. She was the assassin who almost killed me.

In a low voice, I whispered, "She must be Li Hanyou, correct?"

The Prince of Yong had already reached my side. Quietly, he confirmed, "That's her. The Empress has had her take care of Changle. Therefore, she came with Changle."

When Xiaoshunzi learned that that woman was Li Hanyou, a dazzling cold light immediately flashed in his eyes. He stared intently at Li Hanyou, remembering every detail about this woman.

After I boarded the carriage, I pensively thought, *This kind of proud and beautiful woman was the partner that the descendants of rich and powerful families yearned for even in their dreams. Would Qin Qing be able to reject her?*

On the seventh day of the fifth month, information arrived that the King *Emeritus* of Southern Chu was assassinated not long after crossing the Yangtze River. The assassin used martial arts from Sichuan's Li (历) Family. The assassin left behind a message written in blood, "*The beautiful territory is my home, my country is destroyed and its people starving. Today, I have taken recompense* ." After Zhao Jia's death, several of his favored concubines committed suicide and were buried alongside him.

Setting down the intelligence report, I let out a soft sigh. It was likely that

the emperor had handed the assassination of Zhao Jia to the crown prince. The crown prince's faction was truly capable, having the Embroidered Union Head Huo Jicheng go assassinate Zhao Jia, completely removing any ties between the assassin and Great Yong. Such easy success was presumably due to those favored concubines playing the role of insiders. Huo Jicheng would acquire both fame and fortune, while Great Yong was also perfectly satisfied with this result. Alas, it was a pity for Lu Can. As the primary envoy and holding responsibility for escorting the King *Emeritus* , by allowing Zhao Jia to be assassinated it was likely that he would not be able to free himself from the blame for quite some time. Regardless of who came up with this plan, he was definitely a deep and ruthless schemer. The only thing that I did not know was whether the plan came from the crown prince's faction or from the Fengyi Sect. On the paper, I wrote down two names: Lu Jingzhong and Li Hanyou. The planner should be one of these two individuals. Although I had never had the opportunity to watch Li Hanyou's methods, seeing her decisiveness and ruthlessness when she attempted to assassinate me was enough for me to understand that she was not an ordinary woman.

Just as I was thinking about this, Li Zhi entered the study. With a gloomy expression, he said, "The Crown Prince did well. Today, Imperial Father bestowed upon him a hefty reward. Not only was the assassination this time flawless,[6] it also completely removes suspicion from Great Yong. I'm baffled. … When did the Embroidered Union become a supporter of the Crown Prince? Although the Crown Prince only stated that he surreptitiously passed on a message to the Embroidered Union and supplied some other help, however, I do not believe that the Embroidered Union is so easily utilized. I must properly investigate the Embroidered Union's relationship with the Crown Prince."

I immediately understood. The crown prince intended to act against the Embroidered Union. Presumably, he was already prepared to stop. In any case, through the mutual market, the crown prince had the ability to make large profits, no longer needing to take risks by smuggling. I glanced at Xiaoshunzi, signaling him with my eyes. Xiaoshunzi's voice secretly traveled to my ear, "Young master wishes for me to speak to Chen Zhen to have the

Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets disengage itself?”

I nodded my head slightly. Xiaoshunzi softly withdrew. Puzzled, Li Zhi asked, “Suiyun, what’s going on? Are you keeping something from me?”

I respectfully answered, “Your Imperial Highness, this subject has something to report. The Embroidered Union has indeed collaborated with the Crown Prince.” I began to simply explain the military equipment smuggling operation between the Embroidered Union and the crown prince. Frowning, the Prince of Yong listened to me speak for a long time. Suddenly, unable to take it anymore, he said, “Preposterous! Actually going so far as to mess with military equipment! Suiyun, how are you so clear about this matter? Are you somehow involved?”

“This is this subject’s secret,” I replied with a smile. “However, this subject has all of the evidence in my hands. Although this was a trap set by this subject, this subject only supplied an opportunity. I did not have the Crown Prince do this.”

Li Zhi dejectedly collapsed into a chair. It was quite a while before he spoke, “You’re right. If the Crown Prince were not willing, who could force him to do anything? Okay. I’ll listen to you. Since the Crown Prince conducts himself in this manner, then he cannot blame this Prince for forgetting brotherly feelings. Military equipment and supplies are so significant and yet he still dares to do such a thing? Do you feel that we can achieve success in one go? I feel that it’s not likely.”

“There is no need for Your Imperial Highness to worry,” I responded. “This matter is naturally insufficient. However, constant perseverance yields success.[7] Would Your Imperial Highness please believe in this subject’s judgment? If this matter were to be exposed, it would be sufficient if Your Imperial Highness impartially handles matters. There is no need to excessively threaten the Crown Prince. In this way, this subject can take the next step.”

Li Zhi smiled and asked, “Are you always so secretive?”

I gently replied, “This subject is adept at crafty plots and machinations. If things are revealed, then inevitably it will cause Your Imperial Highness

worry. It is better to leave the scheming to this subject. If Your Imperial Highness is not worried, then this subject would like to mobilize some manpower to handle some matters."

"You don't need to ask for my approval," declared Li Zhi. "No matter who you order within this residence, there is no one who dares to disobey."

I lightly nodded my head, expressing my gratitude. At this moment, Li Zhi looked at the intelligence reports on the table that I had been reading through. Somewhat hesitant, he said, "Suiyun, you must know that some things are inevitable and necessary."

I softly nodded my head, my expression completely clear and composed. Slowly, I stated, "This subject knows. King Zhao Jia did not fulfill his responsibilities as a monarch. Before the fall of Jianye, he should have committed suicide to apologize for his crimes. It is only that although the King was muddled, he was not a villain. Although he had not made any contributions over these years, he also did not do any outrageous acts that offended the Heavens and reason. He simply should not have been King. Now that his spirit has already returned to Southern Chu, then he should die without any regrets."

Finished speaking, I rose to my feet and walked out of the study. Taking a deep breath of fresh air, I then casually picked a bamboo leaf and began to play it. The trembling, simple music was low and plaintive, mournful. All who heard it could not but feel heartbroken. Finished playing one song, I stopped. My expression gradually became tranquil. Did I still have affection for Southern Chu? Moreover, there was no need for me to grieve for that incapable ruler. While thinking this, I could not help but be distressed. When all was said and done, that man was once my king. Moreover, he was the monarch of Southern Chu. How could I not grieve to see him die under such a conspiracy concocted by Great Yong? Suddenly, I began to regret forcing the King of Shu to commit suicide. Regardless of what else he was, he was still the King of Shu. For him to die under my brush, it was no wonder the people of Shu hated me so much.

Li Zhi had been standing at a distance, watching me. He only now walked over. In a muted voice, he said, "The Southern Chu works have already

arrived. Why don't you go take a look? And also meet my trusted lieutenants?"

I bowed slightly. "I dare not disobey such an order."

Footnotes :

雪上加霜, xueshangjiashuang – idiom, lit. to add hail to snow; one disaster on top of another, to make things worse in a bad situation
源远**流**长, yuanyuanliuchang – idiom, lit. source is distant and the flow is long; fig. something goes back to the dim and distant past
心有余悸, xinyouyuji – idiom, lit. trepidation remaining after trauma; to have lingering fears
探囊取物, tannangquwu – idiom, lit. to feel in one's pocket and take something; fig. as easy as pie, in the bag
嫡母, dimu – lit. a father's first and legal wife; as the primary wife, her status in the family was only second to her husband; her children (especially in royal/imperial families) were given first rights to succession of their father's title and inheritance; all children of concubines also treated this person as their mother
天衣无缝, tianyiwufeng – idiom, lit. seamless heavenly clothes; flawless
水滴石穿, shuidishichuan – idiom, lit. dripping water penetrates the stone; fig. constant perseverance yields success, persistent effort overcomes any difficulty

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 24: Laying a Trap to Hunt

Volume 2, Chapter 24: Laying a Trap to Hunt

On the twelfth day of the fifth month of the twenty-fourth year of Wuwei, the Crown Princess's younger brother, Vice Minister of Revenue Cui Yang died violently in the Peaceful Neighborhood. Matters happened thusly…. —*Yong Dynastic Records* , *Biography of the Prince of Li* [1]

Before I had even entered the hall, I could hear a booming, thunderous voice delightedly say, "Zhangsun, you're not aware, but I, your elder, was really lucky this time! That jar of *shao daozi* is sixty years old! Who would have thought that such a rustic shop would have such a good vintage? Therefore, I, your elder, have been reluctant to drink it, intentionally transporting it back. How about it? If you treat me to a meal, I'll treat you to some drinks."

Following, a steady voice could be heard. "Old Jing, don't make such a big fuss. When His Imperial Highness arrives shortly, I'm afraid that you'll be blamed for not abiding by the rules again."

The thundering voice impatiently replied, "I, your elder, got it! His Imperial Highness won't blame me! This time, I, your elder, brought back some good things back!"

I could hear the steady voice laugh and ask, "You have something good? It can't be just that jar of wine, right?"

The thunderous voice gleefully responded, "You, joker, absolutely won't be able to guess what I brought back! His Highness will definitely like the things I brought back!"

Li Zhi smiled slightly. With a soft cough, he stepped forward and entered the hall. I followed him inside. Entering the hall, there were two men in martial attire standing solemnly at attention off to the side. Li Zhi walked to the master's seat and sat down. The two men stepped forward to pay their respects, both their bearings exuding esteem and respect. From this, I could

tell that they were both Li Zhi's trusted generals.

I carefully sized the two of them up. One of them had long eyebrows and phoenix eyes, his face alabaster and whiskerless. His appearance was handsome and yet also delicate and pretty. His height was close to eight *chi* .[2] He had muscular, long, and dexterous arms like an ape, and a narrow waist, making his build seem not as massive. The other man's stature was also eight *chi* in height. He had a face like that of a leopard with big round eyes. His appearance was coarse and rough, his figure tall and rugged. It seemed like he was a small mountain. After the two had respectfully saluted and paid their respects, Li Zhi proclaimed, "This Major Jiang is this Prince's right-hand man. Greet him properly. Afterwards, treat him as you treat this Prince. Be sure to not lack in manners."

The two turned towards me and paid their respects. I bowed in return, smiling as I said, "Your Imperial Highness is too serious. Jiang Zhe and the two generals are both Your Imperial Highness's subordinates. I dare not accept the two's courtesy."

After we had greeted one another, I walked over and took a seat below the Prince of Yong. The two men remained standing, solemnly at attention, waiting for the Prince of Yong's command.

Li Zhi smiled and stated, "Sit down. This isn't the army camp. There is no need for such courtesy. Zhangsun, did the journey pass without mishap?"

The long-eyebrowed, phoenix-eyed general stood from his seat and recounted, "Reporting to Your Imperial Highness, the whole journey went off without a hitch. It was only that there were too many vehicles and horses, thus we traveled a bit slowly. This is the catalog from the Southern Chu envoy." So speaking, he handed over a booklet.

Li Zhi skimmed it briefly before handing it to me, saying, "How are these works? This Prince does not have any expertise. Take a look."

I casually opened the booklet and neutrally replied, "There aren't many genuine quality works. However, this isn't bad. This subject was not purposely mindful of these works. But, as for those books, although Southern Chu would inevitably have retained some critical classics, I don't

believe we're going to be missing too much. At worst, we probably received eighty to ninety percent. Some other day, I'll ask Your Imperial Highness to deliver the catalog to the Cold Courtyard, so that I can take a close look and see if there are any precious works."

"I have already submitted a memorial to Imperial Father, requesting that these books be organized," replied Li Zhi, nodding. "Imperial Father has already issued a decree to Hanlin Academy to have them take care of this, assigning the matter to Grand Mentor Zhu Ping. Zhu Ping is rigorous and erudite, and will certainly handle these books properly. This will be a major contribution to later generations; it is unlikely that he will slack off."

"I also trust Grand Mentor Zhu," I smiled. "However, some of the books I've only scanned through. I would like to ask Your Imperial Highness to permit me to borrow a few books."

Li Zhi smiled slightly and consented, "You can decide on your own. As for you, Jing Chi. Just a moment ago, this Prince could hear you making a fuss even from outside. What did you bring back for this Prince?"

Jing Chi promptly rose to his feet and reported, "Your Imperial Highness, I'm sure that Your Imperial Highness will like the item that this subject brought back." Finished speaking, he took out a atlas from within his bosom and handed it over.

Li Zhi opened the atlas and took a look. Suddenly, he trembled, quickly flipping through it without stopping. Only when he finished reading did he exclaim in admiration, "What a complete geographic map of the Middle Kingdom! Jing Chi, where did you acquire this book? Who drew all these maps?"

Growing curious, I reached out beckoningly. Li Zhi passed the atlas over to me. I opened it and took a look. Inside were exquisitely drawn maps, all of them of strategic locations and important mountain passes. All of it was drawn extremely meticulously. I had once had the opportunity to see Southern Chu's military maps, but this kind of book filled with detailed maps was extremely rare.

At this moment, Jing Chi proudly stated, "This general was ordered to

guard against the Chu army in the Jingxiang region. I have patrolled every single checkpoint. A few days ago, we captured a young scholar. When we searched his body, we found this atlas. Originally, I intended to have him executed as a spy. However, after Adjutant Xuan interrogated the scholar, he said that the scholar wasn't a spy, but rather a descendant of Xu Heng, Xu Jun, and was a rare talent. Therefore, he was forced to stay in the army. However, this man is truly courageous. While he kept his life with difficulty, he surprisingly refused to become an official, insisting on leaving. He only started behaving himself after I, your elder, got angry, claiming that if he still continued to act in this manner, I would consider him a spy and have him killed. I initially intended to bring him back with us this time. However, Adjutant Xuan told me to first ask Your Imperial Highness for instructions." Removing a letter from his bosom, he handed it over. "This is Adjutant Xuan's letter."

After opening and reading the letter, Li Zhi glanced at me and asked, "What does Suiyun think?"

I smiled and answered, "That man is really a genius. However, the world is currently in chaos. If he is allowed to remain among the common folk, he will inevitably run into misfortune. Your Imperial Highness, how about sending him to Sir Ziyou? In any case, there aren't any maps of Youzhou in this atlas. It won't be bad if he becomes engrossed in mapping."

Li Zhi smiled and replied, "Good, this Prince will write a letter to Changqing. Adjutant Xuan is named Xuan Song, styled Changqing.[3] Although he is reticent, he is a master of military affairs. His character prizes righteousness and benevolence over wealth. Do you remember the Mad Scholar of Shu, Yang Can?"

After thinking for a moment, I responded, "This subject knows of the person. He once served as an envoy for the Kingdom of Shu and came to Your Imperial Highness's encampments."

Li Zhi did not ask how I knew this and only said, "That man is actually an unyielding person. After Shu was destroyed, he unexpectedly cast himself into the river to commit suicide. His testament spoke of Tian Heng's eight hundred followers who committed suicide to follow him in death, and how

the Kingdom of Shu needed those who would die alongside its monarch. After his death, his wife and child nearly died from cold and hunger. In the face of these daunting circumstances, they followed the instructions left in the testament and wrote a letter to Xuan Song. Xuan Song only once had a short conversation with Yang Can, stating that he was willing to help Yang Can if he ever was in need of assistance. Ultimately, Changqing did in fact dispatch someone to deliver all of his savings to Yang Can's family. After this Prince heard this, I respected him greatly. At that time, he had only just entered into this Prince's service. Seeing that he was someone who kept his promises, this Prince made him an adjutant. Jing Chi is impulsive and reckless, and so I dispatched Xuan Song to be his adjutant. It seems that this Xuan Song is really deserving of being placed in an important position. Unfortunately, he is needed to supervise military affairs and cannot be transferred back to Chang'an."

I smiled and remarked, "Military affairs are truly critical. Moreover, now that General Jing has been transferred back to Chang'an to protect Your Imperial Highness, if there is no individual entrusted with handling military affairs, then Your Imperial Highness will surely be uneasy. As for that Xu Jun, since he is Xu Heng's descendant, then he should be adept at surveying. Your Imperial Highness should use him well."

At this moment, Jing Chi blushed with embarrassment and asked, "Then, who is Xu Heng? For what reason whenever Adjutant Xuan spoke of that man's name, it seemed like this general should know who he is?"

I smiled slightly, immediately understanding that this general's character was like his appearance, gruff and unrefined. I gently explained, "Xu Heng was a famous master of geography from the previous dynasty. All of his life, he was fond of touring the world and wrote several travel accounts. Scholars are fond of reading his travel accounts. Without leaving their home, they would be able to learn the local conditions and customs of every place in the world.[4] Even generals should take a look. The more you know, the more benefits to an army marching and fighting."

Jing Chi immediately looked embarrassed and awkward, stating, "Although this general knows a few characters, there is no way that I can understand

those scholarly books. Moreover, I have many responsibilities. When will I be able to find the time to study?"

Li Zhi suddenly became solemn, as he said, "Jing Chi, you're always this way, not seeking to better yourself. Although you are courageous in battle, you will only stay a general. If you wish to take charge of and responsibility for a section, you must study. Since you have come to Chang'an, this Prince will temporarily not assign any responsibilities to you. You should take this opportunity to obediently read and study some books. This is a military command."

The complaining Jing Chi immediately stopped talking, remorseful. I could not help but smile and intervene, "Your Imperial Highness, these few days, I have some things with which I will likely have to bother the two generals. How about handing this matter to me? This subject will guarantee that this will be resolved to Your Imperial Highness's satisfaction."

"This is actually good," replied Li Zhi. "Jing Chi, why aren't you coming forward to kneel before you teacher?"

Seeing the Prince of Yong's imposing demeanor, Jing Chi had no choice but to advance and perform the proper ceremonies, looking distressed throughout. Li Zhi and I exchanged glances and smiled. This Jing Chi had a stubborn and intractable temperament. It would not be easy to control him. If I were to try to order him around, he would not obediently listen and do as he was told. Now with this method, I could perfectly and legitimately order him about. If he were not obedient, I only needed to punish him by copying a couple of pages from books to force him to bend his head and obey my orders.

I glanced at Zhangsun Ji, seeing his expression was tranquil and calm, although there was a hint of understanding in his gaze. It seemed that he was extremely shrewd. He would surely be a good assistant. My plan should be able to be implemented without a hitch. I revealed a look of sincere joy.

***

On the twelfth day of the fifth month, outside of Chang'an's Illustrious Virtue Gate,[5] with night approaching, the city gates were about to be closed.

A middle-aged man dressed in the garb of a merchant entered through the gate. Although it was already early summer, this man still wore a bamboo hat. His features could not be seen clearly under the concealing shadows of the bamboo hat. The soldiers on guard duty glanced at this man suspiciously, but did not stop him. This wasn't a critical moment and there was no need to strictly search and interrogate him. This man seemed to be familiar with Chang'an's streets and alleys, turning left and right. After slightly less than an hour, he arrived at the southwest corner of Chang'an, the Peaceful Neighborhood, where the lowest and poorest commoners lived. What was different about this neighborhood from others was that when night fell, aside from idling ruffians, there was no one else on the streets. On both sides of the alley were the homes of poor commoners. From time to time, one could hear the sounds of laughter and some other noises. Those areas were the locations of underground casinos and residences of unregistered prostitutes. This place, when enveloped by darkness, had its own deformed prosperity.

This man passed through the dark alley. The dim lamplight on both sides caused his silhouette to stretch greatly in length. The long abandoned compound ahead was his destination. He lightly pushed open the door to the courtyard and walked in. The interior of the central building was brightly lit. Just as this man stepped onto the stairs, two men appeared from the shadowy nooks beside the building. One of the men used a lantern to take a close look at this visitor's appearance after he had removed the bamboo hat. The two men quietly withdrew.

Entering the building, this man immediately caught sight of Cui Yang seated under the dim lamplight. The man stepped forward in greeting, stating, "Cui *daren* , have you been well since we last met?"

Cui Yang returned his politeness and replied, "I am fine. Union Head Huo is now famous throughout the lands, truly deserving of congratulations!"

The man smiled arrogantly and stated casually, "This is our final transaction. I hope that we can properly finish off what we started. This is the location where you can pick up the goods." So speaking, he took out a wax pellet.

Cui Yang smiled slightly, handing over a box. “Inside is the balance of money that you are owed. After today, we will no longer have any ties. However, His Imperial Highness has said if Union Head Huo is willing, we can keep in touch.”

Huo Jicheng opened the wooden box. Seeing the golden beads inside, he smiled. “The Crown Prince is quite sensible. It is gold that is comparatively secure. Otherwise, if your side paid using banknotes, wouldn’t I be toiling for no recompense? Cui *daren* , every half month, I will send someone to meet with *daren* . If there are any matters, it is sufficient to inform the courtier.”

Finished speaking, Huo Jicheng turned and departed. Cui Yang smiled cruelly. In his head, he thought, *His Imperial Highness has already set out to eradicate the Embroidered Union. It is unlikely that you survive the night.*

It wasn’t long before a man dressed in black entered and reported, “*Daren* , just as we were about to make our move, we discovered that there were people arriving to rescue Huo Jicheng and could only stay our hands for the time being.”

Cui Yang frowned. “Who was it? Did you see who it was?”

The man in black shook his head. “We do not know who it was. They were all dressed in the garb of poor commoners. Before Huo Jicheng even came out, they had seized control of several strategic locations. As we could only arrange the trap after Huo Jicheng had entered, we did not expect that he would bring several subordinates with him. He definitely entered the city by himself.”

Cui Yang sighed. “Let it be…. Let’s first go back and report to the crown prince. We’ll take care of him another time. In any case, as we did not act, there is still the opportunity to lead him into a trap.”

Just at this moment, a short, miserable cry could be heard outside. The black-clothed man shivered. In a low voice, he said, “We’ve been ambushed! *Daren* , be careful!”

Finished speaking, he turned and was about to exit the building when the door suddenly silently opened, and a black-clothed and masked man

entered. His height was average and his eyes were as cold as ice.

The man in black stepped before Cui Yang, guarding him, and callously questioned, “Who are you to have the impertinence to ambush us? Do you know of our identities?”

The intruder glanced at the black-clothed man. He suddenly shot out, attacking the man in black who retaliated. In this small and narrow room, the two exchanged several blows. The man in black found that he was helpless, while his opponent was free and unconstrained. After only a few attacks, the man in black was struck in the chest by his opponent. The man in black cried out in a miserable voice, “Great Soul Searching Palm!” Before the sound had dissipated, the man in black had already collapsed to the floor. The man in black’s martial arts weren’t completely bad. It was only that he could not fully display his martial arts in such a small and narrow room. In comparison, his opponent, if he were to act in such narrow surroundings, not even the three grandmasters of the era would be able to stop him. The intruder quietly walked over and tore away the black cloth covering the man in black’s face. After memorizing the man in black’s appearance, the intruder glanced at Cui Yang.

Cui Yang let out a miserable shriek and shrank into the corner. Trembling violently, he said, “Hero, please spare my life! This lowly official will surely be very grateful. This lowly official is the younger brother-in-law of the Crown Prince. If hero has any demands …”

Before Cui Yang had finished speaking, the intruder had already flicked his sleeve, turning and departing. Just as he was celebrating a narrow escape,[6] Cui Yang suddenly felt an acute pain in his chest and he felt darkness closing in around him. *What is happening?* thought Cui Yang through the haze.

When the intruder walked out of the room, several men in the attire of poor commoners stood silently at attention outside waiting for him. On the floor were some twenty to thirty men dressed in black. The intruder did not make a single sound, only gesturing with his hand, everyone’s figures disappearing into the darkness.

Huo Jicheng walked on the streets, filled with happiness. He was thinking

about spending a night at the most famous brothel in Chang'an. Just as he was letting his imagination run wild, he scurried along with his head down. After all, he was in someone else's territory. Suddenly, Huo Jicheng halted. He could see gray-clothed, masked man standing in front of him with his hands behinds his back. The masked man's tall and slender physique emanated a thick bloodlust. In addition, Huo Jicheng could also sense faint killing auras in the dark alleyways on both sides. Huo Jicheng did not turn around, but he could sense that there was someone standing behind him as well.

Not even bothering to think, Huo Jicheng leapt high up into the sky, throwing himself on the roof of a dark house. Just as he was rising, the faint twang of a bowstring sounded. Huo Jicheng ducked as he felt an arrow fly past his scalp. Already lying on the roof of the house, Huo Jicheng rolled to the side to escape. Sounds could be heard nearby. Several men in black had already given chase to flank their target. Huo Jicheng felt the powerful gale of a palm strike rushing towards his back. Turning his body, Huo Jicheng retaliated with his own fist. Although his attacker got the worst of it and let out a low groan, Huo Jicheng had no choice but to slow down, as the swords and sabers of the several other men in black were nearing him. Neither side made any sound, beginning to fight desperately in the darkness.

Huo Jicheng could sense that all of these men had fairly good martial arts, especially the one who had exchanged blows with him. His martial arts were outstanding. From the corner of his eyes, Huo Jicheng could see an azure clothed man standing in the middle of the street. Although Huo Jicheng could not make out this man's features, he could see that the man held a bow in his hands. From the man's slender figure and distinguished bearing, he could tell immediately that he was the leader of these men. It was likely that he disdained attacking from all sides, and therefore he did not make a move. Huo Jicheng secretly rejoiced, examining his surroundings, hoping to find a means of escape. However, these men had cut off all avenues of escape. As he fought, Huo Jicheng tried to think of a strategy.

Just at the moment that Huo Jicheng was imminent danger, a short and small figure suddenly dashed out from the darkness. This figure tossed two

fiery red pellets. The pellets exploded with a thunderclap, causing red smoke to billow. Seeing that the opportunity had arrived, Huo Jicheng immediately charged in the direction that he had identified as the best escape route. At this time, there was already the sound of commoners sounding, awoken by the din. Seeing that the situation was not too encouraging, the masked men took advantage of the red smoke to quietly retreat.

In a panic, Huo Jicheng fled without bothering to choose a path. After he had run for some time, a figure suddenly appeared before him, waving his hand. Huo Jicheng immediately identified this man, joy filling him. Huo Jicheng hurriedly followed this man. This man's *qinggong* was outstanding, with him leading Huo Jicheng through several twists and turns before quickly arriving at the back door to a compound. Pushing open the door, the man turned and beckoned his head. Huo Jicheng promptly followed him inside. This was a safe house. After entering the inner chambers, Huo Jicheng tiredly sat down in a chair and gratefully said, "Brother Han, if you hadn't come to save me, I'm afraid that I would have already lost my life."

The man regretfully replied, "Union Head Huo, you were too careless. How could you not think that the Crown Prince would silence you? If I did not provide support outside, the result would only have been disastrous.[7] Fortunately, I had subordinates prepare smoke pellets, otherwise I would have been powerless to save you."

Crestfallen, Huo Jicheng replied, "I did not anticipate that they would so quickly burn the bridge.[8] Moreover, I originally believed that I could at the very least escape as the Crown Prince could not brazenly surround and attack me. It had not occurred to me that the martial arts of his subordinates were so excellent. The imperial household truly has as many experts as there are stars in the sky."

Han Wuji sighed. "Rest properly for two hours and I'll bring out of the city. There are several points on Chang'an's city wall that are not tightly guarded. Your *qinggong* is outstanding; you should be able to escape from there. I'm afraid that tomorrow morning, the soldiers will likely conduct a search of the entire city. If you do not leave tonight, then I'm afraid that you won't

have the opportunity again.”

A cruel and vicious expression appeared on Huo Jicheng’s face, as he ruthlessly responded, “Much thanks to Brother Han. I will definitely not let the Crown Prince off lightly. I am not to be trifled with.”

Around midnight, Huo Jicheng escaped through an old section of the city walls, using a flying claw[9] to climb out of Chang’an. At the same time, within the Cold Courtyard of the Prince of Yong’s residence, Xiaoshunzi, changed back into servant attire, reported to me, “Young master, the hunting operation has succeeded.”

Footnotes :

戾, li – lit. brutal, violent; Prince of Li likely refers to the posthumous title for Crown Prince Li An

Eight chi is slightly over six feet in height.

常青, changqing – lit. evergreen

风**土人情**, fengturenqing – idiom, local conditions and customs

明德门, mingde men – lit. Illustrious Virtue Gate; this was the southern gate of the city of Chang’an

死里逃生, silitaosheng – idiom, lit. mortal danger, escape alive; a narrow escape

凶多吉少, xiongduojishao – idiom, lit. everything bodes ill, no positive signs; inauspicious, everything points to disaster

过**河拆**桥, guohechaiqiao – idiom, lit. to destroy the bridge after crossing the river; fig. to abandon one’s benefactor upon achieving one’s goals, to burn one's bridges

A grappling hook that can also be used as a weapon.

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 25: Caught in a Dilemma

Volume 2, Chapter 25: Caught in a Dilemma

The Prince was bewildered by his affection for Lady Xiao and almost placed the blame on Cui Yang before he was stopped by a warning from Lu Jingzhong. From this point on, discord was sown between Lu Jingzhong and Lady Xiao….—*Yong Dynastic Records* , *Biography of the Prince of Li*

Setting down the book, I asked, “Were Jing Chi and Zhangsun Ji diligent?”

“Do not worry, young master,” eased Xiaoshunzi, nodding his head. “Both generals are individuals who scrupulously abide by commands. Moreover, their martial arts are outstanding. Huo Jicheng is a famous expert from the Kingdom of Shu, but he almost lost his life when he was surrounded by them. Chiji used smoke pellets to save Huo Jicheng, and was almost captured himself. If they had not received orders beforehand prohibiting them from leaving behind any trace, it is likely that Huo Jicheng would never have been able to escape.”

“How can the Prince of Yong’s trusted lieutenants be ordinary?” I replied placidly. “Last time, you stated that you trained the Great Soul Searching Palm to about fifty percent mastery. No one would be able to see through it, right?”

“Do not worry, young master,” mollified Xiaoshunzi with a smile. “Back in Southern Chu, I once had the opportunity to spar with someone from the Li Family. Although the Great Soul Searching Palm is formidable, I believe that I have been able to imitate it properly. Moreover, Huo Jicheng is only an excommunicated disciple from the Li Family. It wouldn’t be strange if his Great Soul Searching Palm wasn’t exact and pure. The only thing I don’t understand is why young master would go to such trouble and get involved when Cui Yang already intended to ambush and kill Huo Jicheng.”

“If the Crown Prince was allowed to ambush and kill Huo Jicheng,” I explained, shaking my head, “Then Huo Jicheng probably wouldn’t have

been able to escape. You were able to see their ambush. If we didn't strike, how would Huo Jicheng escape? If the Crown Prince succeeded in killing Huo Jicheng, then there wouldn't be much use for us to expose this matter. Moreover, if we had directly saved Huo Jicheng with the forces from the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets, then not only would Han Wuji and company be exposed, Huo Jicheng would also become suspicious. Therefore, I could only arrange matters so. At present, Huo Jicheng has escaped. According to his personality, if he were to suffer losses, then he would willingly continue to suffer if he could exact revenge. Only by following my plan can we increase the stakes. I had you kill Cui Yang in order to eliminate one of the Crown Prince's assistants. Originally, if this matter were exposed, the Crown Prince's scapegoat would have been the current Minister of Revenue, allowing Cui Yang to be promoted. Now that Huo Jicheng killed Cui Yang, I want to see whether the Crown Prince is willing to abandon Cui Yang or the Minister of Revenue. As long as we can see how the Crown Prince handles this matter, we will know who he relies upon the most."

"Then what is our next step?" inquired Xiaoshunzi.

My eyes flickering, I answered, "We must draw away the Crown Prince's attention. How about this? I will pay a formal visit to General Qin Yi. Earlier, Qin Qing was implicated because I was attacked by an assassin. I must go and formally apologize."

Xiaoshunzi replied with dissatisfaction, "Qin Qing is still suspicious. Failing to come and explain matters is intolerable."

"They could only do that, otherwise this matter will only become increasingly serious," I stated, shaking my head. "Should His Imperial Highness believe them if they came? Didn't you notice that the others did not come to explain themselves? It is useless to try to explain this kind of situation. Right now, even though we already know who the assassin was, aren't we still restraining ourselves? Moreover, this matter is of great harm to Qin Qing. He is innocent and yet due to the several factions adding fuel to the fire,[1] the majority of those who know that I was not wounded by a Southern Chu assassin think that Qin Qing was indignant at being forced to apologize to him and tried to have me killed."

“Should this be reported to His Imperial Highness?” asked Xiaoshunzi, hesitating.

I smiled and returned, “Do you think that such a lowly major such as myself has the qualifications to meet the Grand General? Oh, that’s right, how is Pei Yun’s situation?”

“Do not worry, young master,” replied Xiaoshunzi. “General Pei has not only recovered from his injuries, his internal energy has greatly improved. Due to fighting with his life on the line, he has already advanced in power and has hopes of breaking the ‘Seventh Layer.’ The Shaolin Temple is also extremely pleased as General Pei took a concubine a few days ago. The woman is from a scholarly family, and is tender and refined. Moreover, her family has an intimate relationship with the Shaolin Temple. Although this hasn’t been made public yet, the union has already been acknowledged by General Pei’s parents. Once the woman becomes pregnant, the Pei family will ask the Xue family to cancel the engagement.”

I mocked, “It seems that General Pei’s parents are unable to wait.”

Xiaoshunzi could not help but laugh. “The Secret Camp has delivered intelligence stating that General Pei’s parents also believe that the general’s fiancée is too active and cannot perform the traditional duties of a wife. Moreover, the Pei family only has this one descendant, and they hate that General Pei can’t take more wives and concubines and impregnate more women. Originally, they intended for General Pei to immediately take several concubines after he got married. Therefore, they agreed when General Pei raised the issue of taking a concubine. It is only because they are considering their in-laws’ face that this matter is temporarily being concealed. Once the concubine has a child, they will be able to properly and legitimately bring her into the Pei family residence. When the time comes, Miss Xue will be unable to do anything no matter how unwilling she is.”

I also could not help but laugh, saying, “So it was actually General Pei who was being too old-fashioned. Now he is able to have the best of both worlds.[2] Oh, that’s right, he was once a subordinate of the Prince of Qi. Did the Prince of Qi make things difficult for him after he saved my life this time?”

“Not only did the Prince of Qi not make things difficult for General Pei,” reported Xiaoshunzi calmly, “The Prince also supported the suggestion of His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, to promote General Pei. Before, the Crown Prince had made some moves, trying to seize the opportunity to push one of his people into the Northern Barracks of the Imperial Guard. However, the Emperor was extremely dissatisfied, personally praising General Pei, forcing the Crown Prince to give up.”

I nodded my head and stated, “All right, His Imperial Highness has already retired. Tomorrow morning, I’ll personally go see if His Imperial Highness has any plans. We must go to the Qin residence tomorrow, otherwise it will be overdue.”

***

At dawn on the second day, news of Li Zhi’s visit to Grand General Qin’s residence very quickly spread throughout the capital.

The Prince of Yong and I arrived at Grand General Qin’s residence close to nine o’clock in the morning. The Qin residence occupied a space that was ten *mu* ,[3] already quite large when compared to other ministers. However, it was only the layout that was expansive. The exterior was actually quite plain and down-to-earth. Even the series of steps leading to and the stone lions lining the entrance were ordinary. It almost seemed that this residence was the home of an ordinary official. As His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, descended from his carriage at the entrance, Qin Yi, who had received a message announcing the Prince of Yong’s visit, waited with his entire household at the entrance to welcome the prince. Although Grand General Qin’s status was high, the Prince of Yong was, after all, an imperial prince. The required etiquette could not be lacking. I followed behind the Prince of Yong, stealing a glance, seeing that aside from Qin Qing standing behind Qin Yi, there was also another tall and well-built youth and several teenagers. The youth was dressed in the uniform of a military officer. His appearance was quite similar to Qin Qing’s, and seemed to be a bit more straightforward. Aside from these individuals, the two sides of the entrance were lined with retainers and servants, all of them with solemn bearings. It seemed that they were all warriors who had survived many bloody battles.

Qin Yi quickly advanced and kneeled on the ground. “This subject, Qin Yi, salutes Your Imperial Highness.”

At this moment, Qin Qing and the other youngsters also advanced forward and kneeled on the ground. The youth similar in appearance to Qin Qing held an official position. When I heard him call himself Qin Yong, I immediately remembered his identity. He was a distant nephew of Qin Yi. His father was Qin Yi’s distant cousin and had the misfortune of dying on the battlefield. Qin Yi had brought his cousin’s entire family to his own household. When this youth’s paternal grandparents had passed away, it was Qin Yi who buried them. At present, Qin Yong was a Deputy General under Qin Yi. Reportedly, although this man’s appearance seemed to be sincere and guileless, he was actually a veritable storehouse of knowledge. His tactics and strategic mind were both top notch. This man was loyal only to Qin Yi and was extremely filial to his mother. Aside from a few years spent on the border, he spent most of his time following Qin Yi and was Qin Yi’s closest assistant. Qin Yi doted on him more than his own son, Qin Qing.

Grasping Qin Yi’s arm, Li Zhi walked alongside the grand general into the residence. Glancing at Qin Qing, I smiled and said, “Last time, when General Qin came to the Prince of Yong’s residence, I invited General to tea. Today, I have come with His Imperial Highness to pay a visit. By rights, it should be General who receives me.”

Qin Qing looked at me with an odd expression on his face, only walking over after he heard me speak. He said, “Major Jiang, please.”

After we had taken a few steps, he asked in a low voice, “Doesn’t Major Jiang suspect me of being the assassin?”

Whispering, I answered, “General Qin is falsely accusing me. Before, I was in a coma for almost two months. Afterwards, I was recuperating from the injury I sustained. How would I have the energy to suspect anyone? Moreover, General is straightforward and upright. Even if you wished to kill me, you would do so overtly. This kind of covert assassination was not of General’s doing.”

A look of gratitude flashed in Qin Qing’s eyes, as his complexion was no

longer icy. Quietly, he replied, “Alas, this matter brought me grievous suffering. Dad locked me up for more than a month, almost using torture to force a confession. If it weren’t for third brother pleading for leniency, I’m afraid that I wouldn’t even be able to climb out of bed.”

I raised my eyebrows to signal my puzzlement. Qin Qing pointed at Qin Yong, standing not far behind Qin Yi. “That is my third brother. He is a distant patrilineal cousin of mine. Fortunately, Dad listens to his advice, otherwise, I would be in a miserable state.”

“So that’s why,” I said before asking, “However, at present, does General still believe in those rumors?”

Qin Qing promptly signaled for me to keep my voice low. Softly, he stated, “Don’t speak of this any further. I was just whipped by Dad for bringing up this matter with him. Dad questioned my understanding of Princess Changle. Even if Her Imperial Highness had intimate relations with someone else …”

Speaking to this point, Qin Qing suddenly stopped, looking awkward. I knew that he had revealed something that should never be spoken aloud, and so I changed the subject. “Oh, that’s right…. I’ve heard that the Empress intends to betroth the Princess of Jingjiang to you. You are truly blessed. I have seen the Princess and she is an outstanding beauty and is a worthy bride for General.”

An odd look appeared on Qin Qing’s face, somehow both adoring and regretful. It was some time before he replied, “The Princess is certainly a celestial being. How can this lowly one be compatible?”

My heart sank. Qin Qing was indeed infatuated with Li Hanyou’s loveliness. This wasn’t surprising. He was a descendant of an influential family. Unlike Pei Yun who desired a hardworking and thrifty wife to run his household, he desired a beautiful wife. Li Hanyou not only was a great beauty and had an unusual temperament, but was also a disciple of the Fengyi Sect and inevitably had talent and wisdom that surpassed others. She was precisely the type of wife that Qin Qing yearned for in his dreams. Presumably it was Qin Yi who prohibited this marriage from going through. No wonder he had

such a peculiar expression. But if this were to happen and the Fengyi Sect was able to involve Qin Qing, then the Qin family's neutrality could not be guaranteed. As I thought of these consequences, I glanced in the direction of Qin Yi and Qing Yong. It would be sufficient as long as they were made to understand the potential damage that this marriage could do. I refused to believe that in a matter of life and death, Qin Qing would still be reluctant to part with a woman. It was all just puppy love. So long as they had no opportunity to become intimate, Qin Qing would quickly forget Li Hanyou. Unfortunately, Princess Changle was unwilling to marry Qin Qing, otherwise … Thinking of this, I suddenly felt somewhat gloomy, perhaps because my wound had not yet fully healed.

***

When the Prince of Yong had stepped through the entrance of the Qin residence, the crown prince had already received news of Cui Yang's death long ago. However, Cui Yang and company's bodies weren't discovered by the crown prince's people, but rather by the Imperial Capital Magistrate. The Vice Minister of Revenue and the crown prince's brother-in-law dying in a poor district where good people and wretches intermixed,[4] was already enough to cause the crown prince a big headache. The crown prince believed that Huo Jicheng had discovered trouble and spared no effort in retaliating, killing Cui Yang. The shock of the strength available to Huo Jicheng and trying to figure out how to handle the aftermath was already enough to cause the crown prince a big headache. The last batch of smuggled goods had not yet been received. The losses suffered from this were already severe. Now that Huo Jicheng had managed to escape, if he were to run amok … Thinking of this, Li An could not but feel frightened and could not help regretting his decision to exterminate the Embroidered Union. Alas…. He shot a glare at Lu Jingzhong. If it weren't for Lu Jinghzong's advice, then it was possible that the current problems would not exist.

Lu Jingzhong was aware of the crown prince's habit of taking out his anger on another person and didn't take it seriously. Lu Jingzhong opened his mouth and stated, "Your Imperial Highness, although the situation has changed, there is no need to worry. Although we have lost the last batch of goods, it is, generally speaking, unimportant. Moreover, we may not actually

suffer any losses. What can the Embroidered Union do by withholding this last batch of goods? Aside from Your Imperial Highness, if there were anyone else who could receive such an enormous shipment, would Your Imperial Highness not know of it? When the time comes, this subject has ways to retrieve the greater part of our losses. Currently, the most crucial point is who Your Imperial Highness wishes to preserve between Cui Yang and Minister of Revenue Liang Jinqian."

Li An scowled, replying, "Of course, it's Cui…." Li An stopped, calming down. Originally, he had intended to use Liang Jinqian as a scapegoat if something were to happen, allowing Cui Yang to be promoted to become Minister of Revenue. But now with Cui Yang's death, if he were to still do this, then wouldn't he have no one in the Ministry of Revenue? The Minister of Revenue wasn't a position that just anyone could hold. Experience, rank, and ability all must meet certain qualifications. Moreover, the Ministry of Revenue was within the scope of his influence. If he did not use a close confidant, then his control over the ministry would be greatly restrained. However, Liang Jinqian was secretly keeping his own records and was already showing his disloyalty. He was unwilling to let Liang Jinqian off so easily. Most importantly, Cui Yang had an intimate relationship with him. If something were to happen to Cui Yang, others would surely turn their gaze towards him. Wouldn't this invite disaster?

Just as Li An was hesitating, Xia Jinyi entered and reported, "Your Imperial Highness, Concubine Lan requests a meeting."

Li An was already quite trusting of Xia Jinyi, especially when he received news that Vice Supervisor Xing Song had died the previous night. Last night after word was received, Xia Jinyi was dispatched to the Peaceful Neighborhood, destroying the features of all of the suicide squad members, destroying all of the evidence linking the incident to the crown prince, and eliminating or bribing any and all witnesses. Xia Jinyi's methods were extremely thorough and formidable. Although the Imperial Capital Magistrate knew that the crown prince was involved in this incident, all of the evidence had been destroyed. The magistrate was not a fool and could only pretend to be deaf and mute. Because of this, Li An decided to employ

Xia Jinyi in an important position. Although this man did not have superb martial arts or any moral integrity, he was adept at flattery and extremely capable. In Li An's mind, Xia Jinyi was the best candidate to replace Xing Song, otherwise he would not have the qualifications to come in and interrupt.

When he heard that Concubine Lan, Xiao Lan, was waiting, the crown prince promptly ordered, "Allow her to enter. Earlier, when We were looking for her, where did she go?"

After a short moment, Xiao Lan entered the chambers. She was twenty-six years old, her appearance gorgeous and her conduct outstanding. She had been the crown prince's second wife for years. Her position and environment caused her already exquisite and elegant temperament to be enhanced with grace and nobility. After she entered the chambers, she performed the proper courtesies towards Li An and greeted Lu Jingzhong. Lu Jingzhong had already risen to his feet long ago. When Xiao Lan took a seat, he stepped forward to pay his respects.

Li An impatiently stated, "You see each other every day, there is no need to go to such lengths." After he explained the situation, he asked, "Lan'er, the situation has already developed thus far. Presumably, you already know what has happened. What do you think We should do?"

Xiao Lan smiled slightly as she responded, "Your Imperial Highness, if your servant were to speak, you cannot blame me."

Li An replied, "Your words always consider us. Even if it is inappropriate, We will not blame you."

Xiao Lan impartially advised, "Although Cui *daren* is the Crown Princess's younger brother, he is already dead. Even if he was once Your Imperial Highness's right-hand minister, he is no more than a sacrificial pawn at this moment. Although Your Imperial Highness does not like Minister Liang, you cannot cut off your own supporters. The only thing that can be done at present is to use Cui *daren* as a scapegoat and first steady Minister Liang. I, your servant, will ask the fellow disciples of my sect to control Minister Liang. Once this matter has quieted down and after Your Imperial Highness

has a trustworthy candidate, it won't be too late to settle matters with Minister Liang. Although this will wrong the Crown Princess, as long as she has Your Imperial Highness's protection, who would dare to make things difficult for her?"

Hearing this, Li An repeatedly nodded his head, saying, "You speak very reasonably. But if this matter implicates Cui Yang, then we will not be able to escape responsibility."

"That is why Your Imperial Highness must be ruthless and heartless," replied Xiao Lan, disdain flashing in her eyes. "Take advantage of the fact that this matter has not yet come to light; you can say that you found Cui *daren* 's death suspicious and thus investigated the Ministry of Revenue's accounts, discovering that Cui *daren* had used some underhanded methods. In this way, you place righteousness before your own family.[5] Who would be capable of implicating you then?"

Hearing this, Li An smiled with delight. Just as he was about to agree, he saw that Lu Jingzhong was uneasy. Li An immediately wondered if Lu Jingzhong had other thoughts and thus asked, "Junior Mentor, what do you think of Concubine Lan's suggestion?"

Lu Jingzhong glanced at Xiao Lan. In his mind, he thought, *This woman's mind is truly vicious. She can even think up this kind of killing two birds with one stone strategy.* However, it was inconvenient for him to express these thoughts aloud. He thus casually remarked, "Although Cui Yang can't be considered much, the Crown Princess is Your Imperial Highness's primary wife and is Cui Yang's elder sister. The heir is Cui *daren* 's nephew. If Your Imperial Highness were to place righteousness before family …"

Although Lu Jingzhong did not continue, Li An completely understood the meaning behind his words. If Li An wished to place righteousness before family, then Lady Cui would definitely be involved. If that were to happen, then there were those who would add fuel to the fire and the crown princess's position would go to another. Imperial Father would definitely become dissatisfied, believing that he did not care for the emotions between husband and wife. Thinking of this, Li An became cold, counting himself fortunate to receive Lu Jingzhong's reminder.

Xiao Lan was extremely intelligent. Seeing that something was amiss in Li An's expression, she said, "I did say that Your Imperial Highness cannot blame this servant."

The crown prince forced a smile on his face and replied, "We will not blame you. However, your method won't work."

Xiao Lan smiled. "What's difficult about this? Although I don't have any other ideas, my junior apprentice sister, Princess Li Hanyou of Jingjiang, will come to see me in a little while. She is also Your Imperial Highness's younger patrilineal cousin. I have long heard that my junior apprentice sister is extremely intelligent. There is no harm for Your Imperial Highness to ask her. She is my junior apprentice sister, don't tell me that she will side with outsiders?"

At this moment, Xia Jinyi knocked on the door and entered, reporting, "Your Imperial Highness, the Crown Princess dispatched a maid to come report that the Princess of Jingjiang has already arrived and is currently in the Crown Princess's chambers."

Li An was overjoyed, instructing, "Quick, send someone to invite her here. Say that we have an urgent matter that requires her assistance."

Footnotes :

推波助澜, tuibozhulan – idiom, lit. to push the wave and add to the billows; to add momentum, to encourage something to get bigger, to add fuel to the fire

两全其美, liangquanqimei – idiom, lit. to satisfy rival demands; to get the best of both worlds, to have it both ways, to have one's cake and eat it too

Roughly 2/3 of a hectare.

龙**蛇混**杂, longshehunza – idiom, lit. dragons and snakes mingle; fig. a mix of good people and wretches

大义灭亲, dayimieqin – idiom, lit. to place righteousness before family; ready to punish one's own family if justice demands it

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 26: The Princess of Jingjiang

Volume 2, Chapter 26: The Princess of Jingjiang

On the thirteenth day of the fifth month of the twenty-fourth year of Wuwei, Emperor Taizong paid a visit to Grand General Qin. When the Prince heard this, he called the Princess of Jingjiang to a meeting….—*Yong Dynastic Records* , *Biography of the Prince of Li*

Xia Jinyi stood outside the door, bored, as he gazed off into the distance. *Alas, why must I be the Crown Prince's personal imperial bodyguard?* Although from this day forward, he was capable of standing on equal footing with his senior apprentice brother, he was also someone quite rational. His martial arts weren't that great and his scheming wasn't too profound. Although he was somewhat clever, he didn't have terribly great future prospects. If his power and authority were too great, then his abilities would not match his position, and he would fall. Finally, he treated people good-naturedly, befriending a bunch of scoundrels. Otherwise, no one would listen to his commands. Having served at the side of the crown prince for several months, although he was like a fish back in water, he was always frightened of one person. He had earlier heard that the man had sustained a serious injury and was dying. The thought had crossed his mind: wishing that man's death and removing the other burden that he carried. However, one night, when he went out to frequent a brothel, he discovered a silver ring in a wine pot. On the ring was written the character, "Jiang." At the time, he broke out in a cold sweat, immediately praying to the Heavens to prolong that man's life. At the very least, that man wasn't someone who would abandon him.

Now that time had passed, and he had become the crown prince's trusted aide, while that man had escaped from danger, he had yet to receive any message from that man. It was almost as if they had never met before. It was very easy to be this kind of spy, only needing to be himself. However, Xia Jinyi wondered if he was really himself. He smiled slightly, almost as if he

had returned to his youth. At that time, he was someone who was filial to his parents and honored his teachers and elders, praised for being a kindhearted youth. Suddenly, he shivered. Let it be…. The past was like smoke. What was the point of recalling those unpleasant events? His mind could not help but turn to tonight's appointment with Xiu Chun. It was likely that he wouldn't have the time. Xiu Chun was a good woman. Unfortunately, she was in an imperial household, and could not act on her own volition. A maid's life and marriage were not in her hands. Moreover, with Cui *daren* dead, if the crown princess was also implicated … Not good. He needed to tell the crown princess of their relationship. After all, the crown princess was Xiu Chun's mistress and had once promised Xiu Chun her freedom.

Thinking of this, Xia Jinyi calculated he would be free for at least an hour while the Princess of Jingjiang was in the meeting. There was no harm in speaking with the crown princess. However, as the Princess of Jingjiang was coming after meeting with the crown princess, the crown princess probably already knew what had happened.

Just as Xia Jinyi was letting his imagination run wild, he saw a woman in snow-white dress walking over from a distance. That exceptional magnificence and gorgeous appearance normally would cause one to feel both adoration and inferiority. However, Xia Jinyi did not have those feelings. His entire body became icy and rigid, a raging fire igniting in his chest. He felt like he was in hell. He could hardly think, and was a puppet as he paid his respects. He could hear himself say, "Princess, His Imperial Highness, Concubine Lan, and Junior Mentor Lu are already waiting inside."

Afterwards, he went so far as to personally open the door for the Princess of Jingjiang, his gaze filled with matchless esteem. These displays were clearly the behavior of a lecherous, licentious, and vulgar man meeting an exceptional beauty. Only after Li Hanyou entered the chambers did Xia Jinyi speak to his fellow imperial bodyguards with difficulty, "I have a bit of a stomach ache. You lot stay here." Following, he did not care for his colleagues' good-natured ridicule as he hurriedly rushed to his own quarters. With great difficulty, he was able to return to his peaceful and independent cottage. Pushing open the door, he could see a sweet and

graceful figure sitting on his bed. It was Xiu Chun. Presumably, she had been sent by the crown princess. Xia Jinyi suddenly pounced on Xiu Chun, tangling the two bodies and tumbling onto the bed. After the curtains were closed, his roughness caused Xiu Chun to cry out in fear. Before long, his rough panting and her painful groans were blended together.

After a while, the satisfied Xia Jinyi finally released Xiu Chun, collapsing onto bed. Xiu Chun angrily rose up, but was astonished to find that the usually mocking and scolding man had tears flooding down his cheeks. His face was twitching, sinister to the extreme. However, Xiu Chun could see that this man was in despair and grief. In spite of her tired body, she pulled him into her embrace. The man shivered before hugging her tightly. It was a long time before Xia Jinyi pulled away and climbed out of bed. After calming down and making himself presentable, he softly said, “If the Crown Princess knows of Cui *daren* ’s death, you must convince her to restrain herself. Right now, His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, is discussing how best to handle this matter. Be sure to have the Crown Princess prepare for any schemes. Concubine Lan has already been in there for quite some time.”

Xiu Chun silently gazed at this man who had suddenly provoked her before opening her mouth and asking, “Jinyi, what has happened? Tell me.”

Xia Jinyi smiled. “What can happen to me? His Imperial Highness was about to use me to handle a task. Don’t talk nonsense.” Finished speaking, he turned and departed. Watching his departing figure, Xiu Chun could not feel sad. It was the first time she realized that this seemingly frivolous, glib fellow had such deep suffering.

Exiting his quarters, Xia Jinyi transformed back into a dissolute, elegant handsome youth, so much so that no one could see any traces of his earlier aberrant behavior. He quickly rushed back to where the crown prince was holding secret discussions and caught sight of an imperial bodyguard rushing over. When this bodyguard saw him, he called out, “Old pal Xia! Please report that something major has happened! The Prince of Yong has gone to Grand General Qin’s residence. It’s already been four hours and he has yet to come out.”

Xia Jinyi’s heart jumped and he asked, “Was the Prince of Yong alone? Do

you know the reason for his visit? I can't just make such a vague report."

The imperial bodyguard described, "The Prince of Yong brought along many guards and also brought along his three generals, Sima Xiong, Jing Chi, and Zhangsun Ji. He further brought along Jiang Zhe, Major Jiang. We originally thought that the Prince of Yong was picking a fight. Who doesn't know that Qin Qing was involved in the assassination attempt on Jiang Zhe? As such, we originally intended to come report after the Prince of Yong left, as we assumed that he wouldn't stay for too long. However, we didn't expect that he would not leave even after so much time has passed. When our agents inside the Qin residence reported back that the discussions were quite cheerful, I immediately came back to report. I'm afraid that it's a bit late. Old pal Xia, please put in a few good words for me."

Xia Jinyi smiled as he replied, "Don't worry. When have I made things difficult for you?" So speaking, Xia Jinyi turned and knocked on the door, requesting an audience. This time, when he pushed open the door and entered, he could see that the crown prince looked fearful, while Lu Jingzhong and Concubine Lan both wore heavy expressions. Only Li Hanyou maintained her graceful appearance.

Li An impatiently stated, "What's the matter? Can't you see that we are discussing something?"

Xia Jinyi promptly reported what had happened, avoiding major issues and dwelling on trivial matters. Hearing that the Prince of Yong had gone to pay a visit to the Qin residence, Li An's complexion immediately sank. He waved his hand to dismiss Xia Jinyi before coldly stating, "He actually started to become lively. It seems that Imperial Father's recent favor caused him to forget his own status. Junior Mentor Lu, you offered a strategy to drive a wedge between the Prince of Yong and the Qin family, but now they seem to be joining forces. Speak, what should we do?"

Thinking it over, Lu Jingzhong replied, "Although I did not foresee this development at the time, it is not difficult to handle. Since no animosity was sown between the Prince of Yong and the Qin family, then let us create hostility. What would happen if Your Imperial Highness were to accompany the Princess of Jingjiang and pay a visit to the Qin residence?"

Li An's heart jumped, suddenly recalling the engagement between Li Hanyou and Qin Qing. Although it had yet to receive Qin Yi's consent, both Imperial Father and Mother were pleased by it. If this matter were to be successful, the Prince of Yong would not trust the Qin family no matter how they preferred him. Li An could not permit them to get any closer. *Fine. Since that matter has already been resolved, then it was time to go pay a visit to the Qin residence.* Thinking this through, Li An rose to his feet and said, "Is Princess willing to accompany me to the Qin residence?"

Li Hanyou blushed, murmuring, "Hanyou follows orders."

Li An immediately ordered Xia Jinyi to arrange a carriage. Li An sat with Lu Jingzhong in his carriage, while Li Hanyou traveled in her own carriage. On the road, Li An gravely said, "This Li Hanyou is indeed highly intelligent, surprisingly able to come up with a plan that allows us to have it both ways, stating that Cui Yang detected someone stealing and selling military equipment, therefore privately went to investigate, and unfortunately was discovered and killed by the corrupt officials. If this turn of events spreads, then Cui Yang's reputation would not be marred, allowing the Crown Princess and us no further worry about being implicated. Afterwards, we can casually select a few scapegoats in the Ministry of Revenue and also blame the Minister of Revenue for failing to supervise. Next, we would vouch for him and allow him to redeem himself for his faults. If this happens then both men would be preserved and we can slowly handle this in the future. This idea is not bad … but why are the Junior Mentor and Concubine Lan both so unhappy?"

Lu Jingzhong smiled wryly. "Your Imperial Highness, although this plan allows us to have it both ways, in reality, this plan primarily preserves Cui Yang's reputation. If that were the case, then Concubine Lan would be unhappy as the position of the Crown Princess and the heir would be as steady as a mountain. Concubine Lan invited her own junior apprentice sister to come lend a helping hand but didn't expect that the Princess of Jingjiang would be honest and loyal. That is why Concubine Lan is so annoyed. The reason why this subject is so unhappy is because Li Hanyou's wisdom and knowledge are outstanding. On the surface, she is acting as a

mediator, but in reality she has caused animosity between Concubine Lan and me. I believe that the Princess of Jingjiang will explain to Concubine Lan that I am Your Imperial Highness's confidant and cannot directly oppose me. They are from the same sect and will easily come to an understanding. When the time comes, this subject will be attacked on all sides.[1] How can I not worry when the Princess has such schemes? Your Imperial Highness, the Fengyi Sect can only serve as outside help and cannot be controlled. If Li Hanyou's actions were the Fengyi Sect Master's command, then this subject will have to block Li Hanyou's marriage to Qin Qing."

Li An's brow furrowed. "But if this isn't allowed to happen, how can we suppress second brother's arrogance? The matter involving the Ministry of Revenue must immediately be taken care of. If second brother takes the opportunity to cause trouble, then I will lose control of the Ministry of Revenue."

Lu Jingzhong sighed. "This subject is also finding this situation difficult. In the next few days, Your Imperial Highness will expose the illegal actions of the Ministry of Revenue. As Your Imperial Highness controls the Ministry of Revenue, for something like this to happen, although it is explainable, His Imperial Majesty will inevitably be angry. Therefore, Your Imperial Highness can only rely on the Fengyi Sect to suppress the Prince of Yong. We'll think of some plans once everything settles down. In reality, roping in the Qin family has its benefits. It is only unfortunate that the Fengyi Sect will also take advantage."

Li An hesitated before saying, "Li Hanyou is also an imperial kinswoman, so she wouldn't go so far as to be partial towards her sect, right?" His voice was completely lacking in confidence.

"Your Imperial Highness speaks true," replied Lu Jingzhong with a wry smile, while a profound and queer expression appeared on his face, although the crown prince did not notice, focused as he was on wrecking the relationship between the Prince of Yong and the Qin family.

***

Today, Qin Yi was honored and favored to the utmost. Just as he was feasting with the Prince of Yong in the rear gardens, a servant came to

report that the crown prince had arrived. Qin Yi flashed a slight wry smile. Who could have thought that while he tried to mind his own business and keep his hands clean,[2] he actually became a spark of contention between the two princes. Regardless of what he thought, he could only lead everyone to welcome this unexpected guest.

After Li An descended from the carriage, he saw Qin Yi and the Prince of Yong hurriedly walk over. The two stepped forward to pay their respects, each kneeling and greeting the crown prince.

Li An extended his hands, helping them rise, stating, “There is no need for second brother and Grand General to be overly courteous. Today, we have come to accompany the Princess of Jingjiang to pay an official call upon the Grand General and Lady Qin. Unexpectedly, second brother is also here. Hanyou, come pay your respects to the Grand General.”

In the wake of Li An’s words, an extremely beautiful woman in snow-white attire descended from the other carriage. Walking in front of Qin Yi, she kneeled and said, “Hanyou pays my respects to the Grand General. My father has repeatedly mentioned fighting alongside General in the past. A few days ago, Hanyou delivered some meager gifts on behalf of my father, but was tactfully declined by the Grand General, presumably because the general is angry that Hanyou paid an official call so late. It is only because Hanyou has recently always been in the palace accompanying the empress. Would the Grand General please forgive me?”

With a calm and tranquil expression, Qin Yi smiled and replied, “This subject and the Prince were indeed brothers-in-arms. But because of imperial command, the Prince is stationed outside the capital, while I am in the capital to accompany the Emperor; therefore we have not met for many years. I appreciate Princess’s kind intentions. The gifts you delivered were rejected for no reason, aside from the fact that excluding the Emperor’s rewards, I never accept anyone else’s gifts. The Princess is overthinking matters.”

When everyone arrived in the rear gardens, servants under Qin Yi's orders had already switched out the food and drink. Li An sat down in the seat of honor. Raising his gaze, he looked out. The Qin residence’s rear

gardens were quite different—no flowers and no pavilions. The entire space was leveled out and covered with limestone and surrounded by trees, becoming a small military drill ground. Weapons racks and weights lined the entire grounds. In a corner of the grounds were placed several military drums. With today's lovely spring sunshine, Qin Yi had organized a feast on the grounds underneath a large tree, having his personal retainers and warriors compete to liven things up. It was liveliest a while ago, as the Prince of Yong's subordinates competed with Qin Yi's retainers, with a flagon of wine rewarded to each winner, while nothing happened to the loser. Everyone was from the army; no one had much in the way of scheming. The Prince of Yong and Qin Yi would not become hostile because of these contests.

Unfortunately the atmosphere could not help but grow somewhat cold with the crown prince's arrival. Qin Yi had his retainers withdraw and also had a servant invite Lady Qin over to accompany the Princess of Jingjiang. Finally, everyone present was used to the machinations and shenanigans of officialdom, leaving a tranquil environment.

Some of those present were busy chatting to determine the other party's behavior. While echoing the crown prince's words, Lu Jingzhong, intentionally or otherwise, took note of the Prince of Yong's Major, Jiang Zhe. Throughout, this man was leisurely chatting with Qin Qing and Qin Yong, accompanied by the Prince of Yong's three subordinate generals. Lu Jingzhong strained his ears to listen, making out that the discussion was regarding the art of war and strategies, landscapes and geography. He was not knowledgeable in these matters. At the same time, Lady Qin was chatting with Li Hanyou. Li Hanyou was unrestrained, leaving Lady Qin with a favorable impression. Originally Qin Qing was listening to Jiang Zhe and company converse, but soon it was clear that his mind was elsewhere, as his eyes frequently fell upon Li Hanyou. As the crown prince, the Prince of Yong, and Qin Yi were deep in conversation, Qin Qing gradually grew bolder and began to chat with Li Hanyou. Lady Qin seemed to look favorably on this, frequently serving as their proxy.

On the surface, Li Hanyou was absorbed with currying favor with Lady Qin

and dealing with Qin Qing. However, her eyes would frequently fall upon Jiang Zhe and Xiaoshunzi standing behind him. She had long ago received news from the Fengyi Sect. She had already gone over this weak and haggard looking youth's conduct in Southern Chu. Who would have expected that such a renowned, erudite youth would become so vicious when using stratagems? Pacifying Shu and sowing discord in Great Yong … If it weren't for the death of the Prince of De, this man would probably inflict significant damage to Great Yong. It was a pity that the Fengyi Sect only took notice of him after the Prince of Yong had taken him captive and brought him back to Great Yong. Only after careful investigation would one realize that this man was an incomparable genius. In order to exterminate the Prince of Yong's assistants, her sect had ordered her to personally assassinate this man. Unfortunately, she had failed.

As for that Li Shun, Li Hanyou immediately felt powerless. Considering age, she was a few years older than him. Considering background, her master was one of the three grandmasters of the era. However, this youth's martial arts unexpectedly surpassed hers. According to the intelligence that she had received, this youth's martial arts far exceeded hers. Within the Fengyi Sect, aside from the sect master, there were probably only six or seven seniors capable of defeating him. What caused her to feel indignant was that such a young and excellent martial artist was surprisingly willing to become a servant of a scholar without the strength to even truss a chicken. Considering his present obedient countenance, one would believe that he was actually a well-trained servant. This left her truly furious…. If only she was able to acquire this kind of expert! Li Hanyou sighed. This man was a cripple, leaving the Fengyi Sect's Divine Phoenix Cultivation Technique completely useless.

Seeing Li Hanyou sigh, Qin Qing could not help but inquire, "Why is the Princess sighing?"

Li Hanyou stirred. "I, your servant, also heard my Royal Father speak of military matters. Unfortunately, Royal Father does not allow me to participate. General Qin and everyone are practically famous generals who survived numerous battles. I wonder if it's possible to explain some of the

particulars of battle."

Qin Qing smiled. "Princess is a disciple of the Fengyi Sect. Unfortunately, you are also an imperial kinswoman. Otherwise, there wouldn't be any difficulties for you to go to the battlefield. Although this general once fought on the battlefield, however if I were to speak of those details, it would spoil the fun."

Seeing that Lady Qin had an unhappy look on her face, Li Hanyou promptly said, "I don't really wish to listen to those stories about fighting and killing. I have only heard that the signal fires of the Gobi Desert are picturesque, the Sichuan scenery enchanting, while the Southern Chu has endlessly beautiful vistas. I wonder if any of those locations are comparable to Great Yong's. Which are more touching?"

Although Li Hanyou's voice wasn't too loud, everyone could hear her words and could not help but begin to ponder her question. Everyone present had extensive knowledge and experience. Although they had not been to all those locations that Li Hanyou had spoken of, they had been to most of them. If they were asked which location had the best scenery, it was difficult to answer. Even if they had some idea, it wouldn't do to speak without corresponding evidence.

Although Li An could not ascertain the motives for Li Hanyou's words, he adopted an approach to target a common enemy,[3] and said, "This is a good topic. Since we are leisurely gathered here today, it would be depressing to only discuss military matters. It would be better to discuss our own experiences. How about we play a drinking game? Everyone must speak of a lovely scenery, utilizing a poem from our forebears to serve as proof. If one cannot speak clearly, then you will be punished by drinking three cups of wine."

Footnotes :

众矢之的, zhongshizhidi – idiom, lit. target of a multitude of arrows; the butt of public criticism, attacked on all sides
洁**身自好**, jieshenzihao – idiom, lit. clean-living and honest; to avoid immorality, to shun evil influence, to mind one's own business and keep out

of trouble, to keep one’s hands clean
同仇敌忾, tongchoudikai – idiom, lit. working against a common enemy; joined in opposition to the same adversary

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 27: Passing Judgment on the World

Volume 2, Chapter 27: Passing Judgment on the World

During the gathering, the Princess of Jingjiang smiled as she asked about the beautiful scenery of the world and was seconded by the Prince, setting up a drinking game. Before the game could begin, the Prince of Qi arrived. The three princes reveled, the party joyous and harmonious. For the time being, they all forgot the internal strife that was brewing….—*Yong Dynastic Records* , *Biography of the Prince of Li*

“Haha! A good idea! You can’t leave me out!” A clear and bright voice called out from a distance just as the crown prince finished speaking. Everyone turned to look and caught sight of Li Xian, the Prince of Qi, leisurely walking over. Behind him were Wei Ying and Xiahou Yuanfeng. Both the crown prince and the Prince of Yong’s expressions shifted, while Qin Yi could only wryly smile. He had never expected that his residence would be so lively.

Signaling his wife with a look, Qin Yi rose to his feet and stated, “What wind is blowing today that even Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, has come to my humble abode? I am truly overwhelmed by such favor.”

Li Xian stopped Qin Yi from kneeling, replying with a smile, “It’s a coincidence. Grand General doesn’t know, but Xiahou Yuanfeng and I originally planned on going out to have some fun. By chance, we ran into Wei *daren* . From him, I learned that both eldest brother and second brother came to visit the Grand General. I didn’t want to miss out on such a lively occasion.”

Li Zhi and the crown prince both felt relieved. They both knew that Li Xian would constantly look for trouble. It would be strange if he did not come to participate in today’s lively occasion.

Everyone sat in their seats, with the three sides clearly delineated. At this moment, Lady Qin had already stated her goodbyes and departed. As a result, the crown prince, the Prince of Qi, Li Hanyou, and Luo Jingzhong sat

together; the Prince of Yong, Jiang Zhe, Sima Xiong and company sat together; and Wei Ying and Xiahou Yuanfeng sat with Qin Yi and Qin Qing. Qin Yong had already made an excuse and withdrawn. For the many distinguished personages gathered here, there were many subordinate bodyguards also gathered. Qin Yong departed in order to take care of them.

Li An ordered a servant to bring several jugs of strong wine, and also had them bring a large wine goblet. This kind of wine goblet could hold four catties of wine. If one had to drink three cups, no matter a person's capacity for alcohol, he would be helplessly intoxicated. With a smile, he stated, "The rules of today's drinking game are military orders. I wonder who is suitable to enforce the rules?"

Jing Chi promptly rose to his feet. "This general is not cultured. It would be best if I were to enforce the rules."

Li Zhi smiled and replied, "Nonsense! The person enforcing the rules must be someone familiar with culture. How can you enforce the rules?"

Li Xian thought it over and declared, "Everyone wants to enforce the rules. The Grand General is a general from an influential family. His family has numerous skilled military retainers. However, there probably won't be too many cultured and scholarly individuals. Since it was the Princess of Jingjiang's suggestion, how about we let the Princess enforce the rules of the game?"

"I, your servant, am a weak woman. How can I enforce the rules?" queried Li Hanyou angrily. "Who doesn't know the rules of your drinking game? The one enforcing the rules must also drink. Regardless of whether the person succeeds or fails, the enforcer must drink a cup. Are you not afraid that Hanyou will die from alcohol poisoning?"

Li Xian spread his hands and replied, "How about this? Let's find an assistant for Li Hanyou. That person will only be responsible for drinking."

Everyone exchanged glances. They all knew who had good capacity for alcohol. However, it would be awkward to become Li Hanyou's assistant.

At this moment, Li Xian suddenly said, "How about this? You be her assistant." So speaking, he pointed at someone.

Everyone turned to look. The person pointed to was the solemn Xiaoshunzi standing behind Jiang Zhe. Although Xiaoshunzi was only a servant, everyone present knew that he was a peak-level expert. It was only someone like Jiang Zhe who dared to treat him as a servant. Both the crown prince and the Prince of Yong would treat him as an honored guest.

Li Hanyou was overjoyed. She had originally intended to use the opportunity to ascertain the truth of Jiang Zhe's situation. It would be good if she was able to attain a favorable impression from him. Unexpectedly, the Prince of Qi would work in concert, bringing Xiaoshunzi into the open and allowing herself the opportunity to fully employ her methods to entice these two men. At the very least, she could seize the opportunity to reduce their enmity. If not for the Prince of Qi's lower status, Li Hanyou really wished to advise her master to utilize the Prince of Qi over that imbecilic crown prince.

Originally, all of Xiaoshunzi's attention was concentrated on Jiang Zhe, going so far as to divide everyone else into two categories: those who were a threat to the young master, and those who weren't. In these two categories, Li Hanyou was someone who was a threat. Recalling how this woman almost assassinated the young master, he really wanted to kill her with one strike. Were it not for Jiang Zhe whispering to him, "Do not worry, we have plenty of time in the future,"[1] he would have acted long ago.

Now hearing the Prince of Qi's proposal, Xiaoshunzi's expression changed, his countenance immediately carrying a piercing, frosty killing aura. His pair of eyes emitted contempt, causing everyone to involuntarily increase their vigilance. At this moment, Jiang Zhe leisurely stated, "This is a good idea. However, Xiaoshunzi's drinking capacity isn't high. Drinking on the Princess's behalf is an extremely exhausting task. If the Princess is willing to offer a hefty reward, even if he is unmoved, I will be moved."

Li Zhi relaxed, agreeing, "That's true…. However, since it was eldest brother who made the suggestion and sixth brother recommended Xiaoshunzi to assist, then you two shouldn't be too stingy."

Li Hanyou revealed a perfectly pure and innocent smile, as she replied, "Your servant came hurriedly. If it is not disparaged, how about using this as a reward?" So speaking, she removed a pair of diaphanous gloves from her

waist.

Everyone looked at these gloves strangely, and could not help but begin to inquire. At this moment, Xiahou Yuanfeng smiled and observed, “The princess is truly generous. That surely is a pair of gloves made from the silk of the Tianshan ice silkworm. It is impenetrable to all weapons and is unaffected by all poisons. It is a weapon perfect for those who specialize in boxing.”

Li Hanyou glanced at Xiaoshunzi. As long as he was moved, even a little, then she would have accomplished her objective. No one knew that Xiaoshunzi would only glance at her tranquilly and simply say, “Much thanks to the Princess for your reward.” His expression did not change in the slightest.

Li Hanyou sighed inwardly. If Xiaoshunzi was happy because of these gloves, then his realm would not have been able to cast aside the lure of outside objects, allowing her to comprehend a bit of the depths of his mental state. Moreover, if he were to rely upon this pair of gloves, then it would be difficult for his martial arts to improve. Unfortunately, from his distant and serene response, she knew that he was aware of this principle and had already reached a realm where he no longer needed to rely upon weapons. Without the instructions from a famous teacher, it meant that his martial arts had already reached that realm.

“This Prince did not bring anything valuable on his person,” stated the Prince of Qi with a smile. “How about this? This Prince has a copy of an old edition of *A Dream of Splendor* that I unexpectedly obtained. Within are some long lost songs and verses. Is this Prince’s reward suitably precious?”

Xiaoshunzi’s expression changed somewhat. He had attended to Jiang Zhe for years and had once heard Jiang Zhe speak of this book. Moreover, the young master deeply regretted not having been able to take a look. Xiaoshunzi could not help but reveal a look of happiness, as he said, “Much thanks to Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, for your reward.”

Li Hanyou and company were left bewildered. Did this individual like books instead of martial arts? But when she saw a slightly cheerful

expression appear on Jiang Zhe's face, Li Hanyou was both delighted and worried. It seemed like Xiaoshunzi's only weakness was Jiang Zhe. If that was the case, then it was impossible her to use any kind of expert. After all, with the importance the Prince of Yong attached to Jiang Zhe, even if Jiang Zhe were to pledge allegiance to her, she still would not dare to employ him. Fine…. It seemed like she could only use heavy methods. A look of determination flashed across Li Hanyou's eyes.

Crown Prince Li An continuously cursed his bad luck. What could he reward? Both Li Hanyou and Li Xian's rewards were already precious to the extreme. If his reward was only money or precious jewels, then it would be too tasteless. Just as he was hesitating, Xia Jinyi, who had been standing silently behind him, suddenly whispered into his ear. Li An immediately beamed with delight and said, "You can also not decline this Prince's reward. Jinyi, send Lü Zhu[2] and Cui Ying[3] over tomorrow. These two women are this Prince's beloved dancing girls. Be sure to enjoy them as much as you like."

When these words were uttered, the atmosphere immediately grew chilly. Although no one spoke it clearly, everyone tacitly understood Xiaoshunzi's identity. If he was an ordinary person, he would have to endure the teasing associated with this kind of reward. However, Xiaoshunzi was a peak-level expert. If he were to become enraged and make a move, no one here would be able to escape responsibility. Not only did the crown prince and the Prince of Qi's trusted bodyguards raise their vigilance, even the Prince of Yong, Qin Yi, and the Prince of Yong's subordinates all very carefully watched Xiaoshunzi's movements.

However, everyone only saw Xiaoshunzi laugh instead of becoming angry. Instantly, he moved, immediately appearing in front of the crown prince. The crown prince was greatly alarmed, while Li Hanyou, the Prince of Qi, and Qin Yi all simultaneously moved before stopping. Although Xiaoshunzi was standing quite far away, he was the first to arrive before the crown prince. Moreover, the crown prince was not harmed, as Xia Jinyi had already stepped forward from behind the crown prince to block Xiaoshunzi. If Xiaoshunzi made his move, he would certainly not be able to kill the crown prince in one strike. As such, they would not rashly take action.

Li Zhi rose to his feet. Glancing at Jiang Zhe, he asked, “Li Shun, what do you intend to do?”

Everyone’s gaze fell on Jiang Zhe. At this moment, he was probably the only one who could stop Xiaoshunzi. I helplessly glanced at the anxious looks on everyone’s faces before I opened my mouth and said, “This subject thanks Your Imperial Highness for your rewards on behalf of Li Shun. Presumably, Your Imperial Highness feels that his usual burden is too heavy, thus sending him two maids to attend to him.”

At this moment, Li An was truly feeling some regret. Originally, Xia Jinyi had only suggested that he reward two beautiful maids. He was overly excited and actually sent two dancing girls and spoke in an implicitly mocking tone, inviting disaster upon himself. Although this individual was still several paces away from him, Li An could distinctly feel the coldness that this individual was emanating. Hearing Jiang Zhe speak, he promptly said, “That’s right! Your martial arts are exceptional and yet always perform the tasks of a servant. This Prince feels this is unfair.”

Xiaoshunzi suddenly revealed an placid smile. Bowing, he very respectfully said, “Many thanks to Your Imperial Highness for this reward.”

Everyone could finally relax. Li Hanyou reveled in finding another of Xiaoshunzi’s weaknesses. What she didn’t know was that Xiaoshunzi and I had already detected her probing and attention. The Prince of Qi’s reward caused him to reveal his biggest weakness, me. Therefore, I had deliberately looked happy. In reality, although that book wasn’t bad, it wasn’t enough for me to be unable to cover my joy. My intentions were to allow people to act against me. With the protection of Xiaoshunzi and the Prince of Yong, nothing should happen to me. However, Xiaoshunzi detected this. Seizing the crown prince’s mocking, he had deliberately become indignant, seemingly unable to hold back from making a move. In this way, everyone would believe that his cultivation was still lacking and would not specially target me. Although I knew his intentions, I could only allow him to act in this way. After all, in his mind, my safety was of utmost importance.

Once Xiaoshunzi retreated back to my side, Li Hanyou smiled and said, “Our drinking game should begin.” In reality, no one was in the mood to play

games. However, since everything had already been set, then it would naturally have to be carried out. Moreover, there was a hint of competition, and thus the considerably tense drinking game began. Before the drinking game started, Wei Ying vaguely said something that many people did not notice. However, I heard his words clearly. He said, “Today is truly marvelous! This elaborate scheming against one another makes better viewing than any plays.”

I could not help but smile wryly. When did I become part of a good play in another’s eyes? Before, I was always a spectator.

At this moment, Li Hanyou explained with a smile, “This drinking game’s rules are simple. First, speak a location before reciting several verses. If the verses match the location, then I will approve. If they do not match, then the person will be punished with drinking three cups. We can’t copy the ‘pass the parcel’ game, so I will set the sequence. Regardless of who agreed to the suggestion first, the Crown Prince shall go first. I invite Your Imperial Highness to begin.”

Li An had already calmed his mind. With the honor of being the crown prince, even if he was not adept at verse, he had studied quite a bit. He thus recited, “Chang’an:

The early summer suits the spring scenery,The harmonious light shines upon the capital.Zhurong[4] desires to defend,While the Yan Emperor[5] creates vermillion brilliance.The day sends off the remnant evening,The wind blows through and purges the imperial park.From the outskirts rise fogLotuses blossom in the pool.The shadows of trees overlook the mountainsThe animals fly into the embrace of man.Fortunate to meet by chance, Yao[6] and Yu,[7] Achieving total victory against the situation in the valley.”[8]

Everyone clapped their hands and voiced their approval. I was amongst them. However, I gave a mental shake of the head. The poetry that he liked lacked in the aura of an emperor. It seemed that he truly was not fated to take the imperial throne. Li An drank a cup of wine. Li Hanyou took a slight sip, while Xiaoshunzi drank a cup.

Li Hanyou smiled and stated, “After the Crown Prince, next should be the

Prince of Yong."

Li Zhi recited, "Youzhou: The grasslands are endless, reaching into the horizon, the border wind touches the harvest land. / Without reason, it comes from afar, at the end equipped with a Wu Hook."[9, 10] Finished reciting, he drank a cup of wine.

I understood behind the Prince of Yong's choice of verse. The entirety of the Prince of Yong's poem was:

The Prime Minister pushed aside the court curtains,The tassels on the imperial crown serve within the cinnabar courtyard.The position as lofty as the senior chancellor,Authority is concentrated in the Han warlords.Not changing the lands south of Zhou,[11] And divided by the anxiety over the lands of Zhao.[12] The twin banners cross the Yi River,The thousands of horsemen enter Youzhou.The grasslands are endless, reaching into the horizon,The border wind touches the harvest land.Without reason, it comes from afar,At the end equipped with a Wu Hook."

With this poem, the Prince of Yong was trying to explain to the crown prince that he only wished to remain a prince. Although it was unlikely that the crown prince would believe him, there was also no room to find fault in these verses.

Next was the Prince of Qi. Li Xian smiled slightly and recited, "Jinci Temple:[13]

Stepping through the forest at break of dawn,Admiring the endless beauty of the lakes in Spring.Written words will last through ages,Empires conquered as armors worn.The sun floods the vast plains with a blurry white,While the mournful wind stirs lightly.Grand strategies cannot be observedLoneliness comes with lofty ambitions."[14]

I played with my wine cup, thinking, *So the Prince of Qi is always thinking about Northern Han, hoping to cross blades with Northern Han's valiant cavalry. This man understands his limitations. Knowing that he doesn't have the fortune to take the Imperial Throne, he single-mindedly wishes to become a grand general. Unfortunately, he has become involved in the conflict over the throne. It is likely that his aspirations will not be fulfilled.* I looked towards

the Prince of Qi, a look of regret in my eyes, only seeing Li Xian looking at me as well, his eyes filled with an indescribable exhaustion.

Qin Yi gently recited, “Luoyang:

On foot, I climbed up Mt. Mang’s[15] northern slopes,I gaze afar on Luoyang’s hills.Luoyang, how quiet it is!Its palaces and houses all burned to the ground.[16] The walls and enclosures have all fallen and crumbled;Thorns and briars rise and touch the sky.I do not see elders from former days, I only see recent youths.I step to the side, for there are no walking paths;The overgrown fields have not been plowed again.Travelers have not returned here for so long,They do not know the way.The fields—how barren and bleak!For a thousand leagues there is no smoke from houses.As I think on this place that was once my home,My breath catches, and I cannot speak.”[17]

Others didn’t react much to Qin Yi’s poem, only recalling that Qin Yi hailed originally from Luoyang and was probably reminiscing about his homeland. However, Li Zhi was entranced by his verses and could not help but ask, “Is Luoyang really so barren?”

Qin Yi did not respond, only silently drinking a cup of wine. Li Zhi sighed and stated, “The area around Luoyang is strategically located and has been plagued for years by war. Even now, it is a land of famine and impoverishment.[18] I will advise Imperial Father to rebuild Luoyang.”

Hearing this, Li An became resentful. In his mind, he thought, *Is there a need for you to shoot your mouth off? Do I not know to remonstrate Imperial Father? If you weren’t contesting succession with me, I would have focused on handling these matters long ago.* While he thought this in his head, nothing was revealed on his face.

As the sequence was in accordance to an individual’s status and position, the next person was Xiahou Yuanfeng. He smiled and recited, “West Lake:

The cold moon and spring seem to be frozen and can’t move and flow,We sing the fisherman’s songs and don’t know where to go boating.In the west wind, the white duckweed and the red knotweed,The vast lake is of a singular color in autumn.”[19]

While others marveled at the grace and elegance of the poem selected by

Xiahou Yuanfeng, I only smiled mildly. This man was a profound schemer, cunning and agile of mind. Even when reciting poetry, he did not forget to mask his actual temperament. If he had not come personally to explain his rescue of Vicious Killer, I probably would not have been seen through this man's mask and would have considered him to be no more than a dissolute young master.

Following, Lu Jingzhong recited, "Changsha:

Here, where you spent your three years' exile,To be mourned in Chu for ten thousand years,Can I trace your footprint in the autumn grass—Or only slanting sunlight through the bleak woods?If even good Emperor Wen[20] was cold-hearted,Could you hope that the dull Xiang River would understand you,These desolate waters, these taciturn mountains,When you came, like me, so far away?"[21]

His recitation had a certain modulation, his gaze falling upon me. Aside from the ignorant Jing Chi and Sima Xiong, everyone had an awkward expression on their faces. Everyone knew that Lu Jingzhong was mocking me, stating that although I was a great talent, I was not recognized a virtuous master. Naturally, in his eyes, it was impossible for the Prince of Yong to become emperor. Moreover, Lu Jingzhong's verses were extremely vicious, cursing me, a guest from Southern Chu, to lose my liege, the Prince of Yong. Jia Yi was the Grand Tutor for Emperor Wen's favorite son, the Prince of Liang, Liu Yi. When Liu Yi died from injuries suffered from falling off his horse, Jia Yi felt guilty and died grief-stricken a year later. I was thus another Jia Yi. Jia Yi had died at the age of thirty-three. It seemed like Lu Jingzhong did not intend to allow me to live past that age.

A cold look of implacable hatred flashed in the Prince of Yong's eyes. He wasn't blaming Lu Jingzhong for cursing him. As enemies, it was understandable to be cursed. However, Lu Jingzhong cursing Jiang Zhe to die a premature death caused his fury to surge up violently, as Jiang Zhe's health was extremely frail after suffering an assassination attempt. Li Zhi was frequently worried that Jiang Zhe would die from of an illness, therefore was especially furious at Lu Jingzhong's behavior. Just as he was about to cause a scene, I had already smiled and stated, "Junior Mentor Lu

speaks well. I admire Jia Yi greatly. If I have the opportunity to visit Changsha, I will definitely pay a visit and admire his former home. Allow me to drink this cup with the junior mentor." Finished speaking, I drank a cup of wine. My pale white complexion immediately gained a rosy color. Xiaoshunzi calmly gazed at Lu Jingzhong, a trace of killing intent flashing in his eyes.

In his heart, Lu Jingzhong was somewhat regretful of his words. He should not have been so rude. However, ever since this man had arrived in the Prince of Yong's household, he always felt that his ploys were no longer as effective,[22] leaving him feeling depressed. This time, he could not help but mock Jiang Zhe, partly to vent his anger and partly because he was somewhat knowledgeable about medicine. From Jiang Zhe's weak breathing, Lu Jingzhong hoped that he would be die from excess anger.

Seeing the atmosphere worsen, Wei Ying opened his mouth and said, "It should be my turn. Zhongnan:[23]

How beautiful the north ridge of the Zhongnan Mountains,Its snow-capped peaks floating in the clouds.Woodlands after rain and snow unveils a bright blue sky,Evening comes and the city grows increasingly cold."[24]

After he finished, he drank a cup of wine. With this change of subject, the atmosphere began to improve. In my mind, I praised Wei Ying for indeed being educated by the prime minister, truly deserving of being Prime Minister Wei's son. This poem was exquisite and fresh; however at the end it could not escape Wei Ying's riches and honor, glory and splendor. Everyone knew that the Zhongnan Mountains were a shortcut to promotion.[25]

Following was the turn of the several generals present. Aside from Zhangsun Ji, they all showed signs of reluctance and embarrassment. Just at this moment, suddenly a servant hastily entered. It was one of the Qin residence's retainers. Glancing at everyone, his face showing signs of reluctance and embarrassment, he walked towards Qin Yi and whispered into the grand general's ear. Qin Yi's entire body shook, waving his hand to dismiss his retainer. At this moment, the forces of several different parties simultaneously burst into the grounds—they were imperial bodyguards serving the crown prince and the Princes of Yong and Qi. I clearly heard

them all report one thing: someone had raided the Ministry of War's military equipment storehouse located on the Wei River, burning all of the equipment located there. Moreover, they had left a symbol behind. That symbol was a piece of Southern Chu tough silk that was as white as snow. Using blood, the piece of silk was written the characters, Embroidered Union.

At the same moment, the crown prince and the Princes of Yong and Qi all rose to bid their farewells. Li Hanyou pretended to not be aware of what was happening, rising to her feet, she said, "Everyone else can leave, but it's Jiang *daren* 's turn. Jiang *daren* is a gifted scholar from Southern Chu. How can he leave like this?"

I knew that she was setting a trap. If I said that I was fond of Southern Chu, she would frame me for not forgetting my homeland. If I said that I was fond of Great Yong, she would mock me for forgetting my old relationships. I had understood this long ago. Therefore, when I heard her name me, I only peacefully recited:

"The booms of her drum harmonize with the zither to please the clouds,From yonder the emperor's soul is aroused.Dances the water goddess so happily,Southerners listen in daze.Her performance induces metal and stone to sing merrily,The clear tones fuse with echoes in space merrily.The old plane tree is moved to express its admiration,Scented white reeds release perfume for saturation.The music flows with the Xiang River to its extent,Then veers across Lake Dongting raising a whirl of desolation.No one can be found whence the melodies ended,On upper river verdant peaks silently stand."[26]

"Zhe once heard of Concubine Xiang's shrine on Junshan Island in Lake Dongting. People in the area would frequently hear two string instruments play in perfect harmony at midnight. No matter how much you want to see, you won't be able to see. Today, I use this poem as my response to this drinking game. I wonder if it is appropriate?"

Li Hanyou's long, shapely eyebrows knitted slightly, as if scowling. Jiang Zhe's verse was filled with ghostly gloominess and yet also did not fully express his views, and could not be surmised. She could only angrily state,

“Jiang *daren* speaks well,” drinking the remaining wine in her cup. Although Li Hanyou had only sipped at her cup, the Qin residence’s wine was incomparably strong. At this moment, her cheeks were rosy, rendering her even more beautiful. Her light frown and shallow anger caused her to be beautiful beyond imagination. Even the crown prince, who was in a rush to depart to handle the trouble, and the anxious Prince of Yong, could only stop in their tracks, dazed by her beauty. Qin Qing stared stunned, the only thing in his eyes the beautiful woman in front of him.

Footnotes :

来日方长, lairifangchang – idiom, lit. the future is long; there will be ample time for that later, we’ll cross the bridge when we get there

绿珠, lüzhu – lit. green pearl

翠莺, cui ying – lit. jade oriole

Zhurong (祝融) aka Chongli (重黎) is a god of fire and the south in Chinese mythology

Yan Emperor (炎帝) or the Flame Emperor was defeated and allied with the Yellow Emperor (黄帝) to form the Yanhuang tribe (炎黄), the progenitors of the Chinese people.

尧, Yao was a legendary Chinese ruler who was one of and one of the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors. He was said to have invented the game of *weiqi* 禹, Yu was a legendary Chinese ruler who was one of the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors. He was said to be the founding ruler of the Xia Dynasty and was said to have stopped a series of floods that had plagued early Chinese civilization

This is a poem by the Tang Dynasty poet, Zhang Yu (张聿), entitled *When Summer Begins* .

The 吴钩, Wu Hook is an ancient Chinese sword that was curved and designed to increase the hooking and kill potential of a sword.

This is from a poem by the Tang Dynasty scholar, Zhang Ji (张继), entitled *Sending Off Minister Wang to Patrol the Borders at Youzhou* .

Refers to the fief originally held by the Dukes of Zhou before overthrowing the Shang Dynasty.

Refers to the land north of the Yellow River.

晋祠, Jinci – the Jinci Temple or the Jin Ancestral Temple is a temple that

dates back to the Zhou Dynasty located near modern-day Taiyuan
This is a poem by the Qing Dynasty poet, Zhu Yizun (朱彝尊), entitled *Taizong's Stele at the Jinci Temple* .
邙山, Mangshan – Mt. Mang is located just outside Luoyang in Henan and is the location of many tombs dating back to the Han and Jin Dynasty
Refers to the sack of Luoyang by Dong Zhuo (董卓) in in 191 AD during the Three Kingdoms period.
This is a poem by the third son of Cao Cao, Cao Zhi (曹植). One of the most famous poets of his era, Cao Zhi is lamenting Luoyang's devastation after it was sacked by Dong Zhuo. This poem is the second of two poems entitled *Presented to Lady Ying* .
民生凋敝, minshengdiaobi – idiom, lit. the people's livelihood is reduced to destitution; famine and impoverishment
This is a poem entitled *Autumn Moon over Calm Lake* by the Song Dynasty poet, Sun Rui (孙锐). The poem speaks of the third of ten beautiful sceneries on the West Lake in Hangzhou.
汉文帝, Han Wendi was the fifth emperor of the Han Dynasty
This poem is by the Tang Dynasty poet, Liu Changqing (刘长卿), entitled *On Passing Jia Yi's House in Changsha* .
一帆风顺, yifanfengshun – idiom, lit. propitious wind throughout the journey; smooth sailing, to go smoothly
终南, zhongnan – refers to the Zhongnan Mountains (终南山), a branch of the Qin Mountains (秦岭) located south of Chang'an, modern-day Xi'an
This is a poem by the Tang Dynasty poet, Zu Yong (祖咏), entitled *On Seeing the Snow Peak of Zhongnan* .
终南捷径, zhongnanjiejing – idiom, lit. Zhongnan Mountains are a shortcut to a ministerial job; fig. to take a shortcut to promotion
This is a poem entitled *Musical Soul of the Xiang River* by the Tang Dynasty poet, Qian Qi (钱起).

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 28: Marrying Couples

Volume 2, Chapter 28: Marrying Couples

In the fifth month of the twenty-fourth year of Wuwei, the Emperor bestowed the title of Imperial Princess upon the Princess of Jingjiang, and arranged for her to marry the son of Qin Yi, the Grand General Who Suppresses Distant Lands, Qin Qing. In other words, further empowering the Prince….—*Yong Dynastic Records* , *Biography of the Prince of Li*

On the road back, the Prince of Yong stated gravely, “Don’t worry, Suiyun. Someday in the future, I will definitely kill Lu Jingzhong for you.”

I smiled calmly and replied, “Why is Your Imperial Highness so enraged? Your Imperial Highness should be happy instead. Lu Jingzhong is strong on the offensive but neglects defense. Advising the Crown Prince, he is able to come up with three stratagems with each step. However, those three stratagems are difficult to combine and work in concert. Isn’t this a good thing? Moreover, can the eggs remain unbroken when the nest is totally ruined? That subject does not take to heart this man. This subject is concerned about Li Hanyou. That woman’s intelligence is outstanding. Each and every one of her actions is able to affect the will and sentiment of others. She was the winner this time. I’m afraid that Qin Qing will probably be unable to escape. Wasn’t Your Imperial Highness also tempted?”

Li Zhi could not help but blush with shame, as he denied, “Suiyun is joking.”

My expression did not change, observing, “This woman is a disciple of the Fengyi Sect and is also a noblewoman of the imperial clan. What is rare is that her profound scheming is concealed from view. Her appearance and bearing carry not a single of hint of pride or haughtiness. It’s understandable for Qin Qing to shift his affections to her. I believe if it weren’t for Grand General Qin making excuses, their marriage would have already happened. Your Imperial Highness should be careful of her. If she is married to Qin Qing, then his status will increase. In the future, the one who

can harm Your Imperial Highness's ambitions is that woman."

"If Qin Qing marries her, then things will likely turn for the worse," worried Li Zhi anxiously, "Although Grand General Qin is just and impartial, if the marriage were to proceed, then …"

Although Li Zhi did not finish, I already understood the meaning of his words. I waved my hand and replied, "Don't worry, Your Imperial Highness. Although Qin Qing is the Grand General's eldest son, he does not have the ability to influence his father. With the subtle influence caused between father and son, it is improbable that they will make things difficult for Your Imperial Highness. Moreover, Qin Yong is the Grand General's closest subordinate. If we are able to rope over that man, then Your Imperial Highness will have no need to worry."

Li Zhi inquired, "Qin Yong is completely loyal to the Grand General. How are we going to draw him to our side?"

I smiled and responded, "Leave this matter to this subject. If Your Imperial Highness were to get involved, it would instead cause the Crown Prince and the Grand General to become unhappy. This subject has a way to have him unwittingly serve Your Imperial Highness."

"This matter will be handed to you," accepted Li Zhi, nodding his head. "There is another matter. The Embroidered Union is so aggressive and unbridled. Imperial Father will surely dispatch a general to destroy them. This Prince wants to recommend Zhangsun Ji. With his capability and outstanding martial arts, he is the prime candidate. What do you think?"

"If General Zhangsun were to take charge of this matter," I explained, "Then whatever evidence he finds tying the Embroidered Union to the Crown Prince will be met with skepticism. If this subject's anticipation is correct, the Crown Prince will recommend the Prince of Qi to handle this matter. After all, His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, does not have a capable military commander under his command."

Li Zhi asked, "If that is the case, then wouldn't it mean that there will be no evidence found whatsoever?"

"In reality, the Crown Prince and Your Imperial Highness are both too

anxious," I responded with a smile. "The Embroidered Union's raid on the military storehouses is only a small rebellion. If it weren't for the Crown Prince having a guilty conscience, why would he be so anxious to dispatch people to quell their rebellion? Initially, Your Imperial Highness was not actively involved in this matter. At present, the Crown Prince's involvement is not yet exposed. However, if this matter were exposed by Your Imperial Highness, then it would inevitably cause His Imperial Majesty to suspect Your Imperial Highness's motives. The Crown Prince's recommendation of the Prince of Qi will only serve to make this matter more conspicuous.[1] Cui Yang's death has already alarmed all levels of society. The matters involving the Ministry of Revenue have not yet been revealed. If the Crown Prince were to recommend the Prince of Qi, there is no harm for Your Imperial Highness to suggest that there is no need to dispatch such a high-ranking commander to handle something so trivial. Have Qin Qing handle this matter. If Qin Qing performs meritorious service, then it would be proper and expected for His Imperial Majesty will bestow a marriage. Presumably, His Imperial Majesty will also feel that the neutral Qin family is most appropriate. I believe that the Emperor will not reject this candidate."

A lively light danced in his eyes, as Li Zhi replied, "Moreover, this ploy will drive a wedge between the Qin family and the Fengyi Sect. If the Fengyi Sect is determined to obstruct the investigation, then the marriage will definitely not proceed."

I smiled. "Regardless of the result, there will be no benefit to Your Imperial Highness. To speak the truth, this subject really didn't expect that the Embroidered Union would have such methods. Although Huo Jicheng is a perverse and disagreeable character, he is a firm and decisive man. No wonder, the Embroidered Union has been able to survive to this day."

"Suiyun, this Prince feels that the current situation is entirely within your grasp," sighed Li Zhi. "Fortunately, you have always been working behind the scenes for this Prince's benefit, otherwise this Prince really could not sleep and eat peacefully."

Seeing that my face actually revealed a bleak and desolate look, Li Zhi asked with alarm, "Suiyun, what's wrong? Has this Prince misspoken?"

I smiled slightly, discarding the disappointment and frustration in my heart. Although I had an untreatable illness, as long as I focused on convalescing, it was still possible for me to live a hundred years. Although this fighting and scheming could only shorten my lifespan, I should be able to ensure that the Prince of Yong's ascension to the imperial throne within a few years. When the time came, with the size of the world, would I really be unable to find a place to convalesce? In a low voice, I recited, "Green and limpid the water of the lake, the ancients gone. / Hearing boating songs, not knowing where the boat has gone."

"Who composed this poem?" asked Li Zhi with a smile, "For it to be so carefree and leisurely?"

Without thinking, I answered, "This is a poem that this subject once saw in a book. I do not know who composed it. Your Imperial Highness, presumably the Emperor will very quickly summon Your Imperial Highness to an audience. Your Imperial Highness should go back to change and prepare. Since this subject has promised to instruct General Jing, then there's no need for him to accompany Your Imperial Highness to the palace."

Li Zhi smiled. "Okay. This Prince wants to see how Suiyun makes something of that stubborn and naughty disciple."

I also smiled, inquiring, "If I have him compose a poem by himself, I wonder what rewards Your Imperial Highness will bestow on this subject?"

After thinking it over, Li Zhi replied, "This Prince can't think of anything appropriate at this moment. You do not like money or jewels. Books and scrolls, you have read aplenty. If Suiyun requires anything, there is no harm in speaking it. This Prince is willing to fetch anything to serve as your reward."

I respectfully stated, "Your Imperial Highness is too courteous. There is only one thing…. Last time, Your Imperial Highness flew into a terrible rage when this subject was almost assassinated, because Vicious Killer was introduced by Jiangnan Spring. Although Your Imperial Highness did not shutter and seize the assets of that restaurant, Your Imperial Highness still had the Imperial Capital Magistrate investigate rigorously. Over these days,

Jiangnan Spring cannot be at peace. This subject asks Your Imperial Highness to grant a favor and forgive this subject's younger cousin."

Li Zhi immediately remembered. That day, he had flown into a rage. If it weren't for Guan Xiu's reminder that Jing Shunqing was Jiang Zhe's cousin, it was likely that the Jiangnan Spring would be completely shuttered and seized. But after being implicated, the Jiangnan Spring's business was quite miserable. After Jiang Zhe's life was saved, Li Zhi had forgotten about this matter. Now that Jiang Zhe brought this up again, Li Zhi could not help but be somewhat embarrassed. Promptly, he confessed, "This Prince has been so busy that I've forgotten about this. In reality, I have already everything investigated and your younger cousin was not involved with the assassination attempt. This Prince will immediately dispatch someone to inform the Imperial Capital Magistrate. However, this can't be considered as a reward. How about this? If you can teach Jing Chi how to compose poetry, then this Prince will bestow this upon you." As he spoke, he removed a green jade pendant from his waist, fiddling with it.

I knew that this jade pendant was bestowed by the emperor and was a top-quality piece of jade. Its value was higher than a thousand catties of gold. This was an extremely precious stake for our gamble. I thus smiled and said, "This subject knew about this situation for a while now. Originally, this subject wished to have my younger cousin be taught a lesson, teaching him the meaning of the word 'caution.' However, two days ago, my virtuous sister-in-law came to tearfully beg for my help. It is already difficult for her as a woman far from her native land. Now that she has come to earnestly beseech my help, I can't even give her face."

Seeing my smile, Li Zhi wondered, "Suiyun, if you are to lose, what is your stake?"

After thinking it over, I answered, "This subject has already received many rewards from Your Imperial Highness. I can't show my sincerity if I do not use something special. If this subject were to lose, this item shall be forfeited." As I finished speaking, I removed the jade belt at my waist.

Li Zhi looked over with misgivings. Although this jade belt appeared to be nice-looking, it was only a leather belt with jade pieces sewn onto it.

Although it was ornate, the jade was not exquisitely refined, nor were the jade of high quality. How was it worth serving as a stake? However, he would not haggle and thus said, “This will do. If you lose, I will take this jade belt.”

I smiled slightly. At present, I had no intention of informing Li Zhi that I had recently designed this belt. It had only been fetched back by Xiaoshunzi a few days earlier. Inside the belt was a mechanism that was able to fire three poisoned needles dipped in a highly toxic poison. This belt had been prepared for my own protection. If another assassin were to come, then I would have the opportunity to strike back. This jade belt was quite precious. Moreover, it was a special design by the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets.

As we were speaking, we had already arrived back at the Prince of Yong’s residence. Just as we arrived at the entrance, we saw a mounted imperial bodyguard gallop towards us. In his hand, he was holding an imperial edict. Seeing the Prince of Yong, the bodyguard dismounted from his horse and kneeled, proclaiming, “Your Imperial Highness, His Imperial Majesty has summoned you to enter the palace.”

Li Zhi promptly replied, “Please allow this Prince to change and I will immediately enter the palace.”

The imperial bodyguard quickly rose to his feet and withdrew, saying, “Understood.”

Idle, I returned to the Cold Courtyard. Following behind me was not only Xiaoshunzi, but also the unwilling Jing Chi. With great difficulty, he had escaped from the headache inducing drinking game and itched to find a place to train his fists and feet and loosen his muscles and bones. Who could have imagined that he would be summoned to the Cold Courtyard?

Jing Chi gloomily watched Jiang Zhe from behind, once again moaning bitterly in his heart. This weak and feeble scholar had unexpectedly received His Highness’s decree to exercise control himself. He usually looked down on these scholars. Although there were plenty of civil officials serving under the Prince of Yong, the majority of them were advisers adept at

military strategies and Jing Chi would actually remain at a respectful distance.[2] However, he had never seen this scholar put forward any plans or offer any advice, hiding in the Cold Courtyard all day long, panting for breath to the point of near death if he were to walk a few paces too many. However, the Prince of Yong truly trusted this scholar greatly, having Jing Chi and others listen to his commands. Last night, Jiang Zhe had dispatched him to handle that matter that he could not make heads or tails of. Even now, Jing Chi was still confused.

Following them into the Cold Courtyard were the imperial bodyguards assigned to protect Jiang Zhe. They had all accompanied Jiang Zhe on this recent outing. Practiced in rapidly defending vital locations, these imperial bodyguards immediately transformed the Cold Courtyard into an impenetrable fortress. Jing Chi's mouth twitched. This Jiang Zhe was truly once bitten, twice shy. At this moment, Jing Chi suddenly felt a chill. Raising his head to look, he caught sight of a pair of icy eyes staring at him. Xiaoshunzi had seen the expression on Jing Chi's face and was using his eyes to serve as a warning. Jing Chi shivered inwardly. He greatly admired Xiaoshunzi's martial arts and promptly lowered his head.

Returning to my chambers, I called Jing Chi in. Picking up a couple copies of Sun Tzu's *Art of War* , I placed it on the desk. Serenely, I said, "If you can memorize the contexts of this book, I will let you out."

Stupefied, Jing Chi looked at that thin book, an agonized smile appearing on his face.

I smiled and stated, "My health is poor. I won't be able to teach you today. Starting tomorrow, I will teach you every day for one hour. The remaining time, you must transcribe and copy the contents of my teachings. I know that you can recognize some characters. Oh, right … you can recite and transcribe in the room next door. Xiaoshunzi will supervise you. All right, bring your luggage and move into the Cold Courtyard."

Jing Chi was greatly astonished. Just as he was about to decline, he saw a resolute look in the weak scholar's eyes and could not help but reply, "Yes, *daren* ."

After Jing Chi had departed, Xiaoshunzi asked, dissatisfied, “Why is young master wasting time on such a coarse individual? Wouldn’t it be better to spend the time resting?”

“From this man’s appearance and character, he is someone loyal and candid, firm and courageous,” I replied calmly. “If he can learn some of the *Art of War* , then His Imperial Highness will have acquired an additional loyal and high-ranking general. This man most highly values camaraderie. In the future, I will also be able to acquire some safeguards. What’s not to like about this? Pass down the command: the Secret Camp must dispatch individuals to get close to Qin Yong. The best would be gaining Qin Yong’s trust and confidence. Hualiu and Lü’er are both handpicked operatives from the Hidden Group. Have Chen Zhen select one of them to perform this task. The ruckus caused by the Embroidered Union will be very large. We should pull back. You, Chen Zhen, and Han Wuji can consider how to deploy everyone else. However, at least half of the Secret Camp must be ready to listen to my commands. Arrange for the other half to become concealed amongst the common people. In the future, we will have a use for them.”

Xiaoshunzi nodded his head, quietly replying, “I will take care of this matter tonight. We have been preparing for quite some time now; it won’t be too difficult. Young master, Li An and Lu Jingzhong were both extremely rude. If young master were not occupied with important matters, I would have taken their lives long ago.”

In an tranquil voice, I stated, “Someday in the future, I will definitely send you to take their lives.”

That very night, I learned of the contents of the debate before the imperial throne. Sure enough, Qin Qing was appointed to exterminate the Embroidered Union. Although the crown prince had pulled out all the stops to dispatch the Prince of Qi, what the Prince of Yong said was reasonable—there was no need to dispatch an imperial prince to exterminate the small Embroidered Union. In addition, the choice of Qin Qing completely conformed to the emperor’s intentions. After the Prince of Yong returned, he told me that he had noticed that the crown prince and the Prince of Qi had both secretly dispatched men. As for whether the Fengyi Sect

dispatched anyone, the Prince of Yong did not yet know. However, we both knew that the Fengyi Sect would not sit idly.

During the following period, I was occupied with instructing my uninterested disciple. Although Jing Chi would become drowsy whenever he caught sight of books, there was no way that he would be as naughty and mischievous as Lu Can. Therefore, as I lectured about books, I also used real life examples to raise his interest. Although Jing Chi found everything extremely dull in the beginning, his interest was quickly piqued. Although he did not understand the art of war, the years spent in the military caused him to be able to ask difficult questions based upon his personal experiences. In this way, whether he asked or I answered, both of us received great benefits. After two to three days, Jing Chi was already listening to my teachings in high spirits. Every morning, he would wait outside my chambers for me to get out of bed. In the afternoon, I would force him to transcribe books. Surprisingly, he persisted. Though his handwriting left me not knowing whether to laugh or cry. However, I was finally able to roughly explain Sun Tzu's *Art of War* to him. Although because of his temperament, he was never able to understand the thirteenth chapter on *Intelligence and Espionage* , I did not make any unreasonable demands. Sun Tzu's *Art of War* was wide-ranging and profound. Even I dared not claim that I was a master of all of its contents, let alone this man. My mind recalled the period when I taught the *Art of War* to Lu Can, he was able to infer the whole matter after hearing one point. However due to his obstinacy, probably because of his family background, Lu Can was always filled with doubts whenever I spoke of the eleventh chapter, *The Nine Battlegrounds* . Moreover, although his strategic ability was extraordinary, his understanding of the sinister and vicious nature of man was quite lacking.

This day, I had Jing Chi write down the *Art of War* from his memory. Watching him dripping with sweat as he wrote, I once again regretted my decision to allow him to use my desk. Fine … Out of sight, out of mind.[3] I closed my eyes and laid down on the soft couch, gradually falling asleep. Suddenly, the sound of urgent footsteps could be heard approaching from the distance. I quickly opened my eyes, only seeing Li Zhi filled with anger

enter the chambers.

I smiled slightly and ordered, “Xiaoshunzi, bring some tea for His Imperial Highness to help His Imperial Highness’s anger dissipate. What has happened to cause Your Imperial Highness to become like this?”

When Li Zhi caught sight of Jiang Zhe, for some unknown reason, his anger gradually vanished. Further catching sight of Jing Chi staring at him blankly, his face covered with ink marks, and the disorder on the desk, Li Zhi could not help but snicker. After he sat down, he accepted the teacup from Xiaoshunzi, taking a sip. With the sip, the last of his anger disappeared. Jing Chi promptly rose to his feet to bid his farewell. With a smile, I said, “You are not permitted to goof off. Go next door to continue to write. If you peek at the book, don’t blame me for punishing you to copy books until your hair turn white.”

Jing Chi promptly made a solemn vow. He could not forget what had happened last time I had tested him when I had punished him by forcing him to copy the *Art of War* ten times. He didn’t sleep a wink that night.

After Jing Chi had departed, I softly asked, “What has happened?”

Li Zhi coldly expounded, “Qin Qing is truly capable. The Embroidered Union was greedy for accomplishments and repeatedly launched raids. Qin Qing deliberately let them do as they pleased for a time before launching a strike and completely defeating the Embroidered Union. Although some remnants were able to escape, they are no longer a threat. Unfortunately, Huo Jicheng was able to escape. Although this is a fly in the ointment,[4] it is still acceptable. The captured Embroidered Union rebels have all confessed to the smuggling operation collaborating with officials from the Ministry of Revenue. Qin Qing was honest and just. After he obtained all of their confessions, he delivered it with all of the witnesses to the Emperor. However, as this evidence was circumstantial, as no one could testify to the Crown Prince and Cui Yang’s involvement, and Huo Jicheng had escaped, therefore the Crown Prince completely ducked responsibility. He claimed that the officials of the Ministry of Revenue had formed a conspiracy to defraud the state, while Cui Yang was acting on his orders to investigate the rumor of the smuggling operation and was thus killed by the Embroidered

Union. Ultimately, Imperial Father only had him going into seclusion to reflect upon his mistakes. Originally, the Minister of Revenue, Liang Jinqian, was to be relieved from his post, but Imperial Father was persuaded otherwise by Prime Minister Wei. Liang Jinqian has been temporarily allowed to remain at his post to atone for his faults. This, in itself, is nothing. Imperial Father then took the opportunity to bestow marriage between Qin Qing and Li Hanyou."

I asked, "The Emperor's predisposition towards the Crown Prince has not just been for one day. There is no need for Your Imperial Highness to worry. It is likely that all of the ambitious scholars in the world now know the Crown Prince's true colors. With this, we have already achieved our objective. However, why is the marriage between Li Hanyou and Qin Qing being arranged in such a rush? Did the Grand General not object?"

Li Zhi sighed. "Li Hanyou actually privately followed Qin Qing to put down this rebellion, and even saved Qin Qing's life from the hands of assassins from the Embroidered Union. The two are already together. It would be impossible for the Grand General to prevent this union from happening no matter how he wishes to prevent it. How can the purity of a princess of the imperial clan be besmirched? Imperial Father even specially bestowed the title of Imperial Princess upon Li Hanyou. Qin Qing is now the Commandant of the Attendant Cavalry."

With a sigh, I inquired, "Wasn't Your Imperial Highness prepared for this situation long ago? Why are you so indignant?"

Li Zhi was silent for a while before he responded, "Imperial Father issued an edict, betrothing Princess Changle to Wei Ying."

My hand shook, the folding fan in my hand dropping to the floor. After a while, I leaned down and picked up the folding fan. Then I said, "This isn't anything major. Your Imperial Highness knew of the Emperor's wish to find a worthy husband for the Princess. Wei Ying's character and talent are both incredible. What is even rarer is that his temperament is gentle and honest. Didn't Your Imperial Highness look favorably upon him?"

In an agonized voice, Li Zhi stated, "Suiyun, do you really not know of

Imperial Sister's intentions? Why does she always keep your poems with her, never letting them leave her side morning and night? Why do you think she went so far as to send the millennium-old Ningpo figwort to continue your life? Why do you think that she treats Roulan as her own when the Princess of Yong brings her to the palace? Are you really so blind to these matters? Do you know that when Imperial Sister learned that Imperial Father betrothed her to Wei Ying, she actually went so far to cut her long hair and wish to become a nun? In anger, Imperial Father told her, as long as she gave a name, regardless of whom it was, Imperial Father would allow that person to become the imperial son-in-law. However, she did not say a word and has been placed under house arrest in the palace. Suiyun, if you have the mind, this Prince will stake everything and bring you into the palace to propose marriage. Are you willing?"

Footnotes :

欲盖弥彰, yugaimizhang – idiom, lit. trying to hide something makes it more conspicuous; a cover up only makes matters worse

敬鬼神而远之, jingguishen'eryuanzhi – idiom, lit. to respect Gods and demons from a distance; to remain at a respectful distance

眼不见, 心不烦, yanbujian, xinbufan – idiom, lit. what the eye doesn't see, the heart doesn't grieve; out of sight, out of mind

美中不足, meizhongbuzu – idiom, lit. everything is fine except for one small defect; the fly in the ointment

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 29: The Shadow of the Waning Moon

Volume 2, Chapter 29: The Shadow of the Waning Moon

In the fifth month of the first year of Southern Chu's Tongtian era, the Yong Emperor betrothed Princess Changle to Wei Ying. Wei Ying was renowned throughout the world for his ability and virtue. But the Princess cut her hair and made a solemn pledge, refusing to acquiesce, causing the Emperor to break into a violent rage. It was some time before his anger dissipated. Secretly, the Emperor said to the Princess, "If child has anyone in mind, regardless of worthiness, regardless of social status, We will betroth you to him." The Princess remained silent….—*Southern Chu Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Jiang Suiyun*

The waning moon was like a hook, floating heavily and peacefully in the night sky. Standing below the imperial dais was Princess Changle dressed in plain, unadorned clothes, silently gazing up at the serene, weak moonlight. These days, her originally rounded features gradually gained a sense of heartbreak. Half of her ink-black hair had been cut, and now only reached her shoulders. Palace maids had already helped her groom her hair. Unfortunately, it was too short and could not be tied up into a bun. It was only held together with a headscarf. Although the night breeze was refreshing, Princess Changle's clothes were thin and the wind penetrated her to the bone. However, throughout, she refused to return to her chambers. Under this kind of moonlight, she would find it difficult to sleep. After a long while, she raised her white hand. Within was a folding fan. On it was written a quatrain:

The cold water of the pond is fresh in the autumn,
The distant road is exhausted when it arrives at the crossing.Fortunately, the painting could not be painted,The completion of the painting is a life's regret.[1]

She recited the poem in a low voice. This folding fan had recently been delivered by the Princess of Yong, the poem composed and penned by that

person. The Princess of Yong knew that she was fond of Jiang Zhe's poetry and had gotten the folding fan to present to Changle. Jiang Zhe probably did not pay much mind to a simple folding fan, but to Changle, ever since she received the fan, it had never left her side. This object was the most precious item and she would never willingly part with it.

At this moment, Lü'e walked over, carrying a cloak. In a begging voice, she said, "Your Imperial Highness, this servant cannot bear to watch you suffer so. If His Imperial Majesty and the Noble Consort were to learn of this, they will definitely blame this servant for failing to serve upon Your Imperial Highness."

Princess Changle smiled slightly and accepted the cloak. "We are not so fragile and are here only because of this beautiful night scenery. It's okay. You go back and retire first. We will go back soon to rest."

Lü'e saw that the princess's expression was not bad and thus steeled her nerve to ask, "Princess, this servant doesn't understand. Xiahou *daren* is a master of brush and sword, and is also extremely handsome. That he is not to your liking isn't a problem as, after all, everyone says that Xiahou *daren* is dissolute and debauched. The Princess's temper is gentle and kindhearted. It wouldn't be strange if you dislike him. However, Wei *daren* not only has behavior and appearance that surpasses others, but is also clean-living and honest, never involving himself in immoral conducts. And yet he is still not to the Princess's liking. It truly leaves this servant greatly puzzled."

Princess Changle tranquilly replied, "What do you understand? All right, go …"

Lü'e shivered inside, seeing that the princess's exquisite features carried with it a faintly discernible sneer. The distinctive dignity of these members of the imperial household caused Lü'e to no longer dare to speak any further. Quietly, as if walking on tiptoes, she withdrew.

Princess Changle sighed slightly, feeling the cold of night become increasingly crisp, her embroidered shoes feeling ice-cold. Just as she was about to turn to return to her chambers, the evening breeze transmitted the sound of a faintly discernible sigh. Princess Changle's eyebrows slightly

furrowed and she questioned, “Who is it that is spying on Us?”

A jade figure glinted and a woman dressed in a green court uniform appeared in front of Princess Changle. Princess Changle stared at this woman blankly before she stated, “So it is Sister Hanyou. Why have you come so late to pay a visit to my Jade Phoenix Hall?”

Fluttering like a breeze, Li Hanyou bowed. “Today, this servant was betrothed to General Qin. But remembering elder sister’s loneliness in the palace, I could not help but feel restless. Therefore, I have intentionally come here. As expected, elder sister has not yet retired. I hope that elder sister can invite me inside to chat.”

Princess Changle placidly replied, “These days, younger sister has frequently come to keep me company. Changle can’t thank you enough. However, it is already the dead of night and it is inconvenient to chat. Younger sister should return home to rest.”

Li Hanyou’s long, shapely eyebrows furrowed. After thinking it over, she recalled the news that the Princess of Yong had come into the palace. Could it be that Princess Changle had learned of how she tried to make things difficult for Jiang Zhe in the Qin residence? Everyone knew that Princess Changle was fond of Jiang Zhe’s poetry. Moreover, reportedly the person that Princess Changle admired most was that man. Now it seemed that this was highly likely, otherwise why would she be so frigid[2] now after being so affectionate last time? If this was the case, she must find out the truth, otherwise wouldn’t this matter spin out of control?

Thinking of this, Li Hanyou smiled. “I have long heard that Your Imperial Highness is fond of the poetry of Southern Chu’s gifted scholar. A few days ago, Hanyou had the fortune of witnessing Jiang *zhuangyuan* reciting poetry. Although it wasn’t a poem composed by the *zhuangyuan* , there was sentence that was well said. It is said that poetry expresses one’s ideals. Does elder sister not want to know the details?”

Princess Changle was moved. A few days ago, the Princess of Yong had entered the palace, unintentionally bringing up the poetry gathering. It was only that Noble Consort was next to her, and she did not have the

opportunity to ask carefully. She thus agreed, “I’d like to hear the details.”

Li Hanyou skipped over the scheming and fighting, only speaking of the poems that everyone had selected. Finally, when she recited the verses, “No one can be found whence the melodies ended, / On upper river verdant peaks silently stand,” surprisingly, Princess Changle smiled faintly. Li Hanyou mentally understood, but pretended that she did not notice, continuing to speak, “Jiang *daren* ’s selected poem is quite excellent. These last two verses are the most significant. How does Princess feel about Jiang *daren* ’s way of looking at things?”

Princess Changle smiled and replied, “Jiang *daren* most likely selected this poem to muddle along. From what I can see from his poetry, his verses are either remote and refined, or possessing boundless grandeur, or having profound meanings, or are gentle and contented. There isn’t a single composition that is so ghostly gloomy.” So speaking, she could not help but look down at the folding fan in her hands.

Li Hanyou’s heart jumped and she asked, “Is elder sister willing to lend the fan in your hands for little sister to take a look?”

Princess Changle glanced at Li Hanyou and replied, “You cannot speak of this matter to anyone…. I snatched this folding fan from second sister-in-law. These last few years, very few of Jiang *daren* ’s verses have been circulated. His handwriting is even rarer.” So speaking, she handed over the folding fan.

Li Hanyou softly read the poem on the fan, only feeling a faint distress directly hit her face[3] due to the elegance and profundity of the verses. She could not help but state, “Jiang *daren* ’s poetry is truly peerless in the world.”

Retrieving the folding fan, Princess Changle smiled. “Jiang *daren* ’s poetry is circulated throughout the world. If younger sister is fond of it, there is no harm in collecting it.”

Seeing a faint, happy expression on Princess Changle’s face, Li Hanyou suddenly asked, “Why has Your Imperial Highness so rigorously resisted the betrothal? Could it be that you already have someone in your heart?”

Princess Changle's expression did not change, as she gently responded, "Does younger sister know why Imperial Father is so impatient to find a virtuous husband for me?"

Li Hanyou paid an obeisance and replied, "Everyone knows that His Imperial Majesty loves Princess deeply."

"The love and affection of members of the imperial household are thin and faint," replied Princess Changle distantly. "Although Imperial Father dotes on me, this is not the reason why he is so impatient to find a virtuous husband for me. On that day, Imperial Father dispatched me to be married to Southern Chu, but he always felt a brooding gloominess in his heart. If he could not find an ideal husband for me, then Imperial Father would always feel that he has let me down."

The look in Li Hanyou's eyes changed. "Does elder sister harbor resentment towards His Imperial Majesty?"

"From start to finish, there has been no resentment in my heart," answered Princess Changle, shaking her head. "From childhood, Changle has been fond of poetry and literature, my temperament has been gentle and agreeable, different from the strong and resolute women of Great Yong. Were it not for Imperial Father and Consort Mother's love and doting, Changle would not have any status to speak of. Therefore, although I was sad when Imperial Father dispatched me to a distant land, I did not complain. Further, We are supported and served by the common people of the world, how can We not sacrifice Ourselves for Great Yong? Therefore, although I was married off to an enemy country and foreign land, it was foreordained that in this life, I cannot spend it with a husband to old age, and thus personally took medicine to abort the child in my stomach. Changle has never blamed Great Yong, blamed Imperial Father. Now that Imperial Father wishes that I marry another, he is naturally hoping to provide me with happiness. However, We have experienced hardships and have long ago become discouraged towards the words 'love and affection.' I only desire to perform my filial duties to Imperial Father and Consort Mother. Someday in the future, regardless of which brother ascends to the throne, I am but a widow, a frail woman, presumably no one would be suspicious or

jealous of me. When that time comes, Changle will accompany the oil lamp before the statue of Buddha. Such a life is sufficient."

Li Hanyou sighed with admiration and inquired, "Your Imperial Highness, can it be that you still remember the former King of Southern Chu? He is no more than a mediocre person. Why are you remaining faithful to his memory?" As she spoke, she herself did not believe this was the case, as Li Hanyou looked at Changle with a mournful look in her eyes.

Princess Changle neutrally replied, "That is not the case. We are only downhearted. Not everyone wishes to emulate Wenjun."[4]

Li Hanyou said, "Wenjun was originally a wise and virtuous woman. She was only unfortunate that she ran into the brilliant Sima Xiangru, and thus could not help but be enamored. What does the Princess think if Jiang *daren* is of mind to seek the phoenix?"

Princess Changle looked at Li Hanyou deeply, a faint trace of disdain in her eyes. Li Hanyou smiled and added, "His Imperial Majesty has already stated that as long as Princess is willing, regardless of who it is, he will be able to become the Emperor's son-in-law. Jiang *daren* is a peerless talent of our age. If Princess tacitly consents, little sister is willing to communicate this to the Emperor."

Princess Changle became increasingly frigid, as she coldly declared, "Li Hanyou. We have resided in the depths of the Yong palace for many years, and were further the Queen of Southern Chu. Although I live in seclusion, do you really think that We do not have a single shred of cunning?"

Li Hanyou's expression changed greatly, and she dropped to the ground. "Your Imperial Highness please calm down. Little sister is only being utterly sincere and cannot bear to see worries lock up the Princess's eyebrows. If I have offended Your Imperial Highness in any way, Hanyou is willing to accept punishment."

Princess Changle's expression became even more frigid, as she slowly and carefully stated, "Jiang *daren* 's moral character is noble and unsullied. Were it not for second brother's character, an ordinary person would not be able to get this man to pledge his allegiance. Even though he has surrendered, he

is not someone who a common person can insult lightly. We are fond of his talent and respect his moral character. How can I permit you lot to distort Our kindly feelings? I know of the current complicated state of affairs in the court. It is only that Changle was originally an outsider. Why are you determined to involve Us? Princess of Jingjiang, although We are not fond of struggling, if you lot continue to persist in pressing me, We can only report this matter to Imperial Father and immediately become a nun. When that time comes, it should satisfy your lot's wishes."

Following, Princess Changle coldly excused herself. "We are tired. Please return, Princess of Jingjiang. It is the dead of night. You have to be careful. If there are such rumors spread, We will have Imperial Father and Mother give me justice."

When she had hastily returned to her quarters, Li Hanyou caught sight of Noble Consort Ji waiting for her wearing a grave face. She promptly advanced and said, "Martial Aunt, why have you come? Has something important happened?"

Noble Consort Ji answered, "The Sect Master has dispatched news. Huo Jicheng has already been held up by eldest apprentice sister and will certainly be unable to escape. However, currently, the tongues of the entire court are wagging, and this matter must be handled cautiously."

Li Hanyou happily replied, "Eldest apprentice sister's martial arts are exceptional and will certainly easily capture Huo Jicheng." However, her brows furrowed slightly and she continued, "However, how can we remedy the Crown Prince's current situation? Sect Master has always taught us disciples that guarding against rumor-mongering is more difficult than preventing a flood. Does Martial Aunt have any methods?"

Noble Consort Ji responded, "There is no need for you to worry excessively. You have completed eliminated all witnesses. Right now, there is no one who can prove the Crown Prince's involvement. Minister Liang is currently no more than a bird in a cage. After a few days, it will be sufficient to kill him to silence him forever. Although it is vital to control the Ministry of Revenue, we must ensure that the Crown Prince does not become aware. Therefore, we cannot handle this matter overtly. We have ways of arranging

some of our people inside. This position is extremely important. It is better if we leave the Crown Prince to mess around. Do you have any idea about the party that collaborated with the Embroidered Union?"

"How can I explain this?" expressed Li Hanyou with a wry smile. "The Embroidered Union's partner was Southern Chu's Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets. However, their power and influence is concealed. At present, there are no traces of their presence, going so far as unloading all of the businesses that they control. This Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets is truly enigmatic, while our power and influence in Southern Chu is not sufficiently formidable. It is truly beyond our power."

Noble Consort Ji indifferently said, "It is enough for you to remember this matter. The Sect Master has stated that the only way to prevent people from gossiping is to divert their attention. Since such a matter has happened to the Crown Prince, then we must have something happen to someone else. The more confused, the better. In this way, who will remember the Crown Prince's matter? Even if they remember, as long as we ensure that the Crown Prince ascends to the throne, who will bring this matter up again? Of vital importance is that he does not lose the Emperor's favor. It is better if you don't get involved in Changle's affairs."

"This disciple follows orders," obeyed Li Hanyou. "I already have an idea. Please Martial Aunt, do not worry."

Noble Consort Ji voiced, "You are the Sect Master's beloved final disciple. Why would I be worried? Handle matters properly. Although your eldest apprentice sister has already received the Sect Master's true teachings, the Sect Master has yet to select a successor. If your meritorious service is sufficient, I will speak on your behalf to the Sect Master."

When these words were uttered, a look of delight appeared on Li Hanyou's face. However, she quickly recovered her serenity. Dropping to the floor, she declared, "Many thanks for Martial Aunt's kind intentions. Hanyou extremely respects eldest apprentice sister and dares not have any vain delusions."

Noble Consort Ji smiled slightly. "All right. Go take care of your business."

Watching Li Hanyou's receding figure, Noble Consort Ji smiled faintly. As someone who had spent years in the world of fame and fortune, she knew that regardless of whom, those who could lightly discard the enticement of fame and fortune were all lying. How could fame and fortune; power and influence; riches and honor; and glory and splendor be lightly abandoned? Even if it wasn't money, fame, or fortune, then great authority—with one's words being adhered to, the awe-inspiring manner of causing the entire world to bend their knee—was even more enrapturing. Who in this world could resist these enticements?

***

Huo Jicheng concealed himself in the underbrush, holding his breath, not daring to move. At this moment, a raging inferno burned in his heart, as he persistently cursed the incompetence of his subordinates for failing to properly execute his plan and easily being annihilated by Qin Qing's army. Most vile was the Fengyi Sect. They had already chased him for one day and one night. If he wasn't an expert at concealment and stealth, it was likely that he would have lost his life to those women's hands.

Suddenly, Huo Jicheng caught sight of a figure appearing under the dim moonlight. It was an azure-clothed woman, her clothing plain and simple, exactly the attire most favored by Great Yong's common women. Huo Jicheng was originally someone from Shu, and had great appreciation for beautiful materials. With one glance, he could tell that the woman's clothing was not made by a famous tailor and seemed to be made by weavers. Under normal circumstances, he would have assumed that this woman was a country bumpkin. However, at this location, Huo Jicheng felt a chill go down his spine. At this moment, this woman set aflame a torch. Under the flickering fire, it revealed the ordinary face of the woman. This woman's appearance was average, however the severe and serene expression on her countenance caused her figure to immediately acquire a bit of mystery. Huo Jicheng's heart jumped, recalling a rumor about the Fengyi Sect. Reportedly, because of the beauty of the Fengyi Sect Master, all the disciples she accepted all had good looks. There was only one exception. This person was her first disciple, Wen Ziyan. Wen Ziyan had been accepted when the Fengyi Sect Master was still young. Not only was her appearance ordinary, her

aptitude was also not top class. However, this woman had formidable willpower that caused others to admire her greatly, surprisingly receiving the Fengyi Sect Master's true teachings. At present, she was no more than thirty years old and supposedly had attained seventy to eighty percent of her master's martial accomplishments. In those days, when the Fengyi Sect was helping Li Yuan fight for supremacy, Wen Ziyan was the Fengyi Sect Master's most capable assistant. It could be said that she fought throughout the world, her hands covered in blood. Only after Great Yong had pacified the Central Plains did this woman return to seclusion in the Fengyi Sect, from then on not leaving the sect lightly. Reportedly, she had trained most of the martial arts of the disciples of the Fengyi Sect on behalf of her master.

Huo Jicheng was practiced in a cultivation method that allowed him to reduce his breathing and heartbeat to its lowest limits. At this moment, he was like a lifeless rock. He could sense this woman was concentrating her attention and listening closely to her surroundings, and so he did not dare to take a single breath.

It was a long time before this woman seemed to be disappointed, waving her hand to extinguish the torch in her hands, her figure disappearing into the darkness. Huo Jicheng only moved softly after another hour had passed, finally stretching his long since numbed limbs. After regulating his breathing for a moment, he looked up at the starlight in the skies, trying to determine cardinal directions. Earlier, the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets had sent him news: if he was able reach a farmhouse about thirty *li* away, then they would be able to deliver him to Great Yong's borders. After feeling that he had largely recovered his energy, he continued his journey.

Traveling in the dark was originally an extremely difficult matter. Huo Jicheng was already frightened from his past experiences and was overcautious as he traveled. He finally arrived at the small farmhouse at daybreak. This farmhouse was extremely remote, its surroundings completely deserted. Huo Jicheng monitored it for quite some time and only after determining that there wasn't an ambush did he step forward and knock on its door. The door opened. When the two fifteen-or sixteen-year-old youths saw that it was Huo Jicheng, they revealed looks of joy. Huo

Jicheng entered the farmhouse and saw the figure of Han Wuji.

Seeing Huo Jicheng, Han Wuji sighed. “Union Head Huo, why were you so obstinate? You were able succeed in your first raid. I had advised you to quickly withdraw. But you refused. Now that the Embroidered Union has been seriously damaged, what do you plan on doing?”

Huo Jicheng blushed with shame. “I only continued because my subordinates urged me onwards, thus falling into a trap. However, it doesn’t matter. The Embroidered Union still has half of its manpower on the outside. As long as I can find them, within three to five years, I will be able to make a comeback. I will have to request that you dispose of that batch of goods for me.”

Han Wuji smiled. “There is no need for me to dispose of it for you. I will purchase it at fifty percent of its value. Take the banknote with you when you go. Isn’t that better than leaving empty-handed?”[5]

Huo Jicheng delightedly asked, “Is Brother Han speaking the truth?”

Han Wuji answered, “Why would I deceive you? I will slowly sell that batch of goods. At the very least, I will not make a loss. Brother Huo, in order to rebuild the Embroidered Union, what can you do if you don’t have any money?”

Huo Jicheng clasped his hands and stated, “Many thanks to Brother Han for your generous friendship. If I can one day make a comeback, I will definitely not treat Brother Han unfairly.”

“The more friends one has, the more potential paths,” replied Han Wuji with a smile. “I am only listening to the Pavilion Master’s orders. Brother Huo, first take a bath and change. I have already prepared food and drink. After you have eaten your fill and changed into the clothes I have prepared for you, changed your appearance, and changed your identity using the identity documents that I have prepared for you, you will be able to strut out without fear.”

Huo Jicheng worriedly said, “However, the Fengyi Sect’s Wen Ziyan is pursuing me closely without letting up. How will she willingly give up?”

Han Wuji smiled. “Do not worry, Union Head. I have already prepared a

corpse to take Union Head's place. The corpse is in the room next door. Once the Union Head has departed, I will burn down this farmhouse, faking Union Head's death."

Huo Jicheng was moved, replying, "First let me take a look at its likeness."

Han Wuji pointed at a small door. Huo Jicheng opened the door and walked in. Inside, on the bed, was a corpse, its figure very similar to his own. With this, Huo Jicheng was relieved. It seemed like the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets had no intention to kick a man who was down.

After changing his clothes, he ravenously devoured the food until he was full and downed a cup of tea. He found that he could barely tolerate the aching of his entire body, presumably because of the exhaustion of journeying through the night. He wished that he could sleep for a while before continuing onwards. However, with them chasing from behind, Huo Jicheng could only say, "It seems that I should take my leave. This place is too unsafe."

Han Wuji smiled slightly and apologized, "I'm sorry, Union Head Huo, you won't be going anywhere."

Huo Jicheng was greatly alarmed. Just as he was about to jump to his feet, he could feel his two legs go weak. Strangely, he could not move a single step. With shock, he gazed at Han Wuji and asked, "Are you also seeking to betray me?"

"We are both people of Shu," replied Han Wuji coldly. "Although we don't have the strength to restore our state, we cannot slaughter our own people. As the Head of the Embroidered Union, how many people of Shu who have refused to join you have you harmed? Your crimes are uncountable."[6]

Huo Jicheng angrily replied, "What does this have to do with you? You have received quite a lot of benefits from me."

Han Wuji uncaringly replied, "That's true. We have relied on you for a lot. However, today, you are at an impasse.[7] We are completely unwilling to be implicated by you. You know of some of the matters regarding our Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets. Moreover, the Pavilion Master had issued an order long ago: to kill and silence you before the Fengyi Sect could find you. We

absolutely cannot allow the Fengyi Sect to learn that we are supporting you in the shadows."

Huo Jicheng shivered inside. Thinking that although he had been flush with success, the conducts and deeds were truly mostly his proposals. Could it be that he had become someone else's chess piece? He thought highly of himself,[8] and thinking this, he could not help but become madly enraged, his eyes almost popping out of their sockets.

Han Wuji smiled slightly and stated, "Union Head Huo, when you meet the Han Zhang couple in the underworld, be sure to beg for forgiveness. In addition, my young master wishes for me to communicate to you that young Miss Roulan is doing well."

Huo Jicheng finally understood and he replied, "You are taking revenge for Han Zhang?"

Han Wuji did not speak further, a dagger slipping out from his sleeves. Lightly brandishing it, he severed Huo Jicheng's throat. Once this wanton and berserk man's life was ended, his eyes still contained indignation and gnashing wrath. Han Wuji brought out a jade bottle, pouring the fine powder within onto Huo Jicheng's corpse. After a series of terrifying sounds, Huo Jicheng's body was completely dissolved, only leaving clothing, shoes, socks, and some scraps of other articles. Han Wuji indifferently said, "Shanzi, Quhuang, gather everything up. It is time for us to leave."

After Han Wuji led the two youths in eliminating all traces of their presence, he set fire to the farmhouse. Not long after they had departed, Wen Ziyan arrived. She had long ago noticed that someone had been eliminating Huo Jicheng's trail, creating several false trails and leading her down the wrong path. However, she was finally able to discover Huo Jicheng's real trail. Unfortunately, she arrived one step too late, only discovering a charred corpse. An indescribable coldness emanated from her eyes. On discovery of that corpse, because she arrived in time, the majority of the corpse had not been scorched. It was only the facial features that were completely burned away. Wen Ziyan smiled coldly. From this corpse's limbs, she could immediately tell that the body while living was not a martial artist. Huo Jicheng's desire to escape required her willingness to allow him

to do so.

Footnotes :

This is a poem by the Song Dynasty poet, Sima Chi (**司**马**池**), entitled *Circumstances of Departure* .

冷若冰霜, lengrubingshuang – idiom, lit. as cold as ice and frost; icy manner, frigid

扑面而来, pumian'erlai – idiom, lit. something hits one in the face; directly in one's face, something assaults the senses

卓文君, Zhuo Wenjun was a young widow who eloped with the famous Han Dynasty poet, Sima Xiangru. Her poems often complain about the inconstancy of male love.

两手空空, liangshoukongkong – idiom, lit. empty-handed; fig. not receiving anything

罄竹难书, qingzhunanshu – idiom, lit. so many that the bamboo slats have been exhausted; innumerable crimes

穷**途末路**, qiongtumolu – idiom, lit. the path exhausted, the end of the road; an impasse, in a plight with no way out

自视**甚高**, zishishengao – idiom, lit. to think highly of oneself; giving oneself airs; arrogant and self-important

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 30: Silencing Witnesses

Volume 2, Chapter 30: Silencing Witnesses

Within the Prince of Yong's residence's Cold Courtyard, I had a brocade gown draped over my shoulders as I sat within the pavilion. All the spring flowers had already blossomed, the trees verdant and lush, making the entire courtyard refined and exquisite. After rising from bed at daybreak to appreciate the morning sun, Xiaoshunzi was worried that I would catch a cold and insisted that I drape a brocade gown over my shoulders. As I gazed upon the rising sun and the reddish clouds, there was only one matter, or rather one person, on my mind.

Witnessing my silence, Xiaoshunzi had already dismissed the imperial bodyguards in the surrounding area. Walking close to my side, he softly inquired, "Is young master still bothered by what His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, said?"

I responded with a soft sigh, "Xiaoshunzi, tell me … is Princess Changle really interested in me? How was I never aware of it?"

Xiaoshunzi laughed gently and replied, "Young master, you have never interacted intimately with young women. On a daily basis, you're either reading books or appreciating beautiful scenery. In the situation between you and the late mistress, it was the mistress who took the initiative. Her Imperial Highness's temperament is dignified and pure, and she has never revealed her true feelings. It is no surprise that young master does not know this. From what I can tell, the Princess truly has feelings for you, otherwise she would not surround herself on a daily basis with young master's poetry. I also believe that the Princess knows a bit about what happened in Southern Chu, and yet she has not informed anyone. Moreover, were it not for the half a root's worth of Ningpo figwort from the Princess, young master would have died long ago.

"I would not believe it if the Princess did not have any affection for you. However, the Princess probably has the same mindset as you. Therefore,

she has never been willing to reveal her feelings. Young master, don't you also treat the Princess differently? All this, Xiaoshunzi has seen bit by bit. However, you two are obstructed by the relationship between liege and vassal, therefore neither of you have ever been willing to express your true feelings."

I placidly glanced at Xiaoshunzi and asked, "Are you blaming me for refusing to accept the Princess because of the harm it would do to my reputation?"

Xiaoshunzi fell silent and did not speak, clearly tacitly agreeing. I sighed and stated, "How am I, Jiang Zhe, someone who cherishes my reputation? It is only that there are some things that absolutely cannot be done. My responses to Qin Qing's accusations did not contain a single shred of falsehood. The status between the Princess and me is completely different. However, I am not rejecting this marriage because of this reason. If I truly only had eyes for her, there is nothing that would stop me. However, you must know that the Princess has not made a single statement expressing her willingness to marry me. This means that although the Princess has feelings towards me, she will absolutely not defy etiquette and rites. This being the case, how can I follow the Prince of Yong's intentions and propose? But if I were to do this, wouldn't it besmirch the Princess's reputation? Although there won't be many who dare to say this clearly, due to the prestige and dignity of the imperial clan, but the brush is merciless. I do not want the Princess to leave behind a bad reputation in the histories. What's more, I have only had the fortune of meeting the Princess a mere few times. How can I know whether the Princess truly loves the entirety of my person?"

In a low voice, Xiaoshunzi replied, "Young master speaks the truth. It is this servant who misunderstood."

I serenly replied, "These are only spoken from personal considerations. If we consider this from an official viewpoint, I am a surrendered subject from Southern Chu. What qualifications do I have to take the Princess as my wife? Even if the Yong Emperor agrees to my face, he'll dispatch someone to have me commit suicide in the blink of an eye. Although the Yong Emperor allows the Princess to make her choice, he probably only wishes for the Princess to

marry one of Great Yong's elites. Moreover, if I were to do such a thing right now, I would likely harm the Prince of Yong. How can I be someone who shirks official business for private considerations? Moreover, you more than anyone, knows the condition of my health. If I were to meet with any misfortune, how could the Princess endure it?"

Xiaoshunzi did not make a single sound. It was a sometime before he stated, "This servant only wishes that young master will not spend the entirety of your life alone."

I smiled slightly and replied, "When we have ensured the ascension of the Prince of Yong to the throne and avenged the murder of my wife, I will let everything go. When the time comes, if my health improves, I will take a virtuous woman as my wife. How about it?"

Xiaoshunzi smiled and agreed, "Of course that's good. This servant can't wait for there to be a mistress,[1] and afterwards have a few young masters."

"The Prince of Yong probably has thought it through these last few days, thus not coming to force me to do anything," I guessed, exhaling softly and collapsing into the chair. I asked, "That's right, how is the situation outside?"

Xiaoshunzi revealed an odd look as he inquired, "Does young master wish to hear the good news or the bad news?"

"The bad news first," I replied with a wry smile.

"The bad news is that something major has occurred in the capital," said Xiaoshunzi. "At present, everyone is going to watch the fun and no one is paying attention to the Crown Prince's activities."

My brows furrowed, as I asked, "What has happened to divert all of the attention away?"

Xiaoshunzi answered, "This matter was originally a *jianghu* affair. Young master knows about the Guanzhong Alliance, right?"

I responded, "I remember, the Alliance Head is Sha Qingyuan. His daughter, Sha Zhijing is a disciple of the Fengyi Sect. They are the biggest *jianghu* faction in Chang'an."

Xiaoshunzi confirmed, "That's right, young master met them once. A few

days ago, Sha Zhijing went to Xianyang[2] to visit her maternal grandmother and had actually been killed. Reportedly, she died gruesomely. No matter how poor the martial arts of a disciple of the Fengyi Sect, they had all trained in the martial art called 'Falling Jade Killing Technique.' This martial art had been personally created by Fan Huiyao and was based entirely on the supple flexibility of a woman's body. In close combat, it was completely unscrupulous and was used by the disciples when they faced a strong opponent who they could not escape from. Even if they could defeat their opponent, the result would be mutual destruction. If that was not capable, then the martial art would allow the disciple to commit suicide. Thinking back, it truly is a shame. Liang Wan feared injuring the Princess so did not dare to act blindly, thus not using this martial art. In short, with Sha Zhijing's death, both the Guanzhong Alliance and the Fengyi Sect are chasing after her killer. As for the killer, he has continued to commit crimes. Over the last dozen or so days, quite a few unbetrothed women have died in the area around Xianyang. The killer, however, has left behind clues."

I said, "If that's the case, based upon the power of the Fengyi Sect and the Guanzhong Alliance, this man should have been captured and executed long ago."

Xiaoshunzi shook his head. "Initially, as the Fengyi Sect's main force had not yet arrived, this person wreaked havoc in the Xianyang area without any fear. By the time the Fengyi Sect's manpower arrived, the criminal had already escaped without a trace."

I frowned and inquired, "How did this matter elicit the attention of the court ministers?"

Xiaoshunzi smiled wryly and responded, "All of the dead women had signs of being raped and their virginity taken. Therefore, the members of *jianghu* all suspect that the Devil Sect has returned to the Central Plains. That year when the Devil Sect Sovereign Jing Wuji withdrew north to the desert, the disciples of the Devil Sect followed. Those who did not depart went into hiding. One of the branches of the Devil Sect, the Pitying Fragrance Faction, specializes in taking women's virginities. If the Devil Sect has reappeared, then it is likely that Jing Wuji may return to the Central Plains. Now that he

is the State Mentor of Northern Han, his return from retirement can symbolize Northern Han on the verge of launching a large-scale invasion. If this is the case, how can the civil and military officials of the court not be concerned? Therefore, at present, no one remembers the affairs relating to the Embroidered Union."

I subconsciously fanned the folding fan in my hands, asking, "What do you think?"

Xiaoshunzi answered, "I don't find it strange that there are some Devil Sect disciples who remained behind in the Central Plains. I would find it strange if they were not present. Moreover, the movements of the members of the Devil Sect are concealed. Although there have been rumors of their whereabouts these last several years, all of it seems to be groundless.[3] Therefore, I believe that the Fengyi Sect is using this as a pretext to make a fuss, drawing away everyone's attention."

I smiled coldly and replied, "The Devil Sect's strength has already attached itself to Northern Han. Jing Wuji wishes to continue to compete with Fan Huiyao. However, there is no meaning to compare martial arts. It's likely that victory or defeat between them will be based upon who can unify the world. As soon as something happens to the Crown Prince, the Devil Sect appears. What a coincidence! Since this is the case, I will join in on the fun. Xiaoshunzi, do you know what the Minister of Revenue, Liang Jinqian is doing right now?"

Xiaoshunzi answered, "He is currently atoning for his crimes. However, according to the Prince of Yong's intelligence, the Crown Prince is preparing to take over his power. Liang Jinqian has already been placed under house arrest."

I smiled slightly and inquired, "Has Han Wuji settled the matter relating to Huo Jicheng?"

Xiaoshunzi smiled. "This is exactly the good news that I needed to inform young master. Huo Jicheng has disappeared. However, we left behind a fake corpse. Trying to cover it up will only make it more conspicuous. At present, both the Fengyi Sect and the Crown Prince are chasing after him. However,

he has disappeared without a trace. The Secret Camp has already delivered Huo Jicheng's proof of identity."

"If that's the case, then you go personally handle the matter," I said, rising to my feet. "Go kill Liang Jinqian. Do not act physically; use poison. If this happens then what do you think everyone will think?"

With an odd expression on his face, Xiaoshunzi replied, "Naturally it would be that the Crown Prince killed Liang Jinqian to silence him. Young master's plan is truly vicious and ruthless."

"That is exactly my intention," I stated with a smile. "I have another matter that I want you to handle. Huo Jicheng will not truly die. Although he is physically dead, he still remains alive in the hearts and minds of the people. That is his remuneration for the million taels of silver he helped me earn. Be sure to not sully his good name."

Holding back laughter, Xiaoshunzi agreed, "Do not worry, young master. I will definitely transform Huo Jicheng into the Crown Prince's nightmare."

I warned him, "Be sure to be careful. If your identity is exposed, then I will be in dire straits."

Xiaoshunzi gravely replied, "Do not worry. If I am no match, I'll just run. I will definitely not allow them to capture me."

I was still a bit anxious. However, after recalling that I could arrange for Jing Chi and Zhangsun Ji to provide support, I no longer worried. Just as I was about to exhort a few more words, even if Xiaoshunzi would blame me for being long-winded, I heard the sound of footsteps approach from a distance. From the sound, I could tell that the Prince of Yong had arrived. He had probably come to apologize. Nevertheless, I still had to give him a way out of the embarrassing situation.[4] Waving my hand to have Xiaoshunzi withdraw, I waited for the Prince of Yong to arrive. However, when I saw the Prince of Yong, his face carried a difficult to explain distress. My heart jumped and I asked, "Your Imperial Highness, why are you so sad?"

Li Zhi replied in an agonized voice, "Today, Imperial Sister was determined to leave the palace to pursue purity in the Dustless Nunnery. Imperial Father and Noble Consort Zhangsun could not convince her otherwise and

could only give their consent, only prohibiting her from taking vows and becoming a nun."

My heart shook, and I was unable to say a single word. Gazing at the Prince of Yong's fervent gaze, I could only softly respond, "Your Imperial Highness, marriages cannot be forced. The Princess's wholehearted prayers to the Buddha are probably the only way for her to peacefully and joyfully spend her life."

Li Zhi let out a soft sigh, saying, "Let's not speak of this…. As long as Imperial Sister does not take her vows, there will be room to save the situation in the future. What should our next step be? The marriage between Qin Qing and the Princess of Jingjiang has caused me to be greatly disappointed."

I smiled reassuringly. "There is no need for Your Imperial Highness to be overly worried. The only thing that we can do at present is letting Your Imperial Highness treat the Qin family with proper courtesy, otherwise it won't be good if they join the Crown Prince's faction. I believe that Grand General Qin will not be so unwise. The Qin family has several other young sons."

Li Zhi's eyes brightened. Without him speaking, I knew that he would handle this situation better than I could. At this moment, I caught sight of Jing Chi's figure surreptitiously sneaking back into the courtyard. Presumably, he had slipped out last night, having been stifled by his stay in the Cold Courtyard. I had originally intended to pretend that I did not notice his return, but after thinking it over, I called out, "General Jing, why aren't you coming over to pay your respects to His Imperial Highness?"

Jing Chi stopped sneaking about and walked over. Following etiquette, he paid his respects to the Prince of Yong. I smiled and stated, "His Imperial Highness wants you to compose a poem. What do you think?"

Jing Chi's jaw dropped, not knowing what he could do. With a laugh, the Prince of Yong declared, "I have heard that you have learned how to compose poetry. This Prince is very interested. How about this? This Prince will choose a topic. Oh, that's right! Where did you go just now?"

Jing Chi awkwardly responded, “This general went out to gamble last night. I have returned now to go to sleep.”

Li Zhi glared at him and suggested, “How about this? Compose a poem using sleep as the topic.”

Jing Chi racked his brains for some time before responding with one line: “The Buddha sleeps well.”

Li Zhi chuckled and replied, “This is truly interesting. It seems that you have seen the reclining Buddha at the Great Transformation Temple.”

Jing Chi promptly confirmed, “That’s right. Yesterday, this general went out with General Zhangsun and went to the Great Transformation Temple. Because the hour was too late, we did not return.”

I smiled and spoke, “All right. There is no need to explain further. Continue composing the poem. If you can compose a poem, I will spare you. Otherwise, I will have you copy the *Art of War* for the entire day.”

Jing Chi promptly said, “I’ve got it … With one rest, a hundred matters resolved. / I desire to mimic him and sleep.” Reciting to this point, he could not think of the final line, no matter how he racked his brains.

Li Zhi smiled and observed, “Although the second line is somewhat like a humorous poem, it can barely be considered as acceptable. What is the last line? Jing Chi, if you can’t compose it, Sir Jiang will lose the bet.”

Jing Chi immediately felt dizzy. He knew that if Sir Jiang lost today, then he would have no chance to catch up on his sleep. But no matter how he thought, he could not think of a final line, only causing his brow to be beaded with sweat. Li Zhi smiled slightly and comforted, “It’s no matter if you can’t come up with the last line. As a general, you’re not bad at pacifying the world, but you probably aren’t capable of composing poetry.”

At this moment, Jing Chi was struck by a spark of inspiration, recalling all the times that Jiang Zhe lectured him, Jiang Zhe would frequently mention, “pacify the world, sweep away the warning smoke.” He thus recited, “No one heeds the warning smoke.”

Both Li Zhi and I could not help but stare blankly at him. In reality, I had no

expectations of winning this bet with the Prince of Yong. I didn't expect that Jing Chi could actually compose a poem. Li Zhi recited the poem,

"The Buddha sleeps well,
With one rest, a hundred matters resolved.I desire to mimic him and sleep,No one heeds the warning smoke."

"Good, good. This last verse turns something crude into a literary gem[5] and shows the poet's inherent heroism. This Prince wholeheartedly admits defeat." Finished speaking, he removed the jade pendant from his waist and said, "Suiyun, Li Zhi completely admits defeat. Able to teach Jing Chi how to compose poetry in half a month—truly formidable."

I accepted the jade pendant, a faint, wry smile on my lips, as I replied, "Jing Chi, this jade pendant was lost to me by His Imperial Highness. I will borrow it to gift it to you.[6] If you weren't able to compose this poem, the loser would have been me."

Jing Chi respectfully accepted the jade pendant. "Many thanks to Sir for your reward."

I smiled gently, shaking my head. What could I say? Who could have thought that this coarse general would cause me to sit up and take notice? Originally, I had intended to deliberately lose to the Prince of Yong, gifting the Prince of Yong this protective belt of mine. It seemed like I could not do so this time.

***

In the Eternal Serenity Neighborhood, the Minister of Revenue, Liang Jinqian gazed at the lonesome lamp, filled with distress and terror. He was an old fox who had bobbed up and down for many years in the waters of officialdom. How could he not see his desperate straits? Ever since the Ministry of Revenue smuggling case was exposed, he had immediately understood what was going on. What bullshit about Cui Yang investigating the smuggling? He was basically acting under the crown prince's orders to smuggle. In addition, he had been completely excluded from the beginning. Although he was not dismissed from his post after the situation came to light, once he saw that the crown prince was hurrying to take over his

power and authority, he knew that the end drew nigh. He did not want to be resigned to his fate, strongly desiring to use his secret accounts to accuse the crown prince of embezzlement. However, whenever he recalled the profound relationship between father and son, he became completely discouraged. More terrifying was that as he tried to figure out why the crown prince was abandoning him, he realized that he had not seen his younger brother-in-law for quite some time. He inwardly trembled. Examining his secret accounts, he discovered that all of his secret markings had disappeared without a trace. At this moment, he really felt as if a bucket of ice-cold water poured over his body. He trembled without stop. Thinking of how his wife, concubines, and children would not be able to escape after his death, he truly wished that he could flee immediately. However, the entire world belonged to the emperor. Where would he be able to escape to?

Before he could think of an escape plan, assassins from the Fengyi Sect had already arrived by his side. One was a woman in plain, unadorned clothing. Although her appearance was beautiful, her entire body exuded a dense killing aura. Gazing at this woman, while holding his beloved youngest son in his arms, Liang Jinqian surrendered. In accordance with her orders, he handed over all of his authority and power. Right now, he was completely worthless and was placed under house arrest in his home by the crown prince. Presumably in a few days, after the situation had calmed down, he would be punished for the crime of smuggling military equipment and be executed. Even if he was demoted to become a commoner, he would still die when leaving the capital. He truly didn't mind dying. This entire life, he had enjoyed prestige and great wealth, enjoying money and women. However, his death wasn't important. What would happen to his family? After only half a month, all his hair turned white. His originally well-maintained appearance became aged and haggard.

Just as he was racking his brains, the door to his room suddenly opened softly. A man in black entered. When Liang Jinqian saw this man's arrival, he was not surprised and unemotionally stated, "Are you here to take my life? This old man has been waiting for some time now. In reality, that lady has been residing in my inner residence for some time. Wouldn't it be simpler to have her kill me?"

The man in black closed the door and asked, “If you simply die, you will implicate your family. Do you not want to resist?”

Liang Jinqian’s heart jumped. This man’s feminine voice was pleasant to hear and did not seem to be the voice of an ordinary person. Liang Jinqian raised his head and gazed at the man in black’s face. The man’s face was covered with a black cloth, only revealing a pair of bone-chillingly icy eyes. Liang Jinqian slowly spoke, “How does this old man not know this? However, I have fallen deep into the trap and do not have the strength to struggle.”

That man lightly removed the cloth covering his face, revealing a face that was as cold as ice. The man smiled gently and expressed, “One’s death can be unimportant[7] or highly significant.[8] If you die legally, then you would not only implicate your family members, but would also benefit the crafty villains. If you are willing to commit suicide, I can promise you that your family will be able to peacefully live the rest of their lives. In the future, if your sons or grandsons are capable enough, they will be allowed to attain scholarly honors.”

Liang Jinqian’s eyes brightened. If he were to commit suicide, then perhaps those people wouldn’t make things difficult for his family. However, how would their survival be guaranteed? He truly did not trust the crown prince. After a good while, he responded, “You are in the service of His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince. If I were to commit suicide, could you truly have the Crown Prince let my family off?” His words were filled with doubt.

That man laughed lightly and replied, “The Crown Prince’s promises cannot be guaranteed. But do you believe in the Prince of Yong’s promises?”

Liang Jinqian was greatly surprised, as he stuttered, “You … You serve His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong?”

That man calmly replied, “His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, knows that you have done much for the Crown Prince. However, the Crown Prince is preparing to completely abandon you. Your family members, especially your children, will be buried with you. If you are willing to commit suicide, His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, will arrange for

them to settle in Youzhou. His Imperial Highness's words carry enormous weight,[9] and will not try to deceive you."

Liang Jinqian's mind turned before he finally answered, "I trust in the sincerity of His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong. If this old man had long ago followed His Imperial Highness, then I would not have fallen into today's straits." Finished speaking, he retrieved a newly ink-stained volume and said, "This old man once recorded an account of all of the funds that the Crown Prince had embezzled from the Ministry of Revenue. However, it has been taken away. These last few days, I have recorded from memory what I can remember. I hope this will be of use to His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong."

That man accepted the volume and gravely stated, "His Imperial Highness will be grateful for your diligence. This is red arsenic.[10] You will definitely not feel any pain. I know that you wish to say your goodbyes to your family, but I cannot take any risks. Therefore, I can only trouble you. If you have any last words, you can write them down."

Liang Jinqian smiled slightly. Picking up a brush, he wrote a short message. Not bothering to seal it, he handed it to his unexpected visitor. Afterwards, he laughed and said, "Whenever a ranking minister of our imperial court has committed a capital offense, the Emperor would frequently bestow red arsenic. His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, is truly a shrew individual. Please inform His Imperial Highness that this subject believes in his promises." Finished speaking, he drained the poison in one gulp. In an instant, he began to bleed from all small apertures on his head and died.

The man glanced at Liang Jinqian's note. Upon it was straightforwardly written two lines:

Greedily coveting money and thus lost one's good reputation,
Loving power and influence and thus lost one's life.

—Liang Jinqian's last words, second day of the sixth month of the twenty-fourth year of Wuwei, the eleventh year of the sixty-year cycle

Footnotes :

主母, zhumu – lit. mistress of the household

咸阳, Xianyang was the former capital of the Qin Dynasty and was a county just outside of Chang'an; currently a prefecture in modern-day Shaanxi Province
捕风捉影, bufengzhuoying – idiom, it. chasing the wind and clutching at shadow; fig. groundless accusations
台阶, taijie – lit. steps, flight of steps; fig. way out of an embarrassing situation
点石成金, dianshichengjin – idiom, lit. to touch stone and turn it to gold; fig. to turn crude writing into a literary gem
借花献佛, jiehuaxian'fo – idiom, lit. presenting the Buddha with borrowed flowers; fig. to win favor or influence using somebody else's property
轻于鸿毛, qingyuhongmao – idiom, lit. light as a goose feather; trifling, unimportant
重于泰山, zhongyu'Taishan – idiom, lit. heavier than Mt. Tai; fig. extremely serious matter
一言九鼎, yiyanjiuding – idiom, lit. one's words worth nine sacred tripods; fig. words of enormous weight, trustworthy
White arsenic with sulfide impurities, causing it to appear red

Volume 3: Battle Over Succession

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 1: Hidden Waves Surging

Volume 3, Chapter 1: Hidden Waves Surging

In the twenty-fifth year of Great Yong's Wuwei era, the twelfth year of the sixty-year cycle, after the affair regarding the Ministry of Revenue, all levels of Yong society were silent, serenely waiting for the storm to come. Under the pretext of illness, Taizong excused himself from court, never leaving his home.—*Yong Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Taizong*

In the second year of Southern Chu's Tongtai, the twelfth year of the sixty-year cycle, Jiang Zhe gradually recovered from his injury. At this moment, although the court seemed to be peaceful, everyone was waiting on the beginning of the succession battle. In charge of this matter from the Prince of Yong, Jiang Zhe could only bear with it.—*Southern Chu Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Jiang Suiyun*

The scenes of springtime were warm and harmonious, the breeze gentle. The area within the Cold Courtyard was covered by shady foliage. Since last year's incident in the Ministry of Revenue and the sudden death of the Minister of Revenue, Liang Jinqian, the situation suddenly became confusingly calm. Yong Emperor Li Yuan continuously issued edicts, either dismissing, demoting, or fining all of the officials in the Ministry of Revenue. After the ministry was purged, the new Minister of Revenue, Han De of Sanyuan,[1] was appointed, a bureaucrat who had spent years in the ministry. As he had not passed the imperial examinations nor had any accomplishments, he was never able to reach his aspirations for many years. During the latest investigation into the accounts of the Ministry of Revenue, it was only his accounts that were the clearest. Therefore, Li Yuan promoted him several grades to become the Minister. Han De was impartial and unbiased, valuing only the emperor. As such, the crown prince did not dare to disrespect him. Although the crown prince once again inserted many of his people into the ministry, it no longer completely obeyed his commands.

During the fifth month last year, the appearance of disciples of the Devil

Sect in Xianyang caused alarm in the entire world. Ultimately, that rapist was captured by the Fengyi Sect. The man captured claimed that he was unhappy with the sovereign's decision to leave the Central Plains, and would frequently return to the Central Plains to stir up trouble. After the Fengyi Sect executed the man, they delivered his remains to Northern Han. The Sovereign of the Devil Sect, Jing Wuji was completely indifferent, not bothering to raise difficult questions and not apologizing. As a result, this matter was ended without a conclusion.

Afterwards, an unprecedented calm happened to Great Yong's political situation. Every day, the crown prince adhered to a routine, only handling administrative duties. Aside from not relinquishing military matters, the Prince of Yong simply stayed in his residence, single-mindedly focused on reading. He not only did not associate with the ministers of the court, he made no efforts to attract new, virtuous subordinates. His only action was delivering some of the poor scholars who failed the imperial examinations to Youzhou to become officials. Li Yuan had allowed Youzhou to autonomously choose its officials, and therefore did not meddle. These individuals weren't incomparable geniuses, and as such the crown prince's faction were unwilling to become hostile over such a small matter. Both sides concealed their strengths and bided their time. As a result, Great Yong entered a period of unprecedented calm and tranquility. However, those who used their heads knew that this was only the calm before the storm. The relationship between the crown prince and the Prince of Yong had reached a point where neither could permit the other to live.

For the time being, regardless of the storm outside, within the Cold Courtyard, a marvelous scene had appeared. Within the pavilion, the Prince of Yong was leisurely looking at a chessboard. Seated opposite him was Xiaoshunzi, placing a piece with a calm expression before indicating that it was the Prince of Yong's turn. Outside the pavilion, a white-clothed scholar was on all fours on the lawn, playing the role of a mount. Seated on him was a young girl dressed in red. In a tender and loving voice, she called out, "Daddy, faster!"

Over this year of rest and convalesce, I had already completely recovered.

Although I still seemed weak and frail, I was radiant and all smiles, no longer looking like I would die at any moment. But after spending around a quarter of an hour pretending to be a mount, I was already panting for breath. I could only beg for mercy, “Lanlan, daddy can’t go on. Surely, you don’t want to exhaust daddy such that there will be no one to read Brother Jun’s letter to you?”

Roulan’s black eyes rolled for a moment before she finally agreed, sliding off my back. In a small voice, she said, “Daddy, I want to go see the Princess.”

I smiled and replied, “Not today. After a few days, when the Princess of Yong goes to see Princess Changle, I’ll ask her to bring you along.”

Roulan pouted. “Didn’t the Princess say that Lan’er can frequently go see her?”

A slightly wry smile appeared on my face. This wasn’t something that we had the final say on. After the princess retreated to meditate at the Dustless Nunnery, her marriage to Wei Ying was delayed. Although the emperor did not cancel the engagement, he also did not force the princess to complete the marriage. The only one who suffered was Wei Ying. He did not dare to take a wife nor did he dare to ask that his betrothal to Changle be completed. Rumors about the princess and I were circulated for some time. But as the princess and me never met, and without the crown prince adding fuel to the fire, the Prince of Yong was able to suppress the rumors, causing them to vanish like smoke. After all, no one wished to force the uninvolved Princess Changle to become embroiled in the succession dispute. Furthermore, no one dared to provoke Li Yuan’s anger, and thus these rumors were quickly forgotten.

In reality, I believed that the Yong emperor had heard some of the rumors. However, since there was no love affair between Changle and me, and we never met, I could not be punished for Changle’s possible feelings. Therefore, over this year, I spent the time quite comfortably. It was only that I would frequently think of Princess Changle, recalling the two times that we had met. The Princess of Yong would frequently go to see Princess Changle. Roulan would frequently be brought along by the Princess of Yong. This small detail did not elicit any unwanted attention. Everyone knew that

the Princess of Yong treated Roulan as her own. Everyone knew that the heir, Li Jun, was in Youzhou. Every month, Youzhou would dispatch a messenger back to the capital to report. The messenger was bound to bring back toys for the young girl and a letter. Therefore, Roulan's appearance in the palace had become expected. Princess Changle's love for Roulan was thought of by everyone as due to her own lack of children and thus liked my little girl. Although there were those who thought that involvement with someone also meant involvement with their connections,[2] no one dared to bring this matter up. Matters derived from the imagination could not be brought to light. In addition, in order to see Roulan, Princess Changle would spend half the time in the palace. After all, it was normal for the Princess of Yong to enter the palace to pay her respects to the empress and the noble consorts. However, if the Princess of Yong went to the nunnery to see Changle, it would cause people to worry whether Changle was becoming close to the Prince of Yong. As a result, even Noble Consort Zhangsun loved Roulan dearly, going so far as to allow Roulan to stay in the palace for several days. Roulan had even met Yong Emperor Li Yuan. Li Yuan was quite fond of this clever and naughty little girl. With this, no one dared to gossip and meddle.

Although I did not meet with Princess Changle during this year and had no intention of asking if she loved me, I could not help but have the Princess of Yong pass my newly composed poetry to Princess Changle. She did not respond, only bestowing jade pendants and protective talismans to Roulan. From the Princess of Yong, I learned that over this year, Princess Changle's complexion had greatly improved, and would not only frequently laugh happily, but was also cheerful before the Yong emperor and Noble Consort Zhangsun. Seeing their daughter like this, they no longer felt anxious to compel her to get married and cause her to become gloomy and unhappy.

If there was anything that caused Princess Changle unhappiness, it was probably Wei Ying's advances that used gentle and tender sentiment. Wei Ying was earnest and sincere towards the princess. Although he was disappointed at the princess's refusal to get married, he would frequently send over small presents and books or top-notch brushes and ink-stones to try and win over this beautiful woman. Wei Ying's tender steadiness in

trying to win Changle's affection little by little caused the emperor and Noble Consort Zhangsun to become extremely touched. Although Princess Changle was not moved, Wei Ying's refinement and elegance, lack of menace, and thorough courtesy caused the gentle princess to become unwilling to harshly reject him. As a result, she was only indifferent and distant. However, the Yong emperor and Noble Consort Zhangsun both looked favorably upon their union. Thus, Princess Changle would often have "chance" encounters with Wei Ying.

Earlier, after considering Wei Ying's stubborn infatuation, I realized that there was no harm for me to become colder. If the princess had a compatible match, I would no longer have to worry. As a result, I did not permit Roulan to enter the palace for more than a month. Surprisingly, the Princess of Yong quickly informed me that Princess Changle's mood was poor and had once again moved to the nunnery. If under these circumstances I did not understand Princess Changle's intentions, then I must probably be the world's greatest idiot. As a result, I no longer prohibited Roulan from entering the palace. Although the princess and I never met, I was always able to feel a strange warmth in my heart. Although we were so close and yet so far apart, I did not feel that we were disconnected.

Regardless, I finally was able to get Roulan off my back. What was hilarious was that Roulan had yet to be taught how to read. When Li Jun's letters arrived one by one, I would burst out with laughter whenever my daughter held the letters in her hand that she could not understand and beg me to teach her how to read. Even if I taught her to read and write, it would probably take two years before she would be able to understand the contents of these letters. Without any other choice, I could only read them to her. In reality, there was nothing about their contents, only talking about the comings and goings of the heir. It was only that this Li Jun was quite articulate. Every single time, Roulan would raise a ruckus and want to go to Youzhou to play. Fortunately, these never lasted too long. Although Roulan was still small, she was shy at heart and would absolutely not allow anyone else to see the contents of the letters, only allowing me to read them for her. As a result, I was able to use this as leverage to let me off. I had already decided to put off teaching her to read and write, otherwise I would lose this

trump card.

Seeing that I had finally risen to my feet and was bringing Roulan towards the pavilion, Li Zhi smiled and observed, “Suiyun, you’ve come. All right, let this game end like this.”

I looked at the chessboard, seeing Li Zhi’s pieces already broken and in complete disorder, I smiled and stated, “Everyone states those who are gracious are good commanders. If this were the battlefield, Xiaoshunzi would surely lose. But with this game, Your Imperial Highness can only concede defeat.”

Expressionlessly, Xiaoshunzi collected the pieces and chessboard, uninterested in agreeing with me, only giving me a teasing look. I could not help but touch my nose. Truthfully, if I were to play with him, this little fellow could give me a three stone handicap. Sitting down, I picked up a teacup. Xiaoshunzi had already handed Roulan over to the Princess of Yong’s maids to send her back. I felt my entire body ache from head to toe. After downing the cup of hot tea, I could feel my vigor restore and could not help but let out a comfortable groan.

Li Zhi smiled and said, “Yesterday, Qin Qing impeached the Commander of the Northern Barracks of the Imperial Guard, Pei Yun, stating that his household is a mess.”

I smiled slightly and replied, “This is probably Li Hanyou’s idea, right? Qin Qing completely listens to his wife now.”

The persons who were the most well-regarded over this last year were probably Qin Qing and Li Hanyou. Half a year ago, she had been married to Qin Qing. After the wedding, Qin Qing had been promoted to become the Chief Commander of the Imperial Guard. Though this was an empty position, as the reality was that the Imperial Guard was controlled by the Grand General Who Suppresses Distant Lands. However, as Qin Yi’s eldest son, no one could compare with Qin Qing. Although Qin Yi had not relinquished his power and authority, Qin Qing had the authority to mobilize a section of the Imperial Guard. At present, Qin Qing had become one of Great Yong’s most reputable young generals, while Princess Li

Hanyou of Jingjiang had the status of an imperial princess and was a disciple of the Fengyi Sect. Although her marriage prevented her from becoming a disciple of the Internal Hall of the Fengyi Sect, her position in the Fengyi Sect was still very high. This couple would naturally be the focus of everyone. What was rarer was that they were extremely affectionate, causing the entire Great Yong to become very envious.

Li Zhi humorlessly smiled and related, “A few days ago, Pei Yun formally brought his beloved concubine into his household, while his wife proper received a letter of divorce. It is no wonder that Li Hanyou is indignant. Lady Pei, Xue Qiuxue is a disciple of the Fengyi Sect. Reportedly, she is as close as sisters to Li Hanyou.”

Picking up the teacup, I calmly stated, “This can only be blamed on that woman for being stupid. Pei Yun clearly did not wish to marry her. That day when Pei Yun went to the Xue residence to ask for forgiveness, he already spoke quite clearly, indicating that he had a pregnant concubine. If the Xue family was willing to cancel the betrothal, he was willing to pay the price. But that Lady Xue was determined to marry into the Pei family. That, in itself, isn’t much. If that woman adhered to the traditional duties of a wife, Pei Yun would have been able to accept her after some time, as he is a good and honest man. However, she wasn’t experienced enough and she was too hasty, causing Pei Yun to remain at a distance. But now that she has tried to harm the concubine and newborn infant, Pei Yun would have killed her if it weren’t for the Fengyi Sect. Fortunately, this matter was discovered early, otherwise it would have been two lives lost. However, Qin Qing’s criticism is also within reason. Whatever happened, this can definitely be considered as a mess in one’s household.”

“If this happens, then the Fengyi Sect would naturally refuse to let matters lie,” anticipated Li Zhi. “Although they cannot directly interfere due to the rules and customs governing human relations, they can criticize Pei Yun for turning a cold shoulder to his wife proper. As a result, the Fengyi Sect has already quarreled several times with the Shaolin Temple.”

“Although their arguments are correct,” I replied with a smile, “However, the Shaolin Temple basically tacitly accepted Pei Yun’s conduct. Pei Yun is a

carefully selected disciple of the Shaolin Temple. They would definitely not be willing to allow Pei Yun to have any relationship with the Fengyi Sect."

Li Zhi nodded his head. "Be that as it may, the Shaolin Temple will not fall out with the Fengyi Sect. Although the Fengyi Sect cannot openly trouble Pei Yun, Li Hanyou can still make things difficult for Pei Yun through Qin Qing. What do you think we should do? Pei Yun is a nail that you planted in the Imperial Guard with great difficulty. We cannot casually abandon him."

Shaking my head, I responded, "Your Imperial Highness is overly praising me. I was only the guide. The only person who was able to cause Pei Yun to loyally serve Your Imperial Highness was Your Imperial Highness yourself. Since time immemorial, capable subjects seek their lord. If it were not for Your Imperal Highness's benevolence, righteousness, and sagacity, how would Pei Yun be willing to pledge his allegiance? This time, Your Imperial Highness must take action to help him, and cause the Shaolin Temple to truly support Your Imperial Highness. Before, the Shaolin Temple was willing to cooperate with Your Imperial Highness against the Fengyi Sect. However, due to the Emperor and the Crown Prince, they could only do so secretly. This time, the Fengyi Sect is being excessively arrogant and will likely infuriate the Shaolin Temple. This is exactly Your Imperial Highness's opportunity."

Li Zhi sighed. "Suiyun, this Prince admires you greatly. Your actions from a year ago caused those with knowledge and experience in Great Yong to see clearly the Crown Prince's true face. Although they have yet to make up their minds and support me, they have all become neutral. Before, many people supported the Crown Prince because he was the heir apparent and because he had not displayed any outward signs of indecency. As a result, even if they felt that this Prince was wise and capable, they always me lukewarmly. Now, even though this Prince followed your advice and does not casually attracting talents, this Prince can feel that they are even more willing to become close to my household. It has only been a little over a year and you have helped this Prince completely reverse the situation. This Prince does not know how to thank you."

"This is also because Your Imperial Highness is willing to listen to my

advice," I acknowledged gently. "I advised Your Imperial Highness to conceal your strength and bide your time. Your Imperial Highness cheerfully agreed. Over this year, Your Imperial Highness has not made any abnormal moves. As a result, the Crown Prince cannot use Your Imperial Highness's heavy meritorious service to attack you. His attempts at making things difficult for Your Imperial Highness actually caused others to feel sympathy. In addition, Shi Yu, in Youzhou, has followed Your Imperial Highness's commands to select officials. Everyone believes that he is doing so for Your Imperial Highness's fief. At present, Your Imperial Highness has innumerable civil and military officials under your command, and can already begin to realize Your Imperial Highness's grand ambitions. This subject can guarantee that the Crown Prince will lose his position as heir apparent this year."

Li Zhi doubtfully said, "Although the Crown Prince has lost a portion of popular support, after all, there is still no possibility of him being ousted from his position. In this year, he has also been quite cautious. How can you be sure that he will be ousted?"

I smiled mysteriously and answered, "These years, Your Imperial Highness has always been focused on inserting your own people into the Crown Prince's faction. Previously, because of the Crown Prince's caution, and because of Lu Jingzhong and the Fengyi Sect's strength, it was always difficult. However, in this year, because the Crown Prince has lost the will of the people over the incident relating to the Ministry of Revenue, and with the underlying tensions between Lu Jingzhong and the Fengyi Sect, hasn't Your Imperial Highness successfully inserted your people into the Crown Prince's faction? Although they have not reached the core, His Imperial Highness's actions, those of the Crown Prince, can no longer be completely concealed from Your Imperial Highness. Do you really not know what the Crown Prince is doing?"

Li Zhi smiled awkwardly. "I do know some of this. Reportedly, the Crown Prince has somehow become enamored with brothels and prostitutes, several times playing around with the most famous and beautiful prostitutes in Chang'an. He only exercised restraint when Imperial Father heard rumors. As a result, he has not done such things recently.

Purportedly, he is frequently accompanying the Imperial Father and the Empress in the palace, displaying his filial piety."

I smiled callously and explained, "That is because he has changed the way he amuses himself. He has become enamored with one of the Emperor's new concubines."

Li Zhi was startled. "How is this possible? If Imperial Father were to learn that such incest was going on, then wouldn't he be heavily punished? It is probable that he would be deposed as heir apparent." Speaking to this point, Li Zhi paused. It was only some time before he asked, "Using the affairs of the harem to depose the heir apparent isn't easy to do. After all, the harem is not permitted to meddle with matters of the state."

"If His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, had some ability, it is possible that the Emperor would not depose him," I profoundly expounded. "However, the Emperor has already lost confidence in the Crown Prince. Now, to the Emperor, the biggest function served by the Crown Prince is suppressing Your Imperial Highness. If this matter were to flare up, even if the Emperor would not depose him, then the Crown Prince would still be punished severely. Regardless of the Emperor's intentions to depose the Crown Prince's position as heir apparent, he would still have to speak out if this were to be revealed. If this happens, then the Crown Prince will naturally be filled with worry and hesitation. Father and son would suspect one another. This is the result that this subject wants—the Crown Prince to feel shame. Even if he is able to preserve his position as heir apparent, it is likely that he will be worried day and night that the Emperor is biding his time to make his reckoning.[3] When the time comes, he will inevitably lose his rationality. If this were to happen, the more he wants to make up, the more he would likely arouse the Emperor's discontent and ire.

"In addition, the matters within the palace chambers are more important than Your Imperial Highness thinks. Since ancient times, the relationship between the Emperor and his sons has never been profound or deep. Savagery between father and son is frequently seen. At that time, it is likely that the Crown Prince's suspicions of the Emperor's intentions will become greater than his suspicions of Your Imperial Highness's."

Li Zhi wondered, “Surely, Noble Consort Ji and company will help by any means possible? It is likely that this won’t be enough.”

I tranquilly replied, “This subject will only be worried if they put their safety above their principles. The more they do, the more mistakes and flaws they reveal. Does Your Imperial Highness not want their true colors to be seen?”

Li Zhi sank into deep thought, a trace of joy appearing on his face. He declared, “Suiyun truly has wonderful strategies. If their wickedness is not revealed, how can this Prince exterminate them with just cause?”

Footnotes :

三原, sanyuan – a county that is located in modern-day Xianyang prefecture
爱**屋及**乌, aiwujiwu – idiom, lit. love the house and its crow; involvement with somebody and everyone connected; love me, love my dog
秋后算帐, qiuhousuanzhang – idiom, lit. settling accounts after the autumn harvest; fig. to wait until the time is ripe to settle accounts, to bide time for revenge

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 2: Repeated Abuses of Power

Volume 3, Chapter 2: Repeated Abuses of Power

In the twenty-fourth year of Wuwei, the Prince was punished for the smuggling case of the Ministry of Revenue and was ordered by the Emperor to reflect over his mistakes in solitude. The Prince by nature was violent and perverse, his conduct improper….—*Yong Dynastic Records* , *Biography of the Prince of Li*

The sunshine of an early summer afternoon was already quite intense. In the shade under a tree stood two imperial bodyguards who gazed at their surroundings with solemn expressions on their faces, carrying out their duties to protect the imperial household. Behind them was a small, exquisite palace hall. At the entrance stood several palace maids and eunuchs, chatting and laughing in low voices. This was the quarter of the emperor's newly favored concubine, Concubine Chun.[1] She was only nineteen years old, possessing a gorgeous appearance. She was charming to the bone and carried an innately beautiful disposition. She was greatly doted upon by the Yong emperor. But, the Yong emperor was, after all, old, and none of the ranking members of the harem—the empress and the noble consorts—were willing to allow the emperor to indulge in his lust to his heart's content. Consequently, Li Yuan did not visit this hall frequently.

It was presently afternoon. These palace eunuchs and maids did not have any responsibilities and work, thus allowing them to be so leisurely. However, if one were to look closely, the expressions of these individuals carried a faint trace of dread and worry, and would frequently turn to look towards the palace hall.

Within the depths of the hall, behind layers upon layers of curtains, atop a mahogany soft couch, a man and a woman were intertwined. Delicate moaning and heavy panting reverberated throughout the hall until finally, after a hysterical venting of energy, the two stopped. The woman embraced the man's bare-naked and robust body, refusing to relinquish her grip on

him. After the two embraced for some time, the woman finally released her hold. She lazily stated, “Your Imperial Highness, you should get up.”

The man was reluctant to leave, stroking the woman’s snow-white, tender, and lovely skin. Eventually, he rose to his feet and walked to the side chambers. There, a tub filled with water had been prepared. After he had bathed and changed, he returned to the main chambers. He wore the apparel of a prince, yellow dragons embroidered on the clothing. Only the crown prince was permitted to wear robes of this color. The lust filling the palace hall was actually the result of incest.

Li An was infatuated with this woman. In reality, when speaking regarding loveliness, although this woman was good-looking, she was probably inferior to Concubine Lan and many of the other women that he had indulged himself with. When thinking back to when he took Xiao Lan as his concubine, he was also so frenetic with his lust. As a man, to have a magnificent, noble, and fairy-like woman was heavenly. But afterwards, he gradually became tired of Xiao Lan’s earnest face, awaiting instructions. In the beginning, he would secretly hunt for beauties, but at the time, he was unfortunately afraid of the Prince of Yong’s pressure to the point that he was unable to breathe freely. In order to obtain the approval of Imperial Father and those sanctimonious elderly subjects, he could not but be cautious and prudent, and thus did not dare to be wanton and impudent. Even during family dinners, he did not dare to be frivolous or act rashly.

Only after he had substituted for the emperor when making sacrifices at the Imperial Shrine and his position as heir apparent was stabilized could he not but relax greatly. In the beginning, he used the dancers and songstresses of his household to satiate his lust. By lucky coincidence, he was able to obtain the services of a considerate imperial bodyguard, Xia Jinyi. Although the man’s martial arts were mediocre, he was adept at a dissolute and loose lifestyle, training all of the household’s dancers and songstresses to be capable in both their arts and sex. These women allowed the crown prince to become continuously and endlessly intoxicated with such a life. This was particularly the case after last year’s incident in the Ministry of Revenue. Although he had not been punished by Imperial Father, he could still sense

the cold indifference from Imperial Father. Recalling this, he could not help but become indignant. The fortunate appearance of a Devil Sect disciple in the Central Plains had drawn away everyone's attention. He couldn't care less that there were disciples of the Fengyi Sect affected. However, it wasn't long before that Liang Jinqian had died from poison. That Liang Jinqian deserved death and he, the crown prince, had no intention of letting him off. However, Liang Jinqian should absolutely not have died at that moment. Not only was the emperor furious, sternly reprimanding him, but he also had to carry the charge of silencing Liang Jinqian. Even Lu Jingzhong and Xiao Lan grumbled at him. As a result, he was gloomy and worried for a good spell. Ultimately, it was Xia Jinyi who drove away his worries. Xia Jinyi gathered together the dancers and songstresses. In a private room, Xia Jinyi held an orgy. Even the debauchery of King Zhou of the Shang Dynasty[2] was not more than this. Originally, the crown prince should have been careful in speech and conduct. However, this kind of depravity caused the gloom and fury in his heart to vanish. Gradually, he discovered that he could only use Xia Jinyi's methods to calm himself. In any case, he believed that his conduct was secret enough. Moreover, even if Imperial Father knew, the emperor would not become angry with him over this matter. Wasn't the emperor himself enjoying the three palaces and six courtyards?

At the beginning, the crown prince was only indulging himself in degenerate pleasures within his residence. Afterwards, he became bored with these pleasures. These women were either ingratiating themselves towards him or pretending to smile, causing him to feel dreary. He could not help but remember the last time he had indulged himself. That famous Southern Chu courtesan was magnificent. Her dance blazed fiercely. However, she had refused to engage in a carnal relationship with him. Angrily, he had raped her. The taste and feeling from that time was completely unforgettable. Presumably, the courtesans of Great Yong were not necessarily inferior. However, as the heir apparent, how could he visit prostitutes? Thinking of this, he could not help but envy Prince Li Xian of Qi.

Afterwards, he had expressed his intentions towards Xia Jinyi. Xia Jinyi was quite intelligent, dispatching men in disguise to pick up several famous courtesans of Great Yong to keep at a separate manor. Then, Li An would

dress as a commoner to tease and titillate these courtesans. Sometimes, he would succeed easily. Sometimes, he could only strenuously and stubbornly pursue them. However, this allowed him to feel a different experience. Later on, Li An became weary of these ordinary experiences, beginning to dally and play with all sorts of women. From that point on, the manor became a deathtrap. None of the women who entered would ever leave. The number of beautiful young women buried there were incalculable.

Xia Jinyi even provided a one-of-a-kind aphrodisiac. After taking it, he would not only be able to have intercourse with several women, he would also be filled with vigor when he got out of bed. As a result, Li An became even more unbridled and wanton.

Unfortunately, even before he had completely satiated his lust, he had been stopped from continuing by Xiao Lan. With an eerie expression on her face, Xiao Lan had spoken to him in an icy voice, “If Your Imperial Highness wishes to ascend to the throne to become emperor, how can you permit anyone to hold evidence of your conduct? To not speak of others, if my master learned of this, she would be furious. When the time comes, if my master ceases to support Your Imperial Highness, I’m afraid that it will be too late for regrets. This time, your servant will deal with everything for you. If this happens again, it is unlikely for your servant to help Your Imperial Highness again.”

Although Li An was somewhat angry, he knew that he was being excessive. The following days, he could only melancholically stay within his residence. However, he was always restless,[3] feeling the concubines and maids of his household too dull. It was only during one of the family dinners hosted by the Yong emperor, when he saw an incomparably beautiful woman sitting at the last position amongst the imperial concubines, that he felt all of his blood blaze with lust. That was a gorgeous young woman. Her smile was like the blossoming of spring flowers. When her lithe body advanced to present her dance, Li An could no longer restrain his desires and lust. The woman was from the north, and was adept at the whirling dance of the non-Han people of Central Asia. At the moment, she stood barefoot on a circular rug, spinning rapidly, her diverse and ever-changing movements and high-level

difficulty spinning leaps caused Li An's heart to pine. When he saw his Imperial Father advance to raise the kneeling concubine to her feet, Li An could not help but sigh with regret when he saw the youthful Concubine Chun with the already aged Imperial Father.

Although Li An admired and lusted after her, he was not that muddleheaded. Even though the woman was only a lower-grade concubine, she was still his mother. And though incest in the harem was frequent, it was not an honorable and aboveboard matter. What's more, he was still only the crown prince and did not have the courage. However, the more he tried to endure this, the greater the allure. For several days, Li An continuously tossed and turned in bed, his head filled with visions of that woman's enchanting spinning.

The Vice Supervisor of his personal imperial bodyguards, Xia Jinyi, saw his melancholy. Unable to improve the crown prince's mood, Xia Jinyi asked directly what was going on. Li An already greatly trusted this subordinate of his. This subordinate was not only intelligent and capable; he was also tight-lipped, never revealing any of the crown prince's secrets. Xia Jinyi's contributions were not shallow. Li An ultimately explained the load on his mind. This kind of matter, Li An was unwilling to discuss this matter with Lu Jingzhong, no matter how much he respected him.

At the start, Xia Jinyi awkwardly replied, "Your Imperial Highness, this subordinate's life, position, and wealth were all bestowed by Your Imperial Highness. Even if I were to sacrifice my life, I do not fear difficulties. However, this kind of matter is different. If this matter were ever to be revealed, this subordinate would be unable to take the blame for Your Imperial Highness."

Li An was also very discouraged. His anxiety became a disease and he unexpectedly fell ill. This deeply frightened Xia Jinyi. Ultimately, he could not bear but to say, "Your Imperial Highness, you should have plenty of operatives in the palace. The Empress is also your biological mother. Noble Consort Ji is also your support. Although Concubine Chun is greatly favored, she is only a lower-grade concubine. You can use your power to force her, using power as enticement. That woman is not a widow faithful to the death

of her husband's memory. Moreover, you are the future emperor. Once you have ascended to the throne, her life, death, and reputation will mostly be in your hands. To speak of nothing else, once the Emperor passes, if Concubine Chun does not have any children, she can only become a nun. When the time comes, she will spend her days praying to Buddha while accompanied only by lamplight. Such a life is desolate and lonely. She is young. How would she be able to endure? The Emperor is already aged and it is unlikely that Concubine Chun will become pregnant. If she were to become yours, it may even be possible for her to have children. When the time comes, she will have something to rely on. Even if she doesn't, she will have Your Imperial Highness's support, allowing her to spend the rest of her life without any worries."

Hearing this, Li An became radiant with delight, feeling his breathing clear and crisp. Immediately, he made up his mind. After discussing the plan with Xia Jinyi, he first submitted a petition requesting to help the emperor deal with matters of the empire. As it turned out, Li Yuan's anger had already dissipated, permitting Li An to handle matters in the Eastern Palace. Moreover, Li Yuan was also exhausted by the heavy workload of being emperor, dispatching ranking ministers to assist Li An. Li An would seize the opportunity to visit his mother every afternoon, and also seduce Concubine Chun. As the honored crown prince, he had enormous power and authority in the harem. With the help of money, he was quickly able to successfully approach Concubine Chun. In the beginning, Concubine Chun tactfully declined. But afterwards, she could not stand up to the crown prince's fervent wooing. In addition, with Xia Jinyi's threats and enticements, intentional or otherwise, Concubine Chun ultimately threw herself into the crown prince's embrace. The effect of this taboo, passionate love caused the crown prince to forget the women on the outside. Every day, he would always handle matters in the Eastern Palace, only spending two hours in Concubine Chun's chambers. The emperor was not aware of the scandalous incest that was going on and was instead extremely pleased at the crown prince's recent diligence.

When Li An reluctantly departed Concubine Chun's chambers, Xia Jinyi and the other imperial bodyguards, keeping a lookout, came over. They

escorted the crown prince back to the Eastern Palace. Li An did not notice that Xia Jinyi's expression was somewhat restless.

Xia Jinyi was filled with anxiety over this last year. He had used all of his methods and skills to curry favor with the crown prince, going so far as to perform many deeds that he would previously have never dared to do. He had arranged for more than half of those young women beside the crown prince. Moreover, he had dealt with the aftermath, personally killing all of those women. He did not dare reveal these matters to anyone, only telling himself, if he wished to take revenge and sink that gorgeous woman into hell, then he had only one path. It was the path that had been given him by that man: allow the crown prince to indulge himself. Xia Jinyi was convinced that he could accomplish this. However, his hands were covered in blood, his sins grave. He knew that he would not have the face to meet his parents in the underworld. What caused him to be even more restless was that he had never had the opportunity to meet with that man, not even once. He knew that the man lived in the depths of a prince's residence and would not leave the Cold Courtyard without reason. The imperial bodyguards by that man's side were ruthless. Xia Jinyi knew that he would not have the opportunity to transmit any information to that man. Moreover, he also did not dare. Having been beside the crown prince for so long, he deeply understood how formidable Junior Mentor Lu Jingzhong and Concubine Lan were. He did not dare rashly contact the man and could only hope that his conducts and deeds could help that man, to allow him to fulfill his long-cherished dreams one day. However, how could he deal with his present crisis?

Yesterday, Xiu Chun had stealthily come to inform him that she had heard Concubine Lan speak with the Crown Princess, Lady Cui. Although Xiu Chun could not make out the details, she had heard Xia Jinyi's name. Xia Jinyi had a guilty conscience. Last time, Concubine Lan had ordered all of the guards and women of that manor killed. Although their corpses and all traces had been destroyed, if he hadn't been taken away by the crown prince, he would probably have also died. However, he could never forget the look in Concubine Lan's eyes as she gazed at him, filled with grimness and heartlessness. Would he be so lucky this time?

***

Returning to the Eastern Palace, Li An began to doze off as he read the memorials. At last, he could not help but bend over on the desk and take a nap. Xia Jinyi covered the crown prince with a cloak, quietly retreating outside the door. He waited, perking his ears to listen carefully, waiting for the crown prince's summons. At this moment, an imperial bodyguard quietly walked over and whispered, "Vice Supervisor, the Crown Princess dispatched someone to transmit an order, stating that there is something for you to take care of."

Xia Jinyi frowned and replied, "You must know that I am in middle of serving upon His Imperial Highness. His Imperial Highness is inseparable from me."

The imperial bodyguard smiled wryly. "Vice Supervisor, how do I dare speak of this matter with the Crown Princess? It is best if you return."

After thinking it over, Xia Jinyi asked, "Did the Crown Princess personally summon you to transmit this order?"

The imperial bodyguard confirmed, "Do not worry, *daren* . I personally heard the Crown Princess speak. She has matters that require your attention and handling."

Xia Jinyi was slightly relieved, continuing to ask, "Is my senior apprentice brother in the residence? What matter is there that he can't handle?"

In a low voice, the imperial bodyguard muttered, "You understand that the supervisor's temperament is solemn and stern. There are some matters that he refuses to handle. To speak the truth, I have heard from the Crown Princess's maids that the Crown Princess's nephew committed a crime and requires someone to facilitate matters. You surely understand that if you do not go to handle this, then no one will be able to handle it. The Crown Princess does not wish for this matter to be known by anyone."

Only with this did Xia Jinyi cease to worry. Nodding his head, he accepted, "Fine. Be sure to properly wait upon His Imperial Highness. I'll go back quickly."

On his way back to the crown prince's residence, Xia Jinyi felt restless.

Remembering Xiu Chun's words from yesterday, he felt something wasn't right. Before entering the residence, he instructed his subordinate, "There's no need for you to go in. Wait outside for me. The Crown Princess's instructions shouldn't take long. If I do not return in an hour, you must immediately enter the palace to request a meeting with His Imperial Highness to beg His Imperial Highness to save my life."

The subordinate repeatedly nodded his head and acknowledged, "Understood, Sir. Vice Supervisor, please be careful."

Xia Jinyi flashed a slight, wry smile. In his head, he thought, *I am now covered with sin; it is acceptable for all to kill me. If it weren't for my aspiration not being fulfilled, what do I have to fear of death? However, I cannot die just yet. I will definitely not rest if I cannot see her sink into the depths of misery.* [4] Thinking this, he raised his head and straightened his back as he walked inside the crown prince's residence. Regardless of what, it would at most be one blow. With things coming to a head, he could not shrink back. Moreover, how could he decline the crown princess's summons?

Entering the residence, Xia Jinyi saw that all of the imperial bodyguards and maids that he had dealings with had traces of sympathy and pity in their expressions. Xia Jinyi knew that he was in dire straits. Although he had received the crown prince's doting and trust, his character was straightforward and generous, never stealing others' meritorious service, and never bullying or humiliating the weak. Regardless of imperial bodyguard or maid, as long as they tolerated him, he was very friendly towards them. This last year, the crown prince had been temperamental. Without Xia Jinyi's pleas for leniency, it was likely that many individuals within the residence would have received the crown prince's punishment. Therefore, although he was actually a sycophant, he was really quite popular. And while none of these individuals dared to speak openly, many of them secretly signaled Xia Jinyi. Several of the imperial bodyguards that he was especially close with even secretly communicated that he run away. However, Xia Jinyi knew that he absolutely could not. He could only walk towards the rear reception pavilion. This was where the crown princess

received subjects. Once Xia Jinyi entered the pavilion, he immediately caught sight of Xiao Lan seated in the seat of honor. Her expression was stern and foreboding. In the guest's seat was a ravishingly beautiful woman. The Princess Li Hanyou of Jingjiang. A glimmer of unperceivable contempt flashed across Xia Jinyi's eyes. Stepping forward, he kneeled and stated, "This subordinate, Xia Jinyi, greets Concubine Lan and the Princess."

Li Hanyou smiled indifferently. Glancing at Xiao Lan, she inquired, "Senior apprentice sister, so this is the presumptuous flunky? The fortunate subject that dares to instigate the Crown Prince to veer off the correct path?"

Xiao Lan coldly replied, "It is this person. Ignore his stately appearance. He is a toady with a seedy and rotten core who flatters his master. Truly reprehensible. Junior apprentice sister, today's one of the rare occasions that you've come to see me, please watch my methods. Xia Jinyi, are you aware of your crimes?"

Xia Jinyi lifted his head. Although his expression was calm and tranquil, his mind was racing, violent with worry. Xiao Lan's gaze was filled with bloodlust. It seemed that she was determined to kill. However, why was that woman present? Could it be that she remembered him? Impossible. Not only had his facial features not yet matured, now that she was so respected, how would she remember the ruthless way she had harmed that youth? He raised his eyes and looked at Li Hanyou. Li Hanyou seemed to be shocked by his calm and looked back at him. When the two looked at each other, Li Hanyou's gaze did not seem to change in the slightest. Xia Jinyi stopped worrying. His temperament had greatly changed. Presumably, she would not recognize him as one of her old friends.

Li Hanyou looked upon the man. He obviously had a petty and low status, little moral integrity, and yet he was so calm and tranquil, possessing an easygoing and leisurely bearing. His handsome appearance would entice a woman's amorous feelings. However, this man was a sycophant, a vile being with poor moral character. *Truly a pity* , she thought, shaking her head and looking at Xiao Lan.

Seeing Xia Jinyi not respond, Xiao Lan became even more enraged, interrogating, "Are you not answering because you view me with contempt?

I ask you, Xia Jinyi, are you aware of your crimes?”

Xiao Lan’s rage burned so fiercely that Xia Jinyi felt as if his chest was hit by the bloodlust that she was exuding from her body. He could not help but bow and confess, “This lowly one is not aware of the crimes that he has committed. I ask that the Concubine state them explicitly.”

Footnotes :

淳, chun – genuine, pure, honest
纣王, King Zhou was the last king of the Shang Dynasty known for causing the fall of his dynasty due to his debauchery and depravity.
坐立不安, zoulibu’an – idiom, lit. agitated sitting or standing; restless, fidgety
苦海, kuhai – lit. sea of bitterness; abyss of worldly suffering (Buddhism), depths of misery

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 3: Flattery

Volume 3, Chapter 3: Flattery

In the fifth month of the twenty-fifth year of Wuwei, the Princess of Jingjiang and Concubine Lan desired to kill the imperial bodyguard, Xia Jinyi, for flattering his lord. They were stopped by the Prince. From then on, hostility was engendered, with the Prince against the Concubine and Princess.—*Yong Dynastic Records* , *Biography of the Prince of Li*

Xiao Lan's long, shapely eyebrows furrowed, her expression frigid. In a cold voice, she declared, "Good, you dare to quibble. In that case, We will explain things clearly to you. Do you need to have Us explain to you everything that you have done in this last year? As a subject, you not only do not know to admonish your lord's behavior, you only know how to flatter and curry favor, instigating the Crown Prince so many deeds that are contrary to proper rites. Do you not deserve to die? As a subject, you are disloyal. As an individual, you are unrighteous. Since you are such a disloyal and unrighteous individual, if you have the least bit of conscience, you would slit your throat and commit suicide. Could it be that you still need Us to take action for you?"

With a calm expression, Xia Jinyi replied, "This subordinate is no more than a wastrel from *jianghu* . I am unlearned and do not possess exceptional martial arts. My only expertise is insignificant. His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, saved this subordinate's life. This subordinate is unable to return the favor and can only spare no effort to help ensure the Crown Prince's happiness. If this can be considered as disloyal, this subordinate has nothing to say. As for being unrighteous, this subordinate actually accepts that charge. However, this subordinate is only wholeheartedly loyal to the Crown Prince. Since time immemorial, loyalty and righteousness ofttimes cannot be both met. Moreover, this entire world belongs to the Emperor—those who command these lands are all vassals to the Emperor. Even if the Crown Prince acts out of line, what is the big deal? Were this not the case,

why would you have to kill so many people to silence them instead of placing righteousness over family?”

Xiao Lan was immediately at a loss for words. At this moment, Li Hanyou smiled humorlessly and said, “What a formidable mouth on this flunky! His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, is the lord, while you are a subject. His Imperial Highness can err, but you cannot. You are damaging His Imperial Highness’s great ambitions. We are disinclined to reason with you. Senior apprentice sister, there is no need to speak further with this flunky. Let us quickly ask the Crown Princess to issue the order. While the external affairs will naturally be handled by the Crown Prince, the matters within this household are the responsibility of the Crown Princess.”

Xiao Lan immediately saw the reason in Li Hanyou’s words. In a loud voice, she ordered, “Quickly report to elder sister, saying that Xia Jinyi, the flunky that has been confounding his master, has been bound, and we await elder sister’s instructions.”

Xia Jinyi smiled joylessly. In his head, he thought, *This Concubine Lan’s scheming is quite profound. Using someone else to do the dirty work is not bad.* However, he had not a shred of fear. To him, death was something that he had been seeking all along.[1]

Li Hanyou’s brows furrowed. She originally thought that this Xia Jinyi was no more than a social climbing,[2] vile character. Whenever that kind of person’s fate hung in the balance, they would frequently become servile[3] and beg for a way out, completely lacking moral integrity. However, today this youth only had a slight sneer on his face, not only refusing to beg for forgiveness, but also not supplicating himself. This caused Li Hanyou to become extremely worried. Did this man have some method of protecting himself? Or was this his natural attitude? In either case, his outrageous conduct that offended Heaven and Earth was likely to have ulterior motives.

***

Within the resting chambers of the Crown Princess, Lady Ciu, Xiu Chun was kneeled upon the floor, begging piteously. Lady Cui helplessly stated, “We know that this Xia Jinyi is your paramour, and would frequently speak on Our behalf before the Crown Prince. How would We not be grateful?

However, Concubine Lan spoke reasonably. His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, is Our husband and is also the one We depend upon. What will We be able to do if something happens to the Crown Prince? Xia Jinyi has instigated His Imperial Highness to lead a dissolute lifestyle outside this residence. If this information were to be spread, it is likely that it would enrage and offend the Emperor. We do not have any alternatives."

"Your Imperial Highness, this servant isn't speaking ill of Concubine Lan," replied Xiu Chun tearfully. "Over these years, has Concubine Lan ever taken Your Imperial Highness seriously? Has she ever asked for Your Imperial Highness's views about any matters? One of her orders has greater power than a thousand words from Your Imperial Highness. Why has she now remembered to have Your Imperial Highness give the order? What's more, no matter how bad Jinyi is, he is completely loyal to His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, and is also extremely respectful to Your Imperial Highness. Has Your Imperial Highness not sensed that over these days? Regardless of the situation, he would always speak up for Your Imperial Highness. Last year, when Your Imperial Highness's brother passed, if not for his notification, Your Imperial Highness would still be completely in the dark.[4] If it were not for Your Imperial Highness wailing and begging His Imperial Highness, it is likely that criminal charges would have fallen upon Your Imperial Highness's brother. Although everything ends with death, what would happen to Your Imperial Highness's family? Furthermore, it is possible that that incident would have implicated Your Imperial Highness and the young heir. If solely considering Jinyi's loyal intentions, Your Imperial Highness should help him."

Lady Cui sighed. "That's right. That man has truly been respectful to Us. Over this year, it has been extremely difficult for the Crown Prince's concubines to see him, while it has been easy for Us. All of the supplements and snacks we sent to the Crown Prince elicited return messages. Moreover, every month, His Imperial Highness would spend several days in the palace. I know that Xia Jinyi has put much thought into his conduct."

The expression on Xiu Chun's face greatly improved, as she continued, "Your Imperial Highness, this servant is going to say something that I should

not say…. Over this year, although His Imperial Highness has not treated Your Imperial Highness especially well, he has also not completely snubbed Your Imperial Highness, continuing to pay visits to Your Imperial Highness's chambers. No matter how dissolute His Imperial Highness has become, it has not harmed Your Imperial Highness's status. But if Your Imperial Highness were to issue the order to kill Xia Jinyi, once His Imperial Highness returns, he will surely become enraged. When the time comes, that woman will only say that it was Your Imperial Highness's decision. It is likely that from that point on, His Imperial Highness will cease to come to Your Imperial Highness's chambers. When the time comes, who will benefit? That woman has coveted Your Imperial Highness's position for quite some time now. Even if Your Imperial Highness does not consider yourself, you must consider the heir. In the future, when the Crown Prince ascends to the throne, let alone now, without a trusted individual beside the Crown Prince, how will Your Imperial Highness be able to deal with that bunch of foxes?"

The more she listened, the more frightened she became. She stated, "Xiu Chun, you speak the truth. We were almost deceived by that slut. Immediately transmit my order: Imperial Bodyguard Xia is the Crown Prince's trusted confidant. It is not suitable for Us to punish him. First, have him be taken into custody. Once the Crown Prince returns, have His Imperial Highness handle his punishment."

Xiu Chun was overjoyed, promptly going to transmit the crown princess's order personally. Hearing the crown princess's response from Xiu Chun, Xiao Lan's elegant facial features became ugly. Angrily, she rebuked, "What a cheap maidservant! Have you been causing mischief?[5] Why has elder sister changed her mind? I have long heard rumors that you and this flunky are having an illicit affair. Now, We can see that those rumors are true. Fine. We will not ask others to help. Today, I must beat you two to death."

A look of fear appeared on Xiu Chun's face. She was originally worried about Xia Jinyi's safety and thus had come personally to transmit the order. Unexpectedly, Xiao Lan wanted to punish her also. Xiu Chun was frightened, not daring to make a single sound. However, although she was ashamed, the expression on her face was obstinate and unyielding, refusing to beg

piteously for forgiveness. Xia Jinyi coldly stated, “Both His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, and Her Imperial Highness, the Crown Princess, have long known about this subordinate’s relationship with Xiu Chun. It is only that Her Imperial Highness is fond of Xiu Chun, while His Imperial Highness is fond of this subordinate. Therefore, we did not urgently wish to get married. This subordinate dares not dare accept the words of illicit couple.”

Li Hanyou’s complexion abruptly changed. She callously said, “What’s the use of yammering on with them? Senior apprentice sister, they’re stalling for time.”

Xiao Lan immediately rose to her feet and called out, “Come! Use punishment! Beat this illicit couple to death for me.”

Li Hanyou cruelly stated, “That servant girl has her own mistress. For her to lack honor and shame, she should be punished by her mistress.”

Xiao Lan replied, “Have you lot heard clearly? Deliver Xiu Chun back. Tell elder sister that I am allowing her to discipline this servant girl of hers. Why haven’t you lot made your move yet? What are you waiting for?”

Two imperial bodyguards walked over, carrying red-lacquered punishment staves in their hands. At the same time, several palace maids dragged Xiu Chun away. As she struggled, Xiu Chun wept and yelled, calling out, “Darling Xia, darling Xia!” However, the palace maids had great strength. Quickly, Xiu Chun was dragged far away and her voice could no longer be heard.

The two imperial bodyguards walked to either side of the kneeling Xia Jinyi. One of the two whispered, “Her Imperial Highness is observing us, please forgive us subordinates for not holding back.” As he finished speaking, one of the punishment staves had already heavily smashed onto Xia Jinyi’s shoulder and back. Xia Jinyi felt his back burst out in sharp, stabbing pain, immediately understanding that these bodyguards were acting decisively. With a few hits, his back would be broken. But facing his absolutely detested enemy, Xia Jinyi absolutely refused to beg for leniency and forgiveness. Closing his eyes, he did not speak a single word, gritting his

teeth and waiting the following painful strike.

Strangely, that strike never came. Opening his eyes, Xia Jinyi caught sight of a large, sturdy looking individual with his eyes wide open and glowering, tightly holding onto the punishment staves. With surprise, Xia Jinyi called out, “Senior apprentice brother!” This man was his senior apprentice brother, Zhang Jinxiong. At this moment, Zhang Jinxiong exuded a terrifying and imposing aura, his eyes filled with bloodlust. Xiao Lan’s expression sank as she asked, “Supervisor Zhang, what are you doing? How dare you have the impertinence to be so rude to Us?”

Zhang Jinxiong coolly replied, “Xiao Lan, there’s no need to use your identity to suppress me. Status-wise, you are the mistress and I am the supervisor. However, I, Zhang Jinxiong, am a disciple of the Kongtong Sect, while you, Xiao Lan, are a disciple of the Fengyi Sect. Originally, when the envoy from the Fengyi Sect arrived to form an alliance with the Kongtong Sect, I came to help you on the order of my master. However, how has this junior apprentice brother of mine obstructed you? Could it be that you do not take me, Zhang Jinxiong, seriously? Or is it that you believe that I will look on while you beat him to death?”

Xiao Lan was furious. Just as she was about to speak, Li Hanyou had already spoken up in a frosty voice, “Hero Zhang, let Us speak a fair word. First, regardless of whether this man is an unworthy disciple of your Kongtong Sect, what has he done while attending to His Imperial Highness? Have you not heard any rumors? Killing him will remove his evil nature from this world. You are the future master of the Kongtong Sect, and should cherish purity. How can you shield such a vile creature?”

Zhang Jinxiong uncaringly replied, “Princess of Jingjiang, don’t think that I am a fool. Even if Jinyi has sinned, his crimes do not deserve death. If you truly have the ability, go convince His Imperial Highness. Although this junior apprentice brother of mine is a useless good-for-nothing, he is not a bad person. Even if he is acting as an accomplice to the true villain, you should go kill the villain. Instead, you two are making things difficult for my junior apprentice brother. Truly wonderful scheming.”

Xiao Lan could no longer endure, suddenly jumping to her feet and

bounding forward. Although she did not have a sword in her hands, her sleeves were like the drilling strike of a snake or dragon. Her figure appeared before Zhang Jinxiong, already striking out. Zhang Jinxiong did not dare to be neglectful in the slightest, throwing up a fist in defense. This fist's intent was to strike first, using solidity to combat emptiness. It was exactly the martial art only taught to the direct disciples of the Kongtong Sect, Divine Gates Fist. The fist and sleeve slammed into one another, forcing Xiao Lan to retreat one step. She trembled inside. Ordinarily, she was conceited due to the unique characteristics of the Fengyi Sect's cultivation techniques. As a result, her internal energy was quite strong. Surprisingly, this direct disciple from the Kongtong Sect had such strong and solid internal energy. This being the case, her fear grew and she withdrew, jumping back. At this moment, Li Hanyou had already unsheathed a sword and tossed it to her. Grabbing the sword out of mid-air, Xiao Lan guarded with her other, empty hand, putting her arm up defensively. Instantly, her expression grew solemn and grave, while her bearing relaxed.

Mentally, Zhang Jinxiong praised the disciples of the Fengyi Sect as living up to their reputations. Wielding a sword caused Xiao Lan to appear severe, fierce, and malicious. Her *qinggong* was quite good. In the blink of an eye, the entire chambers were filled with the glint of steel. Zhang Jinxiong's pair of iron fists were not weaker in the slightest. The Kongtong Sect's martial arts were already mysterious. The two directly assaulted each other without regard for defense. In the span of a few short seconds, the two had already exchanged dozens of blows. Although Xiao Lan's swordsmanship and *qinggong* were extraordinary, she was after all only a woman and had spent years living a life of luxury. How could she be a match for the pure energy of Zhang Jinxiong's martial arts and ample fighting experience? Gradually, she fell onto the back foot.

To the side, Li Hanyou frowned slightly. If it were someone else, it was likely that they would have given Zhang Jinxiong face. However, this Xia Jinyi was completely out of her expectations. Although he was social climbing, his temperament was unexpectedly so obstinate, not only refusing to acknowledge his mistakes, but also not revealing a single shred of remorse or dread. If he were permitted to escape today, he would definitely harbor a

grudge. Over this past year, the crown prince had already become aloof and distant towards Xiao Lan. If this person was allowed to stir up trouble, it was likely that it would affect the Fengyi Sect's ability to influence the crown prince. Thinking of this, Li Hanyou's expression grew bleak. Offhandedly, she stated, "Hero Zhang, Supervisor Zhang, it seems that you are determined to protect this hoodlum. Fine. Allow Hanyou to experience your martial arts."

Finished speaking, Li Hanyou glided forward, launching herself towards Zhang Jinxiong's back, arms raised, fists outstretched. At this point, Zhang Jinxiong was busy fighting with Xiao Lan. In addition, Li Hanyou's martial arts were better than his. Just at the moment that Zhang Jinxiong would have been grievously injured, Xia Jinyi suddenly leaped at Li Hanyou like a madman. A gleam of disdain flashed in Li Hanyou's eyes, as she punched down with one fist. Like a kite with its string cut, Xia Jinyi slumped to the ground. Li Hanyou saw that although blood was trickling out of Xia Jinyi's mouth and he had a mournful expression, his eyes still exuded belligerence. Li Hanyou landed. Just as she was about to attack Xia Jinyi again, Xia Jinyi laughed ruthlessly and lifted one of his cuffs, causing a silvery light to blink out. Li Hanyou trembled in her heart, suddenly remembering that the disciples of the Kongtong Sect were all trained to use several types of concealed weapons to protect themselves. She quickly ducked at the waist, avoiding the concealed weapons. The silvery light did not hit the wall and instead disappeared. With a humorless smile, Li Hanyou quipped, "Let's see if you have any other talismans to protect yourself."

So speaking, she advanced again. Xia Jinyi once again raised his hand and shot out something. This time, Li Hanyou extended her lily-white hands to block, revealing a silver wrist guard, which caught that silvery light, now embedded. Then, she pulled out the silvery light and took a look. It was a five *cun* [6] long needle with triangular heads on each side, manufactured from sharp, polished steel. If this kind of concealed weapon were to hit, blood would not stop flowing from the injury location. Li Hanyou mercilessly stated, "Good, We will allow you to suffer the consequences of your own actions."[7]

Finished speaking, she flicked the needle out, sending it flying towards Xia Jinyi. The speed was incomparably fast. Seeing that there was no way for him to avoid it, a look of bitter resentment and loathing appeared on Xia Jinyi's face as he gazed towards Li Hanyou. This kind of deep-rooted hostility caused Li Hanyou to not help but feel cold. Just as the dual-edged needle penetrated into Xia Jinyi's chest at the heart, an enraged voice could be heard from outside. "Desist!"

Hearing this voice, not only did Li Hanyou's expression change, even Xiao Lan and Zhang Jinxiong could not help but stop at the same time. At this moment, the door to the hall was kicked open and Li An furiously strode in. Just as Li Hanyou was rejoicing that she had already killed Xia Jinyi, she saw Xia Jinyi had already frantically rolled towards the crown prince. Prostrating before the crown prince, Xia Jinyi burst into tears and begged, "Your Imperial Highness, please quickly save this subordinate's life. Concubine Lan and Her Imperial Highness want to kill this subordinate."

Li Hanyou stared at Xia Jinyi blankly. How did this man not die? The crown prince hastily asked, "Are you okay? When We heard the news, We immediately hurried back. At least, We arrived timely."

At this moment, Xia Jinyi pulled open his outer robes, revealing that he was wearing a protective mirror before his heart. At present, the protective mirror had been completely split apart by the dual-edged needle. Xia Jinyi tearfully lamented, "This subject almost would never see Your Imperial Highness again."

Li An immediately became infuriated. "Li Hanyou, the matters of Our household do not require your interference. You … You may go."

Li Hanyou sighed. "Your Imperial Highness, since you refuse to accept sincere advice, what can your servant say? It is only that this person cannot be left alive. Would Your Imperial Highness please reconsider?"

Li An remained unmoved and frigidly replied, "We got it. Go."

Li Hanyou paid her obeisance. Sighing again, she departed. Xiao Lan's expression was somewhat tense. Stepping forward, she hemmed and hawed, "Your Imperial Highness, your servant was only …"

Before she could even finish, a eunuch entered from outside. Entering, the eunuch said, “Mistress Lan, the Crown Princess has sent word …”

Before the eunuch finished speaking, he saw that the crown prince’s face was completely ashen. The eunuch was so frightened, he collapsed onto his knees. Li An coldly asked, “What has the Crown Princess have you speak of?”

Trembling, the eunuch reported, “Her Imperial Highness said, since Concubine Lan is so presumptuous as to conceal your punishment of Your Imperial Highness’s close imperial bodyguard from the Crown Prince, and even bound Our maid, then We will petition Her Imperial Majesty, the Empress, to allow you to become the Crown Princess.”

Hearing this, Li An could no longer restrain himself. With a shove of his hand, everything on the table was swept onto the floor, creating a great mess. In an absolutely furious voice, Li An said, “Xiao Lan, you’re good, not only punishing Our confidant without permission, but also trying to force the Crown Princess to yield her position. We will petition Imperial Father tomorrow to divorce you. We are not fit to have a lofty disciple of the Fengyi Sect as a concubine.”

Xiao Lan was greatly alarmed, promptly stepping forward and kneeling on the ground, bending her head. She implored, “Please quell your anger, Your Imperial Highness. It is entirely your servant’s fault. Please see it in your heart to pardon your servant, since your servant was only thinking about Your Imperial Highness’s well-being.”

Although Li An was extremely incensed, he did not forget the importance of the Fengyi Sect. If he were to drive off Xiao Lan, it was likely that his position as the crown prince would immediately not be safe. He could not help but hesitate. At this moment, Xia Jinyi suggested, “Your Imperial Highness, it is all this subordinate’s fault, offending Concubine Lan. The Crown Princess also became angry with Concubine Lan because of this matter. If Your Imperial Highness permits it, this subordinate will apologize to Concubine Lan. I’m sure that Concubine Lan will spare this subordinate.”

Li An glanced at Xiao Lan. Having already recognized that this was a way out of the situation, Xiao Lan promptly replied to Xia Jinyi, “We will not

blame you. From this point on, you must be cautious with your words and conduct."

Xia Jinyi immediately consented. Pleased, Li An stated, "That's good. Concubine Lan, go apologize to the Crown Princess. If you provoke her anger, neither Imperial Father nor Mother will be happy."

Xiao Lan was already extremely regretful that someone had a hold of her weakness. She promptly agreed, "Your servant will immediately go. Please do not worry, Your Imperial Highness."

Li An nodded his head with satisfaction. "That's fine. Xia Jinyi, why aren't you going back with Us yet?"

Xia Jinyi swiftly rose to his feet and followed the crown prince out. Before he departed, he shot a look of gratitude to his senior apprentice brother. Only when Xia Jinyi had gone far did Zhang Jinxiong state with an icy expression, "This subordinate bids his goodbyes."

Xiao Lan hastily apologized, "Supervisor Zhang, this is all Our mistake, please do not take it to heart so that our two sects' friendship is not harmed."

Zhang Jinxiong casually remarked, "Your Imperial Highness is royalty, while Jinxiong is a subject. How dare I take this matter to heart? This junior apprentice brother of mine is from a pitiful background. It is possible that his conduct and behavior is improper and inappropriate. However, his nature is kind-hearted. Would Your Imperial Highness please be lenient?"

Xiao Lan smiled slightly and inquired, "Do you really not know what he has done?"

Zhang Jinxiong coldly responded, "This is exactly what Jinxiong wishes to speak to Your Imperial Highness about. Does the Fengyi Sect really believe it's worthwhile to support and protect this kind of lord and master? Jinxiong will report this incident back to my sect. Your Imperial Highness, please search your heart. Is Jinyi truly at fault for what has happened?"

Xiao Lan's expression became grave and heavy. She did not respond as she watched Zhang Jinxiong's departing figure. In a low voice, she murmured, "This time, I've truly miscalculated. I must properly remedy the situation,

otherwise what can I do if Master blames me?”

Footnotes :

求之不得, quizhibude – idiom, lit. seek but fail to get; fig. exactly what one’s been looking for

趋**炎附**势, quyanfushi – idiom, lit. to curry favor; playing up to those in power, social climbing

奴颜**婢膝**, nuyanbixi – idiom, lit. servile and bending the knee; fawning, bending and scraping to curry favor

蒙在鼓里, mengzaiguli – idiom, kept inside a drum; fig. completely in the dark

搬弄是非, bannongshifei – idiom, lit. to incite a quarrel; fig. to sow discord between people, to make mischief

A **寸**, cun is roughly 2.31 cm or close to an inch in length

自食其果, zishiqiguo – idiom, lit. to eat one’s fruit; fig. suffering the consequences of one’s own actions; to reap what one has sown

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 4: Shadows of the Past

Volume 3, Chapter 4: Shadows of the Past

Departing the hall, Li An relaxed, glancing at Xia Jinyi. If it weren't for his desire to not lose this subordinate, there was no way he would have fallen out with Xiao Lan and Li Hanyou. What's more, it was truly appalling that those two women did not consider his face. If he allowed them to kill Xia Jinyi, wouldn't he be a completely useless individual who couldn't even protect his own subordinates? It seemed like Lu Jingzhong was correct. He needed to be wary of the Fengyi Sect, otherwise it was likely he would become their puppet, a figurehead emperor. Thinking of this, Li An warmly instructed, "Jinyi, call over Junior Mentor Lu. We have some things to ask him. Tonight, have your senior apprentice brother be on duty. You might as well take some leave outside the residence."

Moved to tears, Xia Jinyi acknowledged, "Many thanks for Your Imperial Highness's profound favor. This subordinate would rather serve Your Imperial Highness tonight."

Li An smiled and replied, "Don't worry. I won't have time tonight. For this past year, you have not left my side. Presumably, you must be exhausted. We have no way of compensating you for what happened today. As such, I'll give you the day off and enjoy the short holiday. Be sure to bring plenty of subordinates to prevent someone from seizing the opportunity to plot against you."

Xia Jinyi immediately replied in gratitude, "Many thanks for Your Imperial Highness's favor. This subordinate will go invite Junior Mentor Lu."

Li An waved his hand and said, "Go … There are some things that even We have no alternative. Don't take what happened to heart."

Xia Jinyi's gaze shifted. In a low voice, he said, "This subordinate's status is petty and low. My fate is a small matter. However, Your Imperial Highness's honor and reputation has been stamped on by another. If this can be

tolerated, what cannot?”

His expression changing slightly, Li An replied, “Let it be…. There is no need to speak further. We will first go to see the Crown pPrincess. Go invite Junior Mentor Lu.”

Xia Jinyi respectfully withdrew. His lowered gaze was filled with satisfaction.

Sitting inside the study that he had not entered for quite some time, Li An calmly gazed at Lu Jingzhong seated opposite him. It was a long time before he asked indifferently, “Do you also wish to advise this Prince to kill Xia Jinyi?”

“This subject does not care about Xia Jinyi’s fate,” responded Lu Jingzhong respectfully. “It is only that if the Fengyi Sect becomes estranged with Your Imperial Highness because of this incident, then the gains would not make up for our grievous losses. This subject naturally does not wish for Your Imperial Highness to offend the Fengyi Sect because of this matter.”

“The Fengyi Sect truly takes this Prince lightly,” replied Li An enraged, “Xia Jinyi is no more than my favorite. He not only cannot harm Our great ambitions, he does not even have the qualifications to vie for authority and power with them. They are too arrogant!”

“They are only taking out their anger on Xia Jinyi,” explained Lu Jingzhong with a smile. “To this subject, Your Imperial Highness’s conduct is only dissolute and lecherous. To them, it is difficult to tolerate. However, they can’t rebuke Your Imperial Highness and can only take their anger out on Imperial Bodyguard Xia. Since Your Imperial Highness has already preserved your face, Your Imperial Highness should now take action to placate and appease them. The present situation is not advantageous towards us. Your Imperial Highness cannot diminish your own strength.”

Li An nodded his head and agreed, “Junior Mentor speaks correctly. Do you know who killed Liang Jinqian that day causing Us to be unable to refute the blame?”

Lu Jingzhong frowned. “Speaking of this matter, this subject has also thought it over. After consideration, aside from the Prince of Yong, there are

two other individuals that are highly suspicious."

Curious, Li An said, "Last time I asked, you stated that suspicions on Prince of Yong were the greatest, because the individual who benefits the most from Liang Jinqian's death is the Prince of Yong. However, today, you have said that there are two others who are suspicious. Who are they?"

Lu Jingzhong casually remarked, "Prince Li Xian of Qi and Prince Li Kang of Qing are both suspects."

"Although the Prince of Qing has a grudge against the Fengyi Sect, he has always been respectful towards Us," replied Li An, staring back blankly. "Why would he do such a thing? Moreover, the Prince of Qi and We are in the same boat. Why would he do this?"

"The Prince of Qing is suspicious because this subject has discovered that he has planted many men in Chang'an," replied Lu Jingzhong with a humorless smile. "He was originally a child of the imperial household, but because of the Fengyi Sect was sent off into the distant Hanzhong region. Although Yizhou[1] is rich and plentiful, how can it compare to the prosperity of Chang'an? What's more, the animosity of killing one's mother is absolutely irreconcilable.[2] Now that the Fengyi Sect is guaranteeing Your Imperial Highness, he would naturally oppose Your Imperial Highness. Originally, when the Fengyi Sect was leaning towards the Prince of Yong, didn't the Prince of Qing frequently make things difficult for the Prince of Yong? Recently, this subject captured a spy from the Prince of Qing. Under torture, I was able to learn that during the time when Liang Jinqian was poisoned, the Prince of Qing's best martial artist, Ye Tianxiu, was in the capital. If he was not seeking to take advantage of the crisis for personal gain,[3] why would the Prince of Qing allow his bodyguard to leave his side?"

Li An's expression changed and he somberly asked, "If it really was him, how do you feel we should handle him? Should I speak a few words before Imperial Father to have him punished?"

"Your Imperial Highness must not do that," advised Lu Jingzhong, shaking his head. "It is impossible for the Prince of Qing to inherit Great Yong. Therefore, Your Imperial Highness should entice him to become your

support. Besides, Your Imperial Highness will need to use the Prince of Qing to check and balance the Fengyi Sect. How can we handle him? What's more, we do not have definitive evidence pointing to his involvement. Your Imperial Highness need only to be careful towards this man. These days, the Prince of Qing's people have become increasingly impudent and unbridled in Chang'an."

Li An nodded his head and inquired, "Then how did Junior Mentor also come to suspect the Prince of Qi?"

"His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, was originally Your Imperial Highness's greatest supporter," explained Lu Jingzhong. "However, these last few years, Your Imperial Highness has inevitably become aloof and distant towards him. In reality, Your Imperial Highness cannot be blamed for this. Although the Prince of Qi stands in opposition to His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, he has always refused to go overboard, always retaining some considerations. It is proper and inevitable that Your Imperial Highness would suspect the Prince of Qi. Over this last year, the Prince of Qi has asked for an assignment to the frontier on numerous occasions. All of these requests were rejected by Your Imperial Highness. In the Prince of Qi's eyes, Your Imperial Highness is deliberately preventing him from establishing meritorious service. In comparison, in Your Imperial Highness's eyes, the Prince of Qi is actually hoping to avoid a direct confrontation with the Prince of Yong. In reality, this subject feels that neither Your Imperial Highness nor the Prince of Qi is incorrect. Although the Prince of Qi has not spoken it aloud, he truly fears the Prince of Yong. Your Imperial Highness refuses to allow him to leave the capital to campaign because of an unwillingness to permit his fighting prowess and military glory to become even greater. Your Imperial Highness also has to safeguard against the Prince of Qi. After all, someone is bound to get hurt when war begins.[4] Isn't this how Concubine Lan has advised Your Imperial Highness?"

Li An blushed. "I also believe that Concubine Lan speaks correctly. Moreover, the Prince of Qi is too arrogant. This Prince feels that he is always disrespectful."

"Regarding this, Your Imperial Highness didn't do anything wrong," said

Lu Jingzhong, stroking his beard. “It is only that it would be better if the Prince of Qi is consoled. After all, the Prince of Qi is a general who will help Your Imperial Highness protect the empire. Your Imperial Highness cannot offend him. Without the presence of the Prince of Qi’s army, it is likely that the Prince of Yong would have rebelled long ago.”

Li An deeply understood this. He stated, “You speak correctly. In a few days, I will invite sixth brother over and soothe him, having him rest easy while staying in the capital. In the future, would he truly fear that there are no battles for him to fight?”

Lu Jingzhong meaningfully replied, “In reality, there is another person that Your Imperial Highness also needs to pull over.”

Li An looked at Lu Jingzhong. Lu Jingzhong smiled and named, “Xiahou Yuanfeng.”

Li An could not help but laugh. “Xiahou Yuanfeng has long been a part of this Prince’s faction. You already know this. He and his father have pledged their support for this Prince long ago.”

“At present, the majority of Your Imperial Highness’s strength comes from the Fengyi Sect,” replied Lu Jingzhong with a grim smile. “The Fengyi Sect only listens to the orders from its master, Fan Huiyao. Today, the Fengyi Sect Master supports Your Imperial Highness, the sect supports Your Imperial Highness. Tomorrow, if Fan Huiyao were to support the Prince of Qi or Prince of Qing, they would immediately dance a different tune. Over this last year, isn’t Your Imperial Highness gathering a significant number of bandits for the purpose of building Your Imperial Highness’s military strength? Xiahou Yuanfeng’s martial arts are outstanding and he is also greatly favored by the Emperor. If Your Imperial Highness can gain his sincere support, then he will become Your Imperial Highness’s sharp blade. At present, Commander Pei Yun of the Northern Barracks of the Imperial Guard has already joined the Prince of Yong’s faction. Although he still esteems the Prince of Qi, he has no favorable impression of Your Imperial Highness. Xiahou Yuanfeng once defeated Pei Yun. It would be a great pity if Your Imperial Highness does not gain this subordinate. As long as we respect the capable and wise, pulling Xiahou Yuanfeng onto our boat, when

the time comes, we would gain the help of an expert with outstanding martial arts and profound scheming. Moreover, we can command him without needing to go through the Fengyi Sect. However, Your Imperial Highness has kept your distance from him. It would be a shame if this man slips away."

Li An was somewhat uneasy. It was inappropriate for him to speak of his intentions to remove Xiahou Yuanfeng, if only because the man was too mysterious and he could not see through him. Li An asked, "Tell me, how should I entice him?"

Lu Jingzhong's gaze lowered. "I have heard that Your Imperial Highness obtained a flexible sword capable of paring any metal and cutting jade, and is extremely precious. Xiahou Yuanfeng is the fondest of flexible swords. Reportedly, he once dispatched people to all parts of the country to collect flexible swords."

"I thought that it would have needed a treasure," replied Li An with a smile. "So it is only a mere flexible sword. Although this flexible sword is precious, it is only a toy to this Prince. Tomorrow, I will have someone gift it to him."

Lu Jingzhong bowed and acknowledged, "This subject is endlessly grateful for Your Imperial Highness's willingness to accept criticism even from his inferiors."

Li An smiled. "All right. Over this year, We have endured enough. You have to think of a way to allow Us to vent Our anger."

Lu Jingzhong smiled as well. "This isn't difficult. Now that the past is water under the bridge, it is the perfect opportunity for us to retaliate. If Your Imperial Highness feels that there are no obstructions, we can act against Pei Yun."

"What use is a lowly commander of the Imperial Guard?" wondered Li An with a frown. "Imperial Father approves of him. I think it would be better if we change our target."

"I've selected Pei Yun for several reasons," answered Lu Jingzhong. "On the one hand, he is close to the Prince of Yong. Taking action against him will

allow us to punish him and use it as an example to others.[5] Second, that man has caused the Fengyi Sect to lose face. We can use the Fengyi Sect to act against him. If this were to happen, then the Fengyi Sect would create a deep grudge with the Shaolin Temple. This would allow Your Imperial Highness to better control the Fengyi Sect. Moreover, His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, is also extremely appreciative of Pei Yun. This is the perfect opportunity for us to send a warning to the Prince of Qi. When the time comes, if the Prince of Qi pleads for leniency on Pei Yun's behalf, Your Imperial Highness can conveniently perform a favor for the Prince of Qi. In any case, Your Imperial Highness only needs to remove Pei Yun's position. In comparison, his life isn't all that important."

Li An nodded his head. "Then where are you acting from?"

With a faint smile, Lu Jingzhong approached Li An. In a low voice, he whispered a few words into Li An's ear. Li An grinned from ear to ear and replied, "Tell Xiahou, if this matter succeeds, We will reward him heavily as a matter of course, and will not treat him unfairly."

The two exchanged looks and laughed, their laughter sounding merciless and cruel.

***

Even under the beauty of the moonlit night and accompanied by a beautiful woman, Xia Jinyi's entire face expressed worry. Lying down on the soft bed, he stared blankly up towards the ceiling. Today, he had brought several of his fellow imperial bodyguards to this famous brothel. After feasting with everyone and becoming helplessly intoxicated, he was helped into a room by a stunning courtesan. However, when he arrived in the room, Xia Jinyi immediately sobered up. After some horizontal refreshment,[6] the famous courtesan yieldingly nestled against his side. However, Xia Jinyi felt his heart completely empty. In his eyes, he would rather sleep in the crown prince's residence tightly embracing Xiu Chun. However, he knew that since the crown prince had spoken, it was better for him to leave the crown prince's residence. But today's trauma left him with lingering fear. At this moment, Xia Jinyi's urgent desire to meet with Jiang Zhe increased, as he had no idea how he would proceed. Just as he was in the middle of letting his

mind run away, suddenly someone knocked softly on the door.

Xia Jinyi was startled. Turning his head, although he saw that the courtesan was already sound asleep, he was still worried. Gently, he sealed her acupuncture points before rising out of bed and walking to the door. Standing behind the door, he pulled it open lightly, only seeing an azure-clothed servant girl enter the room with her head lowered and bringing a pot of tea. The servant girl flicked a glance at the lowered curtains covering the bed. After she placed the pot of tea on the table, she turned and seemed to be prepared to leave. From the corner of her eyes, she saw Xia Jinyi gazing at her aloofly. She seemed to be frightened, her hands covering her chest.

Xia Jinyi shot her a smile of apology, stepping aside from the doorway. The servant girl paid her obeisance before carrying the tray and walking to the doorway. Just as she was about to leave and just as Xia Jinyi was about to let her depart, the servant girl suddenly took out a spring-loaded dart shooter from her sleeves and pointed it at Xia Jinyi. Xia Jinyi's entire body shook. He knew that the weapon in the servant girl's hands could easily penetrate light armor from a distance of thirty paces. The present distance between them was no more than three paces. There would be no way for him to avoid the attack. However, that this servant girl unexpectedly did not fire an arrow meant that there was room to redeem the situation. Xia Jinyi calmly gazed at this servant girl. She had already raised her head, gazing back at him with a slight smile.

Xia Jinyi stared back at her blankly. This servant girl was actually someone he recognized, Chiji. Chiji's appearance was originally delicate and pretty, and possessed a short stature. He very closely resembled a maid if he chose to disguise himself as such. Xia Jinyi relaxed. In a low voice, he stated, "Little brother Chiji, you almost scared me to death." Afterwards, he excitedly asked, "Does *daren* wish to see me?"

Chiji smiled and replied, "The young master is waiting next door. He requests that young master Xia go over."

Xia Jinyi looked at his current appearance. So disheveled, how could he meet anyone? But if he were to wash and clean himself, it would likely raise that courtesan's suspicions. Thinking it over, he picked up his robes.

Draping it over his shoulders, he followed Chiji out, swiftly striding into the room next door. After entering, he saw Jiang Zhe wearing a set of azure-colored silk robes, seated on a chair. Jiang Zhe's bearing was leisurely as he gazed upon the chessboard on the table. Standing at his side was an azure clothed refined youngster, accompanying in a game of *weiqi* .

When Xia Jinyi saw these two individuals, he immediately stepped forward and kneeled on the floor, declaring, "Xia Jinyi pays his respects to *daren* ."

I rose to my feet. Walking forward, I extended my hand and helped him rise to his feet. I replied, "Young master Xia, there is no need to be overly courteous. I do not deserve it."

Xia Jinyi respectfully and cautiously rose to his feet, almost as if he was a servant or subordinate. I could not help but feel overjoyed. Originally, I was worried that he would not listen to my commands and was prepared to threaten and force him. Surprisingly, he was so polite. It seems that there was no need for me to force him. Indicating for him to sit down, I smiled and stated, "Over this last year, young master Xia has attained the total and sincere favor of His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince. Amazingly, you still remember your old acquaintances."

"After parting with *daren* last time," said Xia Jinyi, rising to his feet, "Jinyi has longed for the time of our next meeting. Over this last year, Jinyi has done his utmost, only hoping that I can be of assistance to the young master. If *daren* is able to make Jinyi's desire into reality, then Jinyi is willing to sacrifice this life to repay *daren* 's kindness."

Gazing thoughtfully at Xia Jinyi, I came up with the reason for his current behavior. Before, I forcibly had him serve me. I initially found it strange that he did not forget our previous arrangement after receiving such glory and honor over this past year. However, upon hearing his words, I understood. If he did not have something to ask of me, why would he be like this?

In no rush, I languidly instructed, "Young master Xia, please explain in detail your desires. I will definitely think it over."

Repeatedly kowtowing, Xia Jinyi stated, "If *daren* is able to help Jinyi completely defeat the Princess of Jingjiang and cause her to die in prison,

Jinyi will listen to *daren* 's commands regardless of what they are."

I stared back at him confounded and asked, "Xia Jinyi, you were originally just a wastrel in *jianghu* , while Li Hanyou is a princess of the imperial clan and is now an imperial princess. If we were to consider her status in *jianghu* , she is a disciple of the Fengyi Sect. How did she earn your animosity?"

A look of bitter resentment appeared on Xia Jinyi's face as he replied in distress, "What bullshit! She's neither a princess of the imperial clan nor an imperial princess. Li Hanyou is no more than an imposter, a pheasant pretending to be a phoenix. Although her plumage is splendid, her heart is vicious and ruthless, filled with ingratitude. She is someone who turns her back on emotions and friends."

My heart shook, as I commanded, "Explain in detail. If this is true, I will absolutely give you justice."

Xia Jinyi's facial expression became extremely severe. Slowly, he spoke, "My original name was Xia Quan. My family has only had one descendant for three generations. Although our bloodline was thin, my entire household was joyous and harmonious. My hometown was remote and far from civilization. That year, when war erupted in the Central Plains, it did not reach my hometown. Therefore, my entire family was able to enjoy familial love and joy together. Because my parents were worried that the Xia bloodline would end, my parents adopted a girl when I was five years old, hoping to have us marry when I reached adulthood. This girl's parents came from the same village as us, but were unable to raise her because of the family's impoverished financial state and because they had seven daughters. As a result, this girl was adopted into my family as a future daughter-in-law. At the time, I was young, only treating her as a younger sister. This girl's appearance was actually quite beautiful and extraordinary. She was also extremely intelligent, and was loved dearly by my parents. They had the two of us study together. I could not compare. At the age of twelve, I was fortunate, and followed a priest from the Kongtong Sect to learn martial arts. My parents knew that in these chaotic times, it would be wonderful if I learned martial arts to be able to protect myself. Therefore, they were greatly pleased. At the time, she was only seven years old. She even held

onto me, asking that I return home frequently to see her.

"One does not know the passage of time while learning martial arts deep in the mountains. When I had attained a certain degree of success and master finally gave me permission to return home to visit my family, I was sixteen years old, while she was eleven. Although both of us were young, both of us were already knowledgeable about the ways of the world. During that time, because of my mother's frequent illnesses, she and I were married to use the luck and fortune from the wedding to counteract my mother's misfortune. Although our marriage was not consummated as I still needed to train martial arts and she was still young, we were already officially husband and wife. Shortly after the wedding, I returned to the Kongtong Sect. However, although we were young, we had made a promise to spend the rest of our lives together.

"Unexpectedly, two months later, I received news from my clan that both of my parents had died. Bewildered, I returned home. After questioning my clansmen, I learned that not long after I had departed, several swordswomen passed through my village. Apparently, they had taken the wrong path. As my father was the elder of the clan, he offered them warm hospitality. No one expected that when these women saw my wife, they stated that she possessed incomparable aptitude, and desired to take her away. My parents naturally refused. However, these women convinced my wife. I do not know what they said, but my wife perfectly and willingly followed them away, only leaving behind the several hundred taels of silver that they forcibly foisted on my parents to serve as payment to redeem for my wife. Because of this, my mother was so enraged that she passed away. It wasn't long before my father also fell ill and died as well. I examined my father's injuries. His arteries had been damaged by someone using yin energy. It did not need to be said who had injured my father. I wished to seek revenge, but I was not a fool. After learning of the women's attire, the only possibility was the Fengyi Sect. They had plenty of women who used swords. However, the Kongtong Sect had an alliance with the Fengyi Sect. What use would it be even if I diligently trained my martial arts? There was no way for me to take revenge. Therefore, I was deeply discouraged. From that point on, my spirits became depressed. Within half a year, I was

expelled from my sect and ended up wandering the *jianghu* for several years."

Speaking to this point, tears were flooding down Xia Jinyi's face.

With a grave expression, I inquired, "Are you saying that Li Hanyou is your wife? Do you have proof?"

Xia Jinyi lifted his head and responded, "There is no way I'm wrong. Although her temperament has changed greatly, I would definitely not fail to recognize her. She is definitely my wife, Qiao Cuiyun. Although she is now magnificent and noble, I grew up with her from a young age. Her appearance still retains traces of her past. There is no way that I can't recognize her habits. If *daren* does not believe me, this lowly one also knows that she has a red birthmark at her waist."

I was completely stupefied. Who could have thought that Li Hanyou was actually not of the imperial clan? Then how did she become the Princess of Jingjiang?

Footnotes :

益州, Yizhou – was the ancient province name for Sichuan
不共戴天, bugongdaitian – idiom, lit. (of enemies) cannot live under the same sky; absolutely irreconcilable
浑水摸鱼, hunshuimoyu – idiom, lit. to fish in troubled waters; to take advantage of a crisis for personal gain
两虎相争，必有一伤, lianghuxiangzheng, biyouyishang – idiom, lit. if two tigers fight, one will get injured; if you start a war, someone is bound to get hurt
杀一儆百, shayijingbai – idiom, lit. kill one to warn a hundred; fig. to punish an individual as an example to others
云雨, yunyu – euphemism for sexual intercourse

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 5: Preparing the Bait

Volume 3, Chapter 5: Preparing the Bait

In the twenty-fourth year of Great Yong's Wuwei era, for three years following the eighth-year of the sixty-year cycle, Huo Jicheng, by himself, completely disrupted Great Yong's *jianghu* . The news of the bloodbath did not spread. There was only one man who became known throughout Great Yong, Huo Jicheng's adopted son, Huo Li. At this time, we have not yet touched upon Huo Jicheng's assassination of the Southern Chu King.…—*Shu Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Jicheng*

After contemplating for a short while, I felt relieved. Whatever her past, Li Hanyou had already adopted her current identity. Regardless of the collusion between the Fengyi Sect and the Prince of Jingjiang, this was all in the past. I should consider how to best employ this new information. Unfortunately, the weight of Xia Jinyi's testimony was insufficient, otherwise it would be enough to have the emperor strip Li Hanyou of her status as an imperial princess. The punishment for the crime of corrupting the bloodline of the imperial clan was not light. But this was unimportant. It would be enough if Grand General Qin believed this was true. However, this information could not easily be exposed. I would have to wait for the opportune moment before unmasking Li Hanyou's real identity.

But why hadn't Li Hanyou also recognized Xia Jinyi? Reasonably, the change in Li Hanyou's appearance should be greater than Xia Jinyi's. With doubts, I raised this issue.

Xia Jinyi lowered his head, two teardrops falling to the ground. He said, "From a young age, Li Hanyou was beautiful, her appearance not much changed. Moreover, the given name Hanyou was originally one that she gave to herself. That year, when we were studying together, she disliked her original name, thinking it too rustic and uncouth, and thus gave herself this new name. It was only because she was afraid of my parents' reprimands that only she and I know of this. Therefore, I became somewhat suspicious

when I heard the name, Hanyou. It was only that I did not dare to believe this was the case. Only after I saw her did this lowly one become certain of her identity. As for why she has not recognized this lowly one, it is because before the age of sixteen, this lowly one's temperament was wooden and slow, my skin color dark, and my stature was thick and solid, completely different from my current appearance. This lowly one's current appearance was transformed through secret medicine from my second master. In addition, my second master also prohibited me from training in external martial arts styles and focus instead on internal martial arts styles only. However, this lowly one did not expect that I would have today's appearance."

I could not help but laugh as I replied, "Why did your master, the Dream Daoist, attach such importance to the appearance of his disciples?"

Xia Jinyi did not question how Jiang Zhe knew of his second master's identity. In reality, Xia Jinyi would have found it strange if Jiang Zhe did not know this. He answered, "My master stated that his disciples could have poor martial arts skills, but they definitely must be dissolute and elegant. That year, this lowly one had already given up on my desire for revenge and was unwilling to exhaust myself training martial arts. Therefore, I was extremely happy learning those insignificant skills from my master."

I gazed deeply at Xia Jinyi, not uttering a single word. It was possible that his master had another, deeper motive. However, I would need to investigate this matter thoroughly before I could be certain. Returning to the main topic, I gravely stated, "The situation between His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, and the Crown Prince has already reached the stage where neither party can permit the other to coexist.[1] Since the Fengyi Sect is supporting the Crown Prince, they are naturally within the list of those that need to be eradicated. You can be reassured. Regardless of whether you are able to live to see that day, Li Hanyou will definitely not meet a good end. Over this year, I have never met with you because I did not want your identity to be revealed. Today, we only have a short amount of time. I know much about your circumstances. In the future, when everything succeeds, I will definitely not treat you indifferently. At present,

there is one matter that I need you to perform. This will be extremely dangerous and your life may be in danger. Originally, I had no intention for you to handle this matter. However, only you can do it in a completely secret manner. Are you willing to take the risk?"

With a calm expression, Xia Jinyi replied, "This lowly one had disregarded life and death long ago. This lowly one is well aware of the Crown Prince's brutality and tyranny. If he ascends to the throne one day, it is likely that the common people of the world will all suffer horribly. Although I am not a benevolent and righteous individual, if I am able to provide my meager contribution to help His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, wrest control of the succession, then this lowly one is willing to die in order to see it happen."

I again gazed at him deeply, handing him an emerald-green silk handkerchief. Xia Jinyi accepted it and took a look. His expression changed greatly. However, he did not speak. I carefully explained the arrangements that I had made. Xia Jinyi's expression was full of dread and admiration. He voiced, "No matter how *daren* learned of this matter, this lowly one believes that this matter was handled rigorously and no one else knows of this."

I smiled, but did not speak. There was no need to tell him that Xiaoshunzi had snuck into the palace and accepted two disciples. Although the martial arts skills of these two pitiful children were subpar, they were nimble. Combined with their clever minds, they had unexpectedly discovered an enormous secret.

Seeing that I did not speak, Xia Jinyi could only solemnly put away the silk handkerchief. He said, "This lowly one can only do his utmost."

Seeing him agree, I took out a porcelain bottle and stated, "Inside are two pills. When the time comes, take the green-colored pill. That pill will protect your heart. It may be assumed that when that day comes, they will take their anger out on you. However, the individual tasked with killing you will not use weapons. To casually and randomly kill someone and shed blood before the Emperor is a crime. If the individual uses fists or palms, I dare to claim your life will be preserved. Afterwards, you have to secretly take the second black-colored pill. All signs of life will vanish and you appear dead. If

this were to happen, then I have a way to rescue you. Although from that point on, you will never be permitted to appear in public, I believe that the present you should have no interest in continually muddling along in the turbid and dirty world of officialdom. If you still wish to have a future career, I will definitely not treat you unfairly in the future."

A look of gratitude flashed in Xia Jinyi's eyes. He replied, "Many thanks for *daren* 's considerations for this lowly one's life. If this lowly one can avenge my great hatred, I couldn't care less about prestige and great wealth. This lowly one only wishes to personally see Li Hanyou meet her retribution."

Smiling faintly, I remarked, "This won't be difficult. After everything succeeds and you have escaped, I will arrange for you to go into hiding. Someday in the future, you will naturally be able to fulfill your long-cherished wish. However, the situation may not necessarily reach this stage. If the Crown Prince refuses to take the bait or if your life is not in danger, you will continue to serve the Crown Prince. Remember, no matter what, you must be loyal and devoted, and must not reveal any snobbish overtones. If you can continue to stand by the Crown Prince's side, in the future, you will continue to have full autonomy. Keep in mind, if you have the opportunity, there is no harm in inciting disharmony into the relationship between the crown prince and Lu Jingzhong."

Xia Jinyi hesitated before he revealed, "At present, the Crown Prince is suspicious of the Fengyi Sect and the Prince of Qi, and relies heavily upon Lu Jingzhong. I'm afraid that it will be extremely difficult to sow discord between them."

"What's difficult about it?" I replied with a smile, "Those who are talented inevitably are inordinately proud of their ability. Lu Jingzhong's mindset is sinister and malicious, while the Crown Prince is a petty and narrow-minded individual. You only need to praise Junior Mentor Lu's outstanding stratagems a few times. The Crown Prince will definitely be filled with jealousy and resentment."

Xia Jinyi dubiously consented, "This lowly one understands and will absolutely follow orders."

After we had finished discussing these matters, Xia Jinyi quietly departed. In my mind, I understood that he was not entirely convinced by my judgement. However, he would also definitely not be only paying lip service.[2] After all, my methods would not harm him. There was no harm for him to speak a few words of compliment to Lu Jingzhong.

Gazing at my expression, Xiaoshunzi stated, “It’s getting late. Does young master intend to spend the night here or return?”

“Let’s go back,” I tiredly replied. “I do not like this kind of place, entirely suffused with the greasy fragrance of cosmetics. Even breathing the scent makes me feel ill.”

Bringing over the cloak, he draped it around my shoulders. Placing a bamboo hat with a muslin covering on my head, I walked out of the room and exited through the side door of the brothel. Outside, in the dark alleyway was an ordinary looking carriage. Xiaoshunzi helped me board the carriage before he followed me inside. After the carriage’s hanging screen was lowered, the carriage began to move. I knew that the surrounding area was defended by my personal guard. Their leader was Jing Chi. Over this last year, he was always by my side if he was not within the barracks. Every time I left the prince’s residence, he would snatch the opportunity to accompany me. Could it be that he became muddled by all the books that I had him transcribe and copy?

The carriage made several twists and turns. It was the dead of night and there practically was no one present on the streets. As a result, the carriage’s speed gradually increased. Pulling aside the curtain of the carriage’s window, I observed the trees on both sides of the street speed past. On both sides of the carriage were six mounted imperial bodyguards following closely. I knew that Jing Chi was definitely bringing up the rear. Although I was not familiar with Chang’an’s streets, I knew that our present location was already quite far from where I had secretly met with Xia Jinyi and was thus reassured to allow the carriage to travel so quickly. Today, the imperial bodyguards that followed me out were those that I trusted the most. However, even they did not know why I had gone to that brothel. In reality, in order to prevent others from discovering my whereabouts, I had

specially arranged a meeting with someone else. Naturally, that individual had sufficient reason to meet with me in secret. If the crown prince's people were to discover that individual's whereabouts, they would presumably suffer a terrible headache. That individual was someone whom no one could discover his whereabouts, the famous Huo Jicheng.

A year ago, I had ordered my subordinates to kill Huo Jicheng and silence him forever, and yet still faked his continued survival. Huo Jicheng only did two things over this last year. However, this was enough to cause the Fengyi Sect incessant and sufficient grief.

The first matter was that the Fengyi Sect set a trap using the remnants of the Embroidered Union, waiting for Huo Jicheng to walk right into the trap. However, although Huo Jicheng entered the trap as they had planned, they were beaten at their own game. All of the disciples of the Fengyi Sect and those experts from *jianghu* invited to assist were all handled in one fell swoop. However, no one knew what strategy was used, as all of the participants were killed, only leaving behind a lime-pickled head, publicly exposed and suspended on the roadside. From that point on, the remaining elites of the Embroidered Union disappeared without a trace. It was only until the second matter occurred two months later did they reappear.

That matter was quite dubious. Luoyang was a large city. Within, the relationship between the orthodox sects and the underworld were complicated and tangled. On the surface, the two largest and influential families, the Luo and Ding families, were polite and amiable. Both of them were upright and orthodox sects that adhered to the banner of the Fengyi Sect. However, behind the scenes, they were fighting bitterly. Aside from these two sects, there were several minor sects and factions that existed. Neither of the two families wished for their struggle to result in both sides being harmed. Instead, they used the minor sects and factions as proxy agents. Who could have thought that the city of Luoyang would suddenly fall into an unstable situation? The strength of a minor faction suddenly expanded rapidly, absorbing and annexing all the other minor sects and factions. The two families could not sit idly, cooperating to suppress this new opponent. Who could have expected that the minor faction

unexpectedly pledged support to the Luo family? With this, the Ding family became worried about the dramatic increase in the Luo family's strength, and inevitably began to make preparations. However, before they could act, all of the important characters in the Luo family were assassinated. The Luo family was naturally unwilling to let this matter rest. The Ding family seized the opportunity to expand its own strength. The two sides repeatedly fought bloody battles. The secondary leader of the minor faction was bought over by the Ding family. A foul wind and a rain of blood immediately swept through the city of Luoyang, leaving no one at peace.

Only after the arrival and mediation of the Third Miss, the "Compassionate Guanyin" Feng Feifei and the Seventh Miss, the "Hibiscus Sword" Xie Xiaotong, of the Fengyi Sect in Luoyang did both sides finally sit down. Only then did everyone discover that someone was inciting disharmony from within. With that, the minor faction immediately became the target of attack. When the two families united and breached the minor faction's main branch, they discovered that the leader of the faction had already been assassinated in his sleeping chambers. After a thorough investigation, they discovered that a youth named Huo Li was missing. The members of the minor faction only knew that this youth was the faction leader's new bodyguard. It was only after he had arrived, did the minor faction began to wantonly develop. Moreover, some suspected that this youth was the faction leader's strategist. It was only because of his young age that it was difficult to believe this fact.

If this matter were to conclude in such a manner, although it would leave individuals filled with doubts, it could only be allowed to end in such a way. At most, they could only investigate that youth's background. However, the problem was that they discovered a secret letter amidst the faction leader's correspondence. This letter was actually written by Huo Jicheng. There were only a few uncomplicated irrelevant words within the letter. It was only at the end did the letter state that Huo Jicheng's adopted son, Huo Li, would come to provide support. Seeing this letter, everyone looked at each other with dismay. Who could have expected that someone who had slipped through the net would have such fierce and sinister methods?

Henceforth, the Fengyi Sect's order came down: search for Huo Jicheng everywhere. However, although the authorities and the Fengyi Sect issued strict orders for Huo Jicheng's arrest, there was no news of Huo Jicheng. However, after this, Huo Jicheng became a scourge to the Central Plains second only to the Sovereign of the Devil Sect. Most terrifying was that after he had completely reorganized the Embroidered Union, that organization disappeared and reappeared like smoke. Although some of its members were still entrapped by the Fengyi Sect and the Great Yong authorities, but when these members were ensnared, they would either fight to the bitter end or commit suicide. Even if one or two of them were captured, those captured were all completely numb, not knowing what they had done and also not knowing how to communicate with others. They had only received written commands to execute actions. Reaching this point, there was no way to investigate any further. But from the obtained intelligence, everyone could see that the Embroidered Union had already become a mysterious organization.

Because of this, the senior-most disciple of the Fengyi Sect, Wen Ziyan, once again reappeared in *jianghu* , taking charge of chasing and killing members of the Embroidered Union. The Fengyi Sect's command was transmitted throughout *jianghu* : all members of the Embroidered Union were to be killed without reprieve. From that point on, although Huo Jicheng would occasionally appear, he would very quickly disappear again. Wherever the "Bloody Handed Luocha," Wen Ziyan, appeared, rivers of blood would run. But because of Huo Jicheng's profound schemes, always leaving behind traces of his collaboration with the top individuals of the *wulin* of various regions, and because Wen Ziyan would rather mistakenly kill innocents rather than allow a single guilty individual to escape, Wen Ziyan became an indiscriminate executioner. Members of Great Yong's *jianghu* would immediately become frightened when hearing Huo Jicheng's name. It was only when all the major sects of *jianghu* penned letters to Fan Huiyao, did the Fengyi Sect finally recall Wen Ziyan. Only with this did the slaughter that lasted half a year finally conclude. If they learned the news that Huo Jicheng had arrived in Chang'an, one couldn't know how frightened everyone would become.

Proud of myself, I smiled. Who could have imagined that Huo Jicheng was all a part of my schemes? Originally, I felt that Huo Jicheng's identity could be exploited, and thus had Han Wuji brave the dangers to kill and silence Huo Jicheng. Afterwards, I had Xiaoshunzi coordinate with Chen Zhen and Han Wuji to exterminate all of the disciples from and experts invited by the Fengyi Sect. Although this plan relied upon Xiaoshunzi's excellent martial arts skills, the matured members of the Secret Camp were the primary strength. Based upon the first-rate martial arts that they had learned and the military formations that I had taught them, and combined with assassination and scheming, we were able to completely exterminate all of these experts in one go.

Moreover, because of Huo Jicheng's caution, the majority of the members of the Embroidered Union did not know his appearance. Relying upon the command pendant that he had left behind, Chen Zhen was able to take command of the Embroidered Union, dismissing all of the members who were kind-hearted or who had been forced to join the Embroidered Union. The ones who were left were all savage and cruel. Afterwards, Chen Zhen used extreme measures to thoroughly subdue them, ordering them to go into hiding all over Great Yong. In reality, all of their assignments were fabricated. In order to fulfill their assignments, they had to rein in their savagery and conceal themselves amongst the common people. None dared to do evil or slink off, as Chen Zhen had all of them take a highly toxic poison I supplied. In order to receive the antidote every month, they would absolutely not dare to run away or disobey orders. With this, we were able to completely separate and control these individuals, using them when we needed to.

Following, I began the second step of my plan. Although the relationship between the Luo and Ding families of Luoyang seemed to be harmonious, it was really not the case. As they were the Fengyi Sect's accomplices, I had Daoli pretend to be Huo Li and infiltrate into a minor faction. Relying upon my teachings and the commands of Chen Zhen and Han Wuji, conflict was provoked between the two families. Not only was the impression that Huo Jicheng had surreptitiously seized the opportunity left behind, but we were also able to cripple the strength of the two greatest and most influential

families in Luoyang. Days earlier, I received news from His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong. The current general assigned to garrison Luoyang was from the Prince of Yong's faction. He had already successfully gained complete control over Luoyang. However, I did not reveal the truth about Huo Jicheng to the Prince of Yong, otherwise I would become the mastermind behind the rebel organization, the Embroidered Union. This wouldn't do! What's more, with the subsequent slaughter perpetrated by the Bloody Handed Luocha, although those killed were either members of *jianghu* or local tyrants from influential families, the Prince of Yong inevitably felt that all this was too excessive.

Through this slaughter, both the Fengyi Sect and I were able to acquire good harvests. I was able to successfully reduce the Fengyi Sect's strength, and also transformed the Fengyi Sect's original noble and virtuous image into one of bloody reality. This would cause everyone to remember that the Fengyi Sect had started out by relying upon assassination and slaughter. However, the Fengyi Sect was also able to successfully massacre the opposition forces that had gradually arisen in *jianghu* . Without the cooperation of the Fengyi Sect master, then it would have been unlikely for me to achieve my objective.

The Prince of Yong had once expressed his worry that the loss of so many experts in *jianghu* would harm the combat capability of the army. After all, a significant number of the experts in the army came from *jianghu* . I took the opportunity to hint to the Prince of Yong that the army could take advantage of the situation and recruit experts, and also announce that if they were to join the military, then those individuals who remained in *jianghu* would not be permitted to come disturb those soldiers. As a result, quite a few experts enlisted in order to escape the storm broiling in *jianghu* . This matter received Grand General Qin and the Prince of Qi's support. Who wouldn't seize the opportunity to increase their own forces? Because of this, no one was able to take full advantage, and yet at the same time, no one lost out.

The only ones who were truly pitiable were those who somehow got involved for no reason in the conflicts. However, these individuals were either bandits of *jianghu* or local tyrants. Their deaths would actually be of

benefit to the common people. Therefore, I tucked my sympathy away in the back of my mind.

If news of Huo Jicheng's arrival in the capital were to spread, I wonder if the crown prince would feel fear and trepidation in the face of disaster?[3]

Just as I was calculating the soon-to-be executed plan, a loud shout could be heard coming from before the carriage. The voice came from Zhou Wu, the imperial bodyguard assigned to opening up the path. Then there was a cry of alarm. Subsequently, the carriage came to a sudden stop. Completely unprepared, my body shot forward. Even as I was about to slam into the door of the carriage, Xiaoshunzi swiftly grabbed me around the waist and pulled me back. I felt fortunate. Calming my rapidly beating heart, I glanced at Xiaoshunzi and said, "What has happened?"

Footnotes :

你死我活, nisiwohuo – idiom, lit. you die, I live; irreconcilable differences, two parties cannot coexist
阳奉阴违, yangfengyinwei - lit. outward devotion but inner opposition; to pay lip service; to agree overtly, but oppose in secret
心惊肉跳, xinjingroutiao – idiom, lit. heart alarmed, body leaping; fear and trepidation in the face of disaster

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 6: Guest from the Eastern Sea

Volume 3, Chapter 6: Guest from the Eastern Sea

In the second year of Southern Chu's Tongtian era, Jiang Zhe was traveling on the streets of Chang'an at night. While traveling, his carriage ran into the Prince of Qing's guard, Ye Tianxiu and Marquis Jiang Yong of the Eastern Sea's valiant subordinate general, Fang Yuanxin….—*Southern Chu Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Jiang Suiyun*

Xiaoshunzi raised the curtain of the carriage. The both of us saw that all twelve of the imperial bodyguards assigned to protect me had already drawn their blades, surrounding and protecting the carriage. Imperial Bodyguard Zhou Wu, who was clearing the way, pointed at the two men who had blocked the carriage and hollered, "Who are you to have the impertinence to block our travel?"

I gazed out from within the carriage, catching sight of two men standing before the carriage. One was in gray clothes; his appearance was elegant and he had a sword at his waist. The other man was dressed in black. Although his appearance was not bad, his skin appeared to be bronzed. His hands held onto the bridle of Zhou Wu's horse. With one glance, I saw that his hands were covered with faint scars. My heart leaped into my throat. My gaze shifted and I saw that the man in gray clothes carried a young boy roughly six or seven years old in his bosom. Although this man's clothing was ragged and he had an excited expression on his face, there wasn't any sign of dread in his eyes.

At this moment, I heard Zhou Wu speak in a stern manner, "It is now the dead of night, and though we are traveling swiftly, it is difficult to injure anyone. Although this child appeared suddenly, I am confident that I am able to rein my horse in promptly. Why are you meddling in other people's business?"

The man in black angrily replied, "Regardless of the time, how can you travel so rapidly in the city? If I hadn't used all my strength to stop your

speeding horse, it is likely that this pitiable child would have been injured by the horse hooves."

Just as Zhou Wu was about to dispute the man's assertions, Jing Chi arrived from the side. Shooting a glare at Zhou Wu, Jing Chi coldly stated, "As it is late at night, we didn't expect for there to still be people on the streets, so we traveled quickly. This is our fault. I will apologize on behalf of this brother of mine. Since you two have the courage to meddle in others' affairs, presumably the two of you are real men. Do you dare to come with us?"

The two men exchanged looks, clearly seeing the hesitation in each other's eyes. Although the carriage escorted by these men was extremely plain and simple, they could see that the carriage was of excellent quality and was not something that an ordinary family could use. Moreover, although these guards were dressed in civilian clothing, their vigor and grandeur was not normal. Just by looking at their posture on the horses, one could immediately tell that they were military men. In addition, each and every one of them had extraordinary martial arts. At the very least, this squad of guards could only be from the family of a duke or marquis. The two men had aspects that were inconvenient to be revealed. Having exchanged intents, the gray-clothed man calmly stated, "Since you have already apologized, then that is enough. We still have some matters to attend to and will not bother you any further."

Just as the two finished speaking and were preparing to leave, Jing Chi laughed aloud. With the wave of his hand, eight of the imperial bodyguards spurred their horses forward and surrounded the two men. The two men's expressions changed greatly. The gray-clothed man's eyebrows furrowed, while killing intent was revealed on the black-clothed man's face. At this moment, Jing Chi spoke, "I have been in Chang'an for some time now. With one look, I could tell that the both of you are out-of-towners. This city is the Emperor's capital. Within the imperial capital, even if outsider great bandits arrive here, they have to follow the rules. There aren't many people who dare to walk about at night. After all, you would inevitably get into the trouble if you run into the Imperial Guard patrolling the streets. For the two of you to be so fearless, presumably the both of you have great martial arts

and can come and go as you please."

The gray-clothed man aloofly demanded, "What is this? Chang'an does not have a curfew. Traveling at night is our business. Are you using our meddling in other people's affairs as a pretext to make a fuss? Do you wish to deliver us to the authorities?"

"That's not the case," denied Jing Chi with a laugh. "I only wish the two of you to come be our guest. If the two of you are innocent, I will not only apologize to the two of you, I will also like to befriend both of you. Afterwards, if you two run into trouble in Chang'an, as long as I am able to help, I will definitely do so."

The gray-clothed man tightly clutched the hilt of his sword, his expression grave. The man in black moved his hands to his waist. It seemed that they were about to act. However, the two of them could see that the men surrounding them watched them closely, while Jing Chi's tiger eyes were filled with the power. A bloodlust that reached the skies had already completely enveloped the two of them. The two felt extremely uneasy. Even if they were able to charge out of the encirclement, it was likely that their whereabouts would be completely revealed.

Just as they were wavering, the curtain of the carriage was raised and a youthful looking man leaned out. This man had a black cloak draped over his shoulders, completely covering his clothes. This man's appearance was of a delicate and handsome, weak scholar. Sticking his head out at this point of no return filled with bloodlust, this man smiled and ordered, "General Jing, stay your hand."

The hearts of the two men leaped with anxiety, both of them glancing at Jing Chi, a look of understanding flashing in their eyes. The gaze that they directed at me, however, was filled with suspicion. With this, I was even more certain that my judgment was correct and thus smiled, as I declared, "This lowly official is a subordinate of the Prince of Yong, Major Jiang Zhe of the household of the Marshal of Heavenly Strategies. Just now, my subordinates offended the two of you, I will apologize to you two on their behalf." So speaking, I clasped my hands together and saluted them.

The two men bowed, at the same time, from the waist to return my politeness. An indescribable emotion flickered in the gray-clothed man's eyes, as he said, "So it is actually Jiang *daren* . This one has long heard of *daren* 's name. Please forgive our crime of blocking your carriage."

The man in black's face expressed both alarm and joy, but he did not utter a single word. Glancing at him, I smiled and stated, "Brother Ye, Brother Fang needs to be careful in Chang'an. His Highness does not have any ill intent towards your master. However, if Brother Fang's whereabouts are leaked, then it would be extremely inconvenient for His Highness to be lenient. Although Chang'an is good, it is not a place to stay long in. It is better if you two leave quickly."

When I said the words, "Brother Fang," the bodies of both men shook simultaneously, concentrating all of their energy to prepare to make their move. But when they heard my subsequent words, they relaxed. The man in black surnamed Fang hesitated before he bowed and requested, "Jiang *daren* , I was forced by circumstance to enter the capital. Would it be possible to speak privately with *daren* ?"

I stared at him blankly. It was only by chance that I saw through the identities of the two men. That Ye Tianxiu was originally the Prince of Qing's subordinate. He had frequently entered the capital in secret. I had seen a painting of his appearance before. I ought to recognize him. I had guessed that the other man was surnamed Fang. The man's skin tone was peculiar, clearly someone who was exposed to strong sunlight all year round. Beyond that, his hands had traces of rope burns from frequently releasing and pulling up the sails. Lastly, combined with his close friendship with Ye Tianxiu, I was able to guess his identity. Originally, I only thought that a few kind words to express my benevolence would be enough to have them depart and prevent some uncontrollable incident from happening. Surprisingly, this Fan Yuanxin wished to speak with me. If news of our conversation were to spread, it would not be good. After all, Jiang Yong was still a rebel, even if the Prince of Yong had no intentions of making things difficult for him. However, seeing the beseeching look in his eyes, I softened and said, "Brother Fang, please climb aboard the carriage to converse."

Fang Yuanxin glanced at Ye Tianxiu and muttered in a low voice, “Go back first.”

Quietly, Ye Tianxiu whispered back, “He is a trusted confidant of the Prince of Yong. You have to think this over carefully.”

With a wry smile, Fang Yuanxin replied, “The little master’s life is more important. We can’t worry about anything else. The Prince of Yong definitely won’t take advantage of another’s difficulties.”

Fang Yuanxin boarded the carriage. Ye Tianxiu hesitated and glanced anxiously at me before bowing to bid his farewell. Just as he was about to take the boy and depart, I raised my voice and said, “Wait a moment.”

Ye Tianxiu shivered inwardly before turning around and asking, “Does *daren* have any instructions?”

I smiled and observed, “Brother Ye is a transient guest here in Chang’an. It is better if this boy is handed over to me to handle.”

His worries relaxed, Ye Tianxiu accepted, “If that is the case, then I will entrust him to Jiang *daren* .” Finished speaking, he quickly disappeared into the night.

One of the imperial bodyguards urged on his horse, bending over to pick the child up and placing him on the horse. After obstinately struggling for a moment, he glared with hostility at the imperial bodyguard. The imperial bodyguard laughed aloud, patting the boy’s head.

Fang Yuanxin entered the carriage and immediately saw a refined and feminine looking young man seated within staring at him callously. The icy gaze caused Fang Yuanxin to feel as if his entire body had been drenched by a bucket of ice-cold water, penetrating straight to the heart. He immediately knew that this man’s identity—Demonic Shadow” Li Shun. This man was an expert with martial arts that were sinister and astonishing to the extreme, and yet was willing to serve as a servant.

Seeing that Fang Yuanxin looked as if he was sitting on pins and needles,[1] I shot a meaningful glance at Xiaoshunzi. The killing intent being emitted from Xiaoshunzi’s immediately vanished. Fang Yuanxin felt his breathing relax, realizing the extraordinariness of the Demonic Shadow. Only after seeing

Fang Yuanxin had calmed down did I inquired, “What is it that Brother Fang wishes to speak to me about?”

With a saddened expression, Fang Yuanxin asked, “Since Jiang *daren* already knows my identity, then *daren* should also know who my master is?”

I smiled slightly and responded, “I naturally know. It is only that General Fang must know that your master, at present, is still Great Yong’s criminal anointed by the emperor. Why would you wish to speak with me? If this matter were leaked, it is likely that I wouldn’t be able to let you go even if I wanted to.”

Fang Yuanxin answered, “It is specifically because Jiang *daren* intends to protect me that I dare to discuss this matter with *daren* .”

Recalling the words that he had exchanged softly with Ye Tianxiu, I was moved. With a smile, I inquired, “May I ask what matter requires this one’s help?”

“I dare not keep *daren* in the dark,” replied Fang Yuanxin. “My master is almost forty and only has one child. Unexpectedly, a few days ago, the little master went to sea and was bitten by a ‘rouge jade’ sea snake. The little master is close to death. Although my master has a number of famous doctors under his banner, they were all helpless in the face of this crisis and could only watch as the little master was tormented on a daily basis by the poison. Although his life was preserved with difficulty, he can neither live nor die. My master dispatched his subordinates to search for famous doctors everywhere. However, all of them said they were powerless. Ultimately, my master could only pin his hopes on being able to find the Medical Sage, Sir Sang. However, after appearing in Chang’an, Sir Sang has since disappeared. I have arrived in the capital under orders to find his trail and was unable to find a single shred of news. However, I have heard that Jiang *daren* once studied medicine under Sir Sang and reportedly has profound medical ability. I wish to ask *daren* to use your skills to save my little master. Not only will I be moved to tears in gratitude, even my master will not forget *daren* ’s kindness.”

“General Fang, let’s first ignore the opposing positions that we stand on,” I said, furrowing my brows. “And let’s also ignore whether I truly have the ability to save little master Jiang’s life. Ever since I was injured by the assassin, my body has been extremely weak and frail. Without His Highness, the Prince of Yong, and this servant of mine’s meticulous care, it is likely that I would have died long ago. If I rush to the distant Eastern Sea, it is likely that I will die before I arrive there. What’s more, the Prince of Yong employs me as his advisor. I cannot leave Chang’an even for a moment.”

Fang Yuanxin knew that Jiang Zhe did not speak a single word of falsehood. His master’s identity could be ignored for now. After all, if Jiang Yong were willing to surrender to Great Yong, he would inevitably be placed in an important position by the Yong emperor. However, although Jiang Zhe’s complexion wasn’t bad, the signs of his poor health and frailty were quite evident. If he were to rush to the distant Eastern Sea, it was likely that he would probably collapse from illness even before he arrived. However, the little master also could not go to Chang’an. After thinking it over for a long while, Fang Yuanxin still felt that things were extremely difficult. Originally, he had wanted to kidnap Jiang Zhe. However, when he arrived in Chang’an, he had learned that this Jiang Zhe was highly valued by the Prince of Yong. Even his master was unwilling to brazenly oppose the Prince of Yong. In addition, Fang Yuanxin was able to ascertain today that Jiang Zhe’s protection was indeed tight. There was no way for him to kidnap and bring Jiang Zhe out of Chang’an.

I paid especial attention as I observed Fang Yuanxin’s complexion. At the beginning, he was a bit vexed. Afterwards, he emitted a trace of bloodlust before being replaced with despair. How could I not understand his intentions? However, I absolutely could not leave Chang’an at this time. I would have referred him to Sir Sang if Sir Sang had not already stated that he would no longer practice medicine, and his secluded location was a secret that could not be revealed to outsiders. The only thing that could be done was to have his little master come to Chang’an. It was only that if the child were to come to Chang’an, then it was likely that he would never have the opportunity to leave. This sticking point would make things extremely difficult even for Jiang Yong.

While I was thinking, Xiaoshunzi suddenly notified me, “Young master, we have already arrived at the Vermilion Bird Gate.”

Hearing this, Fang Yuanxin immediately paled. He knew that he could only leave now. Sadly, he said, “I will return and report this matter to my master. This matter is of great importance. I am unable to make the decision.”

“Why is Brother Fang in such a rush to depart?” I asked, coming up with a plan. “Since you are willing to speak with me, then there is no reason not to meet with His Highness, correct? His Highness is broadminded, his temperament honest and generous. It is possible that he may have a way of helping your little master. At the very least, I can guarantee that His Highness will not prevent Brother Fang from departing.”

Fang Yuanxin was startled. He understood that even if Jiang Zhe was willing to treat the little master, this matter would still require the approval from the Prince of Yong. Thinking of the deep kindness of his master, Fang Yuanxin was willing to risk his life. Thus resolved, Fang Yuanxin stated, “If that is the case, then I can only ask that *daren* Jiang helps me obtain an audience.”

With a solemn expression, I replied, “Do not worry, General Fang. I guarantee that you will safely depart from Chang’an.”

Just as Fang Yuanxin was about to respond, the expression on Xiaoshunzi’s face suddenly changed. In a unfeeling voice, he stated, “There is someone following us.”

“How many people?” I asked, “When did they start following us?”

Xiaoshunzi responded, “They attached to us after we met with General Fang. Originally, they kept their distance from the carriage. Just now, they suddenly got a lot closer. Oh! I understand! There is a patrol of the Imperial Guard coming.”

My heart leaped with fear and I asked, “Who commands those imperial guards?”

Xiaoshunzi pulled open the curtain and glanced out. In a low voice, he said, “*Daren* , it’s General Qin commanding this Imperial Guard patrol. They will very quickly meet us.”

With a cold smile, I inquired, “Xiaoshunzi, will Qin Qing search the carriage?”

Xiaoshunzi’s brows furrowed and he responded, “This carriage belongs to the household of the Prince of Yong. Rationally speaking, he wouldn’t search it.”

“According to the law, he has the authority to search all carriages traveling at night,” I replied with a slight smile. “Of course, if it was based upon my status, there is no need for an inspection. However, if he were really to search this carriage, then it would be inconvenient for me to stop him. Presumably, those following us were originally tailing Brother Ye and Brother Fang. Unexpectedly, they ran into me. Those following us are quite firm, hoping to use this method to falsely accuse me of the crime of communicating with the enemy.”

With a frown, Xiaoshunzi wondered, “It is inconvenient for young master to refuse the inspection and we also cannot harm the Imperial Guard. What can we do?”

“First have Jing Chi deal with them,” I instructed with a smile. “It would serve the opposite effect if I were in a rush to appear. It is a pity with regards to Qin Qing.”

At this moment, the squad of Imperial Guard arrived before us. At their head was a valiant and formidable-looking man. He was Qin Qing. Urging on his horse, he advanced and in a loud voice questioned, “General Jing, why are you personally escorting this carriage? Who is it within the carriage?”

In a grave voice, Jing Chi replied, “So it is Commander Qin. This general is under orders to protect Major Jiang. I bear a heavy burden at present and cannot stand on ceremony. Would General Qin please forgive me?”

With a smile, Qin Qing said, “What are you saying? Although Qin Qing’s rank is higher, General is a brave commander who has fought on the battlefield. Who doesn’t know that you are the bravest commander under His Highness, the Prince of Yong, adept at killing enemy commanders and seizing standards? Qin Qing is only a younger superficial student, and dares not accept general’s courtesy. Now that it is already late at night, would it be

possible for me to see Major Jiang? Qin Qing bears the heavy responsibility for ensuring the security of the Imperial City and dares not be slack. Would you please forgive me?"

"Although it is proper and expected to perform an inspection," frowned Jing Chi, "However, this is a carriage belonging to the Prince of Yong's household. Within is also the major. Why is General Qin determined to search it? The night breeze is very cold and recently, the major's health has been poor. It is possible that he will come down with a cold. It is inconvenient for him to meet you."

Qin Qing's expression changed. Turning his head, he asked one of his personal subordinates in a low voice, "Major Jiang is not to be trifled with. Why is the princess determined for me to search his carriage? If the Prince of Yong is angered and informs Father, it is likely that I will be blamed."

The imperial guardsman replied in a low voice, "Emperor's son-in-law, don't worry. Our men saw a rebel within this carriage. We aren't intentionally making trouble for Major Jiang. If we were, then the grand general would definitely not approve. However, if that rebel enters the Prince of Yong's residence, it is likely that the consequences will be endless. As long as General takes that man away for questioning, Major Jiang will be in the wrong, and will definitely not dare to obstruct us. When the time comes, as long as General does not speak, presumably even Major Jiang will not take the initiative to try to worry about a criminal."

Qin Qing continued to hesitate. However, recalling that his wife's intelligence surpassed his own, he believed that she would not be wrong. As such, he spoke in a loud voice, "This is a mere formality and won't take long. There should be no harm to Major Jiang." So speaking, he urged his horse forward to lift the curtain of the carriage.

Two imperial bodyguards simultaneously advanced to block his path. All of the imperial bodyguards knew that there was someone within the carriage that could not be exposed. Qin Qing's bladelike eyebrows rose, as he stated, "What? Are you trying to obstruct this commander from executing official business?"

With a humorless smile, Jing Chi replied, “If you are allowed to search the carriage, then wouldn’t the entire court know of General Qin’s great abilities tomorrow? Unexpectedly daring to search the carriage belonging to the household of the Prince of Yong. When the time comes, the one without face will be me.”

“If it was the Prince of Yong present, this general would naturally give way,” rebuked Qin Qing angrily, “However, it is Major Jiang who is within the carriage. Since that is the case, then this general has the authority and power to search it. If there is no guilty conscience in your heart, what is the harm in allowing me to take a look within?” So speaking, he waved his hand. The squad of imperial guardsmen surrounded the carriage. Qin Qing gazed at Jing Chi frostily. If Jing Chi were to say a single no, Qin Qing would immediately advance to conduct the inspection by force.

Fang Yuanxin trembled inside, his hand once again dropping to his waist. He was originally a rebel. If he were to fall into the hands of the imperial guardsmen, it was likely that he would not survive. Consequently, he was determined to fight with his life on the line. Inwardly, he could not stop blaming himself. He should not have taken the risk of boarding Jiang Zhe’s carriage. It wasn’t important if he himself were to die. If the only person who could save the little master was also implicated, then he could not absolve himself even if he died.

I shook my head slightly, lightly pressing down on Fang Yuanxin’s hand. If I couldn’t handle this simple matter, then did I deserve to be the Prince of Yong’s chief strategist? Glancing at Xiaoshunzi, I removed a gold pendant from my waist and handed it to him. Although I had many ways of handling this situation, this method was the simplest and most direct. In order to calm this General Fang’s mind, it would be better to use force to bully[2] Qin Qing. Unfortunately, Qin Qing was too stubborn. If it was someone else, they would absolutely not dare to search a carriage belonging to the household of the Prince of Yong. Not just anyone was capable of being impartial and incorruptible.[3] It could be only said that Qin Qing was too naïve.

Xiaoshunzi took the gold pendant. Pulling aside the curtain, he exited. It wasn’t long before I smiled faintly. This gold pendant was truly useful, truly

a good object deserving of the serious manner in which the Prince of Yong had lent it to me.

Note :

In China, there are multiple ways of saluting. In *jianghu* and common usage, a typical salute involves making a fist with the right hand, while either using the left hand to wrap around the right fist or the right fist is held against the open left palm . Females switch this around. It's also switched around to denote the start of an argument or fight. In polite society, salutes were made holding the two palms forward together, the fingers overlapping somewhat .

Footnotes :

如坐针**毡**, ruzuozhenzhan – idiom, lit. as if sitting on pins and needles; fig. to be in an uncomfortable situation
仗势**欺人**, zhangshiqiren – idiom, bullying others on the strength of one’s powerful connections or position
铁**面无私**, tiemianwusi – idiom, lit. iron-faced and without regard for personal matters; fig. impartial and incorruptible

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 7: Lifting Heavy Weights Easily

Volume 3, Chapter 7: Lifting Heavy Weights Easily

In the twenty-fifth year of the Wuwei era, an imperial censor impeached Commander Pei Yun of the Northern Barracks of the Imperial Guard for being immoral and violating filial piety. Although everyone knew of his innocence, no one except for Taizong dared to speak up …*Yong Dynastic Records, Biography of Taizong*

Just as Qin Qing was about to forcibly search the carriage, suddenly, the curtain of the carriage was pulled open and an azure-robed youth exited. He stood at the front of the carriage, his arms behind his back. The youth's expression was as cold and arrogant as ice. Under the dim moonlight, he appeared as if he was completely aloof from the world, as if he was not a mortal of this world. What caused the greatest dread was this youth's pair of icy, sparkling eyes that were coldly gazing at Qin Qing. Qin Qing could feel that this man regarded him and his imperial guards as no more than lifeless objects and could easily destroy them without the slightest degree of remorse.

Calming himself, Qin Qing spoke, "Brother Li never leaves Major Jiang's side, truly wholeheartedly loyal. This general has no malicious intent. I only need to take a look inside the carriage."

Xiaoshunzi dryly laughed and replied, "Major Jiang is extremely respectful of the Grand General and General Qin. Who could have thought that the person come to drag down the young master's face is actually General Qin?"

Qin Qing grew fearful. In his own home, he had personally witnessed this youth's arrogance. If it weren't for a word from Jiang Zhe, no one dared to believe that he wouldn't have killed Crown Prince Li An in one blow. Over this last year, everyone in Chang'an had learned about the existence of this young expert, the "Demonic Shadow" Li Shun. His martial arts were sinister and his actions ruthless. And yet, this man was only wholeheartedly loyal to one person, willing to be that person's shadow. It wasn't clear who came up

with the moniker, but it was extremely appropriate. When he stood behind Jiang Zhe, he truly seemed to be just a shadow. No one could believe that this kind of expert would willingly perform the duties of a servant, moreover, without complaint. However, once he became enraged and was intent on murder, he became terrifyingly ruthless. Several months ago, some people took advantage of the Prince of Yong's decision to enjoy the spring weather to attempt to assassinate him. Unexpectedly, Jiang Zhe felt strong enough to accompany the Prince of Yong and ended up being meeting danger. This Li Shun angrily slaughtered all of the dozen or so assassins. According to those who went to clean up the scene, none of the corpses were intact; all of them had died miserably. The scene caused all of the imperial guardsmen and coroners to experience several nights' worth of nightmares upon their return.

But Qin Qing also realized that if he were to let them off so easily, how would he explain things to Hanyou? Strengthening his resolve, he stated, "This general is only performing his duties. Would Brother Li please forgive me?" Finished speaking, he urged his horse forward. He calculated that Li Shun would not dare to kill a court official.

Li Shun smiled callously, dense killing intent exuding from his eyes, and prepared to raise his right hand. All of the imperial guardsmen brought by Qin Qing cried out in alarm, unsheathing their weapons. Following this, all of the guards from the Prince of Yong's household also drew their weapons. At this moment, this area before the Vermillion Bird Gate was completely covered with bloodlust. Anything could happen at any moment.

No one expected that Li Shun only raised his right hand up high. In his right hand was a gold pendant. Qin Qing stared up and looked, quickly catching sight of the pendant's unique decorative design and the nine coiled, golden dragons. On it were carved the words, "as if We are present in person." Qin Qing cried out in shock. He knew what this pendant was. This gold pendant was bestowed upon His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, by the Emperor, allowing the prince to inspect and tour the empire on the Emperor's behalf. Everywhere he passed through, the Prince of Yong had the authority to interfere in any and all matters. At present on this earth,

there was only this one pendant. However, because the Prince of Yong conducted himself with care and caution, and in addition, his fame as a general was spread far and wide, he did not need this gold pendant and could act at will. Therefore, very few people had seen the pendant. Surprisingly, the Prince of Yong had actually given this gold pendant to Jiang Zhe. Qin Qing could not help but be filled with jealousy that the Prince of Yong so trusted and favored this surrendered Southern Chu subject to lend this golden pendant worth the lives of the entire prince's household to him. However, regardless of that, the most pressing issue now was not this. He hurriedly called out and led all of his imperial guards to dismount from their horses and prostrate themselves on the ground, proclaiming the words, "Long live Your Imperial Majesty."

Xiaoshunzi smiled faintly. Putting away the gold pendant, he stated, "General Qin loyally performs his duties and should garner the major's respect. However, this matter is not so simple. If General was permitted to search the carriage today, it is likely that the Prince of Yong's household would no longer know any peace. General Qin, His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, is a current imperial prince and is also the Emperor's personally enfeoffed Marshal of Heavenly Strategies. He would absolutely never perform any action that would adversely affect the national prestige of Great Yong. From now on, General Qin's conduct should be more careful to ensure that you do not gratuitously without reason serve as another's tool."

Qin Qing could only reply in the affirmative, while he was extremely enraged internally. Just as he was about to half-heartedly speak a few words, a group of mounted warriors rushed over from the distance. Qin Qing looked over and saw that all of them were in the uniform of the household guards of the Prince of Yong. At their head was a man with long eyebrows and phoenix eyes. His appearance was handsome and he had an uncommon bearing that caused others to feel a sense of intimacy. From the golden bow slung over his back and the special quiver beside the saddle, one would immediately know that this was Golden Bow Gongsun Ji. At a gallop, he approached. After first saluting Qin Qing, he spoke in a clear voice, "After waiting for some time and not seeing the major return, His Imperial

Highness was worried and specially dispatched this general to come and serve as an escort."

Jing Chi mumbled to himself, "Isn't it because someone was blocking us?" Xiaoshunzi shot him a cold look, immediately causing Jing Chi to fall silent. Over this last year, I had frequently punished me by forcing him to transcribing books and to learn its contents by heart. Regularly, Xiaoshunzi would supervise Jing Chi's work. As a result, now, one look from Xiaoshunzi was enough to cause Jing Chi to fall silent.[1]

At once, we saw off Qin Qing with proper etiquette. Xiaoshunzi quietly observed the guardsman who had secretly advised Qin Qing, carefully memorizing that man's appearance. Afterwards, I finally returned to the Prince of Yong's residence. Entering the main hall, I could hear the Prince of Yong furiously exclaim, "Suiyun, something has happened! Take a look …" Just then, he caught sight of Fang Yuanxin. Li Zhi's expression changed, the majestic presence of a sovereign immediately enveloping the entire hall, causing one to have no intention of daring to resist.

Fang Yuanxin did not know why, but he advanced and prostrated himself on the ground. It was only when his knees touched the ground did he come to his senses and question what was happening.

I had already bowed and replied, "Your Imperial Highness, this is Jiang Yong, Marquis Jiang's subordinate commander, Fang Yuanxin, General Fang."

For a moment, the Prince of Yong stared at us blankly before he laughed heartily and stepped forward to raise Fang Yuanxin to his feet. Li Zhi stated, "Your name has been known to me for a long time. General Fang is an adept naval commander and is renowned throughout the world. I have heard that several years ago, general repeatedly fought bloody battles in the Eastern Sea, completely eradicating and subduing all of the pirates invading and harassing the coastal regions. Many of the sea merchants and fishermen have all established a long life memorial tablet on general's behalf. With the coast at peace, General Fang's contribution is not shallow. Although your master has set up an independent regime, you are all still the descendants of the Yan and Huang Emperors. This Prince greatly admires Marquis Jiang's

feats."

Fang Yuanxin could only grow warm from the Prince of Yong's words. Unexpectedly, the Prince of Yong greatly recognized his master and his colleagues' actions. He opened his mouth and replied, "Your Imperial Highness praises us too much. Although My Lord is alone out overseas, his heart has always been inclined towards the Central Plains. Although he still holds resentment towards the Great Yong court, whenever he speaks of Your Imperial Highness's outstanding and glorious military service, he would always be filled with admiration and respect."

With a sigh, the Prince of Yong said, "Thinking back, cousin and I were childhood playmates and were as close as brothers. However, fortune toys with people. Now that he holds deep hatred for the death of his father, this Prince always becomes sad when thinking of our relationship. If it is possible, I would like to ask general to advise my cousin. Even if it is for his descendants, he should not stay long overseas. Cousin presumably longs for the beautiful landscape of the Central Plains? If cousin is willing to return, Zhi is willing to apologize to cousin. Whether he wishes to strike or to kill me, this Prince will accept it all."

Fang Yuanxin's expression was filled with a bit of gloom, as he responded, "This general will definitely convey Your Imperial Highness's deep friendship to my master. However, Your Imperial Highness must know that My Lord does not hate you. Although it was Your Imperial Highness who defeated the forces of the old marquis, it was all the result of the old marquis being too ambitious and unwilling to accept the noble rank bestowed by Great Yong. But if the old marquis died on the battlefield, although My Lord would be filled with grief, he will not wish for revenge. However, the old marquis was assassinated by that wicked woman, Fan Huiyao. My Lord can never forget this kind of humiliation. If this hatred is not avenged, My Lord will not be able to close his eyes when he dies."

The Prince of Yong sighed once again. "General Fang, please take a seat as we talk. Let's talk about these matters later on. There will definitely be a day when all this will be resolved. For what reason has General Fang come to my humble home? Is there something that this Prince can help out with? As long

as it is not a major matter that interferes with the proper governance of the empire, Zhi will definitely not refuse."

Fang Yuanxin promptly explained his wish to seek medical treatment for his little master, his eyes filled with entreaty and worry. He knew that with his explanation, the Prince of Yong would be able to control his master. However, he could not allow this last thread of opportunity—of letting the little master live—go by.

Just as expected, when he heard Fang Yuanxin's words, Li Zhi immediately looked hesitant and vexed. He had just sat down, but with this, he instantly rose to his feet. With his hands behind his back, Li Zhi paced in a circle within the hall, glancing at Fang Yuanxin and also at the already seated, yawning, and drowsy Jiang Zhe. At last, he spoke, "General Fang, this Prince will not deceive you. If it weren't for Sir Jiang's poor health, this Prince would definitely request that he travel to the Eastern Sea. However, since he was attacked by an assassin, although he has recuperated for more than a year, his body is frail and his breathing weak. The only way he can travel now is if the journey is slow and unhurried, and requires several days of rest if anything were to happen. Only then will I be reassured. However, with this, without a year, it is unlikely that he will be able to arrive at the Eastern Sea. If this matter were to be delayed for that long, ignoring for now the fact that this Prince requires his help, with the extended time period, it is likely that this matter will inevitably be leaked. If that were to happen, what could we do? You must know that other people aren't deaf or blind. This Prince cannot predict what will happen when that time comes. However, Sir Jiang will definitely be unable to reach the Eastern Sea."

Fang Yuanxin's heart froze. He knew that the Prince of Yong did not speak a single word of falsehood. Could it be that the only way was to escort the little master to Chang'an?

With sympathy, the Prince of Yong glanced at Fang Yuanxin. He continued, "At present, this Prince has two methods. One is to have this Prince secretly report this matter to Imperial Father. Imperial Father may tacitly allow the child to come to be treated in Chang'an. However, if this were to happen, then Marquis Jiang must make some concessions. The second method is for

the marquis to think of a way to deliver nephew to Chang'an, concealing his journey from everyone. When the time comes, if everything goes smoothly, then nephew will be able at liberty to return to the Eastern Sea. However, there is no harm for me to speak bluntly. At present, the various factions in Chang'an are tangled and complicated. This Prince does not dare guarantee that this information will not be leaked."

After thinking for some time, Fang Yuanxin replied, "This general will report this matter to My Lord as quickly as possible, and have him make the decision. If there is any news, I hope that Your Imperial Highness will be generous with your help."

The Prince of Yong smiled. "Your master and I are still close blood relations. How can I harm him? As long as nephew arrives in Chang'an, this Prince will absolutely not stand apart and do nothing. The hour is already late. Originally, I should have you stay, but you must know that this Prince must avoid arousing suspicion. I will order someone to see you out."

Fang Yuanxin kneeled and bowed, acknowledging, "Many thanks to Your Imperial Highness. Regardless of the success of this matter, this general and My Lord will both remember Your Imperial Highness's kindly intentions."

Li Zhi sighed and replied, "The timing is unfortunate. There are some matters that I need not explain to you, as you know them already. This Prince can absolutely not permit Major Jiang to journey far from Chang'an."

In his mind, Fang Yuanxin thought, *At present, you brothers are fighting tooth and nail to succeed the imperial throne. Jiang Zhe is also the prince's most highly valued confidant. It is no wonder that you are unwilling to let him leave. Moreover, this Jiang Zhe's health was really too poor. While we were speaking, he looked like he was about to faint.*

Just as Fang Yuanxin was about to bid his farewell, I spoke up. "Wait a moment, General Fang." As I spoke, I took out two small jade boxes that Xiaoshunzi had earlier gone off to grab. Languidly, I stated, "I have only heard the name of the rouge jade sea snake, therefore I can only treat the wound after I have seen it. However, I also cannot allow General Fang to return empty-handed. In these boxes are two kinds of medications. One is

capable of treating the majority of common poisons. Its efficacy is very high. At the very least, it should be able to prevent the poison from attacking your little master's heart. The other medicine, if taken one per day, will cause a person to enter into a deep sleep, and yet, at the same time, not harm one's body. This will allow your little master to avoid having to endure the pain and suffering daily."

Hearing this, Fang Yuanxin was overjoyed at the unexpected gift. He appreciatively said, "This general thanks Sir Jiang for your compassion on behalf of my little master." Even if it was to temporarily alleviate the little master's pain, then it was already worth it. Therefore, he absolutely gratefully accepted the boxes of medicine.

"This medicine was originally for my own use," I stated with a smile. "While I was recovering, the wound would frequently ache and itch, making it difficult for me to sleep. Therefore, I specially made this medication. I didn't expect that its effect would be so great. It is only that the concoction is quite difficult. Moreover, its prescription can absolutely not be leaked, otherwise I would have written down the prescription for you."

After Fang Yuanxin had departed, I heaved a deep sigh before asking, "Your Imperial Highness, has something happened?"

Only then did Li Zhi remember the matter that he had originally wished to discuss with me. With a wry smile, he stated, "Tonight, Imperial Father received a remonstration memorial, impeaching Pei Yun for being immoral and violating filial piety."

I stared back at him blankly and inquired, "Your Imperial Highness, Pei Yun dotes on his concubine and is estranged from his wife. This can be argued to be immoral, but violating filial piety? This shouldn't apply?"

"How can I explain it?" replied Li Zhi with a wry smile. "That Imperial Censor Cai is truly audacious. In his criticism, he stated that Pei Yun has snubbed the wife that his parents had betrothed to him, causing his parents to grieve and worry to this day. Therefore, he is unfilial. After all, ever since that incident happened, Pei Yun's father was so enraged that he fell ill. What's more, that imperial censor has alluded to the fact that Lady Xue is

still a virgin, which is clearly Pei Yun's failure to adhere to the ethics of human relations."

"Imperial censors should be mindful of important matters of state," I wondered in amazement. "Is he also now worrying about someone else's bedroom matters?"

"To them, it is better to help a villain do evil than to help with the worries and difficulties of Great Yong," replied Li Zhi with a humorless smile. Continuing, he said, "Forget about him for now. What's to be done? We can't have Pei Yun's father to submit a memorial that he approved Pei Yun to take a concubine and snub the wife. Wouldn't that cause the household to fall into chaos? If this happens then Pei Yun would truly be unfilial. Since ancient times, only sons take the blame for their fathers, not the other way around."

I was also somewhat vexed. I did not expect that someone would make a fuss out of something like this, even going so far as to label Pei Yun as unfilial. However, at this moment, I couldn't think of any solutions. Each successive dynasty governed the world through filial piety. If Pei Yun were to gain a reputation for being unfilial, then it was likely that his future career prospects would be extremely challenged and limited. From the present situation, it looked like the commander of the otherwise ironclad Northern Barracks of the Imperial Guard would be changed.

Xiaoshunzi suddenly distantly observed, "The Emperor may not necessarily view this matter in such a light."

Both the Prince of Yong and I looked over and stared at him, however Xiaoshunzi stopped talking. Both the prince and I very quickly understood. The Emperor was wary of the Fengyi Sect. If the Emperor learned that Pei Yun did not wish to be connected by marriage to the Fengyi Sect, it was likely that he would not fault Pei Yun. After thinking it over, I stated, baffled, "The crown prince's faction must surely know this. Why would they do such a thing?"

Xiaoshunzi smiled slightly and explained, "Your Imperial Highness and young master are too close to the situation and don't see the big picture. If

this news were to spread, it is likely that Lady Xue would have no face to see anyone ever again. For a woman to be so ignored, in addition to ruining her reputation, it seems likely that her only option going forward is death. When that time comes, the Vice Minister of Works, Xue Ju, will inevitably submit a memorial denouncing General Pei. Regardless of what, General Pei cannot say that his actions were not improper.

"In addition, as an important official in the Ministry of Works, Xue Ju is adept at the manufacture and improvement of weapons. Who in the world does not know that the 'Divine Armed Bow' [2] is an effective weapon for defending city walls? When that time comes, Xue *daren* can stake himself, as he carries the responsibility of failing to properly educate his daughter, and will definitely seek to pull General Pei down with him. Even if Your Imperial Highness sides with General Pei, he will still be temporarily suspended from duties. When General Pei resumes his duties, he will no longer be able to control the Northern Barracks of the Imperial Guard. Moreover, General Pei has newly pledged his allegiance to Your Imperial Highness. If Your Imperial Highness is helpless to protect him and also cause Xue Ju to become an enemy, then this will be three birds with one stone."

Listening to Xiaoshunzi's words, Li Zhi grew frightened. With admiration, he replied, "Xiaoshunzi, you are indeed incisive. This Prince didn't foresee all these consequences. It is likely by tomorrow that this impeachment memorial will be spread widely throughout all levels of society. Even if Lady Xue does not wish to commit suicide, she will still be forced to do so. What do you think we should do now? Pei Yun has the disposition to become a famous general. This Prince honestly cannot bear to see him so sullied."

After understanding the key points, I sighed and stated, "This strategy is indeed fierce and malicious. However, there are ways to resolve it. The best method would be if General Pei's concubine dies from the injuries sustained. If that were to happen, then Lady Xue would be guilty of murder. Pei Yun's actions would therefore not be considered as excessive. Unfortunately, this is impossible, as the concubine's body has already been cleansed of poison. Many people know of this fact. Another method would be to use Lady Xue. If she is willing to submit a memorial to beg forgiveness, explaining her guilty

conscience and willingness to become a nun to redeem her sins, then no one will be able to continue to blame Pei Yun."

"If she were willing, then we would need not to worry," replied Li Zhi with a wry smile. "However, it is likely that she will be unwilling to admit defeat. Every single one of the disciples of the Fengyi Sect is proud and arrogant. It is likely that she would rather die than admit her guilt and concede."

With a slight smile, I countered, "Why would a young lady wish to die? It is likely that she is extremely remorseful of her marriage to General Pei. The problem is whether she is willing to submit a memorial and admit her guilt. Even if she wishes to commit suicide, with the importance of life, why would she not cherish it? If she were given the opportunity, she would probably agree to get away and live a new life. However, whom should this matter be handled by? This is somewhat difficult. If this isn't handled properly, we are likely to end up with egg in our face."

After thinking it over, Li Zhi's eyes brightened and he declared, "I have a method! The Duke of Wei, Cheng Shu, has always been friendly with all the court officials, and is someone who can speak with Xue Ju. Moreover, that old fart has plenty of ideas. Combined with Cheng Shu's kind intentions, Xue Ju will absolutely not take precautions and reject him outright. Moreover, the Duke of Wei has a jocular temperament. Many of the children of the top officials all consider him to be their uncle. Lady Xue was once one of them and is still extremely intimate whenever she meets him. If he were to go, this matter would definitely be successful. There's no time to lose. This Prince will go immediately to speak with the Duke of Wei. He has always guided the younger generation and will absolutely be unwilling to see Pei Yun receive censure."

That night, Li Zhi personally paid a visit to the residence of the Duke of Wei. After a long discussion, Cheng Shu quickly hurried to the Xue residence. He entered the residence right after the morning court session had just ended. At this moment, Lady Xue had just learned about the impeachment memorial. Even as she was completely disheartened and about to raise her sword to cut her own throat, Cheng Shu let out a loud shout and burst into the room, knocking the sword out of Lady Xue's hands. If it was someone

else, Lady Xue would have flown into a rage out of humiliation, but seeing that it was Uncle Cheng who had frequently allowed her to sit on him to serve as a horse, she could not help but kneel on the ground and break out into tears.

Footnotes :

噤若寒蝉, jinruohanchan – idiom, lit. keep silent like a cicada in cold weather; keep one's mouth shut, to keep quiet

神臂弓 or Divine Armed Bow is actually a crossbow that was invented during the reign of Emperor Shenzong of the Northern Song Dynasty with a range over two hundred and forty paces and capable of penetrating through the double-layered iron armor of the Jin cavalry.

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 8: A Grandmaster Pays a Visit

Volume 3, Chapter 8: A Grandmaster Pays a Visit

Taking pity, Cheng Shu stated, “Foolish child, you are an unfortunate soul who was deceived by those people. Tell Uncle Cheng, what do you plan on doing in the future?”

Lady Xue blankly replied, “Uncle Cheng, I don’t know what I can do. Once upon a time, I was a disciple of the Fengyi Sect. In addition, my family background was pretty good. As a result, there were a significant number of men chasing after me. However, in my heart, there was only Pei Yun. It wasn’t because he was my fiancé, but because I loved him as an individual. When he went to train in the Shaolin Temple, I sought to be deserving of him, not wanting him to treat me as an ordinary woman and hoping that he would receive honor and glory from marrying me. Therefore, I entered the Fengyi Sect. At present, I can state that I am a master of both brush and sword. Furthermore, my appearance is stunning. I had believed that he would treat me as a treasure. However, he became increasingly aloof and distant with me. Ultimately, he even took another woman as a concubine.

“Daddy originally advised me to cease my entanglement, but I refused to be resigned. My hard work was all because of him and yet he regarded me as nothing more than a worn out shoe. As a result, my sisters all instigated me to forcibly marry him. However, it was useless. He was always courteous and polite to me, but at night, he would always be with that woman. I was filled with hate, but I was unwilling to show any weakness and could only look on helplessly as they are together. Afterwards, when that child was born, I had never seen him so happy. In addition, my parents-in-law also became solely preoccupied with that mother and child pair. I was able to bear all of this, only hoping that he would glance at me. However, he came to me to discuss the matter of our divorce. I could not bear it anymore, desiring to kill that child that wrecked my happiness. However, I failed. He would absolutely never forgive me.”

Gazing upon the bitterly crying Lady Xue, Cheng Shu understood that without her current collapsed state of mind she would absolutely never have revealed these matters of the heart to an outsider. Pitying her and regretful, he could not help but state, “Child, don’t blame uncle for chiding you, but your greatest mistake was becoming a disciple of the Fengyi Sect. Although the disciples trained by the Fengyi Sect are indeed noble and elegant, qualified to even become the empress or imperial concubines, however, Pei Yun is only an ordinary man. He is like uncle. That year, within three months after I married your aunt, I enlisted in the army. By herself, your aunt took care of my parents for a whole twelve years. It was only after I became a general was I able to bring them to Chang’an. At that time, my son was already halfway to adulthood and yet it was the first time that uncle saw him. Afterwards, I accompanied the Emperor on numerous campaigns and never had the opportunity to look after my parents and children. It was only your aunt who maintained my household. As a result, everyone joked that I, Old Cheng, was henpecked. However, who could know that in reality, I felt full of regret and guilt? My entire life, I have neglected her too much.

“If it were you, instead, if Pei Yun were to leave for a military campaign, it is likely that you would accompany him. Although with your martial arts and intelligence, you won’t become a burden, what Pei Yun really wants is a wife who can stay at home to take care of his parents with filial piety and raise his children. Child, you are too outstanding. That is why Pei Yun was unwilling to marry you.”

Lady Xue stared forward hollowly for a long time before she inquired, “Was it not because of my sect?”

Cheng Shu smiled wryly and responded, “I won’t blame you if you think this way. However, Pei Yun is not that kind of person. Isn’t that also why you love him?”

“It is now too late to say these things,” replied Lady Xue in an agonized voice. “Niece no longer has any face to see anyone. Would uncle please not stop me.”

With a humorless smile, Cheng Shu chided, “Why are you so muddled, child? No matter how grave the matter, there is always a solution. If you are

willing to start afresh, based upon your appearance and ability, how can you not find a husband? This world is so enormous, if you are willing to listen to uncle, you can go to someplace where no one recognizes you, changing your name. Isn't that better than dying?"

Lady Xue gazed stupefied out the window, her expression nebulous. Seeing her current state, Cheng Shu knew that the critical moment had arrived. However, he could not exhort her any further. At this moment, it would be best if someone who knew her heart would come to speak to her. However, this person was extremely difficult to find.

Suddenly, a remorseful sigh could be heard from outside the window. Lady Xue's expression changed, as she threw herself forward and pulled apart the window. Outside stood a black-clothed man with a handsome appearance. His entire body exuded a faint killing intent. However, his face was gloomy and his bladelike eyebrows were furrowed with distress.

Lady Xue let out a gasp, a flood of tears washing down her face. Cheng Shu shook his head lightly, turning and departing from the room. The black-clothed man jumped through the window into the room. In a vicious voice, Lady Xue asked, "Why are you here? Are you here to laugh at me? Now that the entire world knows that I, Xue Qiuxue, am cruel and malicious. Everyone says that you should divorce me. You surely must be pleased?"

The black-clothed man was Pei Yun. In a heavy voice, he replied, "Qiuxue, I have never wished to harm you. However, I did not anticipate that matters would reach this stage. I originally hoped that if you were willing to cancel the engagement, you would definitely find an ideal husband for yourself. I didn't expect that things would turn out like this."

Remembering the past, Xue Qiuxue could not help but feel grief well up from her heart. She inquired, "Do you truly wish to only take an ordinary woman as your wife and still be unwilling to marry me?"

"Qiuxue, you are truly remarkable, having accomplishments in both brush and sword," answered Pei Yun sadly. "I once watched you discuss poetry and literature. I had not even heard of many of the examples that you brought up. In addition, you are also familiar with court politics and military

affairs. With you as my wife, I would have a great wife to serve as my support, but Qiuxue, I am completely disinterested in these traits. Serving in the army and dedicating myself to Great Yong is my long-cherished wish, and I am uninterested in becoming involved in schemes and machinations. I am already like this when not at home. I only wish to be able to return home, yearning for peace and quiet. I wish that my wife can provide a home-cooked meal, help me mend my clothes, and be able to discuss the domestic trivialities with me. To me, that is enough. I do not require a wife that is preoccupied with scheming. However, Qiuxue, you are so dazzling. It is I that am not a match for you."

"You speak the truth," murmured Xue Qiuxue in agony. "So it was you who was not a match for me, not a match for me …" She repeated that last phrase several times, until her voice fell hoarse. Pei Yun took one step forward but stopped. After all was said and done, he was unwilling to offend her. He truly wished that this woman would have a wonderful future. If that was the case, he needed to ensure that she no longer had any illusions. It was too late to be tender to her at this moment.

It was only a long time before Xue Qiuxue calmed down. She stated, "Thank you for telling me the truth. It isn't that I am not good enough; it is instead that you do not require a wife like me. Do not worry, I will not implicate you. I also won't remain in this hurtful Chang'an."

Pei Yun didn't say anything, tacitly agreeing with her. After a short while, he said, "I have a junior apprentice brother who is a merchant in the Southern Sea. We are friends that went through life and death together. If you are willing to go there, I will ask that he take good care of you."

Xue Qiuxue was silent. Just as Pei Yun believed that she would refuse his suggestion, Xue Qiuxue peacefully acknowledged, "Thank you. I have heard that the Southern Sea's landscape is peculiar and has frequent dealings with non-Han people. I have long wished to take a look."

The grave matter involving Pei Yun had been reduced to nothing. Although many imperial censors and court officials submitted memorials impeaching him, once Lady Xue's memorial was submitted, these impeachment memorials no longer had any power. In addition, Lady Xue disappeared

from Chang'an. Although the Xue family stated that Lady Xue had become a nun, they did not know which nunnery she went to. Just like that, the pitiful and lamentable woman disappeared from everyone's sight. No one knew that Lady Xue had been escorted by the Duke of Wei's retainers out of Chang'an.

However, this matter was not resolved entirely according to my wishes. Pei Yun was still implicated. Although he was not demoted or fined, the emperor dispatched Xiahou Yuanfeng to serve as the Vice Commander of the Northern Barracks of the Imperial Guard. With this, a nail was still inserted into the originally ironclad Northern Barracks. Xiahou Yuanfeng was elegant and poised. Assisted by his money and power, and as the emperor's favored subject, he was quickly able to stand on his two feet. Fortunately, Pei Yun had the loyalty of his guardsmen and was not powerless. On the whole, Xiahou Yuanfeng did not dare to press forward urgently. The situation sank into a deadlock.

Sitting in the pavilion, enjoying the abundant evening breeze, the faint scent of plants assailed my nostrils. In my mouth was a just plucked bamboo leaf, as I focused on playing a simple tune. There wasn't any technique, but the soft and pleasant to hear music flowed throughout the Cold Courtyard in the wake of the evening breeze. When the tune ended, Xiaoshunzi's figure appeared in the distance. I did not know why, but every single time that I became gloomy and incredibly anxious, I would discard everything and sit here, playing the bamboo leaf. This would always allow my mood to become tranquil again. I had never forgotten Sir Sang's diagnosis. Since I could not distance myself from the hustle and bustle, then I could only use this method to cleanse my spirit. In fact, all of the imperial bodyguards assigned to me understood that they could absolutely not disturb me when I was playing the bamboo leaf. Even Xiaoshunzi would not come to disturb me. Once, an imperial bodyguard that I had been granted important responsibilities had violated this custom and had been expelled from the Cold Courtyard. From then on, no one dared to rub me the wrong way.

Accepting the fragrant cup of tea that Xiaoshunzi handed me, I smiled and stated, "General Pei has suffered some setbacks, but ultimately it will not

affect his future prospects. In reality, we cannot be considered to have failed. In any case, what we regard as important is the person, Pei Yun, and not the Imperial Guard. Tomorrow, issue an invitation to General Pei to come be a guest here in the Cold Courtyard. Also invite His Imperial Majesty as company."

"His Imperial Highness has already invited over General Pei for tomorrow," replied Xiaoshunzi indifferently, "Since young master also wishes to meet him, I will go inform His Imperial Highness to hold the feast within the Cold Courtyard."

Shaking my head, I replied, "Since His Imperial Highness wishes to invite him, then there is no need for me to go join in. There are some things that are best handled by His Imperial Highness personally. Oh, that's right, has there been anything from the Shaolin Temple?"

"The great and prestigious sects can truly stay calm," replied Xiaoshunzi, knitting his brows. "They have yet to make any moves."

With a faint smile, I said, "If it weren't for their ability to bear patiently, why do you think the Shaolin Temple would have survived for so long without failing? Over a hundred years, how many sects have come and gone? Shaolin has survived for so long because of this comportment. Sometimes, matters of the world are just like this. Looking down and making reality is far better than looking up to beg. Were it not for the impediments of everyday affairs, why spend my time in this material world? Xiaoshunzi, your martial arts are originally fabulous. It is simply that your moves are far too ruthless and malicious, lacking a bit of forbearance. I have always felt that this was inappropriate. It is said that the firm cannot last, the soft cannot defend, the ingenious cannot defeat the proper. In war, one cannot constantly use innovative tactics and strategies to attain victory. I believe that this is the same in martial arts. Think this over."

Xiaoshunzi began to mull over my words. Just at this moment, a gentle voice came to me. "Benefactor[1] Jiang is indeed spiritually intelligent as if made that way by the Heavens. This old cassock[2] did not understand this until after I turned forty."

I was startled. This voice was gentle, pure, and profound as if the speaker was next to my ear. However, because of my heightened six senses, I could tell that there was no one else within a hundred *zhang* .[3] I glanced towards Xiaoshunzi, but saw that he was deep in thought. It was clear that he had forgotten about my protection. After thinking it over, I suddenly laughed and declared, “Elder True Compassion has personally come to the Cold Courtyard. Your presence truly brings light to my humble dwelling. Please forgive Zhe for being unable to welcome you. Would the great master please come meet in the courtyard?”

Before my eyes, almost like a flower, a middle-aged monk in a gray cassock appeared at the entrance to the courtyard. Unhurriedly, he walked towards me. Straining my eyes, I gazed at him. This middle-aged monk had delicate features, his face like the full moon. Between his eyebrows was a rouge red dot. No matter how I looked, he seemed to be no more than an ordinary Buddhist monk. However, I could sense from this great master’s deliberate and measured footsteps that each and every one of his movements resembled nature itself, almost as if he was one with the Heavens and the Earth.

At this moment, Xiaoshunzi snapped out of his reverie, raising his head to look over, a light flickering across his eyes. Although he knew the identity of this man, in his eyes, everyone in the world was dispensable. As a result, killing intent roiled up from within. If this man were to try and injure the young master, Xiaoshunzi knew that he would have to use the entirety of his strength to stop him.

As his killing intent was released, Xiaoshunzi felt that he was surrounded by formidable pressure on sides. Greatly alarmed, he looked towards me, seeing that there was no change in my expression. He immediately understood that this pressure was solely directed at him and thus used all of his strength to resist. But the more he tried to resist, the stronger the pressure became. He could feel that there was someone reciting Buddhist scripture in his ear, telling him to accept his defeat and yield. However, Xiaoshunzi’s will was extremely firm and he instead continued to rigidly brace himself, and refused to back down. That kind of pressure only

increased and Xiaoshunzi could not move a single part of his body. Suddenly, his heart leapt and drew back some of his resistance. Sure enough, the pressure weakened a little. Xiaoshunzi laughed callously and suddenly increased his killing intent. That killing intent was a bone-piercing cold that rapidly spread throughout the Cold Courtyard. A bizarre scene appeared. It was plainly dusk in the middle of summer and yet the Cold Courtyard was filled with two competing forces—one a desolate, autumn breeze, the other the harmonious beginning of spring. Although the desolation weakened little by little, the spirit betting one's life became increasingly strong. Even the harmonious force was gradually adulterated by the desolation.

Although I was in the pavilion, I did not personally sense the completely incomparable atmosphere. But seeing the falling tree leaves, even though there was no wind within a radius of a hundred *zhang* , before violently rotating and fluttering, I knew that something bizarre was happening. Afterwards, I saw that Xiaoshunzi's complexion grow increasingly ugly. Without having to think, I knew that he was at the disadvantage. After some consideration, I randomly picked up a teacup and hurled it forcefully down onto the ground. It was as I expected. This small surprise was enough to cause both Xiaoshunzi and Elder True Compassion to form a tacit understanding and begin to pull back their internal energy. It wasn't long before everything returned to normal.

The monk did not seem to take a large stride and yet he was able to cross those one hundred *zhang* with one step and arrive at the pavilion. With a slight smile, he said, "Benefactor Li's martial arts have taken a different approach, going down the path of ruthlessness. This old cassock originally wished to use sacred words to enlighten you and did not expect that Benefactor Li's heart is already as firm and unyielding as metal and stone, unmoved by external influences. If Benefactor Li is focused upon his cultivation, reaching the Emotionally Detached Realm, you will inevitably become a generational grandmaster."

Xiaoshunzi advanced and greeted the monk. He replied, "Great master is praising me too much. This lowly one has no ambitions to become a

grandmaster and only wishes to be able to ensure the safety of my young master for the entirety of his life."

Pensively, True Compassion glanced at Xiaoshunzi, seeing the austere majesty in his eyes. The firm and unwavering determination caused True Compassion to sigh with regret at Heaven's ingenious arrangement. If this eunuch completely lacked restrictions, it was likely that he would do as he pleased, moving unhindered throughout the world, inevitably causing a monstrous slaughter. The deep harm that he could cause would surpass the Sovereign of the Devil Sect by a hundredfold. However, the Heavens were concerned by the welfare of all living things and had arranged an individual capable of restricting and correcting him. True Compassion gazed at Jiang Zhe, who had just warned Xiaoshunzi and helped terminate their confrontation. Although this youth's gaze was bleak and gloomy, his pair of eyes seemed to have the ability to see through worldly affairs. True Compassion bowed lightly towards Jiang Zhe and introduced himself, "This old cassock is True Compassion. I greet Sir Jiang."

Somewhat panicked at the monk's courtesy, I promptly returned his bow and replied, "Great master is a grandmaster. How does Zhe dare to accept such a great courtesy? Please do not be like this. Great master, please sit."

True Compassion smiled slightly and mentioned, "Someday, in the future, Benefactor will understand that you are deserving of this old cassock's courtesy."

"Great master's arrival has caused Zhe to become overwhelmed," I spoke respectfully before inquiring, "Is there something that I can help with?"

"Originally, this old cassock came to meet with His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong," responded True Compassion softly. "But having long heard of Benefactor's astonishing intelligence and wisdom, I therefore came here first to pay my respects. After seeing you today, this old cassock has noticed that the Little Benefactor's arteries have internal injuries. I'm afraid that remaining to frequently handle worldly affairs will harm your longevity. Since Little Benefactor is proficient at medicine, why do you not consider your own well-being?"

With a slight smile, I replied, “Zhe is only an ordinary individual. Zhe owes His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, a deep debt of gratitude for his kindness. His Imperial Highness’s magnanimity causes Zhe to admire him from my heart. If Zhe were to discard the mundane world at this moment, guilt would consume my conscience. Therefore, I have not dared to do so. Great master, please do not inform His Imperial Highness of this, so as to avoid him from becoming worried.”

“Let Man and the Heavens examine Benefactor Jiang’s heart,” observed True Compassion with a soft sigh, “This old cassock will naturally hold my tongue. Benefactor treats my Shaolin with deep respect. Although this old cassock will not split hairs and remember gratitude and grudges like the common people, I have the heart to return the favor. This old cassock has a few internal energy cultivation methods that serve no other purpose than to help strengthen your body and nurse your arteries. Although Benefactor has not trained in martial arts, these methods are only breathing techniques. It presumably will not expend a great deal of effort. I hope that it will be of help to Benefactor Jiang.”

Overjoyed, I acknowledged, “Many thanks to the great master for your profound gift. Sir Sang once stated that of the world’s martial arts, it is the cultivation of the Shaolin Temple that allows one to discard all desires and worries from the mind, and to conserve one’s mental and physical states. If Zhe is able to live longer, then it will be because of great master’s kind gift.”

“Benefactor Jiang assists a wise prince,” replied True Compassion with a slight smile. “Your contributions will help the empire and the common people. These few cultivation techniques are nothing in comparison.” So speaking, he recited the words of and explained in detail the cultivation techniques.

Observing from the side, Xiaoshunzi was beaming, delighted. He had originally been worried about my health. Seeing that there was the possibility of a turn for the better, he was naturally overjoyed. His gaze towards True Compassion became gentler.

After a while, the sound of footsteps could be heard approaching from the distance. Hurriedly arriving in the courtyard was the Prince of Yong, Li Zhi,

bringing along Guan Xiu, Gou Lian, Zhangsun Ji, Jing Chi, Sima Xiong, and others. They stopped before the pavilion and respectfully performed the ritual bows. Although True Compassion was a grandmaster, he did not manifest a shred of arrogance, smiling as he returned their bows.

Excited, Li Zhi stepped forward and stated, “It has already been several years since the last time I had the opportunity to pay my respects to the great master. Great master’s mien remains as before, while Li Zhi, burdened by governance and conflict, has aged much.”

“Your Imperial Highness, this old cassock has come this time to express the intention of the entirety of my temple,” declared True Compassion calmly. “If Your Imperial Highness has any commands, the entirety of my temple will obey.”

Li Zhi stared back at him bewildered, a look of hesitation appearing on his face. He had originally only hoped that the Shaolin Temple would not exceed its limits. He did not expect that he would suddenly acquire the full support of the Shaolin Temple. What was going on?

Footnotes :

檀越, tanyue – benefactor, a Buddhist term used to designate a lay person by a monk
老衲, laona – lit. old cassock; used by elderly Buddhist monks to refer to themselves
Roughly 23.1-24.3 meters

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 9: Heaven Startling Misconduct

Volume 3, Chapter 9: Heaven Startling Misconduct

In the sixth month of the twenty-fifth year of Great Yong's Wuwei era, the Emperor issued an edict, announcing to the world that he was offering sacrifices to the Yellow Emperor. An altar was established at Qiaoshan,[1] while the Crown Prince was ordered to preside over the secondary altar set up in Chang'an. Unexpectedly, the Crown Prince's behavior was lacking. In anger, the Emperor ordered the Crown Prince be placed under house arrest. …—*Yong Dynastic Records* , *Biography of the Prince of Li*

Seeing this, True Compassion smiled faintly and replied, "Your Imperial Highness, the Shaolin Temple is only doing this because there is no alternative. The conduct and deeds of His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince,, although not yet revealed to the whole world, cannot be concealed from the common people. Moreover, the perverse way that the Fengyi Sect has handled matters recently has roiled up the entire *jianghu* . The Shaolin Temple, as the most orthodox sect, cannot idly watch this happen. Your Imperial Highness has always given my temple kindness and your governance protects the people. Although my temple cannot become involved in political struggles, the Fengyi Sect is still a *jianghu* sect. As such, my temple is still able to do some things."

Both the prince and I relaxed. So the Shaolin Temple was no longer unable to put up with the Fengyi Sect's arrogant and unbridled shenanigans, and was intent on seeking redress for grievances old and new. The Fengyi Sect had seized the opportunity presented by Huo Jicheng's appearance in *jianghu* to purge dissident factions in *wulin* . This matter could not be revealed. At most, only a select few could know of this, otherwise I would become the main culprit for throwing *jianghu* into calamity and chaos.

At this moment, True Compassion continued, "This old cassock is here today for another matter as well. Recently, His Imperial Majesty intends to offer sacrifices at the Mausoleum of the Yellow Emperor. This old cassock's

senior apprentice brother, Compassionate Respite, has been ordered to preside over the ceremony. Although senior apprentice brother's dharma[1] is profound, he is not adept at martial arts. Therefore, this old cassock came specially to protect him."

Both Li Zhi and I gave mental nods. We were aware of this matter. Great Master Compassionate Respite was once an important official of the previous dynasty. After the dynasty fell, he had become a Buddhist monk. At present, he was one of the most senior Buddhist monks. His understanding of dharma was profound. Over these years, he had translated over a thousand scrolls of Buddhist Sanskrit scriptures and was the greatest contributor to the promotion of Buddhism. He definitely deserved True Compassion's personal escort when leaving the temple. Although True Compassion was a generational grandmaster, his standing in Buddhism was far less respected and honored compared to his senior apprentice brother. Thinking of this, I could not help but be filled with regret. It was likely that the sacrificial ceremony at the Mausoleum of the Yellow Emperor wouldn't end well.

***

Since its founding, Great Yong had held sacrificial ceremonies several times. This time was somewhat different. The emperor would naturally have to go personally to Qiaoshan. However, at the same time, he would have also to set up an altar in Chang'an, simultaneously offering sacrifices, requesting that the fate of Great Yong remain flourishing and prosperous. Normally, only the heir apparent could be considered a candidate for these secondary sacrifices. Therefore, from the sixth month on, the emperor had ordered the crown prince to enter the Eastern Palace to fast, while the emperor himself abstained from sex and food. Only on the tenth day of the sixth month would the emperor begin his journey to the Mausoleum of the Yellow Emperor. The ceremony would be held on the fifteenth day of the sixth month. Those ordered to accompany the emperor were the Princes of Yong and Qi, and a large number of ranking civil and military officials. At the same time, Prime Minister Wei Guan and Palace Attendant Zheng Xia would remain in Chang'an to aid the crown prince in sacrificing to the Heavens.

The necessary observed rites were quite fastidious—one was not permitted to eat meat, drink alcohol, listen to music, have sexual relations, or pay condolences, and also not allowed to pay attention to penal matters. Moreover, one had to be calm and patient but not be jittery or restless. However, how could Crown Prince Li An restrain himself? Eating only tasteless food had already made it difficult for him to swallow it. It was fine if he didn't need to handle government affairs, as he was already fed up with all of it, but being prohibited from listening to music and watching dancing caused him to be filled with gloom. What he found most difficult to endure was that he needed to sleep alone every night. Being unable to have sexual relations caused him to be jittery and distressed, especially as he would have to endure it for half a month. What's more, under Zheng Xia's supervision, he could only scrupulously adhere to the prohibitions. Were it not for the significance of this matter, he would have been unwilling to endure long ago. In his heart, he was determined that when he ascended to the throne, he would ensure that the sacrificial ceremonies wouldn't be so troublesome.

When the eunuch delivering the lunch arrived, he set plates of green vegetables and radishes onto the table. He also brought out a bowl of coarse rice. Lastly, a pot of tea. Li An once again cursed the Heavens. Then he picked up the chopsticks and carelessly ate. Finished, he drank the tea. When the tea entered his mouth, a sensation of bliss immediately ran through his entire body.

Even before he entered the Eastern Palace to fast, the crown prince had already known that it would be too much to subsist on plain tea and simple food. As such, he had ordered subordinates to secretly change out the coarse tea for ginseng tea. This was an idea put forward by Xia Jinyi. Without this ginseng tea, it was likely that the crown prince's appearance would have become haggard from poor diet. It was a pity that this wasn't a pot of wine. Having drunk a cup, Li An could feel his vitality improve greatly and thus placed the pot of tea to the side, preparing to imbibe some more during the afternoon scripture study session.

The eunuch withdrawing the meal was agile, rapidly completing his work.

Afterwards, Zheng Xia arrived to personally deliver the scriptures that Li An was to recite aloud in the afternoon. Li An impatiently glanced at the box filled with scriptures, wishing to take a nap instead. However, after many days of preserving his strength for the final push, Li An longed for his women. No matter how he tossed and turned, he could not fall asleep. He could not help but think of Concubine Chun. Having not seen her for many days, he wondered about her current situation. The more he thought of her, the more he felt himself itch all over and could not help but sit up. Rather than continue to toss and turn, he rose and got out of bed, intending to take a walk outside.

After walking out of his sleeping chambers, Li An saw the entire Eastern Palace surrounded by imperial bodyguards. As for Palace Attendant Zheng Xia, he was nowhere to be seen. Replacing him was an official from the Ministry of Personnel.

Walking forward, Li An casually asked, “Where is Zheng *daren* ?”

The official reverently responded, “Your Imperial Highness, Prime Minister Wei dispatched someone to invite Zheng *daren* over to discuss the sacrificial ceremony. He will return sometime between 1 and 3 PM.”

Li An was overjoyed. If Zheng Xia were present, he would not dare to be wanton. But with Zheng Xia gone, then there would be no harm for him to have a stroll within the palace. Looking around, Li An caught sight of his trusted imperial bodyguard, Xia Jinyi, standing nearby in attendance. In a low voice, Li An stated, “Jinyi, We wish throw darts into a pot. Secretly bring it over. Be sure to not let anyone see you.”

Hearing Li An’s words, Xia Jinyi looked around for a moment before replying, “Wait a moment, Your Imperial Highness, this subordinate will go to fetch it now.”

It wasn’t long before Xia Jinyi returned with darts and a pot. These items were some of Li An’s most beloved and had always been kept within the Eastern Palace. Whenever he became gloomy from reading the memorials, he would play this to pass the time. This silver pot had a wide body and a long, narrow neck. It was filled with some beans in order to increase the

difficulty. If one used too much strength, the dart would bounce back out. Each and every dart was manufactured with extreme care and precision, exquisite and beautiful.

Xia Jinyi handed over the darts. With a smile, he said, “Your Imperial Highness, please be lenient. Last time, this subordinate lost miserably.”

With a laugh, Li An replied, “With regards to this game, none of you are my match.” So speaking, he threw dart and as expected, it landed in the pot. Li An smiled with delight, but after winning several rounds, he found it completely dull. In the past, Xia Jinyi would frequently have Li An lose a few rounds before allowing Li An to turn the tide. Naturally, this would leave him extremely happy. However, today, Xia Jinyi repeatedly made mistakes, allowing Li An to win easily. As a result, his spirits could not help but drop and he angrily questioned, “Jinyi, are you being perfunctory towards Us?”

Xia Jinyi promptly answered, “Your Imperial Highness, how dare this subordinate be perfunctory? It is only that this subordinate is being distracted by some matters.”

Suspicious, Li An inquired, “What is causing you to have such a heavy load on your mind?”

“Today, this subordinate received a keepsake,” responded Xia Jinyi. “Originally, I had planned on handing it to Your Imperial Highness, but Your Imperial Highness is currently fasting and thus did not dare to deliver it.”

“I thought it would be something else,” remarked Li An with a smile. “Give me the keepsake.”

Xia Jinyi did not dare refuse, promptly removing a silk spice bag from his bosom. Accepting it, Li An saw that the spice bag was exquisitely manufactured. On it was embroidered a pair of lotus flowers on one stalk. Enraptured, as he opened the bag. Within, aside from a small bag full of fragrance, was an emerald-green silk handkerchief as thin as a cicada’s wings. On the handkerchief was embroidered a pair of red-feathered and white-headed, neck-intertwined mandarin ducks. Below was a short poem:

Upon the heavenly dais, gazing off into distance at the partitioning into the mist,Pining incessantly for the waning moon in the Heavens.Tonight, the red

bean repeatedly has appointments,The early morning dew is blown by the golden breeze beside the pillow.

Li An could only feel his heart flutter. The affection in this silk handkerchief was touching. Was it delivered by Concubine Chun?

While in the middle of his reverie, Xia Jinyi spoke up. “Your Imperial Highness, the one who delivered this token was one of the trusted little eunuchs beside Concubine Chun. However, Your Imperial Highness is presently fasting. This token of affection is inappropriate, and thus, this subordinate did not dare deliver it. However, if I were to confiscate it, I would be disloyal to Your Imperial Highness. As a result, this subordinate was in a difficult position.”

Li An smiled and replied, “Your actions have merit and are innocent. All right, dismissed. This Prince should recite these scriptures.” Xia Jinyi promptly collected the darts and the pot, withdrawing.

Under the afternoon night, on the surface, Li An seemed to be focused on the scriptures, but he was scheming in his head. Concubine Chun was definitely inviting him to an engagement tonight, but at present, he could not have sexual relations. He absolutely could not do this. Thinking of Concubine Chun’s beautiful and tender appearance, her enchanting body that had practiced dance for a long time, Li An could feel his loins itch. What’s more, after that argument with Concubine Xiao, he had never entered the palace to have relations with Concubine Chun. At present, he had fasted in the Eastern Palace for twelve days and had already found it difficult to sleep at night. Once he thought of Concubine Chun waiting for him, he could not help but feel like he had ants in his pants,[3] letting his imagination run wild.

When night arrived and he laid in bed, Li An found it increasingly difficult to fall asleep. At long last, he rose from bed, draping a set of robes over his shoulders. Seeing that the little eunuchs assigned to attend to him sound asleep outside of the chambers, he softly walked to the entrance and looked out, catching sight of several imperial bodyguards on duty. Walking to the side chambers, he saw Xia Jinyi sleeping in his uniform. This was the custom for the imperial bodyguards assigned to the Eastern Palace. Li An walked

softly to Xia Jinyi's side and gave him a gentle push. Immediately roused from his sleep, Xia Jinyi quickly lowered his hand to his waist. Even though he did not yet have the qualifications to be armed in the Eastern Palace, Li An knew that Xia Jinyi had concealed weapons hidden at his waist. Li An hurriedly whispered, "It's me."

Instantly waking up, Xia Jinyi promptly rose out of bed and kneeled on the ground. Just as he was about to pay his respects, Li An had already waved his hand to order him to cease. In a low voice, Li An requested, "Accompany me to see Concubine Chun. Do not disturb any outsiders."

Greatly alarmed, Xia Jinyi declared, "Your Imperial Highness, you absolutely cannot do this! If this matter were found out, the Emperor would most certainly be furious."

Li An smiled and replied, "No one will know. We'll go and hurry back quickly. There won't be any obstructions."

As Xia Jinyi persisted in his attempts to convince Li An otherwise, the crown prince angrily reprimanded, "Usually you are completely obedient to Us. Why are you so pigheaded today? Why haven't you risen to your feet and come along Us?"

A look of determination flashing in his eyes, Xia Jinyi replied, "This subordinate obeys. It is only that it is inevitably a bit inappropriate for Your Imperial Highness to go like this. It would be better to change."

Thinking this reasonable, Li An changed into an imperial bodyguard's uniform. Leading Xia Jinyi, the two stealthily made their way to Concubine Chun's quarters. Although there were many imperial bodyguards in the palace, Xia Jinyi was quite adept at sneaking about to dally with women. As a result, the two did not run into that many people. They did run into an imperial guard patrol once, but had been able to acquire passage using Xia Jinyi's pendant signifying his status as an imperial bodyguard of the Eastern Palace and his flowery flattery.

Arriving at Concubine Chun's quarters, Li An pushed open the doors in a hurry. Sure enough, the door wasn't locked. Li An walked inside, but did not see a single soul. He surmised that Concubine Chun had already sent away

all of her maids and eunuchs. Quickly, Li An walked into the sleeping chambers. There, he caught sight of a small silver lamp on the table. On the silk brocade bed, Concubine Chun lay, wearing only a gauze-thin chemise. She was sound asleep, her two jade-like arms exposed above the silk brocade quilt, making her even more alluring. Her trusted maids were not in attendance. It could clearly be seen that Concubine Chun had been waiting for a long while and could not help but fall asleep. The more he thought, the more Li An felt guilty. In addition, the desire induced by Concubine Chun could no longer be contained. After casually shedding his clothes, Li An threw himself at the bed.

Concubine Chun was originally sound asleep. Suddenly, she felt someone press down on her. Still half-asleep, she had no capability to resist. After a while, she woke up. Discovering that someone was playing with her, she planned to cry out in alarm, but the familiarity of this man caused her shout to die in her throat. Under the dusky light, after she had identified the man, she could not help but be startled. Why would the crown prince come to have relations with her while he was fasting? However, before long, she became fully absorbed by the crown prince's frantic lovemaking, no longer worrying any further.

While they were making love, Xia Jinyi panicked. He had secretly investigated and discovered that all of the eunuchs and maids were sleeping heavily. It was clear that they had all had their sleep acupoints pressed. It seemed that this place had already been turned into a trap. The crown prince was already an elk that had fallen into the trap. Xia Jinyi, himself, was only the accomplice helping tighten the rope. But after thinking it over, Xia Jinyi realized that the crown prince's conduct did not deserve his sympathy. He had better take the medicine at once to prevent himself from dying miserably.

Xia Jinyi rapidly took the medicine that Jiang Zhe had given him, swallowing the green-colored pill. A sort of heart-cleansing, faint fragrance caused him to feel carefree and relaxed. Then he carefully hid the black-colored pill. He needed to ensure that he did not lose this pill. He stood outside of the palace hall, silently waiting, not knowing whether he was

waiting for the crown prince to come out or for the crown prince's conduct to be exposed and the difficult, dangerous situation to begin.

Not long after the crown prince entered Concubine Chun's chambers, Li Yuan still slept soundly in the Fasting Palace. He was already old, treating the many days of fasting as recuperation that purified his heart and diminished his passions. Suddenly, he was startled half-awake and saw a bright red shining through the paper window. He could not help but drape clothes over his shoulders and rise out of bed. Loudly, he asked, "Gao Hou, Leng Chuan, what has happened outside?"

A forty-year-old eunuch in almond-colored clothes hurriedly entered and reported, "The Eastern Palace has caught fire. At present, the imperial bodyguards are putting out the fire. Supervisor Leng is outside, protecting Your Imperial Majesty."

Li Yuan was greatly startled. Today was already the twelfth day. Why would something like this happen before the sacrificial ceremony? This was enormously foreboding. Thinking of the fire in the Eastern Palace, Li Yuan could not help but feel an ominous premonition. He asked, "Where is the Crown Prince? Quickly bring him over! Nothing can happen to him!"

Somewhat uneasy, Gao Hou stole a furtive glance at the emperor, but did not dare to speak. Li Yuan furiously asked, "What is going on? Has the Crown Prince been injured?"

Gao Hou had no choice but to respond, "His Imperial Highness is fasting in the Eastern Palace and is the responsibility of Palace Attendant Zheng Xia. However, when the Eastern Palace caught fire tonight, Palace Attendant Zheng dispatched men to rescue the Crown Prince, but did not find the Crown Prince inside."

Feeling as if a basin of cold water had been poured on him, Li Yuan felt his heart grow cold, as he slowly and deliberately inquired, "Where did the Crown Prince go?"

Drenched with cold sweat, Gao Hou replied, "This servant does not know. However, just now, after Palace Attendant Zheng dispatched men to investigate, they discovered that two of the imperial bodyguards of the

Eastern Palace went to the Cherishing Fragrance Palace Hall." Speaking to this point, Gao Hou was already trembling with fear.

Dumbstruck, Li Yuan muttered, "Cherishing Fragrance Palace Hall … Concubine Chun … *Humph* … Leng Chuan, accompany me to the Cherishing Fragrance Palace Hall."

A figure flitted and a middle-aged man in the uniform of the Supervisor of the Imperial Palace Guard entered. While this middle-aged man's appearance was average, his bearing was natural and poised. Cold light radiated from his eyes. He was the Yong Emperor's trusted imperial palace guardsman, possessing excellent martial arts. He had Li Yuan's entire confidence. At present, he was the Supervisor of the Imperial Palace Guard and was greatly favored by the emperor. Indifferently, he stated, "There is no need for Your Imperial Majesty to be overly distressed as it would not to harm your health."

Li Yuan coldly replied, "All right. Quickly go to the Cherishing Fragrance Palace Hall. Instruct Xiahou Yuanfeng: take all of the eunuchs, maids, and imperial bodyguards in the Eastern Palace into custody. There can be no mistakes."

Leading Leng Chuan, Gao Hou, and several other imperial bodyguards and eunuchs, Li Yuan swiftly raced to the Cherishing Fragrance Palace Hall. When he arrived, the excitement had not yet spread there. No one seemed to be aware that something had happened in the Eastern Palace. With a single look from Li Yuan, one of the imperial bodyguards advanced and kicked open the door to the hall. Standing in the hall in front of the door, on guard, Xia Jinyi trembled. Gazing up, he saw Yong Emperor Li Yuan glaring at him in rage under the moonlight. Contrary to expectations, Xia Jinyi's actually calmed down. Turning around, he cried out, "His Imperial Majesty has arrived!"

An ominous glint flashed in Li Yuan's eyes. Without needing instructions, Leng Chuan darted out and a heavy palm landed onto Xia Jinyi's back, sending Xia Jinyi flying into the air. Feeling as if he were mounting the clouds and riding the mist, Xia Jinyi slammed into the wall. In an instant, the violent and ferocious internal energy penetrated into all of his arteries and

channels. His gaze darkening, Xia Jinyi fainted.

Li Yuan didn't even bother sparing a glance at the killed imperial bodyguard, instead bursting into the sleeping quarters. Within, he caught sight of his eldest son on the silk brocade bed, his complexion deathly pale. Concubine Chun was completely naked, sitting there in bed, completely scared out of her wits. Li Yuan felt his insides burn, his eyes and head growing dim and dizzy. Stumbling, he almost fell to the floor, only held steady by Gao Hou and several eunuchs. Li Yuan did not bother to ask for an explanation, instead angrily commanding, "Leng Chuan, kill this unfilial son."

A look flashed across Leng Chuan's face, and yet he did not dare to carry out the imperial order, remaining silent and motionless. Li Yuan angrily shouted, "What? Are you not listening to Us as well?"

Leng Chuan impartially explained himself. "Your Imperial Majesty, even if he is guilty, this matter must be explained to the world. How can the situation be handled in this way?"

At first, Li Yuan's command was a result of his anger. After hearing Leng Chuan's words, Li Yuan calmed down. At this moment, Li An had already sobered up, throwing himself onto the floor, he repeatedly kowtowed, as he declared, "Imperial Father, please spare me. Imperial Father, please spare me."

With a look of loathing, Li Yuan glanced at his eldest son and kicked him, sending him flying off to the side. Furiously, Li Yuan commanded, "Gao Hou, have this unfilial son delivered to the Brocade Peace Palace Hall and place him under house arrest. Prohibit all visitors. In addition, execute everyone within this Cherishing Fragrance Palace Hall. Concubine Chun … We do not wish to see Concubine Chun ever again." Finished speaking, Li Yuan turned and departed. Leng Chuan quickly followed behind and left.

Under orders, Gao Hou stayed behind. Outside, with a shout from Gao Hou, the imperial bodyguards charged into the palace hall like tigers and wolves. It wasn't before long that all of the eunuchs and maids of the Cherishing Fragrance Palace Hall had been strangled to death. The majority of them had just awoken from their dreams. Even before they knew what

was happening, they had already lost their lives.

Xia Jinyi had awoken when Li Yuan and company had entered the sleeping quarters. With difficulty, he took out the black pill and noticed its peculiar scent. Staking his life on the pill, Xia Jinyi took it and immediately felt his limbs grow numb. His entire body was incapable of movement and he no longer had any strength to keep his eyes open. However, he did have one single shred of feeling. It wasn't long before Li Yuan departed and the imperial bodyguards began to fulfill the emperor's command and silence all of the witnesses. When they arrived before Xia Jinyi, one of the imperial bodyguards checked Xia Jinyi's breathing and stated, "This man is already dead. In reality, there's no need to even check. When Supervisor Leng takes action, how can anyone survive?"

Footnotes :

桥山, Qiaoshan – in modern-day Shaanxi province, the location of the Mausoleum of the Yellow Emperor (黄帝陵); the earliest known sacrifices here to the Yellow Emperor were made in 442 BC
佛法, fofa – dharma (the teachings of the Buddha)
心猿意马, xinyuanyima – idiom, lit. heart like a frisky monkey, mind like a cantering horse; fig. capricious; to have ants in one's pants

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 10: Vicious and Merciless

Volume 3, Chapter 10: Vicious and Merciless

After these imperial bodyguards departed, naturally there were people who would deliver the corpses to the crematory in the Western Palace. These dead did not have the qualifications to be buried and could only be shoved into the oven to be cremated. These matters were handled by coarse eunuchs. No one paid these corpses any attention. As a result, no one noticed that before the corpses were cremated, one body went missing. Even if anyone noticed, no one would make trouble for themselves.

On the thirteenth day of the sixth month, news of the Eastern Palace fire and the crown prince placed under house arrest spread throughout Chang'an. Ignoring potential suspicion, the Crown Prince's Junior Mentor Lu Jingzhong, Princess Li Hanyou of Jingjiang, and Concubine Lan gathered to discuss countermeasures. However, they were helpless in the face of this crisis. For the crown prince to do such a thing, there was no way to immediately cool the emperor's temper. Just as the three of them were anxiously worried, suddenly a voice could be heard to laugh and state, "What is it? Have you run into a difficult problem?"

All three raised their heads to look, catching sight of a plain-clothed woman standing in the doorway. Although her appearance was ordinary, her imposing and stern aura caused everyone to be unable to underestimate her. Xiao Lan and Li Hanyou were overjoyed, rising to their feet to greet the newcomer. "Eldest apprentice sister! It's you!"

Wen Ziyan smiled and replied, "It's not just me, Master, herself, has already arrived, as well. She is cultivating at Roosting Clouds Nunnery."[1]

Xiao Lan and Li Hanyou were delighted and worried at the same time. They trembled with fear and trepidation as they gazed at Wen Ziyan. Summoning her courage, Xiao Lan pleaded, "We have handled things poorly. If the master blames us, I hope that senior apprentice sister puts in a good word for us."

With a faint smile, Wen Ziyan replied, “All right. Master has not gotten angry. You should first go greet her. If there are any issues, allow Master to make the decisions, to prevent you from being so distressed. Junior Mentor Lu, you should come along as well. Master wishes to see you.”

Li Hanyou and company were ecstatic, quickly changing into civilian clothes. On horses, they galloped out of the city, not caring if their speed attracted attention, only slowing down when they arrived at a Buddhist nunnery located on the eastern outskirts of Chang’an. Lu Jingzhong’s horsemanship was poor, causing him to fall behind. Li Hanyou and Xiao Lan did not bother about him, dismounting from their horses and entering Roosting Clouds Nunnery. This nunnery was several *mu* in size and was the property of the Fengyi Sect. Every time, the Fengyi Sect master came to the capital, she would stay here. As the two walked inside, they noticed that all of the Buddhist nuns here had all disappeared without a trace. On both sides of the tree-shaded small path leading to the master’s dwelling stood countless numbers of azure-clothed women. All of them carried swords, while their faces were as cold as frost. When the two arrived before the door, they found four women standing on either side of the door. All of them wore snow-white dresses. Although they did not wear hairpins or brocade, their clothing was extremely gorgeous. The two promptly greeted the four. Although these four women looked no more than thirty years old, all of their actual ages were over forty. They were the trusted subordinates of the Fengyi Sect master. Serving as maids, they had accompanied Fan Huiyao battling throughout the world. As a result, their status was quite honored and respected.

The two entered the pavilion. Inside, everything was furnished elegantly, a snow-white felt rug on the floor. On the walls were pale azure curtains. At the center of the pavilion was a beaded curtain that split the room in half. Behind the beaded curtain, one could faintly see a bed. A woman in snow-white clothes was reclined on the bed. Separated by the beaded curtain, her expression and appearance could not be seen.

Before the beaded curtain, Xiao Lan and Li Hanyou dropped to their knees. Speaking together, they stated, “Disciple bows before Master. We were

incompetent. Would Master please punish us?”

“You two cannot be blamed, as you have done your best,” replied the woman, opening her mouth. The voice was as rich as pearls and jade, and yet possessed a hint of pure and frosty rawness.

Although one could not see clearly her facial expressions, once this woman opened her mouth, a faint awe-inspiring aura completely enveloped the entire room. Xiao Lan and Li Hanyou did not dare to be remiss. Exchanging a glance, Xiao Lan spoke up, “This is all because of the incompetence of disciples. Disciples already knew about the affair between His Imperial Highness and Concubine Chun, and tried to devise methods to force the Crown Prince to sever his dealings with that woman. However, His Imperial Highness became extremely enraged, refusing to comply. Because of this, he even became hostile towards us. Disciples could only search for another path and didn’t expect that a problem would arise at this moment.”

The woman heaved a deep sigh and inquired, “If His Imperial Highness would not comply, then why didn’t you have Ji Xia think of a method to murder Concubine Chun?” Although her tone was gentle and soft, it carried a biting solemnity within.

Frightened, Xiao Lan broke out into a cold sweat and could not utter a single word. Li Hanyou promptly answered, “Concubine Chun’s death was being planned. We absolutely did not expect that the Crown Prince would have a private engagement with Concubine Chun during the fasting period. Originally, we had planned to make our move after the sacrificial ceremony.”

“Fine. Since matters have reached this point, it is meaningless to assign blame,” replied the woman serenely before asking, “Does Hanyou understand the current situation?”

Advancing one step forward on her knees, Li Hanyou respectfully responded, “The Emperor executed everyone connected to this matter. Concubine Chun has already committed suicide by hanging herself. The Crown Prince has been placed under house arrest. The Emperor has not taken any other steps. In addition, the Emperor has already called Prime Minister Wei Guan, Palace Attendant Zheng Xia, Grand General Who

Suppresses Distant Lands Qin Yi, and Duke Cheng Shu of Wei into the palace for discussion. It is likely that within the day, the Crown Prince's punishment will be handed down. This disciple has already requested the Emperor's son-in-law to ask his father to plead leniency on the Crown Prince's behalf. However, according to Qin Qing, Qin Yi was noncommittal."

The woman sighed. "This matter is not normal. Regardless of who pleads for leniency, the Emperor's anger will not be quelled. The only thing that we can do is to temporarily preserve the Crown Prince's position as heir apparent. Perhaps there may be leeway to redeem this situation. Otherwise, it will certainly and gratuitously allow the Prince of Yong to get his way. This seat[2] has just now issued an order, mobilizing our entire strength to suppress all those who wish to undermine the Crown Prince's position as heir apparent. As for the Prince of Yong, this seat will have to go personally."

With misgivings, Li Hanyou replied, "Master, the Prince of Yong has coveted the Crown Prince's position as heir apparent for many days now. Why would he be willing to forbear at this moment?"

"If this were normal times, he naturally would be unwilling," remarked the woman indifferently. "However, this time, he will have no alternative but to obey. The Embroidered Union affair is his fatal weakness."

Li Hanyou stared back at her master blankly, inquiring, "Master, how is the Prince of Yong connected to the Embroidered Union affair?"

The woman sternly reprimanded, "Hanyou, you are still too young. Let me ask you. If the Crown Prince colluded with the Embroidered Union to smuggle military equipment, do you really believe that the Prince of Yong won't be able to find out? In Great Yong, more than half of its military strength rests in the hands of the Prince of Yong. If he was not deliberately allowing the smuggling to go on, how would the Crown Prince have succeeded?"

"But at the time, Jiang Zhe was seriously injured," argued Li Hanyou. "Because of this, the Prince of Yong was deeply concerned. How would he have the energy to worry about these matters?"

The woman smiled. "Do you not understand the meaning of the words, 'a

small mind makes not a gentleman, a real man lacks not in venom'?[3] If the Prince of Yong would truly forget about the world for a single Jiang Zhe, then he is unfit to be this seat's opponent. What's more, the Embroidered Union was originally a rebel group in Southern Chu. How would they have the ability to do business with the Southern Chu government? Although that Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets is a mystery, it wouldn't be incorrect to identify it as a faction in Southern Chu. If not for the Prince of Yong, who else would be able to make an agreement between the Embroidered Union, originally suppressed by the Great Yong military, and a faction in Southern Chu? This seat believes that even if the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets is not subordinate to the Prince of Yong, then it still has strong links to the Prince of Yong. Although that Jiang Zhe's position in Southern Chu was not high, that man's use of strategies is completely unpredictable.[4] I had you assassinate him at the time to take precautions in advance. Alas, it failed through lack of final effort."

"If the Embroidered Union is acting under the instructions of the Prince of Yong," asked Li Hanyou cautiously, "Then why did the master launch a manhunt for Huo Jicheng?"

"If this seat truly wished to pursue Huo Jicheng, it would be best to keep an eye on the Prince of Yong's residence," answered the woman, heaving a sigh. "Hanyou, you must know that there are many factions in *jianghu* unwilling to submit to the authority of my Fengyi Sect. However, as a leader of the orthodox sects, the Fengyi Sect cannot casually suppress those factions. Without this excuse, I will have to find another opportunity to eradicate all those ambitious and scheming factions. They wished for Huo Jicheng to incite trouble, undermining the Crown Prince's reputation, while this seat used this opportunity to eradicate all dissidents. What's more, what does the Crown Prince's reputation have to do with us? The worse his reputation, the more he will have to rely upon our help. It is only that this Crown Prince has gone overboard, giving someone a hold on him.[5] If we do not act, it is likely that his position as heir apparent will not be preserved."

Li Hanyou's eyes brightened. "Master, if we seize this opportunity to negotiate with the Prince of Yong, if he is willing to obey, we can allow him

to ascend to the throne, so that we no longer need to support this milksop."[6]

Angrily, the woman rebuked, "Muddleheaded! If the Prince of Yong were willing to be obedient, why would I select the Crown Prince to serve as our puppet?"

Frightened, Li Hanyou dropped her head to the ground, not daring to make a single sound. After a while, the woman spoke up again, her voice tranquil and calm. "All right. Lan'er, go back first to placate the Crown Princess and everyone in the Crown Prince's household. Simply explain that this seat will preserve the Crown Prince's position as heir apparent."

Although she was filled with hesitation, Xiao Lan did not dare to question further, bowing down, stating, "This disciple obeys," before quietly withdrawing.

After a short while had passed, the woman spoke again, "Fine … Hanyou, you speak with reason. For the Crown Prince to so lack in virtue, our support for him will be a matter of derision. We will speak of this after I have met with the Prince of Yong. However, you cannot go out and speak nonsense. This matter is of grave importance and cannot be spread."

Only after hearing her master's words did Li Hanyou relax. She replied, "This disciple is reckless and asks Master to forgive me."

The woman sighed and asked, "Hanyou, do you know who the man that has been enticing the Crown Prince, Xia Jinyi, is?"

Startled, Li Hanyou replied, "This disciple only knows that he is an expelled disciple from the Kongtong Sect and a villainous wastrel. Why has Master inquired about him? Isn't he already dead?"

After falling silent for some time, the woman said, "Although he is dead, there is one matter that you must know. His original name was Xia Quan."

Li Hanyou muttered this name to herself several times, the look in her eyes transforming from puzzlement to dread. Her complexion becoming gray, she inquired, "Master, how is he still alive? Didn't you promise this disciple that no troubles would be left behind?"

The woman austerely asked, "Are you reproaching this seat?"

Sobering up, Li Hanyou hurriedly bowed down and apologized, “This disciple does not dare. This disciple was momentarily anxious. Master, please forgive me.”

The woman let out a faint sigh and told the story. “Child, that day, the Princess Consort of Jingjiang asked me to search for the whereabouts of the beloved daughter that she had with the Prince of Jingjiang. The year that the Princess Consort gave birth, a traitorous army invaded the borders, causing the Princess Consort to lose contact with her daughter, breaking her heart. Unfortunately, after I had investigated, I discovered that the baby had died in the chaos of war long ago. Initially, I planned to leave this matter be. However, that day, Huiqiu passed through your home. Seeing your outstanding aptitude, I could not bear to have your abilities to be abandoned amongst the common folk, and thus brought you back to the Fengyi Sect. At the time, I had no intention of having you pretend to be the Princess of Jingjiang. Therefore, we only killed your parents-in-law to prevent them from proclaiming this matter everywhere. After all, you were already their daughter-in-law. Surprisingly, once I saw you, I discovered that you resembled the Princess Consort of Jingjiang. Only then, did I decide to substitute you for the dead princess. Originally, I only believed that this family background would be of benefit to you and sure enough, it has become extremely useful.

“However, at the time, when I dispatched subordinates to completely eliminate all your previous connections, something happened. After your husband returned to the Kongtong Sect, he reported this matter to his master and sect elders. Although he had no evidence that this deed was perpetrated by the Fengyi Sect, however, there was already suspicion. If your husband ended up being killed then, then it was likely that traces would be left behind. Therefore, although I agreed to your request, I could not do as you asked. At first, I intended to cause him to die an unnatural death after he left the Kongtong Sect. However, he was quickly expelled from the Kongtong Sect. From this, I believed that the Kongtong Sect did not have any intentions to become enemies with the Fengyi Sect because of this matter. As a result, I was even more unwilling to have him killed. Otherwise, although it didn’t matter if his lowly life was snuffed out, it would prove

irrevocably that the Fengyi Sect killed innocents to silence them.

“Later, the people I had dispatched to monitor Xia Quan reported back that this man was unwilling to better himself and he did not pose any danger. Seeing that you were already a member of the imperial clan, how would he have the opportunity to meet you again? Therefore, I no longer paid any attention to him. Who could have thought that you would be reunited at the Crown Prince’s residence?”

Her mind elsewhere, Li Hanyou asked, “Master, tell me, did he recognize me?”

The woman smiled and answered, “Regardless of whether he recognized you or not, at present, he has already died at the hands of Leng Chuan and his corpse cremated. What do you have to fear? However, it is unclear if he revealed his discovery to anyone else. Do you know if he has been intimate with anyone?”

After thinking it over, Li Hanyou replied, “There are only two people who may know. One is the Crown Princess’s maid, Xiu Chun. The other is his senior apprentice brother, Zhang Jinxiong.”

The woman sneered. “Then I don’t need to spell out what needs to be done, right?”

Hesitating, Li Hanyou responded, “Zhang Jinxiong is still the disciple of the master of the Kongtong Sect. It is likely that he can’t be killed.”

“We’ll leave him alive for now,” agreed the woman after thinking it over. “This seat expects that the Kongtong Sect will not dare to make things difficult. We only need to monitor him closely. He cannot be permitted to spread this information. Your identity is already of utmost importance and absolutely cannot be leaked to anyone.”

Fuming with rage between gritted teeth, Li Hanyou ground out, “Do not worry, master. This matter concerns this disciple’s honor and disgrace. This disciple will not permit anyone to destroy my hard work.”

“All right, you can go,” dismissed the woman offhandedly. “Lu Jingzhong has arrived. Let me meet with this junior mentor.”

As she departed from Roosting Clouds Nunnery, Li Hanyou saw Lu Jingzhong walk in, led by Wen Ziyan. Gritting her teeth, Li Hanyou turned and mounted her horse, galloping back towards Chang'an. She had only one thought—she absolutely would not allow that man to destroy her work. Under the hazy rising moon, it was almost as if she had returned to her childhood. She obviously was naturally beautiful and surpassingly intelligent, and yet had not dared to reveal it. This was because she had frequently heard her father-in-law state that a talentless woman was a virtuous woman. If it weren't for Xia Quan helping her cover things up, it was likely that she would never have had the opportunity to receive the few years of education. Because she was female, the school's teacher did not teach her the classics and the histories. After teaching her how to read, the teacher left her on her own to read his collection of books. This was only because of her cleverness and charisma, causing him to be fond of her. But the more she read, the more she yearned for the outside world. When she read the verses about famous scenic locations, she wished that she could leave to see touching landscapes different from the remote village. When she read the verses describing glory, splendor, wealth, and rank, she wanted to have a taste of that life. The more she read, the more she hated her present situation. However, she knew that as a mere woman, it was impossible for her to leave the place. Powerless to defend herself, she would only become a servant or a prostitute. Therefore, with her heart completely filled with grievances, she had married Xia Quan, that tolerant and obedient, yet unarousing, youth.

But suddenly, her opportunity came. Those women armed with swords, each and every one of them glowing with health and vigor, appeared in her village. They had a very different life. Therefore, Li Hanyou had approached them at all costs. Although she did not know what the result would be, she was unwilling to give up on this only opportunity. Very quickly, those women took note of her. With surprise, one of them exclaimed, "Such a talent! How can it be allowed to waste away in this remote location?" Afterwards, they were determined to bring her away by force. However, her parents-in-law were naturally unwilling. Those women did not think twice. Leaving behind some money, they took her away. On the road, when Li

Hanyou heard them say, “Future troubles have already been eliminated,” she understood what they meant. However, she was not the least bit sympathetic. Any and all who obstructed her happiness deserved to die. Subsequently, her life was like a dream. She became the last disciple of the Fengyi Sect master and the daughter of the Prince of Jingjiang. She had seized every moment to enrich herself. She absolutely would not allow herself to lose this kind of life. At long last, she became a beautiful phoenix. This was the recompense that she deserved and she absolutely could not permit anyone to wreck it.

Li Hanyou did not take the main entrance. Instead, she fully employed her *qinggong* and jumped into the inner residence. The Crown Princess, Lady Cui, was in the prayer room, chanting sutras and praying, while her maid was, as expected, waiting outside. Seeing that there was no one present, Li Hanyou advanced and lightly sealed Xiu Chun’s acupoints before bringing her into a remote location in the garden. Releasing her acupoints, Li Hanyou asked cold-heartedly, “Did Xia Jinyi mention anything concerning Us and him?”

Her face devoid of color, Xiu Chun cried out, “This servant does not understand what Princess is saying.”

Li Hanyou heartlessly pressed, “Did he ever bring me up?”

As she shook her head, a look of suspicion flashed across Xiu Chun’s eyes. Feeling somewhat calmed, Li Hanyou stroked the handle of her sword and stated, “Xia Jinyi is already dead. Since he was your paramour, then you should sacrifice yourself for love and die with him.”

Panic appeared on Xiu Chun’s face, as she repeatedly kowtowed and begged, “Princess, spare my life … Princess, spare my life.”

Li Hanyou callously declared, “What? You don’t want to die with him? It seems like you’re a fickle woman.”

Weeping, Xiu Chun sobbed, “Princess, spare my life … This servant is pregnant and does not dare to take my life. If Princess is determined for this servant to die, then would Princess please allow this servant to give birth before dying. Jinyi only has this flesh and blood. For generations, his family

has only had one male child. Princess, please allow Xiu Chun to remain alive for a few days. If by chance, I can give birth to a boy, even if Xiu Chun were to die, I could die in peace."

Li Hanyou's hand quivered, as she suddenly remembered the gentle words spoken to her by her mother-in-law on the day of her wedding to Xia Quan, "Child, the Xia family has had only one descendant for generations. Now, everything rests upon you." Li Hanyou softened. Just as she was about to stay her hand, she suddenly also remembered all of the difficulties that she had experienced to attain her present glory. In order to study etiquette, she had practiced day and night, until she reached the point where her bearing never changed no matter the circumstance. In addition, she had trained martial arts and for ten years she had studied the classics and histories to become the current Princess of Jingjiang. Although this woman did not know anything, after today's interrogation, Li Hanyou knew that she had revealed some suspicious evidence. Thinking of this, Li Hanyou steeled her heart and ruthlessly sealed Xiu Chun's death acupoint. Xiu Chun was weeping and begging, and was completely unprepared. She died, soundlessly. The distress and terror on her face still clearly visible.

Stepping forward, Li Hanyou picked Xiu Chun up. She had learned the location of this woman's quarters long ago, learned while she was monitoring the crown princess. Li Hanyou brought Xiu Chun back to her room, disguising her death as suicide by hanging. However, Li Hanyou did not dare to look at this woman's ashen face, quickly turning and departing. In her mind, Li Hanyou considered Zhang Jinxiong, another one who could possibly know of her real identity. She absolutely could not allow him to tell anyone else this information. Although she couldn't kill him now, she also could not allow him to communicate this information to anyone. Oh, that's right! After accusing Xia Jinyi for enticing the crown prince, as Xia Jinyi's senior apprentice brother, Zhang Jinxiong would also be suspicious. Thus, it would be simple to have him confined to the residence. Thinking of this, a pleased look appeared on Li Hanyou's face.

Footnotes :

栖霞, qixia – lit. roosting clouds

本座, benzuo – lit. this seat; used by masters of a sect to refer to themselves
量小非君子，无毒不丈夫, liangxiaofeijunzi, wudubuzhangfu – idiom, lit. a gentleman is not petty, while a true man is not without venom
神鬼莫测, shenguimoce – idiom, lit. neither the spirits above nor the demons below will know; fig. unpredictable
授人以柄, shourenyibing – idiom, lit. to hand someone the sword hilt; to give someone a hold on another
扶不起的阿斗, fubuqide a'dou – idiom, refers to Liu Shan (刘禅), son and successor of Liu Bei, ruler of Shu-Han, one of the kingdoms during the Three Kingdoms period. Liu Shan's milk name was A'Dou (阿斗). Liu Shan was an incompetent ruler who indulged himself in pleasure. The idiom is frequently used to refer to incompetent leaders who no matter how much support you give them, ultimately amount to nothing.

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 11: The Secret of the Devil Sect

Volume 3, Chapter 11: The Secret of the Devil Sect

After he had sat down, with an even more unhurried and calm expression, Lu Jingzhong smiled and spoke, “Sect Master probably knows that the Devil Sect’s inheritance is divided into three branches.”

“That’s right,” replied the woman behind the beaded curtain, “From what this seat knows, the Devil Sect is divided into three branches: Scorching Sun, Freezing Moon, and Concealed Star. The current Sovereign of the Devil Sect comes from the Scorching Sun branch, while Lu *daren* is an elder of the Freezing Moon branch. The disciples of the Scorching Sun branch possess superlative martial arts, while the disciples of the Freezing Moon branch are adept at scheming and planning. It is only the inheritance of the Concealed Star branch that has disappeared.”

Lu Jingzhong properly confirmed, “Sect Master’s information is indeed comprehensive. Our Devil Sect has passed down four phrases since ancient times, ‘the universe in disorder, the Scorching Sun appears, the Freezing Moon supports, the Concealed Star protects.’ Does Sect Master know the meaning of these words?”

That woman had sat up long ago. Hearing these words, she rose to her feet and paced back and forth behind the beaded curtain. Tranquilly, she answered, “Presumably they mean that if the world falls into chaos, then the disciples of the Scorching Sun branch will have to appear to revolt, while you disciples of the Freezing Moon branch will serve as strategists for the Scorching Sun branch. However, as for ‘the Concealed Star protects,’ what does that mean? Does it mean the Concealed Star branch will protect the Scorching Sun branch? No, that’s not right. The Scorching Sun branch’s martial arts are outstanding; why would they need anyone else’s protection? Does it mean that the Dim Star remains in seclusion and does not come out? No, that’s not right either. I have only heard the name of the Concealed Star branch and never seen any of their members. This seat has

become confused. Would Sir Lu please explain the truth to me?"

With admiration, Lu Jingzhong explained, "Sect Master's guess is very close to the truth, however there are still some differences from the truth. The objective of my Devil Sect is to act on behalf of the common people of the world. If the Heaven and Earth are heartless, treating all things as straw dogs; if the sages are heartless, treating the common people as straw dogs.[1, 2] My Devil Sect's purpose for existing is to challenge authority. Therefore, whenever a dynasty becomes undermined by corruption, my Devil Sect will inevitably appear to make this chaotic world even more chaotic, cleansing all of those influential officials and aristocrats. The Scorching Sun branch is naturally the spearhead and the generals, while the disciples of my Freezing Moon branch serve as their strategists. Frequently, we would support different monarchs to ensure that they slaughter one another. The survivor will be covered in wounds, allowing the common people to recover. This was our Ancestral Master's instructions. As for the Concealed Star branch, they are the most secretive of the branches. Their affairs are unknown to the two other branches. Therefore, I cannot explain their function to the Sect Master.

"However, something unexpected has occurred with the present situation. Originally, when the disciple of the Scorching Sun branch, Jing Wuji, became the Sovereign of the Devil Sect, he wholeheartedly supported Yang Laosheng and suffered a crushing defeat. At the same time, our Freezing Moon branch did things our own way. As a result, our strength is still present. Now that Jing Wuji is in far off Northern Han, he desires to continue to make things difficult for Great Yong, in order to consume Great Yong's strength. However, there is no one free from selfish thoughts. The members of the Freezing Moon branch who remained in Great Yong hate to part with the power, riches, and honor from our positions, and are unwilling to see the Scorching Sun branch suppress us from above. We are willing to enjoy the riches and honor together with the Sect Master, assisting the Crown Prince to ascend to the throne. When the time comes, wouldn't that fulfill the desires of both sides?"

After considering this offer, the woman replied, "What you say makes

sense. With your existence, although the Crown Prince will be afraid of us, he will be willing to allow us to do as we please. Although our two sides seem to be opposed, there are benefits. Fine, I will not expose your identities. Today's matter will be considered to never have happened."

Grimly, Lu Jingzhong asked, "Presumably at present, the Sect Master is of mind to abandon the Crown Prince?"

The woman was silent for some time before she tranquilly responded, "This seat is unwilling to conceal this matter from you. The Crown Prince running amok, if we are to continue to support him, it is likely that his conduct will harm our reputation. Your Devil Sect can do as you please, but we cannot."

"It is a common saying that gilding the lily[3] cannot be compared to providing help in the hour of need,"[4] quipped Lu Jingzhong with a smile. "To speak something inappropriate, the Prince of Yong does not need you or your help."

The woman sighed. "I must try. Whatever the case, the Prince of Yong has the disposition to become a virtuous sovereign. If he is willing to treat my sect with courtesy, then this seat will be willing to abandon the Crown Prince."

Lu Jingzhong smiled faintly., "In comparison, we are determined to continue our support of the Crown Prince. If the Sect Master also firmly resolves to support the Crown Prince, this lowly one has a method to preserve the Crown Prince's position."

With a sneer, the woman inquired, "What is it? To vilify those who are secretly harming the Crown Prince?"

Lu Jingzhong did not blush, responding, "That is indeed the case. I had already placed people amongst the Imperial Palace Guard that the Emperor dispatched to investigate this matter. They will say that someone had laced the ginseng tea drunk by the Crown Prince with an aphrodisiac. As a result, the Crown Prince's consciousness became muddled, while Concubine Chun, worried about her future desolate state, would constantly seduce the Crown Prince, bribing the Imperial Palace Guard by the Crown Prince's side to

deliver the love letter embroidered on the handkerchief. Therefore, after the Crown Prince's consciousness became muddled, he went to the Cherishing Fragrance Palace Hall. With this, the Emperor will investigate who laced the Crown Prince's tea with an aphrodisiac and would not blame and punish the Crown Prince."

The woman laughed grimly. "You intend to push the blame onto the Prince of Yong? It won't be that easy."

"Regardless of who the Emperor suspects," replied Lu Jingzhong with his own bleak laugh, "At the very least, he will temporarily not depose the Crown Prince. As time passes, everyone will naturally forget this matter. What's more, the Emperor is already old and won't last long. It will be enough as long as we drag this matter out."

After falling silent for a moment, the woman said, "When this seat has made up my mind, you will be informed. For now, do your utmost."

Lu Jingzhong rose to his feet and bade his farewell, "There is no need for Sect Master to overthink this matter. The Prince of Yong possesses great skill and strategy, how would he permit someone to impede[5] him? Sect Master takes pity on the common people of the world and wishes to borrow the hand of a new monarch to govern the country. However, in their view, you are seeking to wrest away control of the Li family's country."

The Fengyi Sect master smiled slightly and did not utter a single word. After Lu Jingzhong had departed, Wen Ziyan advanced and asked, "Master, do you really trust them? All of the people of the Devil Sect are treacherous and devious."

The woman callously stated, "Although they are treacherous and devious, they have their uses. What isn't good about allowing them to bear the bad reputation? Once we have succeeded, we'll only have to say that they were the ones instigating the Crown Prince, massacring all of them. This way, everything will be perfectly legitimate. When the time comes, who will be able to vie with us over the world? These junior apprentice sisters of yours are all arrogant, willful, and headstrong. They are unable to do anything right.[6] This time, this seat will personally oversee this situation. I want to see

who is capable of flipping the Heavens."

Wen Ziyan replied in a sincere and heartfelt tone, "With Sect Master's amazing prestige, the situation will inevitably be met with success."

The woman serenely observed, "We cannot be careless. With the Prince of Yong, we have slipped up several times. This time, we cannot fail. After I meet with him, if he is unwilling to adapt to the circumstances, then don't blame this seat for being ruthless. Ziyan, this seat does not care about power and authority, but I am truly not at ease leaving this world to anyone, regardless of their surname or dynasty, since 'a country falls as abruptly and rapidly as it rises.'[7] I only desire that the Fengyi Sect can secretly control the government from generation to generation, allowing the common people to be at peace and no longer have to experience the hardships of war and chaos. You are my beloved disciple. Unfortunately, you lack resourcefulness, otherwise I would inevitably pass on my position as Sect Master to you and have you inherit my grand ambitions."

Wen Ziyan solemnly replied, "Master, regardless of who you pass the sect to, this disciple will comply with Master's commands, monitor their conduct. If any of them dare to violate Master's instructions, this disciple will definitely take their life."

Pleased, the Fengyi Sect master nodded her head. "I have yet to make my decision, but regardless of whom I choose, your position will be detached as the Investigating Commissioner. The martial forces that our sect has painstakingly cultivated over these years will be handed to you. You must perform your duties well. Accomplishing this great ambition is only the first step."

Wen Ziyan cheerfully acknowledged, "This disciple solemnly obeys your instructions."

***

When Xia Jinyi woke up from the coma, he was truly filled with gratitude. He really survived. Jiang Zhe did not kill him to silence him. He had truly escaped from mortal danger. Moaning, he sat up, glancing at the bowl of clear water and towel on the chair beside the bed. Jumping out of bed, he

was surprised to discover that his body had no problems. Could it be that the medicine was that efficacious? He rapidly washed his face, changing into the garment prepared and left beside the bed. Afterwards, he glanced at the door, unable to decide if he was to go out by himself. Because of what had happened, his present status was quite awkward. He could no longer serve as an undercover agent. Moreover, he was already "dead." The most convenient way to handle him was to kill him. But since they had expended great effort to save him, they probably would not silence him. Just as he was allowing his imagination run wild, Chiji, who he had met twice before, entered the room.

Seeing that Xia Jinyi was sitting there with a blank expression on his face, a look of surprise flashed across Chiji's face as he spoke, "Brother Xia truly has a good foundation. Receiving such a serious injury and even poisoning, yet you are surprisingly still able to be so vigorous and lively."[8]

Reacting, Xia Jinyi uttered, "What? This isn't because of *daren* 's medicine?"

Glancing at him, Chiji replied, "The young master didn't say anything about this. The young master stated that with the currently unsteady situation, it is best if Brother Xia stays here for a period of time. The young master will meet with you once the situation has been stabilized."

Xia Jinyi calmly stated, "I will completely listen to the young master's instructions. Can I move freely about?"

"Within this courtyard, young master can walk around as you please," returned Chiji. "However, you cannot leave this courtyard. Once the situation has stabilized, young master can decide for yourself your future movements. I do not know if you have any hobbies, but Chiji will prepare everything for you so that you will not stay here with nothing to do."

"I can't ask for more than this kind of carefree life," declared Xia Jinyi with a smile. "If there are no obstructions, please help me collect some musical scores and a flute."

"It is all prepared in this courtyard," Chiji replied. "The study next door has all kinds of books that you can read. This manor is remote and located on the outskirts. No one will disturb you. As long as young master does not

go out, you will not have to worried about your safety."

"I am already a dead man," responded Xia Jinyi peacefully, "Who would be mindful of me? Would little brother please inform *daren* that I, Xia Jinyi, is willing to bend my head and obey his commands, and will absolutely not be disloyal."

With a solemn look on his face, Chiji replied, "The young master also has words for you. He will not treat young master Xia unfairly."

Xia Jinyi smiled slightly. Having experienced great changes in his life, he had already seen through everything. As long as his cherished desire came to fruition, he would have no regrets if he died, let alone worry about recompense.

At this very moment, a storm had suddenly arrived at the Prince of Yong's residence. For something to happen suddenly to the crown prince, the Prince of Yong would naturally gather all of his subordinates to discuss the situation. This matter was of grave importance. The conference was held in the reception pavilion. Guan Xiu, Dong Zhi, and Gou Lian, the three top advisers of the Prince of Yong were all present. Sima Xiong had gone to command the personal guard. Jing Chi and Zhangsun Ji were both seated. All of the other retainers and the Prince of Yong's trusted generals all stood on the left and right. Even Jiang Zhe, who normally did not participate in these conferences, had made an exception and was present, leisurely sitting in a seat just below the Prince of Yong, drinking tea.

Everyone was jubilant. Over these years, under the suppression of the crown prince, the Prince of Yong had always endured matters silently. Although everyone knew that they had no alternatives, it inevitably caused everyone to become gloomy and depressed. Now that the crown prince was under house arrest, if they could add fuel to the fire and have him deposed, then wouldn't their objective be successful? Therefore, everyone was discussing how to worsen the situation.[9] I sat on the side, smiling, listening to the discussion, not expressing my opinions. Several times, Li Zhi had used his eyes to hint at me, but I pretended to not notice. If I did not allow them vent their feelings, then wouldn't I be inviting trouble for myself?

Although Li Zhi believed this was an opportunity, he could also feel that something was not right, sensing that if he were to continue like this, then problems would arise. Therefore, he wished for Jiang Zhe to speak his views of the situation. After everyone had debated for some time, the discussion entirely revolved around how to impeach the crown prince for misconduct. As the discussion was getting lively, suddenly a loud shout came from outside: “Who is it?”

Everyone was startled. How could there be someone barging in here? Zhangsun Ji and Jing Chi exchanged glances. Jing Chi rose and walked to the entrance of the pavilion. Opening the door, he went out and caught sight of a plain-clothed woman carrying a sword, standing nearby with a tranquil and calm expression on her face. It was almost as if she was leisurely waiting on her own territory. Although she had been surrounded by the imperial bodyguards, there was not a trace of fear on her face. Seeing this woman, Jing Chi was greatly startled. Advancing, he saluted and inquired, “So it is Fairy Wen who has arrived. Why has Fairy Wen barged into the Prince of Yong’s residence?”

The woman cast a callous glance at Jing Chi and replied, “The Sect Master is chatting with the Princess of Yong in the rear. If His Imperial Highness is interested, the Sect Master invites His Imperial Highness to meet in person in the inner courtyard.”

Jing Chi was at a loss for words, turning his head to look back. By this time, everyone in the hall had heard his conversation with Wen Ziyan. They all exchanged looks of dismay. With a solemn expression on his face, Li Zhi walked out of the hall and proclaimed, “This Prince will go immediately to pay my respects to the Sect Master.”

Shooting a glance at Jiang Zhe, a hint of hesitation flashed across his eyes. I placidly suggested, “Please allow this subject to accompany you, Your Imperial Highness. An opportunity to meet the Fengyi Sect Master is truly quite fortunate.”

At this moment, Xiaoshunzi had already appeared nearby, eyeing Wen Ziyan like a tiger stalked its prey. Without showing any weakness, Wen Ziyan gazed back at him. The two stared unblinking, disdain radiating out.

Saluting the Prince of Yong, I stated, “Your Imperial Highness, please allow Xiaoshunzi to attend to us. In addition, Jing Chi, quickly proceed to the Cold Courtyard and invite Great Master True Compassion to go and meet the Sect Master.”

An indescribable chill flashed across Wen Ziyan’s eyes. She knew that Great Master True Compassion had arrived in Chang’an, but did not know that the Buddhist monk was staying in the Prince of Yong’s residence. This wasn’t surprising, as how could Great Master True Compassion’s movements be tracked by ordinary people?

***

Within the pavilion frequented by the womenfolk of the Prince of Yong’s household, a woman with her face covered by a light muslin and snow-white clothes stood with her hands behind her back. Gazing out, there was a small lake with shimmering waters everywhere. The Princess of Yong, Lady Gao, had led the Prince of Yong’s two concubines, and stood respectfully at attention off to the side. Not far away, under the tree, the Prince of Yong’s two daughters and Jiang Roulan were frolicking about. The princess had originally intended to send the children away, but had been prevented from doing so by that woman, and as a result, did not dare disobey. The princess knew full well this woman’s background. Even if her husband, the Prince of Yong, were to come, he would have to use the etiquette of a younger generation to pay his respects to this woman.

After all, the Prince of Yong’s two daughters were members of the imperial clan and could feel that something was off. As a result, they could not help but restrain themselves. In comparison, Roulan was usually pampered and had no restrictions, happily running back and forth chasing after the ball used for *cuju* .[10] Originally, *cuju* was a competition to see who could keep the ball in the air most beautifully. However, due to Roulan’s young age, as a result, there was no way for her to keep the ball in the air, and could only kick it back and forth.

The woman in snow white watched all this with amusement. With a smile, she inquired, “Whose daughter is this girl?”

Seeing the woman’s gaze fall upon her, Lady Gao bowed and replied,

“Reporting to the Sect Master, this child is the adopted daughter of Major Jiang of the household. The Prince instructed your servant to help take care of her.”

A look flickered across the eyes of the woman in snow white, as she said, “What a clever, alert, and elegant little girl. Truly rare and precious.”

The Princess of Yong smiled., “Sect Master speaks the truth. All of the honored mistresses in the palace are fond of this child. Although she is young, she is innocent and thoughtful, able to resolve others’ worries. However, she is a bit mischievous, frequently forcing her daddy to serve as a horse.” Speaking of this, she could not help but smile without end.

The woman in snow white also could not help curving her lips. Her long eyebrows reaching her temples originally carried a faint murderous intent. However, with this smile, traces of gentleness could be seen on her face. A hint of gentleness could also be seen from her pair of eyes that could see through worldly affairs, like a pair of resplendent stars.

Then she looked off into the distance, catching sight of the Prince of Yong walking over. Behind him was a man in azure robes, walking evenly. If it were not for Li Zhi’s deliberately slowing down his pace, it was likely that the man would have been unable to keep up. Although this was the case, sweat could be seen on that man’s forehead. Behind him was an azure-clothed youth walking meanderingly. Although they were still quite distant, due to the woman in snow white’s cultivation she could see everything clearly. Although only a few years had passed, Prince Li Zhi of Yong’s expression had acquired more calmness, losing a bit of aggressiveness and domineering. However, his auras of heroic air and spirit were not reduced in the slightest. As for the azure-robed man, his features were delicate and refined. However, his graceful and calm bearing could not be hidden and eclipsed even if he were in the middle of thousands or tens of thousands of people. Lastly, the azure-clothed youth, although wearing the clothing of a servant, had icy eyes and his each and every movement carried with them a faint magnificent bearing that was quite unusual.

The woman in snow white sighed softly. Were it not for the Prince of Yong’s skill and strategy, he would truly be an excellent candidate. If the

Prince of Yong was willing to make concessions, there was really no harm for her to change her mind.

It wasn't long before the Prince of Yong arrived before the woman in snow white. Saluting, he stated, "Zhi pays my respect to the Sect Master. We have not seen each other for many years. Is Sect Master well?"

The woman in snow white clasped a hand over a fist and replied, "Is Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, well? By coincidence, this seat has come to the capital. Recalling the help that this seat rendered on the battlefield during the olden days, I have come specifically to visit."

"Zhi cannot thank the Sect Master enough for your great kindness," acknowledged the Prince of Yong respectfully. "Has Sect Master met with Imperial Father? These years, Imperial Father has frequently had the Sect Master on his mind, always speaking that without the Sect Master's help, then there would not be Great Yong's present circumstances."

The woman in snow white smiled slightly. Glancing at Jiang Zhe, she inquired, "This must be Major Jiang, I presume? This seat has long heard of your name. Meeting you today, this seat can see that your bearing is indeed out of ordinary."

Stepping forward, I greeted her. "This youngster pays my respects to the Sect Master. To be able to meet the Sect Master today is truly a blessing of three lifetimes." As I spoke, I took the measure of the sect master of the Fengyi Sect. Although her appearance was concealed by light muslin, the disdain with which she gazed upon the world out of the corner of her eyes could not be concealed. Her shining and starlike, lustrous eyes were as tranquil as the cold river in autumn, completely devoid of any emotion. And yet, they carried with them a faint hint of mercy.

Gazing at Xiaoshunzi, the Fengyi Sect Master stated, "This must be the Demonic Shadow, Li Shun. I have heard that your martial arts aren't bad."

Xiaoshunzi drily remarked, "This one is only a servant and does not deserve the Sect Master's praise."

In a meaningful tone, the Fengyi Sect Master replied, "It is likely that there aren't many people in this world who would employ a servant like you."

Finished speaking, the Fengyi Sect Master smiled slightly before continuing, “Prince of Yong, Major Jiang, this seat is extremely fond of that little girl. If you do not object, please allow her to become my disciple.” As she spoke, she pointed towards Roulan.

The Prince of Yong and I were both immediately left speechless.

Footnotes :

This is the fifth line of the *Dao De Jing* (道德经) meaning, “Heaven and earth do not act from (the impulse of) any wish to be benevolent; they deal with all things as the dogs of grass are dealt with. The sages do not act from (any wish to be) benevolent; they deal with the people as the dogs of grass are dealt with.

刍狗, zougou – straw dogs used as sacrificial and ceremonial objects

锦上添花, jinshangtianhua – idiom lit. on brocade, add flowers; to decorate something already perfect; gilding the lily

雪中送炭, xuezhongsongtan – idiom, lit. to send charcoal in snowy weather; fig. to provide help in somebody’s hour of need

掣肘, chezhou – lit. to hold somebody by the elbow; fig. to hold back, to impede, to handicap

成事不足，败事有余, chengshibuzu, baishiyouyu – idiom, lit. unable to accomplish anything but liable to spoil everything; unable to do anything right

其兴也勃焉，其亡也速焉, qixingyeboyan, qiwangyesuyan – a line from the eleventh year of Duke Zhuang of Lu (鲁庄公) in the *Commentary of Zuo* (左转) of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (春秋) that means “‘a country falls as abruptly and rapidly as it rises”

生龙活虎, shenglonghuohu – idiom, lit. lively dragon and animated tiger; fig. vigorous and lively

火上加油, huoshangjiayou – idiom, lit. to add oil to the fire; fig. to aggravate a situation; to enrage people and make matters worse; add fuel to the fire

蹴鞠, cuju – an ancient Chinese game that involved kicking a ball through an opening into a net; considered by FIFA to be the earliest form of football (soccer) with evidence

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 12: Ultimate Rupture

Volume 3, Chapter 12: Ultimate Rupture

The sixth month of the twenty-fifth year of Great Yong's Wuwei era, due to the Crown Prince's unvirtuous conduct, the Emperor ordered Taizong to take his place and make sacrifices to the Yellow Emperor in Chang'an … —*Yong Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Taizong*

Prince Li Zhi of Yong's thoughts surged. How could he not understand the motivations behind the Fengyi Sect Master's expression of goodwill to him? This was also the last time she would lay all her cards on the table towards him. Although he understood what it meant to obtain the support of the Fengyi Sect Master, the heir apparent would be in the bag, however as he thought about this, he could not resign himself to become a puppet. If he were to compromise right now, then he would allow the Fengyi Sect's people to permeate his forces. When the time came, it would be extremely difficult to make the necessary reforms. Furthermore, if the Fengyi Sect Master was proposing to take his daughter as disciple, he could naturally decline, but the Fengyi Sect Master wished to take Roulan as disciple. Although the Fengyi Sect Master was their most important enemy, it was impossible to deny that Fan Huiyao was one of the three grandmasters of the current age. Moreover, it was likely that she was the most capable of the three. For this kind of person to wish to take Roulan as disciple was Roulan's honor and privilege. If he were to categorically decline, what would Jiang Zhe think? Thinking of this, he raised his gaze and looked at Jiang Zhe.

My own thoughts were in a complete mess. Allow Roulan to take her as master? Hell no. Roulan's birth parents and I all wished for her to lead a happy life. I only wished that she would have no wants in her life, to marry an ideal husband and for them to spend the rest of their lives until death do them part. I had no intention of allowing Roulan to marry into a rich and powerful family to avoid the possibility of her husband having three to four concubines, and to prevent the dissolute descendant of aristocratic families

to delay her. How would I allow her to learn the sword? In the future, it would be enough for me to have Xiaoshunzi teach Roulan some simple martial arts to protect herself. Of course, if she were truly interested in learning martial arts, I wouldn't stop her. I would absolutely not allow her to become a disciple of a female tyrant. However, the Fengyi Sect Master was clearly here to sue for peace with His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong. If I were to resolutely decline, would the Prince of Yong become discontented?

Exchanging glances, I could see that both of us were filled with anxiety, and for once, had not reached a consensus. I smiled wryly on the inside. The Fengyi Sect Master's actions were truly not ordinary. A short, simple sentence and she had left us unable decide to go on or retreat, and discord to be sown between liege and vassal.

At this moment, I suddenly heard Xiaoshunzi's voice in my ear, "Must not …" He was cut off before he finished speaking. Raising my head, I glanced over. The Fengyi Sect Master's eyes contained a faint look of derision, while from the corner of my eyes, I could see that Xiaoshunzi's brow was beaded with sweat, his expression filled with shame and rage. I immediately knew that the Fengyi Sect Master had cut off Xiaoshunzi's voice transmission. I was aware that Xiaoshunzi's ability to see through other's from his body language and his pragmatic thought process was greater than mine.

Thus enlightened, I had already understood the awkwardness and difficulty that the Prince of Yong faced and so raising my voice, I stated, "Sect Master's profound affection should, by rights, be thanked by Zhe on behalf of my daughter. However, my daughter has suffered loneliness and hardship since childhood. We, father and daughter, rely upon one another for survival.[1] I really cannot bear to part with her. What's more, my daughter's temperament is naughty and mischievous, and she cannot bear to study the sword. Zhe only wishes that she spends the entirety of her life safe and sound, and is unwilling to allow her to excel."

Sure enough, as soon as I finished speaking, I could hear the Prince of Yong let out a breath.

A faintly sinister look flashed across the Fengyi Sect Master's eyes, as she

declared, “This seat has seen that Major Jiang’s verses have a unique and distinctive style. Who would have thought that your conduct s also so pedantic and unwilling to see women excel, right?”

I respectfully and cautiously replied, “Sect Master misunderstands. Zhe does not have these thoughts. It is only that increasing one’s stature and position in life, the mental and physical efforts that one must spend is inevitably a hundredfold that of a common person. Zhe only wishes for my children to have mediocre aptitude, not seeking to become prestigious and illustrious feudal vassals; only seeking happiness for my children, not seeking matchless meritorious service; only seeking that they be both farmer and scholar for generations. In times of need, I only ask that they spare no effort to help. In times of peace, I hope that they will be docile subjects of the country.”

A look of ridicule flashed in the eyes of the Fengyi Sect Master, as she retorted, “If everyone is like this, then who will support the ruler in governing the country? Major Jiang is too attentive to your own moral standing without sparing a thought for others.”

“It is said that ‘a hero is nothing but a product of his time,’” I countered with a slight smile. “There are countless wildly ambitions individuals in the world. However, without the ordinary, common people, who will be able to control the universe? If everyone wishes to become heroes, then wouldn’t the entire world be in chaos? Although I am unfortunate to live in these troubled times and deeply bound by ropes, I absolutely refuse to permit my children to also shed their blood, sweat, and tears.”

Falling silent for some time, the Fengyi Sect Master replied, “There is no way for those who walk different paths to make plans together.[2] Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, what are your intentions?”

By this point, everyone understood the meaning and intentions behind her words. With a peaceful smile, the Prince of Yong replied, “This lowly prince also feels that Roulan is ill-suited to learn martial arts. If Sect Master is able to see His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, please extend this lowly prince’s regards, stating that this lowly prince will be sure to submit a memorial to protect him. Please also invite His Imperial Highness, the Crown

Prince, to keep calm and take good care of himself."

The Fengyi Sect Master faintly heaved a deep sigh. All of us were greatly troubled, identifying the mercy and regret in her sigh. However, neither Li Zhi nor I were moved. Seeing the situation, the Fengyi Sect Master drily stated, "Your Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince is your eldest brother. Now that he has been imprisoned, I do not know if Your Imperial Highness intends to hit a person when he's down or bide your time."

Hearing her ask this question, the Prince of Yong could not help but laugh bitterly in his head. Although his relationship with the crown prince had reached the point where one of them had to die, how could he reveal this in front of everyone? Once spoken, the words would be spread on the breeze. Whatever the case, the crown prince was his liege, was his eldest brother. In private, he could naturally consider the crown prince to be his mortal enemy. However, in front of so many people, if he were to reveal their enmity, it was likely that the words would swiftly reach Imperial Father's ears. Even if his own household had no one who would bite the hand that feeds them,[3] there was no way that the Fengyi Sect Master would keep this secret. However, if he were to say that he would bide his time, then no matter what, he would be unable to launch written attacks with great fanfare against the crown prince.

While he was stuck between a rock and a hard place, the Fengyi Sect Master smiled slightly and continued, "Because of the cases involving the Ministry of Revenue and the Embroidered Union, the Crown Prince has lost the affection of His Imperial Majesty. What does Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, have to say about these matters? Presumably Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, is clear about what really happened."

Li Zhi's brows rose. Although he hadn't been fully briefed about those two incidents, he was clear as to the identity of their prime mover. He had no wish for these affairs to continue to remain secret. However, if the Fengyi Sect Master was speaking without any evidence, then he could not be blamed for being impolite. And so, he casually remarked, "Who in the world does not know about that these two affairs? It is only because they are hindered by abuse of authority and so no one dares to lay matters bare."

The Fengyi Sect Master laughed callously, a hint of ridicule in her laughter. Deliberately, she stated, “This seat does not have any that can be revealed if we speak of evidence. However, Your Imperial Highness must understand that if this matter were to be leaked, it is likely that the evidence would appear.”

Li Zhi frowned. He naturally knew that if Li Yuan became suspicious and were to investigate thoroughly, although no practical evidence could be found, some circumstantial evidence could possibly be found. If this were to happen then it would be greatly detrimental to him. But he was unwilling to bend his head like this. The rage in his heart grew increasingly fierce. Like a sharp sword, he honed his focus on the Fengyi Sect Master.

At this moment, having planned in advance, I spoke up, “Do not worry, Sect Master. The Imperial Highness is only unwilling to show off his accomplishments. In reality, His Imperial Highness is already prepared to submit a memorial to protect the Crown Prince. The years of brotherly feelings, the years of relationship as liege and vassal, His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, is an honest individual. Meticulously adhering to his duty, he will not casually take up arms.”

Hearing Jiang Zhe’s words akin to an iron fist in a velvet glove,[4] the Fengyi Sect Master paid it no mind. With a smile, she stated, “If that is the case, then this seat will thank Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, on behalf of the Crown Prince. It is getting late. This seat must still visit a couple of old friends and thus will take my leave. If there is the opportunity, we will naturally meet again.”

Finished speaking, she looked off into the distance towards a location where a Buddhist monk had appeared without warning. Using her gaze to send her regards, she did not see the monk make any movements. In the blink of an eye, she disappeared, her figure like smoke. Only at this moment did we all truly relax.

With a wry smile, Li Zhi said, “This Prince suddenly feels my pressure has redoubled. For the Fengyi Sect Master to come personally, it seems like it is truly hopeless this time.”

“Do not worry, Your Imperial Highness. There is no need for us to achieve our objective this time,” I replied calmly before turning to gaze upon Xiaoshunzi. Deeply concerned, I asked, “Are you okay?”

A look of shame and rage in his eyes, Xiaoshunzi wondered, “Am I not her match?”

Hearing this, I laughed and replied, “What nonsense are you speaking? How old are you to compare yourself with a grandmaster-level expert? What’s more, Great Master True Compassion has stated that your future is boundless. Why are feeling sad that you slipped up this time?”

Xiaoshunzi’s complexion eased up greatly, though he was still silent and not speaking. I only stopped worrying after seeing that he had returned to normal. By this point, Great Master True Compassion had already disappeared. An extraordinary person was truly eccentric. With a smile on his face, Li Zhi glanced at me and stated, “All right, Suiyun, stop keeping things concealed. Speak your intentions.”

Just as I was about to reply, Eunuch Supervisor Chang En hurriedly rushed over and reported, “Your Imperial Highness, an edict has been issued from the palace.”

With this, we no longer had any mind to continue speaking, first escorting the Prince of Yong to the vestibule. A red-clothed emissary, holding a yellow damask Imperial edict, declared in a loud voice, “We command the Prince of Yong, Li Zhi, to substitute for the Crown Prince to make sacrifices at the secondary altar in Chang’an. By the command of the Emperor!”

The Prince of Yong was filled with ecstasy, but did not show his feelings or intentions, advancing to accept the Imperial edict. After he had voiced his thanks to the emperor, Li Zhi asked, “May I ask Imperial Envoy if this Prince can enter the palace to thank the Emperor for his favor?”

Sharply, the eunuch replied, “The Emperor has already begun his journey to the Mausoleum of the Yellow Emperor in advance, and commands Your Imperial Highness to discuss the sacrificial ceremony with Prime Minister Wei and Palace Attendant Zheng. But from what I know, although the timing is a bit urgent, the fasting cannot be avoided. His Imperial Majesty has

already issued an edict to have Your Imperial Highness to immediately go to the Fasting Palace. This servant believes that Palace Attendant Zheng should arrive soon."

Before the eunuch had finished speaking, a servant came to report, "Your Imperial Highness, Palace Attendant Zheng has come under the command of an Imperial edict to invite Your Imperial Highness to enter the Fasting Palace."

In a heavy voice, Li Zhi spoke, "Invite Palace Attendant Zheng to wait for a moment. This Prince will go with him and enter the palace after I have changed." After seeing off the eunuch, Li Zhi turned to me and asked, his voice containing a bit of anxiety, "Suiyun, could this be a trap?"

Light dancing in my eyes, I replied, "Your Imperial Highness, although reasonably speaking, there shouldn't be any problems, but this subject and others cannot but worry if Your Imperial Highness were to enter the palace by yourself. Xiaoshunzi's martial arts are pretty good. Let him accompany Your Imperial Highness into the palace. Presumably, Palace Attendant Zheng won't say anything."

Xiaoshunzi's complexion changed and he blurted out, "Young master, your safety …"

I completely snapped closed the folding fan in my hands and stoically replied, "Your Imperial Highness, please issue the order. Until Your Imperial Highness returns, Zhe will manage all of the matters of this household."

Li Zhi immediately said, "The gold pendant is in your hands. Even if this Prince were present, who would dare to disobey your commands? You have the authority to punish anyone. Xiaoshunzi, this time, this Prince will have to rely on your support. Don't worry. Great Master True Compassion is within this household and will ensure Suiyun's safety."

Glancing at me, Xiaoshunzi acknowledged, "Li Shun obeys. Your Imperial Highness and young master, do not worry. Even if the Fengyi Sect Master were to come personally, Xiaoshunzi would risk my life to protect Your Imperial Highness's safety."

Seeing the solemn and grave expressions on everyone's faces, I laughed

lightly. “There is no need for everyone to worry. We are not making any rebellious moves and only need to take precautions against our opponent from being driven to desperate action.[5] Moreover, since the Fengyi Sect Master has just visited us, she will not take action at this time. After all, the Emperor and the imperial clan are still present in Great Yong.”

My words helped relieve everyone’s anxiety. When Li Zhi went to greet Palace Attendant Zheng, sure enough, as expected, Zheng Xia did not have any misgivings about Xiaoshunzi accompanying the Prince of Yong. For the Prince of Yong to be so cautious was expected. Very quickly, the Prince of Yong was brought to the Fasting Palace. Fasting, bathing, and learning proper etiquette, the Prince of Yong did not have a moment of leisure. While he was busy, the members of the crown prince’s faction were filled with worry. Everyone knew that the crown prince and the Prince of Yong were archenemies. Everything had changed. At the beginning of last year, the crown prince had substituted for the emperor to offer sacrifices at the Imperial Ancestral Shrine. Henceforth afterwards, the Prince of Yong had ceased his activities, so much so that he was occupied with consolidating his authority and power in Youzhou. Now that the Prince of Yong had replaced the crown prince to offer sacrifices at the secondary altar, what this symbolized needed no explanation. The members of the crown prince’s faction were naturally discussing this matter spiritedly. The core members, as anticipated, refused to give up.

However, after all, Li Yuan was a generational hegemon. How could he have not thought of this issue? Departing the capital this time, he handed over the capital’s Imperial Guard to Qin Qing. Li Hanyou was a member of the crown prince’s faction and naturally would not permit the Prince of Yong to take action and harm the crown prince. And although Qin Qing was young and reckless, Grand General Qin was cautious, leaving behind his trusted subordinate, Qin Yong, to supervise Qin Qing. With this, the crown prince would not have the opportunity to injure the Prince of Yong. Further, Prime Minister Wei and Palace Attendant Zheng were the leaders of the civil officials. With their presence, there would be nothing to worry about. For security purposes, Palace Attendant Zheng personally oversaw and supervised the Fasting Palace that the Prince of Yong was fasting in, while

Prime Minister Wei had dispatched his son, Wei Ying, to oversee the crown prince's house arrest within the Brocade Peace Palace Hall. Although Wei Ying was presently the Vice Minister of Personnel, he was the perfect son-in-law in the emperor's heart and was neutral, so with him overseeing the crown prince, no one needed to worry that he would secretly harm the crown prince or that the crown prince would be able to secretly communicate with the outside world. As for Palace Attendant Zheng Xia, everyone knew his impartiality and incorruptibility. With this, it was tantamount to placing both the crown prince and the Prince of Yong under house arrest. Instead, it was the Prince of Qi who was comparatively free, accompanying the emperor to offer sacrifices at Qiaoshan, not needing to become involved in the political maelstrom.

Under these circumstances, the arrangements on both sides were extremely important. One could not only not disturb the officials and generals left behind by the emperor to protect Chang'an, one also had to preserve the current situation and ensure that one's prince was not capsized. Therefore, both the crown prince's and the Prince of Yong's household requested that Chang'an be placed under martial law. Wei Guan could only agree. After this, Qin Qing rapidly arrested or drove away all of the suspicious individuals in the city. The Prince of Yong's household did not show any weakness. Of the three advisers under the Prince of Yong, Guan Xiu managed the internal affairs of the prince's household; Gou Lian took responsibility for coordinating with Wei Guan and company; while Dong Zhi led Jing Chi and returned to the prince's personal troop encampments outside of Chang'an. The entire army was prepared for war. At the same time, Sima Xiong took charge of all of the imperial bodyguards protecting the residence and readied to move at a moment's notice. As for the one directing all of this, Jiang Zhe, Jiang Suiyun, did not take a step out of the Cold Courtyard, while Great Master True Compassion did not leave his side for even a moment. Although he had lost absolute control over the Northern Barracks of the Imperial Guard, Pei Yun still controlled the majority of its strength. With him present, Xiahou Yuanfeng could not casually mobilize this unit of Imperial Guard and could only rely only the Imperial Palace Guard. With this, both sides were prepared for conflict and no one dared to

make the first move. Additionally, everyone knew that the Fengyi Sect Master had arrived in Chang'an.

However, amidst this storm, there was one person who was at leisure and carefree. That person was me. Although I remained in the Cold Courtyard, careful to not leave, there were no important matters that required my handling. Every day, I would read and file away the intelligence reports. All of the contingencies, I had the prince's subordinates plan themselves. I was only responsible for issuing orders. What was strange was that my seemingly irresponsible behavior seemed to cause everyone to calm down. It appeared that the impression I usually gave to the members of the Prince of Yong's faction had been quite impressive, causing to unconsciously trust me.

In reality, there was no need to worry. As far as I was concerned, our sole current objective was to examine the strength of the crown prince's faction. I was very clear that this was not an opportunity to get things done once and for all. If the Yong emperor had truly and completely lost faith in the crown prince, the crown prince would have been deposed long ago, not placed under house arrest. The purpose of the Yong emperor's moves was to probe the Prince of Yong. If we burned with anxiety to eliminate the crown prince, it would inevitably cause the Yong emperor to feel that the Prince of Yong's intentions were vicious and malicious. If we were completely unprepared, it would also cause the Yong emperor to feel that we were excessively dissembling. Therefore, the way in which I organized the Prince of Yong's household to display as externally tight and internally relaxed was to not only intimidate the crown prince's faction and prevent them from daring to seize the opportunity to cause havoc, but also to allow the Yong emperor to understand that the His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, did not have any rebellious intentions.

Added to this, the crown prince's position as heir apparent was already in grave danger. If we aggravated the situation, it was likely that it would have an opposite effect and cause the Yong emperor to become sympathetic and take pity. As long as we remained even-handed, the actions of the Fengyi Sect to help the crown prince would then be plainly visible. Favors done

could not be used to suppress someone for an entire lifetime. This time, the Fengyi Sect Master could rely upon the favors that she had performed for Great Yong to convince the Yong emperor to reinstate the crown prince's honor and glory. But what about the next time? What's more, the crown prince had already lost the will of the people. Although his faction was still extremely strong, it was already akin to a paper tiger. As a result, my only objective this time was to survive the turmoil without mishap. The next step would be to genuinely plan the seizure of succession.

However, just as I was leisurely pleased with myself, I received some completely unexpected news. From a certain perspective, it was only a trifling matter, however, to me, it was too late for regrets. Today, the crown princess had arranged the funeral for her trusted maid, Xiu Chun. Xiu Chun had committed suicide by hanging herself. Reportedly, she was several months pregnant when she died. This news left me regretful and remorseful. Originally, I had not paid much attention to Xia Jinyi's personal matters. However, this woman sacrificing herself for love and committing suicide caused me to sigh. Even though I did not kill her, she still died because of me.[6] After I sighed, I was determined to pass this news on to Xia Jinyi, informing him of what a woman who loved him dearly would be willing to do for him. A pity that unborn child ...

***

At the same time, within the Fasting Palace, Li Zhi completely devoted his attention to the recitation of scriptures. Sitting in the corner of the room, silently meditating, Xiaoshunzi opened his eyes. A look of respect appeared in his eyes. Although he had followed Jiang Zhe in entering the service of the Prince of Yong, but until now, he still harbored a hint of animosity towards the Prince of Yong. One of the reasons was because of the Prince of Yong's plan to poison Jiang Zhe. The other was because in order to serve the Prince of Yong, not only was Jiang Zhe nearly killed by an assassin, he was also propping up his ill body to help the prince plot and scheme. Therefore, although Xiaoshunzi was grateful to the Prince of Yong for his deep affection for Jiang Zhe, Xiaoshunzi was often unwilling to take notice of the prince. However, today, Xiaoshunzi truly respected this prince.

Xiaoshunzi was not an idiot. He understood well his position and abilities. He was perfectly happy serving as Jiang Zhe's servant. However, this did not mean he did not understand his own worth. If he were to ask himself honestly, if he were the Prince of Yong, he would have been unable to help himself and would have recruited an expert such as himself. Even if he could not count on the expert's complete loyalty, it would be worth it to receive the expert's favorable impression. Xiaoshunzi had thought about what would happen during the time he spent alone with the Prince of Yong in the Fasting Palace, believing that it was likely that the Prince of Yong would use some methods to recruit him. However, completely beyond his expectations, the Prince of Yong wholeheartedly focused on learning the proper etiquette and ceremonies, immersing himself in the scriptures. Although the prince was courteous and polite, he had no intentions of enticing Xiaoshunzi. Having spent quite some time in the Prince of Yong's residence, Xiaoshunzi had frequently borne witness to the way the prince treated his subordinates. Honestly speaking, if the Prince of Yong were to use these methods on him, Xiaoshunzi could not act as if nothing had happened. However, the entire time the Prince of Yong did not utter a single additional and unnecessary sentence.

Xiaoshunzi understood that this wasn't because the Prince of Yong looked down upon him, but rather within the Prince of Yong's mind, Xiaoshunzi was a man who scrupulously abided by the tenets of loyalty and righteousness. This kind of respect caused Xiaoshunzi to finally accept the Prince of Yong as Jiang Zhe's liege lord.

To Li Zhi, it wasn't that he didn't think about enticing Xiaoshunzi. After all, this kind of martial arts expert would be worth it, if Xiaoshunzi could stay by his side. However, the Prince of Yong was not someone who required that all of the world's elite be within his control. In his view, Xiaoshunzi was loyal to Jiang Zhe. As long as he was able to ensure Jiang Zhe's loyalty, then there was no need for him to worry about Xiaoshunzi. Moreover, how could he use bribery to humiliate such a refined and magnanimous individual? At this moment, Li Zhi probably never expected that his conduct finally caused Xiaoshunzi to eliminate his hostility towards him.

Footnotes :

相依为命, xiangyiweiming – idiom, lit. mutually dependent for life; to rely upon one another for survival, interdependent

道不同不相为谋, daobutongbuxiangweimou – idiom, lit. persons who walk different paths cannot make plans together; fig. there is no common ground to be found between persons of differing principles

吃里扒外, chilipawai – idiom, lit. living off one person while secretly helping another; fig. to bite the hand that feeds you

绵里藏针, mianlicangzhen – idiom, lit. a needle concealed in silk floss; fig. ruthless character behind a gentle appearance, a wolf in sheep's clothing, an iron fist in a velvet glove

狗急跳墙, goujitiaoqiang – idiom, lit. a cornered dog will jump over the wall; to be driven to desperate action

我不杀伯仁，伯仁却因我而死, wobusha boren, boren queyinwoersi – idiom, lit. although I did not kill Boren, Boren still died because of me; this idiom is about the death of Zhou Yi (周顗), styled Boren (伯仁), who was a minister to Emperor Yuan of the Eastern Jin Dynasty. Wang Dao (王导), a fellow minister, did nothing as Zhou Yi was executed. When he learned what Zhou Yi had done for him, Wang Dao uttered that idiom, signifying his remorse at failing to save Zhou Yi's life.

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 13: Sovereign of the Concealed Star Branch

Volume 3, Chapter 13: Sovereign of the Concealed Star Branch

Xia Jinyi's eyes opened wide. In a trembling voice, he said, "Repeat what you just said."

With a look of sympathy in his eyes, Chiji repeated, "Xiu Chun has hung herself and died. Moreover, she was pregnant. My young master specially dispatched me over with the news."

Stupefied, Xia Jinyi looked at his two hands, no longer saying a single word. After Chiji had left, just after he just stepped through the door, he heard the sound of sobs. It was the sound of a man crying his eyes out. Chiji's heart ached, and he quickly sped up his pace and walked away.

Listlessly, Xia Jinyi sat on the floor in his room, Li Hanyou's image no longer appearing in his mind. Recalling everything that had happened after he had gotten to know Xiu Chun, the philandering and dallying at the beginning until finally this delicate woman entered his heart and soul. He recalled the many times that they had slept together, looking forward to their beautiful future together. Xia Jinyi even went so far as to think that after his purse had grown full, he would be able to take Xiu Chun far away. Since his remote home was a place of sorrow, he could not return to it. However, in this world, there were many places that they could go.

All of these dreams ended the day he met Li Hanyou, the woman who had engulfed his life and dreams, the one who had completely changed his destiny, but had already completed forgotten his existence. From that moment on, his former life ended. All of his attention had been focused on currying favor with that tyrannical and vicious crown prince and trying to devise a way to take vengeance on Li Hanyou. As a result, Xia Jinyi had been perfectly willing to brave the dangers on his life to complete the assignment that Jiang Zhe had handed him. This was because he knew how insignificant his own strength was. To a disciple of the Fengyi Sect, a princess of the imperial clan, a wife of a general, he was no more than a pissant.[1] In order to

get revenge, he could only overthrow the factions supporting her. As a result, the Prince of Yong and Jiang Zhe was his only option.

However, during that period filled with sorrow and suffering, there was always a beautiful figure by his side. That woman had always been comforting him, encouraging him, leaving a single shred of light in his heart. However, he had not taken her into consideration. After he had accepted that dangerous assignment, in order to keep things secret, he didn't even say goodbye to her. He was even under the impression that if he were to fake his death, that gentle young woman would forget about him and live out her own life in happiness. However, he did not expect that she would actually hang herself in the name of love, and even more, take her child with her. What a cruel decision. Why did she come to such a decision? This surely must be retribution, retribution for all of the innocent women that he had helped the crown prince rape and slaughter.

The more he contemplated, the more pain he felt. Xia Jinyi felt his five viscera[2] burning. Feeling dizzy, he fainted. Half asleep, he imagined that he had returned to his hometown with Xiu Chun. While he tilled the fields, she wove, as they began to live a leisurely life. Apparently, it seemed like his parents were also alive, holding his son in their embrace and laughing, unable to conceal their happiness. Amidst the haziness, Xia Jinyi's subconsciously began to employ the internal energy cultivation methods that his master had taught him. This was an alternate cultivation method that stimulated the consciousness and allowed one to sleep better. For many years, Xia Jinyi had continuously practiced this cultivation method. Although there weren't any other benefits and his internal energy did not improve, he no longer saw Li Hanyou in his dreams over this last year. He had practiced this cultivation method strenuously. Today, in deep pain, he could not help but begin to practice this cultivation method again. However, as he cultivated, Xia Jinyi felt a blazing hot feeling rise from his *dantian* . As Xia Jinyi hesitated, the feeling had flowed throughout his four limbs and into his bones. Xia Jinyi felt as if his arteries and channels were all being burned by a blazing inferno. What was strange was that the pain and suffering in his heart surprisingly diminished. Fascinated, Xia Jinyi continued to cultivate. Sure enough, the feeling coming from his *dantian* and the pain within his

heart caused his cultivation to be increasingly focused, almost as if pain ripping through his body was causing his heart to be comforted. As a result, Xia Jinyi was completely absorbed in the cultivation.

If someone were to walk in at this moment, they would see a truly strange sight. A man's entire body was covered by a faint aura of energy and yet seemed to be burning in a raging inferno. His pained expression carried a hint of serenity. Xia Jinyi was also lucky. At noon, Chiji had arrived to deliver food. Seeing the tightly closed door, Chiji thought that Xia Jinyi was unwilling to come out due to the grief that he felt, and thus remained outside and called out. Placing the food on the table, Chiji did not think to enter Xia Jinyi's room to check on him. If that had happened, Xia Jinyi would have died without a chance for survival.

When midnight arrived, Xia Jinyi could feel a pure energy rise from his *dantian* , flowing all over his entire body. Wherever the energy passed, his four limbs gradually recovered. When the energy flowed to his entire body, Xia Jinyi felt his spirit quake, the sorrow and guilt in his heart no longer causing him to wish to die. Sitting up, Xia Jinyi felt a rancid smell coming from his body. Taking a careful look, he saw that it was already dark. Swiftly, he ran out into the courtyard. Pulling a bucket full of water from the well, he washed himself. After bathing, he extended his hands, feeling that his fair skin almost seemed transparent, moist and full of elasticity. He could not but be greatly alarmed. He did not know what had happened. Just at this moment, he heard someone sigh from behind him and speak, "Yi'er, you finally broke through the Seven Emotions barrier."

Turning his head to look, Xia Jinyi caught sight of a yellow-robed Daoist priest standing there with a smile under the bright moonlight. It was unclear the age of the priest. His appearance was elegant, his skin like that of a baby. However, his hair was all white. He seemed to be about a hundred years old. Xia Jinyi let out a low yelp. This was his second master, the Heavenly Capital Daoist Priest, Priest Dream. Xia Jinyi stepped forward and kowtowed. Initially, he had wanted to cry bitterly, but Xia Jinyi felt like he had no tears to shed and could not help feel strange in his heart.

Stepping forward, Priest Dream helped Xia Jinyi up. He said, "Yi'er, there

are some things that you know now. Your master is not an ordinary person and is the Sovereign of the Devil Sect's Concealed Star branch."

Xia Jinyi was left dumbfounded. He had once heard his master speak of the three branches of the Devil Sect. Only when he departed did he discover that this information was not known by many people. He even once suspected that his master was a member of the Devil Sect. However, due to the kindness and care from his master, he had discarded this thought from his mind. Today, hearing his master admit his identity, Xia Jinyi instead seemed to feel a load was taken off his mind. With a smile, he stated, "Jinyi doesn't care about Master's identity. However, there are many things that Jinyi does not understand. Would Master please enlighten Yi'er?"

Pulling Xia Jinyi along, Priest Dream sat down on a stone bench in the courtyard. With a smile, he replied, "Good disciple, as expected, your master did not choose the wrong inheritor. Please listen to my explanation. I once spoke of the three branches of the Devil Sect. 'The universe in disorder, the Scorching Sun appears, the Freezing Moon supports, the Concealed Star protects,' explains the division of labor for the three branches. The founding Sovereign of my Devil Sect came from humble origins. He bitterly loathed aristocratic and noble families, believing that the reason for the decline of the state was because of the extreme corruption of the imperial clan and the aristocratic families that sucked the flesh and blood of the common people. He once stated that if a ruler is wise and capable, it could certainly lead to a reduction in the suffering of the common people. However, if the ruler is muddleheaded, then the situation of the common people will become far worse. Therefore, he established the Devil Sect in order to level this unjust, chaotic world. The Ancestor believed that if the common people were miserable, there would be those who rise up in arms and establish a new dynasty. This new dynasty would allow the common people to have a hundred years of peace and tranquility.

"As a result of his desire to not want the common people to suffer when the dynasty declined, he therefore created the three branches. The Scorching Sun branch will rebel; the Freezing Moon branch will serve as strategists who cause the aristocratic families to fall into internecine strife,

cause chaos, topple the imperial court, and create a new environment. However, if this were to happen, after the foundations of the new dynasty have been stabilized, there wouldn't be many members left from the Scorching Sun and Freezing Moon branches. In the chaos of war, this is expected. However, if this were to happen, how could my Devil Sect continue and persist? Therefore, our Ancestor, with his wisdom as deep as an ocean, created the Concealed Star branch. The mission of the Concealed Star branch is to hide openly in the world like one of the many stars in the vast sky full of stars in the Heavens. Moreover, our Concealed Star branch bears the heavy burden of ensuring the continuation of the Devil Sect. For many generations, we have safeguarded the sect's secret depository of knowledge. When the world falls into chaos, we find and select from the ambitious youths within the lowest rungs of society to pass onto them the martial arts of the Scorching Sun branch and the art of war and strategies of the Freezing Moon branch. Therefore, although the Devil Sect is frequently surrounded and destroyed by the factions of *jianghu* and the imperial court, it always returns from the ashes. This is all due to our contributions. Unfortunately, our Ancestor could not find a better way to ensure peace and prosperity for the common people. As such, we can only rely upon the chaos of war to purge and cleanse the world of its foulness to create a new era of peace."

A look of doubt flashed across Xia Jinyi's face, as he asked, "Master, doesn't that make the Concealed Star branch a faction that watches whilst others fight then reaps the rewards when all sides are exhausted? Provoking chaos in the world, while staying uninvolved. Isn't that too excessive?"

Priest Dream showed an agonized smile before he replied, "Foolish child, do you truly believe that the inheritor of the Concealed Star branch is easy to find? For generations, the inheritance of the Concealed Star branch is only passed onto one person. As soon as a Sovereign inherits the Concealed Star branch, he must begin to search for successors, while the previous Sovereign returns back to protect the secret repository and concentrate on cultivation. The secret cultivation method of the Concealed Star branch is called the *Nine Death Manual* . Cultivating this secret method will increase the resilience of one's arteries and veins. As long as one isn't beheaded, then

one will not die. Moreover, this method will allow its practitioners to live to the age of one hundred twenty and above. However, to the present seventeenth generation, there were two occasions where the inheritance of the Concealed Star branch was nearly broken off."

After thinking it over, Xia Jinyi asked, "Is it because there are unusual requirements upon the inheritor of the Concealed Star branch that are difficult to meet?"

With a wry smile, Priest Dream answered, "The first requirement for the inheritor of the Concealed Star branch is to have no family and no friends, breaking off all relations. This in itself isn't too bad, and isn't difficult to meet. The second requirement demands that an inheritor never marry and never have children. This in itself is a bit difficult. The third requirement demands that an inheritor must have suffered the hardships of life before the age of thirty, seeing through life and death. You can count the number of individuals that meet these three requirements on your fingers. Further, the Concealed Star branch requires its members to have, at the very least, a medium or above aptitude."

Contemplating this, Xia Jinyi responded, "This disciple can meet these conditions with difficulty. However, this disciple believes that if it were solely these conditions, then it wouldn't be too difficult."

Priest Dream gazed profoundly at Xia Jinyi, as he expressed, "This is because of the limitations of the objective of the Concealed Star branch. Disciples of our branch cannot enjoy prestige and wealth, and must drift around the world to accrue experience. For the entirety of their lives, they will wander without a home. Additionally, they cannot reveal their martial art. Even if their life is in danger, they cannot fight back and can only run. Because of this, although one is the Sovereign of the Concealed Star branch, one will remain a nobody for the entirety of one's life. This kind of fetter is not something that someone with exceptional martial arts can endure. Therefore, our branch's rules require that if a candidate is able to pass all of the tests before the age of thirty, then that person can be considered as a disciple in name only. From then on till the age of sixty, one can do as one pleases, but is not allowed to cultivate stellar martial arts. In any case, with

the protective abilities of the *Nine Deaths Manual* , if the candidate were to die, then it could be blamed on that person's inability to endure silently and patiently and is thus unworthy to become the inheritor. Only after the age of sixty can we distinguish a candidate's temperament and formally take him as a disciple."

Considering this carefully, Xia Jinyi inquired, "Does this mean that this disciple is not the only candidate?"

Blushing, Priest Dream replied, "Yes, that's right. Before you, two other candidates were also selected. However, at present, you are the most suitable candidate. Now that you have faked your death and gone into hiding, and have experienced such tragic events in your life, rejecting the bounds of emotions, you have broken through past the third layer of the *Nine Deaths Manual* , the barrier of the Seven Emotions. If you are able to, in the next thirty years, scrupulously abide by the Concealed Star branch's regulations, then I believe that you will become my inheritor."

After breaking through the Seven Emotions barrier, Xia Jinyi could feel his mind become nimble and shrewd, while the emotions in his heart gradually diminished away into apathy. Not comforting his master, he instead continued to question, "If all of us meet the requirements, then who would master choose?"

Proudly, Priest Dream declared, "In my Devil Sect, only the strong are respected. If all three of you pass, then naturally, the inheritor will be the only one out of the three of you who can survive."

Smiling faintly, Xia Jinyi asked again, "If that is the case, since I already have the qualifications to be shortlisted, shouldn't Master teach me some martial arts so that I can protect my life?"

Not considering Xia Jinyi's words as disobedience, Priest Dream removed a small booklet from within his bosom. The booklet's title was written in tiny handwriting. Priest Dream stated, "These are no more than insignificant skills and it shouldn't matter if you learn them to protect your life. However, you have to understand. If you do not wish to spend the rest of your life alone, then you can rely on these techniques to be famous throughout the

world. When the time comes though, you will have lost the qualifications to succeed as Sovereign. However, according to our sect's customs, if you are willing to renounce the opportunity to become Sovereign, then the Concealed Star branch will not take back your martial arts. As long as you do not reveal the Concealed Star branch's existence, then you will be able to spend the rest of your life in peace."

Xia Jinyi laughed dryly and replied, "Do you, senior, really trust us candidates? It is likely that you have other ways to control us."

Light danced in Priest Dream's eyes, revealing a trace of a smiling expression. From within his bosom, he took out a red colored pill. He said, "This is a 'Truth Parasite Pill' concocted based upon the discoveries made by my Devil Sect's Ancestor in Miao territory. Once you have taken this pill, you will have to solemnly vow that unless you become the Sovereign of the Concealed Star branch, you will never reveal the existence of the Concealed Star branch to anyone. After I have employed some methods, it will be sufficient."

Accepting the Truth Parasite Pill, Xia Jinyi apathetically wondered, "With this pill, if master were to give a command, then I would die immediately from the poison."

Shaking his head, Priest Dream denied, "That is not the case. As long as you do not mention the existence of the Concealed Star branch, then Master has no power over your life and death. Moreover, the Truth Parasite even has benefits—able to slow down the aging process and prevent one from being harmed by other parasitic pills. Therefore, your master was only permitted to take the antidote today at the age of eighty-three, in order to explain the existence of the Concealed Star branch."

Believing that his master's words did not contain a single word of falsehood, Xia Jinyi's expression gradually eased up. Picking up the pill, he inquired, "Master, do you know everything that has happened to this disciple?"

Priest Dream sighed slightly and responded, "Your master knows most of what has happened to you. That year, your master was resting at the foot of

Mount Kongtong when I saw you. Although you seemed to be honest and guileless, on your features were engraved a lifetime's worth of misery and gloom. Therefore, I stayed to observe you. When you returned to the Kongtong Sect and were reporting what had happened to your family, I had already investigated everything for you. Before the Fengyi Sect had dispatched people to come kill and silence you, I had thought of a method to ensure that the Kongtong Sect Master learned of this news. You were expelled because of the Kongtong Sect Master's unwillingness to offend the Fengyi Sect. After you took me as your master, I did not teach you any other martial arts, only transforming you into the wastrel you are today. The first reason was to ensure that the Fengyi Sect no longer worried about you. Second, if you were to become my branch's Sovereign, if you weren't so dissolute, how would you be able to endure the endless passage of time? Afterwards, when you descended from the mountain, although I did not follow you, I had used a vast sum of money to purchase the help of a thief[3] to follow you for several years. Therefore, when I heard something had happened to you in Chang'an, I hurriedly rushed to the capital. The only pity is Xiu Chun. Originally, seeing that you already had something holding you, as such, I no longer held any hopes for you. If you were to bring away that woman and your unborn child safely, then you and I would no longer have any connections. However, none could have imagined that the woman would be killed."

Xia Jinyi's complexion changed. In a heavy tone, he asked, "Master, what are you saying? Didn't Jiang *daren* say that Xiu Chun hung herself?"

Priest Dream glanced pityingly at Xia Jinyi. "I arrived too late at the Crown Prince's residence. Xiu Chun's body was still warm. Her death acupoint had been sealed. Although well hidden, it could not be hidden from my eyes."

Xia Jinyi hissed, "Who was it? Who was it that killed Xiu Chun? She was only a weak woman, unthreatening and without value. Who would kill her?"

Priest Dream tranquilly replied, "I arrived late and did not see the killer. However, how can you not know who it is?"

Feeling as if a knife was being twisted in his heart, Xia Jinyi turned away and did not speak further. Sighing, Priest Dream stated, "If I didn't tell you

about this, it is likely that you would become my inheritor. However, I have no wish to see you live the rest of your life with regrets. Child, from henceforth, do the best you can."

Gazing out at the light of dawn outside the window, he wished to cry but he had no tears. He distantly wondered, "Master, to what extent can I act to have the qualifications to participate in the competition to become Sovereign?"

Glancing deeply at Xia Jinyi, Priest Dream replied, "I believe that you will fully realize when you have lost the qualifications to compete. A non-entity can use another's brilliance, but once that non-entity's brilliance is exposed and seen by everyone, then you will no longer need to come. Thirty years from now, in the temple that we, master and disciple, stayed in, I hope that you will be able to keep the appointment. Now, you should take the pill."

Gazing at the parasitic pill, Xia Jinyi murmured, "One who has seen the world doesn't stop at small things.[4] Aside from hate, there is nothing in this world that I cannot let go." Finished speaking, he took the pill. He did not know if it was reality or if it was psychological, but Xia Jinyi felt that when the pill was moistened, it automatically rolled down into his stomach.

Gazing upon his disciple in satisfaction, Priest Dream stated, "I hope that we, master and disciple, have the fortune to meet again. Everyone in this residence has had their acupoints sealed by me. They should be waking up soon. Your master is going."

With a flicker of his yellow robes, Priest Dream disappeared. The lips of Xia Jinyi started to curve upward. It was a smile that caused those who saw it to feel bitter and sad.

It wasn't long before an uneasy looking Chiji appeared. His acupoint had been sealed last night. Priest Dream's techniques were brilliant; not only did Chiji did not notice anything, he had also slept quite soundly. However, having been trained by the Secret Camp, Chiji felt that there was something abnormal about his deep sleep. Therefore, when he woke, Chiji immediately came to investigate Xia Jinyi's situation. Seeing the change and the indistinct expression on Xia Jinyi's face, as if he was in deep pain, Chiji did not pry.

Probing, he asked, “Did young master Xia not rest last night?”

Xia Jinyi smiled softly and replied, “My love is dead. Jinyi could not sleep.”

A look of understanding appearing on his face, Chiji replied, “Young master Xia should restrain his grief. Losing your love, although painful, if Miss Xiu Chun were to know in the underworld, she would wish young master Xia to live life happily.”

Slightly astounded, Xia Jinyi inquired, “What? Little brother is so young and understands the pain of losing a beloved one?”

Chiji let out a light sigh and responded, “My young master has a poem that has never been circulated. If young master Xia is interested, I can sing the verses for you.”

Interested, Xia Jinyi replied, “What is the *ci* ?[5] Allow me to accompany you.”

A look of grief flashed across Chiji’s eyes as he replied, “It’s a poem set to *Spring Permeating a Garden* .”

Fetching the flute, Xia Jinyi concentrated and began to play. Accompanying the sounds of the flute, Chiji began to sing in a low voice:

“Ephemeral bliss,And ill-fated like this,How could I forget our reluctance to part?Reminiscing of our time by the rippling water in the cold moonlight,In an emerald dress,You danced to the song of the swallow.Songs drifting from the beautiful balustrades,Secretly rendezvousing under the Milky Way.Close friends, so hard to keep,Love broken like a flower plucked, no longer looked after,Obtaining only late night weeping.Sick for long,Even if yearning a hundred lifetimesUnable to paint your form.

Lying down listening to constant rain in the dead of night.Expecting a bob of hair,Frost guaranteed at sunrise.Alone under the vast blue sky,Destiny severed,Fluttering butterflies,Touching scenes wound the heart.Sentimentally attached to noble bearing,Unbearable scarlet blood,In dreams, remembering yesterday’s beauty.Truly helpless,The bittersweet sound of a leaf flute floats by,Composing a worried tune.”[6]

Xia Jinyi listened as he played. But as time passed, the music from the flute became disjointed, as he suffered in agony. At the end of the song, Xia Jinyi

only felt that the originally seemingly faded pain had surprisingly reappeared once again. Finally, tears rained down his cheeks.

Footnotes :

蝼蚁, louyi – lit. mole cricket and ants; fig. tiny individuals with no power; pissant

五脏, wuzang – five viscera of traditional Chinese medicine, namely: heart, liver, spleen lungs, and kidneys

梁上君子, liangshangjunzi – lit. the gentleman on the roof beam; fig. a thief

曾经沧**海**难为**水**, **除却巫山不是云**, cengjingcanghainanweishui, chuque Wushan bushiyun – idiom, lit. there are no rivers to one that has crossed the ocean, and no clouds to one who has passed Mount Wu; fig. one who has seen the world doesn't stop at small things

词, *ci* – a type of lyric poetry set to the same rigorous structure that often possesses a prearranged accompaniment

This is based on a poem by the Qing Dynasty poet Nalan Xingde (纳兰**性德**) based on the structure of the *ci* , *Spring Permeating a Garden* , entitled *Ephemeral Bliss* .

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 14: A Bloody Night in Chang'an

Volume 3, Chapter 14: A Bloody Night in Chang'an

After representing the Emperor to offer sacrifices, all those who witnessed the sacrifice praised Taizong's solemnity and propriety.

The night of the fifteenth day of the sixth month, Chang'an fell into chaos. Rumors spread of someone planning a rebellion. Donning armor and grasping a sword, Taizong's prestige shook the capital.—*Yong Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Taizong*

In the dead of night on the fourteenth day of the sixth month, within a secret room in a hidden residence in Chang'an, a man and a woman were deep in discussion. The man was dressed in a set of black clothes that blended into the darkness and had a black cloak draped around his shoulders. All of his facial features were hidden under the muslin draped down from his bamboo hat. The woman's appearance was mediocre, but her entire body emitted a swordlike aura, Wen Ziyan.

Under the dim lamplight, the two were silent for quite some time, until finally the man opened his mouth, "Please report to the Sect Master, we cannot act this time. With the present disposition of forces in Chang'an, the chance of defeating the Prince of Yong's faction is fifty-fifty. The Prince of Qi's forces can only be mobilized by him or by his own military tally.[1] This time, it is impossible for his forces to participate in this struggle. Besides, His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, still has opportunities. If we are in a rush to make a move, it is likely that we will fall into a trap."

Sighing, Wen Ziyan replied, "Sect Master also thinks this way. However, I will not be reconciled if we do not seize this opportunity to kill several of these thorns in our side."

In a cruel voice, the man rebuked, "Who can we go kill? The Prince of Yong has Demonic Shadow Li Shun by his side. Unless the Sect Master goes personally, who else is able to succeed easily? Beside Jiang Zhe is Great

Master True Compassion. As for the others, what is the point to kill them and groundlessly give them an excuse to retaliate? Wait … don't tell me you intend to kill Princess Changle?"

Wei Ziyan smiled slightly and denied, "We do not dare to kill the Princess. But what about Ye Tianxiu? He is presently in Chang'an. Why not take this opportunity to kill him, chopping off one of the Prince of Qing's assistants?"

Thoughtfully, the man responded, "This idea isn't bad. It is only that Ye Tianxiu's stay in Chang'an is perfectly legitimate. His position as the Supervisor of the Prince of Qing's Imperial Bodyguard isn't ordinary. If we are to kill, we can only do so secretly. The other option will be to have someone else to do the dirty work."

With an icy expression on her face, Wen Ziyan stated, "It is very easy to kill Ye Tianxiu. Were it not for an unwillingness to infuriate the Prince of Qing, I would have acted long ago. Now, we will use this chaotic state of affairs to have him killed. Even if the Prince of Qing wishes to act against the perpetrator, he won't be able to find who acted."

"It is better if we do not act," replied the man with an callous smile. "Have Xiahou Yuanfeng go. He is after all a disciple of the Freezing Moon branch of the Devil Sect. Ignoring the fact that he has learned so many different martial arts, he is not a simple man."

Smiling, Wen Ziyan agreed, "Good, we'll follow your plan. Master has always said that you are her most capable assistant. Truly possessing a well-deserved reputation."

The man casually inquired, "What about being her most capable assistant? Do I not still have to listen to her commands?"

"When this matter succeeds," answered Wen Ziyan sternly, "You will definitely be pleased with the Sect Master's arrangements."

After falling silent for a moment, the man spoke, "I'm going to leave. The hour is growing late."

Wen Ziyan lightly nodded her head, bidding him farewell. "Be careful on the road."

The man walked out of the secret room. Like a flying goose, his figure nimbly disappeared into the night. With this, a bloody slaughter was about to begin.

***

On the fifteenth day of the sixth month, Prince Li Zhi of Yong replaced the crown prince to offer sacrifices at the secondary altar. After Li Zhi had respectfully and cautiously completed the sacrificial ceremony to perfection, even the fussiest Confucian scholars could only speak words of praise. Taking this sacrificial ceremony opportunity, Li Zhi returned to the heart of Great Yong's court authority and power. This fact caused many to loathe incessantly, and many others also to become overjoyed.

Ye Tianxiu was one of those who rejoiced. As the Supervisor of the Prince of Qing's Imperial Bodyguard, he was extremely clear about the hostility between the Prince of Qing and the Fengyi Sect. But he was also clear that the Prince of Qing had fundamentally no chance for success. The only way for the Prince of Qing to succeed was to borrow another's strength. However, only now did Ye Tianxiu finally become willing to admit that the Prince of Yong deserved to become the monarch.

Ye Tianxiu reluctantly watched the Prince of Yong's carriage go off into the distance before he finally decided to return to his residence. In recent days, Marquis Jiang had sent a letter to His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qing. The little marquis's poison had already temporarily been contained. Therefore, Marquis Jiang wished to deliver the little marquis as soon as possible to Chang'an. However, with the current complicated state of affairs in Chang'an, Marquis Jiang's power and influence could not guarantee his beloved son's safety. Therefore, Marquis Jiang had asked the Prince of Qing for help. But, the Prince of Qing also had his difficulties. The Prince of Qing's strength in Chang'an was not stable. Although the Fengyi Sect Master could not overtly deal with the subordinates of the Prince of Qing, this did not mean that they were completely powerless, but rather that the Fengyi Sect was unwilling to give the Prince of Qing a pretext. If the little marquis were to arrive in Chang'an and was discovered by the Fengyi Sect, then they would have the excuse to openly eliminate the Prince of Qing's subordinates.

When the time came, not only would His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qing's painstakingly built up strength in Chang'an would become nothing more than illusions, but the little marquis would also be in grave danger.

It was dusk when Ye Tianxiu returned to the Prince of Qing's secret base in Chang'an. After instructing his subordinates to carefully keep vigil through the night, he went to his study to pen a reply to the Prince of Qing, explaining his own opinion. After he finished writing the letter, it was already the first watch of the evening.[2] Inside, Ye Tianxiu was gloomy and could not sleep and remained in the study to flip through the recent intelligence reports.

At this very moment, a mysterious man was standing in the alleyway not far from this secret base, apathetically gazing towards the building. He wore a set of carbon-black robes. His waist was girded, his stature lanky, as if he was like a tree upright in the breeze. Although his face was covered by azure muslin and his appearance could not be seen, the exposed eyebrows were extremely exquisite and extraordinary. Looking at the color of the sky, he suddenly sprang forth towards that quiet residence. His floating figure, like a large swallow, very quickly leapt over the courtyard wall. The man's tall figure dropping down into the middle of the courtyard had already completely alarmed Ye Tianxiu's subordinates. Issuing secret signals to alert their superiors, they surrounded the man that had suddenly appeared. The man did not panic, only strolling towards the interior. The personal guards of the Prince of Qing could not tolerate this, moving forward to block him. To their surprise, an azure light suddenly flicked out as quick as lightning. Blood immediately spurted out, the guards all having had their throats cut by a sword.

By this moment, Ye Tianxiu had already dashed over. In a loud voice, he cried out, "Who are you to dare barge into another's home?"

The man sighed softly. "This one is here under orders. Please forgive me, Brother Ye." Finished speaking, he threw himself at those surrounding him. The bodyguards all had excellent martial arts, adept at attacking. Acting at the same time, the guards moved to block the man's attacks. However, the man's *qinggong* was superb. They could only see his figure soar into the air,

glints of steel flashing through the air, sparkling all around the man in carbon-black clothing. The sword would occasionally rend through the air, occasionally slashing gaudily. Everywhere it went, blood gushed. Ye Tianxiu angrily cried out. Unsheathing his sword, he leapt forward and threw himself at the intruder. However, that man did not meet Ye Tianxiu head on, only focusing on killing the guards. Seeing the man's actions, Ye Tianxiu became increasingly alarmed and angered. He cried out, "Everyone quickly withdraw."

All of these guards were highly trained, immediately scattering. Ye Tianxiu took the opportunity to block the man. The swordsmanship of both men were extremely brilliant. Ye Tianxiu's swordsmanship was sharp and pungent, fierce and malicious, and nimble. However, within, it was steady and unflustered. The masked man's swordsmanship was quick and skillful, and also unpredictable, combining well with his divine *qinggong* and making it hard to resist. In an instant, the two had clashed seventy to eighty times, the exquisite sword techniques brilliant and varied, the energy of the swords surging up violently. It seemed like the two were on a small boat in the middle of the roiling waves of a tempest.

The Prince of Yong's personal guards knew that if they joined in, they would cause inconveniences for Ye Tianxiu. At the same time, they were unwilling to disturb the authorities. As a result, they surrounded the courtyard, preparing concealed weapons to shoot at the masked man, only waiting for the two to separate.

The two battled to the drinking room. The masked man suddenly let out a soft cry, sword and man flying towards Ye Tianxiu. This strike was incomparably quick. Extremely steady, Ye Tianxiu, brought his sword up to parry the strike. The two swords met and were knocked back. Ye Tianxiu discovered that the masked man seemed to tremble. Ye Tianxiu could not help but be overjoyed, immediately reaching the conclusion that the masked man's martial arts were below his. Jumping, arcing through the air, he stabbed at the masked man's back. He had calculated that the location that he attacked would be difficult for the masked man to turn and defend. The masked man's internal energy was indeed not as strong, his figure becoming

sluggish. Ye Tianxiu's sword pierced towards the right side of the back. Just as he was about to succeed, the masked man suddenly struck back. The sword was like thunder and lightning. Luckily, Ye Tianxiu's mind was meticulous and he had held back a tenth of his strength. Even then, however, there was only time for him to avoid the counter. Crying out in pain, Ye Tianxiu covered his wound with his hand and shouted, "Everyone escape." Finished speaking, he charged out, disregarding his injury.

The masked man originally intended to pursue Ye Tianxiu, but he suddenly stopped in his tracks, turning and throwing himself at the personal guards who had charged forward to block him to allow Ye Tianxiu to help. The masked man leaped high into the air and chopped down, his figure like a diving falcon, his sword falling like torrential rain. In no more than a dozen strikes, the masked man killed all of the personal guards who had stayed behind to serve as the rearguard. Finally, the masked man gazed upon the blood-covered ground. Releasing a light sigh, the masked man took out a snow-white silk handkerchief from his bosom, wiping the blood from his sword. Afterwards, he sheathed his sword into the scabbard masquerading as his belt. The sharp handle was actually a soft, flexible sword.

At this moment, flames suddenly burst out all around the residence. The masked man frowned slightly, immediately understanding that the Prince of Qing's subordinates had set the residence on fire to destroy any evidence. The masked man did not get angry, only returning to the darkness before the alarm was raised.

However, this bloody battle was only the start of the nightmare. Just as the patrolling imperial guards arrived on the scene and not long after they had extinguished the flame, two major incidences occurred in Chang'an. The first was Zheng Xia being attacked by an assassin. The second was an incident had occurred in Chang'an's city marketplace.

Zheng Xia was attacked by an assassin at the beginning of the second watch.[3] After completing the sacrificial ceremony and with work winding down, Zheng Xia traveled through the night and returned to his residence. Although he was a civil official, because of the importance that Great Yong

weighed upon its military, he did not like to ride a palanquin, instead slowing trotting along on a horse. On his left and right, he was accompanied and escorted by his attendants, frequently watching their surroundings. Zheng Xia was known for his honesty and uprightness, his daring to remonstrate forthrightly known throughout the world. Although he was honest and upright, his character openhearted, he had still made many enemies. As a result, he had several good martial artists by his side protecting him. Some had received great kindness from Zheng Xia and were repaying the kindness. Some admired and respected Zheng Xia's moral character. There were also those who were imperial bodyguards dispatched by the Yong emperor. Although there were some matters that Li Yuan was somewhat confused about, he was not an ruler incapable of listening to remonstration. He was extremely respectful towards Zheng Xia. Thus, after Zheng Xia was attacked by an assassin, Li Yuan dispatched four palace guardsmen to protect Zheng Xia. Afterwards, Li Yuan had bestowed honorary third-ranked titles upon three of Zheng Xia's guards with *jianghu* backgrounds. The glory and favor granted Zheng Xia was above all the ministers. Because of this, Zheng Xia was even more wholeheartedly loyal to Li Yuan.

Not long after Zheng Xia had greeted the guards on duty and passed through the Vermillion Bird Gate, a dark shadow creeped along the roofs of the buildings on the roadside. At this moment, Zheng Xia's guards were complacent due to the presence of numerous imperial guardsmen. No one could have expected that this moment, a dark shadow would suddenly jump down from the roof, a sword lunging towards Zheng Xia. This sword was meteoric and as fast as lighting. Originally, there was no chance that Zheng Xia would have survived. He was fortunate, though.

Just as the shadow dropped down to assassinate Zheng Xia, Zheng Xia suddenly remembered that although the proper arrangements had been made for the ceremony welcoming the emperor back to the capital, according to proper ceremony, he needed to report these arrangements to the Prince of Yong. After all, the emperor had appointed the Prince of Yong to make sacrifices at the secondary altar, basically allowing the Prince of Yong to take charge of matters in Chang'an. Although the Prince of Yong had

basically been under house arrest in the Fasting Palace, Zheng Xia needed to strictly adhere by proper protocol. Zheng Xia had always been someone who strictly adhered to etiquette. As a result, Zheng Xia had stooped down from his horse and softly spoke one of his guards, instructing him to deliver a message to the Prince of Yong's residence that explained the reason why he could not pay a visit to the prince tonight. When he stooped his body, the assassin was already in the air, lunging towards Zheng Xia. Zheng Xia only felt a sharp pain. The sword had stabbed through the back of his shoulder.

After the assassin jumped down, his figure was completely revealed by the moonlight. Although the guards were unable to block the sword strike, their belated action was pretty good. The guard that Zheng Xia had been speaking with pulled Zheng Xia off the horse. The other guards drew their weapons, surrounding the assassin. However, this assassin was not ordinary. Seeing the strike not take Zheng Xia's life, the assassin swiftly fled and disappeared without a trace.

Enduring the pain, Zheng Xia ordered, "Immediately dispatch someone to inform His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, Prime Minister Wei, and Commander Qin Qing of the Imperial Guard." Finished speaking, he lost consciousness. These guards swiftly brought Zheng Xia to the nearby Imperial Medical Institute for medical treatment. News of the assassination quickly spread to all of the factions in Chang'an.

While the factions were suspecting one another, on the fifteenth day of the sixth month, a grave incident occurred that caused Chang'an to be turned on its head.

The most prosperous markets in Chang'an were the city marketplace, in the east, and the people's marketplace in the west. The adjacent Peaceful Abundance Neighborhood was a place that did not stop with night. According to convention, the curfews of the two markets were pushed back by four hours. In addition, the Peaceful Abundance Neighborhood was a location where the curfew did not intrude. As a result, even at third watch,[4] it was still brightly lit. Abundant lust filled the never-ending night. At midnight, flames burst out everywhere. Everyone in the eastern marketplace rushed to put out the fires. However, in the chaos, shouts came,

crying, “People of Shu vow to fight to the death and refuse to surrender to Great Yong,” as they plundered. Because the market did not have a gate, its residents and businessmen fled. In a short moment, chaos engulfed the market. Simultaneously, the closest gate to the eastern marketplace, the Bright Spring Gate, also caught on fire. Shouts could be heard vowing to turn Chang’an into rivers of blood. Since the founding of Great Yong, Chang’an had always been prosperous and peaceful.[5] The officials administering the eastern marketplace were caught unprepared and had no alternative but to report the matter to Qin Qing.

Were it not for Qin Qing already being disturbed by the assassination attempt on Zheng Xia, it was likely that the response to the chaos would have been delayed. When he left the Qin residence accompanied by Qin Yong, Qin Qing immediately caught sight of fire erupting in the direction of the eastern marketplace. Qin Qing and Qin Yong were experienced battlefield commanders, immediately issuing orders to mobilize and dispatch the entirety of the Imperial Guard. Qin Qing dispatched imperial guardsmen to protect all of Chang’an’s important government offices and residences. Then he issued the command to seal the city gates, while he himself led a unit of Imperial Guard and surrounded the eastern marketplace. All of this only took slightly over an hour. At the same time, Qin Yong began to thoroughly investigate the entire city. Throughout the city, the Imperial Guard issued military orders in loud voices, declaring that martial law was being imposed on Chang’an. All of the city residents were required to stay in their homes and prohibited from taking a step out onto the street. Any who dared to violate martial law would be executed. These methods were extremely effective.

When Qin Qing and Qin Yong rendezvoused at the eastern marketplace, the entirety of Chang’an had become tranquil, aside from this single location. Because the merchants within the eastern marketplace all had warriors guarding them, the fires were quickly extinguished. However, an internecine slaughter began within. Although Qin Qing and Qin Yong had dispatched imperial guards to suppress the slaughter, the eastern marketplace was one of the most prosperous parts of Chang’an. If the Imperial Guard were to forcibly suppress the chaos, it would inevitably lead to the destruction of

the eastern marketplace. The two could not make the decision. At present, the only one left in Chang'an who could make decisions were the Prince of Yong and Prime Minister Wei Guan. As Wei Guan was a civil official, the two could only dispatch a messenger to ask for instructions from the Prince of Yong.

Before the fires had begun, Li Zhi was deep in discussion with me over what had happened today. In a cheerful expression, Li Zhi stated, "Suiyun, at present, it can be said that this Prince had already obtained the will of the people and the army. What do you think?"

I respectfully voiced my thoughts, "This time, Your Imperial Highness made sacrifices at the secondary altar, causing the entire world to see Your Imperial Highness's elegance and graceful bearing. Although the Emperor is still of mind to shield the Crown Prince, who does not know that the Crown Prince has lost virtue? Therefore, this subject earnestly requests Your Imperial Highness to not be to rushed. Your Imperial Highness must adhere with the intentions of the Fengyi Sect Master and submit a memorial to protect the Crown Prince. If Your Imperial Highness were to attack the Crown Prince, it is likely that the entire world will blame Your Imperial Highness for ignoring brotherly sentiments. Moreover, it is clear that from the rush by the Emperor to kill all witnesses that the Emperor desires to only teach the Crown Prince a lesson. If Your Imperial Highness is too urgent, it will cause the Emperor to be unable to disentangle himself. It is likely that this will cause the Emperor's anger to fall upon Your Imperial Highness."

Frowning, Li Zhi replied, "You speak correctly. It is only that you understand that with the Fengyi Sect Master personally taking action, it is likely that the Crown Prince will not make further mistakes going forward. If a few years were to pass, I'm afraid that this Prince will not have any more chances."

"Do not worry, Your Imperial Highness," I comforted, smiling. "The Fengyi Sect is already staking everything on a single toss. No matter how powerful or strong they are, it is nothing compared to popular sentiment. His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, is not a puppet that will allow himself to be

manipulated. His natural instincts are difficult to change. As such, he is capable of doing anything. Naturally, we can't simply wait for him to make a mistake. This subject already has a plan. Unfortunately, the Prince of Qi is a hindrance. Although the Prince of Qi's temperament is cruel and he is not too shrewd, there are some things that others have not detected, and yet the Prince of Qi, based upon his innate alertness and senses, has discovered. Therefore, Your Imperial Highness's top priority is to send the Prince of Qi out of Chang'an."

"That isn't difficult," said Li Zhi after thinking it over. "Recently, Northern Han has been making some moves. I had planned to recommend that the Prince of Qi be dispatched to inspect the northern frontier."

I promptly responded, "There is no harm in Your Imperial Highness requesting permission to go perform those inspections yourself."

Li Zhi stared at me confused for a moment before he understood my intentions. He inquired, "Are you suggesting that I loosen the reins in order to grasp them better?"

Clapping my hands, I confirmed, "That is indeed the case. If Your Imperial Highness were to return to the army, it would be similar to a flood dragon entering the sea. How can those people permit Your Imperial Highness to go forth? When the time comes, there is no one else with the qualifications aside from the Prince of Qi. Once the Prince of Qi departs, Your Imperial Highness can focus everything on the coming battle with the Crown Prince. When Your Imperial Highness has succeeded, with a single order, what do we have to fear from the Prince of Qi? He will have no alternative but to obey and return to the capital."

Nodding his head, Li Zhi stated, "Good. Once Imperial Father returns, I will submit a memorial explaining the situation. Once sixth brother has gone, I will no longer have to worry. At present, the only man capable of commanding troops in the Crown Prince's faction is sixth brother. If he leaves, I will be able to sleep peacefully."

"That may not be the case," I disagreed, shaking my head. "The Consort of the Imperial Princess of Jingjiang also has the favor of the Emperor. He is

proficient in the art of war."

With a smile on his face, Li Zhi quipped, "Suiyun, please tell me you haven't made any moves against the Qin family."

I smiled slightly, my mind turning to Hualiu, an elite from the Secret Camp and once my personal guard, presently serving at Qin Yong's side. As we were chatting, an imperial bodyguard came in to report that Zheng Xia had been attacked by an assassin. While the Prince of Yong and I were deeply worried, it wasn't long before another imperial bodyguard came to report that fires had broken out in the city. This was the second fire in Chang'an. Its position was the eastern marketplace. After exchanging looks of dismay, I hurriedly racked my brains. Why were so many things happening at once? It would be too excessive if this was a coincidence.

Footnotes :

符, fu – was a tally made from bamboo, wood, metal, or jade that was used as a proof of authorization to mobilize soldiers
一更, yigen – first of the five night watches (7:00-9:00PM)
二更, ergen – second of the five night watches (9:00PM-11:00PM)
三更, sangen –third of the five night watches (11:00PM-1:00AM)
歌舞升平, gewushengping – idiom, lit. to celebrate peace with songs and dance; fig. to make a show of happiness and prosperity

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 15: The Divine Prestige of a Monarch

Volume 3, Chapter 15: The Divine Prestige of a Monarch

At the time, within the eastern marketplace, crooks and honest folk mixed together.[1] General Qin Qing reported to Taizong. Rising vigorously, Taizong marshaled a hundred household guards and personally led them to the eastern marketplace. At the entrance, he cried out in a loud voice, “Spies have risen in revolt. If you are a citizen of Great Yong, stand still and cease moving!” At the time, Taizong wore golden armor and brocade silk robes. All those who saw him kowtowed. With this the chaos ceased …—*Yong Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Taizong*

The Prince of Yong dispatched scouts to find out what was happening. It wasn’t long before they returned to report. Hearing their reports, Li Zhi relaxed and stated, “In the years past when I was in the Ministry of War, I once considered what to do if turmoil erupted in the capital. As a result, I had the Imperial Guard train for this contingency. It seems like Qin Qing is truly a tiger cub from a martial family. He has handled this matter extremely appropriately. At present, it’s only a city gate that has been set aflame, while the chaos is concentrated around the eastern marketplace. As long as it is appropriately handled, the chaos will not grow and get out of hand.”

Just as I was celebrating that my cousin, Jing Shunqing’s Jiangnan Spring was located in the people’s marketplace, I began to worry about the inevitably thorough search that was to come. Xia Jinyi was still in Chang’an. From the Prince of Yong’s words, I could not help but exclaim in admiration, “Your Imperial Highness planned far ahead and is adept at military matters. This subject greatly respects your foresight. However, it is extremely strange that a riot would occur in the eastern marketplace. This subject cannot understand it.”

Gazing deeply at me, Li Zhi replied, “Suiyun has not had much exposure to the military. In this Prince’s view, it is my Great Yong who has been negligent. These years, the struggle to be heir apparent has only intensified,

completely forgetting that the entire world is not yet fully pacified."

I immediately understood. Clapping my hands, I exclaimed, "It must be spies from Northern Han. Southern Chu is too weak and its reestablishment is still under progress. Although some of the rebels have stated that they are from Shu, Shu has been peaceful under the governance of the Prince of Qing, let alone the fact that the Embroidered Union has been destroyed. Therefore, the only possibility is that these spies are from Northern Han. Just now, Your Imperial Highness mentioned that there have been alerts issued from the northern frontier. It is likely that Northern Han is of mind to violate the borders. This time, they first dispatched agents to throw Chang'an into turmoil. This is two birds with one stone. Not only can they stir up grievances from the common people and cancel out the effect of the Emperor's sacrifices at the Mausoleum of the Yellow Emperor, they can also cause all of the disparate factions in Great Yong to become suspicious of one another. Just now, this subject harbored suspicions that the assassination attempt on Zheng Xia was a result of the Crown Prince taking out his anger on the Palace Attendant. If it weren't the Eastern Palace catching fire and Zheng Xia's report to the Emperor that the Crown Prince wasn't in the Eastern Palace, it is likely that the Crown Prince would not have been placed under house arrest. Now, it seems like tonight's events are all a result of Northern Han's actions."

Shaking his head, Li Zhi replied, "The people of Northern Han are doughty and intrepid. It is possible they dispatched assassins. However, their targets would probably only be military commanders. Why would they assassinate an upright and honorable civil official? It is unlikely that they would perform such a deed."

Playing with the folding fan in my hands, I frowned and stated, "Tonight, three major incidents have occurred tonight—the Prince of Qing's secret base in Chang'an has been destroyed, Palace Attendant Zheng was attacked by an assassin at the Vermillion Bird Gate, and the eastern marketplace has fallen into turmoil. The incident at the eastern marketplace is likely the result of Northern Han spies. Alas, I also overlooked them and didn't expect that they would dare to be so unbridled. Now it seems that this is all an

indicator that they will mobilize their army and invade. The Prince of Qing … as for targeting the Prince of Qing, within Chang'an, the ones with the greatest hostility towards the Prince of Qing is the Fengyi Sect. But this matter is relatively unimportant and wouldn't affect matters if we guessed wrong the perpetrators. The major issue is: who attempted to assassinate Palace Attendant Zheng? To speak the truth, Palace Attendant Zheng is a loyal vassal of the Emperor and has the trust and confidence of His Imperial Majesty. Now that he has participated in the incident at the Eastern Palace, given his usual uprightness and honesty, it is likely that he is already dissatisfied with the Crown Prince. With this person by the Emperor's side, it will only be of benefit to Your Imperial Highness. Could it be possible … could it be?" I no longer said another word. The conclusion that I had reached was too terrifying. Even I was afraid to think any further.

The Prince of Yong's heart also jumped, but he did not voice those thoughts. Instead, he said, "Suiyun, that day, the Fengyi Sect Master used Roulan to test the waters. As we resolutely declined, it is likely that we must be careful of the Fengyi Sect's assassins around the clock."

I icily replied, "Your Imperial Highness does not wish to become a puppet. This subject is usually not fond of restriction from others. The Fengyi Sect Master is already an implacable opponent of Your Imperial Highness. From the reaction from the Shaolin Temple, it seems like it won't be long before the Fengyi Sect will find itself utterly isolated.[2] If Your Imperial Highness makes peace with the Fengyi Sect, we will have lost the difficult to come by popular will."

The Prince of Yong loftily laughed and replied, "Although this Prince understands that the Fengyi Sect Master can allow me to ascend to the throne without any difficulties, but things in this world often cannot be acquired by taking shortcuts. This Prince is determined to unify the world and regulate the empire. How can he be held under duress by others? Although the Fengyi Sect Master gave much thought to her words, it is a pity that this Prince is not someone to listen to her words."

"Your Imperial Highness's ambition is far-reaching," I stated, saluting. "This subject admires this greatly. This subject hopes that I can witness

Your Imperial Highness on the day when the world is at peace."

Solemnly, the Prince of Yong responded, "Suiyun, you have helped this Prince greatly. In the future, this Prince will have to discuss state affairs with you. You will personally bear witness to the day when the entire world is at peace."

I smiled slightly. Although I had obtained a cultivation method from the Shaolin Temple and had seen some improvements after cultivating, under the weight of this kind of demanding work, I did not know how long I would be able to live.

Gazing towards the horizon where flickering flames dyed the sky red, I uneasily asked, "Your Imperial Highness, the Princess has not gone with His Imperial Majesty to Qiaoshan. Is she at the Dustless Nunnery?"

The Prince of Yong shot me a glance. Seeing my absentmindedness, he shook his head lightly and answered, "Do not worry, there are men assigned to the defense of the Dustless Nunnery. Imperial Sister has an important status and is Imperial Father's beloved daughter, and receives the respect and love of Great Yong's common people. Therefore, no one would dare to be complacent. Is Suiyun worried?"

Blushing, I advised, "Regardless of whether there are men assigned to protect the Princess, Your Imperial Highness should dispatch subordinates to take a look."

Smiling faintly, the Prince of Yong replied, "You shouldn't be worrying about this. Presumably, the Princess of Yong has already dispatched someone to the nunnery."

At this moment, a maid entered and reported, "The Princess of Yong has ordered this servant to report to Your Imperial Highness. The imperial bodyguard dispatched to look in on Princess Changle has returned. Supervisor Xiahou has already led men to protect the Dustless Nunnery. At present, the situation is chaotic. The Princess of Yong sent a letter to Her Imperial Highness, Princess Changle, urging Princess Changle to return to the palace. Princess Changle has already agreed and has asked the Princess of Yong to bring Roulan along to visit her in the palace."

The Prince of Yong waved his hand to dismiss the maid, while I finally stopped worrying. I asked, “At present, who is assigned to protect this residence? Has Your Imperial Highness taken note of who it is?”

Breaking out into laughter, the Prince of Yong teased, “If this Prince has to wait for your reminders, it is likely that it will already be too late. At present, Pei Yun is outside. No need to worry. There is no one who can seize the opportunity to harm this Prince. Besides, didn’t you already order the household guards to go on alert?”

Blushing, I laughed. Earlier, I had privately ordered Sima Xiong to mobilize and place the household guard on alert. Surprisingly, this did not escape the Prince of Yong’s eyes.

Just as we were about to return to analyzing tonight’s events, Qin Qing’s messenger arrived and entered the residence.

Hearing the messenger’s report, the Prince of Yong’s face fell and he stated, “These spies are truly terrible. The eastern marketplace is a strategic location in Chang’an. The losses this time will be disastrous. Now, it appears that they are attempting to take advantage of the turmoil. Which of the merchants in the eastern marketplace do not have bodyguards protecting them? If this is allowed to continue, it is likely that the eastern marketplace will become nothing more than ash. This is unacceptable. This Prince must go promptly to handle this matter.”

I immediately stopped him and replied, “Your Imperial Highness, at present, the eastern marketplace is already in turmoil. If Your Imperial Highness is to go, it is of no consequence if Your Imperial Highness is able to quell the turmoil. However, if Your Imperial Highness were to fail, there are likely those will shift the responsibility of all of this on Your Imperial Highness. At present, staying calm and not making a move is better than taking action. Please think this over.”

This time, however, the Prince of Yong did not take my advice. Shaking his head, he replied, “Suiyun, this Prince is an Imperial Prince of Great Yong and commander-in-chief of the three armies. This very moment is when I should be serving the dynasty and its people. How can I split hairs over my

personal gains and losses? The sooner the unrest in the eastern marketplace is pacified, the lesser the losses. Zhangsun Ji, Sima Xiong, pick a hundred household guards and accompany me to the eastern marketplace. Suiyun, you must handle the many affairs of this household with care. Between Great Master True Compassion and Xiaoshunzi, one of them must always be at your side."

When I was about to continue to dissuade him, I raised my eyes and looked. Seeing Li Zhi radiating health and vigor, his imposing manner oppressive, I was surprisingly left speechless. I could only lower my head and reply, "This subject obeys. Please do not worry, Your Imperial Highness. I will have Xiaoshunzi remain in the inner residence to protect the Princess of Yong and my daughter. With Great Master True Compassion by your side and General Pei outside, there is no need for Your Imperial Highness to worry."

Smiling faintly, Li Zhi hollered, "Bring this Prince's golden armor! This Prince wants to see who dares to disrupt my Great Yong's capital."

The imperial bodyguards waiting outside shouted in chorus. It wasn't long before the Prince of Yong's personal guards delivered his golden armor. Not hiding from anyone, Li Zhi took off his civilian robes and put on the golden armor. Above it, he put on a battle gown made from Sichuan brocade silk. Li Zhi walked out, his strides like a prowling dragon and tiger, extremely vigorous. When his personal guards, who had accompanied the Prince of Yong through hundreds of battles, saw the prince walk out with such an imposing manner, as if he were returning to the battlefield, they immediately kowtowed and roared, "Long live Your Imperial Highness, long life!"

I could clearly sense the bloody, violent atmosphere coalesce. I could not help but be moved by the heaven-soaring lethality and heroic spirit. In a loud voice, I cried out, "I offer best wishes for Your Imperial Highness's success. This subject will prepare a feast in the residence to await Your Imperial Highness's triumphant return."

Laughing heartily, the Prince of Yong replied, "All soldiers, have you heard Major Jiang's intentions to hold a feast to await our triumphant return? We

must go and return quickly, so that we can drink the entire night!"

Fully prepared, the imperial bodyguards marched out of the main gate of the residence, escorting the Prince of Yong's warhorse. In a split second, the horse like a dragon and the man like a tiger, charged out of the residence, quickly disappearing. The only thing that could be seen was the dust being kicked up and the gradually diminishing sound of horse hooves.

I watched until the Prince of Yong's figure had disappeared, my mind occupied with a multitude of thoughts. Although the Prince of Yong had not taken my advice, I was not even the slightest bit annoyed. Only this kind of man deserved to become the emperor, to become my lord.

At this moment, Pei Yun, commanding the Imperial Guard assigned to protect the Prince of Yong's residence, nudged his horse over. Hailing me, he said, "*Daren* , His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, is deserving of his reputation as a famous general of this generation. Simply taking a look at His Imperial Highness's household cavalry, one can see the strict way His Imperial Highness commands the army. It is a pity that Pei Yun does not have the opportunity to fight under the command of His Imperial Highness."

I smiled slightly. "You will have the opportunity one day. Recently, Northern Han has been making some moves and the northern frontier is in danger. His Imperial Highness is preparing to petition the Emperor to tour and inspect the frontier. If you are willing, you can ask to accompany His Imperial Highness."

His eyes brightening, Pei Yun thought over the feasibility of this plan. However, when Pei Yun's subordinates heard this news, it left all of them thinking different thoughts.

I snickered inwardly. By using this method to spread the news, I had no fear that the crown prince's faction wouldn't promptly come up with a plan to prevent the Prince of Yong from returning to the army. Suddenly, I remembered something. This time, Northern Han conspired to cause havoc in Chang'an. Although they made a great show of strength, the reality was not as large as what was imagined. Unless, they had ulterior motives … If I were planning this operation, how would I set it up? Thinking this matter

over, I suddenly remembered something. Greatly alarmed, I promptly requested, “General Pei, I need to borrow your help.”

Alarmed, Pei Yun replied, “I await *daren* ’s instructions.”

Beckoning him to follow me, I stated, “General Pei, come with me.” Finished speaking, I did not bother to check whether he was following and hurriedly rushed to the Cold Courtyard. According to my calculations, there should be enough time. I could not help but rejoice that I had remembered. Even if my fears were groundless, it was better safe than sorry.

***

When Li Zhi arrived at the east gate to the eastern marketplace, Qin Qing had taken charge of the Imperial Guard positioned here. Qin Qing had become extremely anxious while waiting. Seeing the Prince of Yong arrive, Qin Qing urged his horse forward to the prince’s side. In a loud voice, he declared, “Your Imperial Highness, it’s already completely in chaos inside. This general has already announced that if they do not cease, I will forcibly suppress the turmoil. However, no one has been willing to obey. May I ask Your Imperial Highness if this general is permitted to use force?”

Icily, Li Zhi replied, “Gathered in the eastern marketplace is Chang’an’s essence. Almost all of Great Yong’s largest merchants have shops located in the eastern marketplace. If destroyed indiscriminately, it is likely that it will harm Great Yong’s economic lifeline. It is better if this Prince handles this. Qin Qing, are you willing to temporarily hand over command of the Imperial Guard to me?”

Wiping away the beads of sweat on his forehead, Qin Qing acknowledged, “This general obeys.” Finished speaking, he rapidly transmitted the order. The imperial guardsmen all rejoiced. They had all heard the Prince of Yong’s prestige long ago. Many had even witnessed the heroic appearance of the Prince of Yong going into battle. Under the leadership of their officers, the ten thousand or so Imperial Guardsmen cried out in unison, “We obey Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong’s commands. Long live Your Imperial Highness.”

When those fighting chaotically in the eastern marketplace heard the

shouts of the Imperial Guard, many could not help but slow down their movements. At this moment, those close to the east gate let out cries of alarm. Seated upon a horse, a poised man, dressed in golden armor and a red Sichuan brocade silk battle gown with gentle expression, appeared before the Imperial Guard. At his side were two generals. One was dressed in black armor with a straight mouth and an upright appearance. The other had long eyebrows and phoenix eyes, his face pale and whiskerless. He wore azure-colored armor. In the hands of the black-armored general was a steel lance weighing no less than twenty catties. At his waist was a saber. One could immediately tell with one look that he was a valiant general. As for the azure-armored general, he carried two silver spears in his hands. On his back was a golden colored bow. On his saddle were four pouches filled with arrows. One could detect the faint, murderous aura and grave bearing from the two generals and the accompanying valiant soldiers, making it seem like the golden-armored general's bearing was even more unhurried and calm.

Most of the men within the eastern marketplace had traveled extensively and were familiar with all of the famed generals and bigwigs of Great Yong. With one look, they immediately knew who had arrived. With this, they no longer had the strength to wield the weapons in their hands, as they became anxious and frightened, afraid that His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong would give the order to forcibly suppress the turmoil.

Looking around, the Prince of Yong could see that the bearings of the rioters had weakened. In a loud voice, he proclaimed, "At present, spies have risen in revolt and sowed discord. As citizens of Great Yong, how can you help the enemy?[3] If you have no intentions of rebelling, then you must sit down on the ground, your hands wrapped around your knees! Sima Xiong, count to ten for this Prince! After ten, if there is anyone still standing, shoot them dead with arrows! In years past, this Prince traveled unhindered throughout the world, besieging cities and conquering lands, how can I be hindered by this tiny eastern marketplace?"

As he spoke, Li Zhi used his internal energy. As a result, everyone heard his words clearly.

At this moment, Sima Xiong roared, "All soldiers, shout with me! His

Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, has commanded that if you are not a spy, you must immediately sit down on the ground, hugging your knees with both hands! After a count of ten, any still standing will be killed without mercy!”

It wasn’t long before the order was transmitted. With shouts like rolling thunder, the soldiers bellowed the Prince of Yong’s command thrice. Everyone in the eastern marketplace could hear it clearly. At this moment, Sima Xiong raised his long lance and pointed it up at the sky. In a powerful voice, he began to count, joined by the soldiers. Their cries shook the Heavens and the Earth. Every number he counted, Sima Xiong would raise his long lance. Soon, all it took was for him to raise his lance and a number would echo out.

Before ten was reached, some of those crowded around the east gate had already sat down. At this moment, someone yelled, “They are all liars! We are only battling to defend ourselves! But they, in order to conceal this matter, will treat us as rebels.”

With this shout, some of those in the crowd began to lose their heads from fear. Just as it seemed like the situation would get out of control, the Prince of Yong laughed callously and ordered, “Zhangsun Ji, kill all those rumor-mongering spies for me.”

Before the Prince of Yong had even spoken, Zhangsun Ji had already strung his bow. Hearing the Prince of Yong’s order, he notched an arrow and fired into the crowd, nailing a man to the ground. This action immediately intimidated everyone. Even at the start, the rioters looked with panic-stricken eyes upon the fully armed and armored soldiers.

In a strong voice, Li Zhi shouted, “This man was babbling nonsense with the goal of inciting chaos. If this Prince were to treat you all as rebels, I would have given the order long ago to annihilate you. At present, this Prince is willing to believe that you all have been hoodwinked. As long as you adhere to my commands, this Prince will absolutely not investigate further.”

Finished speaking, the Prince of Yong urged his horse forward. Sima Xiong,

Zhangsun Ji, and the hundred household guards glared at their surroundings as they escorted the Prince of Yong forward. Wherever they went, Li Zhi continually declared his amnesty in a loud voice. The common people of Great Yong all held the Prince of Yong in high esteem. All of them obediently sat on the ground, even going so far as to make a path for the prince. Li Zhi advanced at a measured pace, following the main avenue through the eastern marketplace. Zhangsun Ji firmly held onto the bow in his hands as well as an arrow. If anyone dared to utter any words of instigation, he would fire an arrow. His archery was peerless and his vision keen. As a result, he did not mistakenly a single innocent man.

Although Li Zhi had a light smile on his face, his eyes exuded an icy and penetrating prestige. With one gaze from him, all those who remained suspicious and held onto their weapons could not help but loosen their grips. Following behind the Prince of Yong, the Imperial Guard, formerly blocked outside, easily entered the eastern marketplace, collecting the weapons of those who had sat down before allowing them to return to their residences under escort, prohibiting from coming out again. The eastern marketplace was very large. Li Zhi traveled down each of the major avenues that crisscrossed through the marketplace. Wherever he went, all those who intended to take advantage and make trouble were immediately scared witless by the Prince of Yong's gaze, even though the Prince of Yong was unarmed and defenseless, almost as if they forgot the formidable generals and soldiers escorting the prince. After traveling throughout the eastern marketplace, although there were several locations where there were those who brazenly refused to follow orders, these individuals were swiftly executed by Zhangsun Ji's archery and the blades of the household guards. The Prince of Yong's grave prestige caused the turmoil that they wished for to disappear like smoke.

Only as dawn approached did the Imperial Guard fully take control of the entirety of the marketplace. Fortunately, many influential merchants had locked their doors and stayed inside, only having their subordinates guard their shops. As a result, irreparable damage was avoided. Only then did Li Zhi relax. It wasn't that he couldn't steel his heart and forcibly suppress the turmoil. But after thinking about the consequences, Li Zhi did not dare to

act. Now that the situation was back under control, the only thing that could be done now was to investigate these rioters. It was certain that the spies from Northern Han would be discovered.

Towards Qin Qing, Li Zhi ordered, “General Qin, now that everything is under control, this Prince will return control of the Imperial Guard back to you. Be sure to take care of the remaining matters. If there are any difficulties, you can come see me in my residence. In addition, report this matter to Prime Minister Wei. This Prince is going to go back and get changed. Now that the situation is roughly settled, this Prince still has to enter the palace to report this matter to the Empress and Consorts.”

Filled with admiration, Qin Qing replied, “This general pays my respects upon seeing Your Imperial Highness’s prestige today. Do not worry, Your Imperial Highness. This general will definitely handle this matter properly.”

Li Zhi smiled slightly. Just as he about to bid his farewell and depart, a squad of Imperial Guard walked by, escorting several bound men. Li Zhi stayed his horse, glancing over. He instructed, “Be sure to keep a good watch over these men. They must be carefully interrogated.”

Just as Qin Qing was about to reply, the men suddenly cried out, “Li Zhi! Surrender your life!” So speaking, the men flexed their arms, shaking the ropes off. The several swift and fierce men and that squad of Imperial Guard all bounded towards Li Zhi.

Footnotes :

鱼龙**混**杂, yulonghunza – idiom, lit. fish and dragons mixed in together; fig. crooks mixed in with the honest folk
众叛亲**离**, zhongpanqinli – idiom, lit. people rebelling and friends deserting; fig. to find oneself utterly isolated
助纣为**虐**, zhu Zhou weinüe – idiom, lit. helping Tyrant Zhou (referring to the last King of the Shang Dynasty, Zhou); fig. to take the side of the evildoer, to give help to the enemy

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 16: Tangled and Complicated

Volume 3, Chapter 16: Tangled and Complicated

After the turmoil was first pacified, Su Dingluan appeared out of nowhere to attempt to assassinate Taizong. Fortunately, the grandmaster, Zen Master True Compassion, was hidden nearby. Taizong was unharmed. Su Dingluan was a third-ranked general of Northern Han. His nature was violent, adept at killing enemy commanders and seizing standards. There was nothing that he could not break through. He would frequently precede the main force and was nicknamed the "Vanguard General."—*Yong Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Taizong*

At this moment, the thrum of a bowstring resounded like the sound of pearls falling onto a jade plate. Zhangsun Ji repeatedly notched arrows to his bow and fired. Those men at the front without armor bore the brunt of the attacks, their bodies pierced by the arrows. Due to Zhangsun Ji's care, he had discovered that the Imperial Guard's pace was somewhat confused. This should not be possible among the well-trained Imperial Guard. Therefore, Zhangsun Ji was able to shoot arrows to obstruct the assassins in a timely fashion. Seeing that these men were delayed, Li Zhi's household guard advanced and completely blocked these assassins.

Just as Li Zhi began to smile at the sight of his household guard taking the advantage, suddenly someone burst forth from a nearby shop. The man's body was as swift and powerful as lightning and thunder, the long lance in his hands stabbing directly at Li Zhi.

Right now, Sima Xiong was in front, supervising the household guards. There was not enough time for him to get back. Zhangsun Ji notched and fired three arrows in succession to delay this new assassin. The arrows were blocked out of nowhere by the man, also brandishing a dagger. Zhangsun Ji's arrows that could pierce metal were surprisingly and forcibly sent back. Greatly startled, Zhangsun Ji had no time to dodge. He could only use his bow to block the arrows. However, those arrows carried substantial

force, forcing Zhangsun Ji's person and horse to retreat three paces, while his golden bow's bowstring was severed. Zhangsun Ji surprisingly was powerless to protect the Prince of Yong.

At this point, the Prince of Yong had four personal imperial bodyguards by his side. Simultaneously, they used their bodies to block the incoming assassin. However, the assassin's body suddenly shockingly shot through the air in an arc, stabbing his long lance towards the Prince of Yong. Although Li Zhi was a valiant general who had experienced numerous battles, the assassin's attack left Li Zhi completely powerless to dodge. Li Zhi sighed in his heart, lamenting that he was going to die here. He could not help but close his eyes.

At this moment of life and death, the sound of one of the names of the Buddha could be heard spoken.

"Amitabha." The sound was like a thunderclap piercing the highest of the Heavens. Hearing this, Li Zhi relaxed. The threatening killing aura had disappeared without a trace. Li Zhi opened his eyes and looked, only seeing Great Master True Compassion with his hands together in prayer standing before Li Zhi's horse. The monk was reciting the many names of the Buddha. Some meters away, a man with a height of nine *chi* [1] glared with hot anger at Great Master True Compassion, holding a steel infantry lance.

Glancing over, Li Zhi could not help but take a deep breath. This steel lance was purplish-black in color. Having spent years on the battlefield, Li Zhi knew that it was only blood that could dye a weapon this color. For this person to have such a stature, such martial arts, and such killing intent, Li Zhi immediately knew this person's identity. In a clear voice, he declared, "So it is Northern Han's Vanguard General, Su Dingluan, who has arrived. I wonder how this Prince is so fortunate to have General to personally come to assassinate me."

The Prince of Yong's household guard did not find this name strange. However, many of the imperial guardsmen had once served on the northern frontier and had fought in battles against Northern Han. All of these men had long ago heard the name of the Vanguard General. As they had never met the man, they could not help but look over, their gaze filled with

curiosity and malice.

The Northern Han army was known throughout the world for its ferocity and toughness. Perhaps their training was inferior to Great Yong's soldiers. However, the individual combat prowess of Northern Han's soldiers was greater than that of Great Yong's. All of Great Yong's soldiers, especially those who served on the northern frontier, had frequently heard the names of Northern Han's high-ranking commanders. The commander-in-chief of Northern Han's military was the General Who Dominates Distant Lands, Long Tingfei. The man hailed from a prestigious house and was a master of the art of war. Although only thirty years of age, he had repeatedly defeated Great Yong's armies. The only one that could withstand Long Tingfei's attacks was Li Zhi, the Prince of Yong. Even Li Xian, the Prince of Qi, had also once suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of Long Tingfei. Were it not that Great Yong enjoyed numerical superiority, it was likely they would be unable to advance out past the Great Wall to invade Northern Han, and would instead see Long Tingfei break through the Great Wall and attack the Central Plains. Aside from Long Tingfei, Nothern Han had four generals whose name resounded through the world.

The Flying Tiger General, Shi Ying, was skilled at long-distance raids, capable of breaking any defenses. The Boulder General, Duan Wudi, was adept at defending cities. Any city he defended was impenetrable. Ghost-Faced General Tan Ji was adept at marching the army and troop formations. Lastly, Vanguard General Su Dingluan was skilled at leading from the front and taking the heads of enemy commanders. He was the second disciple of the Sovereign of the Devil Sect, Jing Wuji. Although his martial arts had not reached the level of an expert, he was a hard to come by valiant general from the battlefield. Surprisingly, that this man would actually appear here in Chang'an to attempt to assassinate the Prince of Yong truly difficult to believe.

As everyone was bewildered by Su Dingluan's sudden appearance, Su Dingluan was also lamenting in his heart. It wasn't a trivial matter assassinating the Prince of Yong. Even if successful, it was likely that he would die in the process. Why had Sovereign Jing Wuji have him, a valiant

battlefield general, come to execute this plan? Originally, because of the quiet on the frontiers, he been bored senseless and had specially masqueraded as a merchant, coming to sightsee in Great Yong and try to acquire some military intelligence. He had already loitered in Chang'an for more than a month.

None could have expected that the Northern Han intelligence network would stir up turmoil in the eastern marketplace at this time with intent to disturb Great Yong's capital as preparation for the coming invasion in half a month. Su Dingluan had also received an order from Sovereign Jing Wuji to act as circumstances dictated to kill the commander-in-chief of the Yong army, Li Zhi. Su Dingluan had already been in Chang'an for many days now. He was clear that if this incident were to erupt, then Li Zhi would personally come to suppress the turmoil in the eastern marketplace. As expected, Li Zhi had arrived. Based on his exceptional martial arts, Su Dingluan was seventy percent certain of success. Su Dingluan was focused on killing Li Zhi in one blow before taking advantage of the subsequent chaos to escape. Northern Han's intelligence network had already prepared an escape route for him. To his surprise, things turned out like this and he had been stopped by Great Master True Compassion. The more he thought, the more infuriated Su Dingluan became. Not caring about Great Master True Compassion's position in *jianghu* of grandmaster like his master, Sovereign Jing Wuji, Su Dingluan pointed his lance at True Compassion and furiously hollered, "You bald donkey! Why aren't you cultivating in a temple and instead frequently spoil matters of my Devil Sect? Truly hateful and reprehensible!"

Although Su Dingluan's words were vulgar, Great Master True Compassion was not enraged. The monk only tranquilly spoke, "This old cassock is a citizen of Great Yong. The contributions of His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, have been outstanding. He is Great Yong's God of War and also a pillar of the court. How can this old cassock stand idly by and watch you assassinate His Imperial Highness? If Benefactor Su is willing to let go of the butcher's knife, this old cassock is willing to plea for leniency and ask His Imperial Highness to spare your life."

Su Dingluan gazed at his surroundings, seeing that the Prince of Yong's

household guard and Imperial Guard had completely surrounded this location, while before him was a grandmaster level expert. Su Dingluan knew that it was would be extremely difficult for him to escape with his life. However, he was resolved. Thus, he icily replied, “Fine. Allow me, your daddy, to show all of you my ferociousness.”

Finished speaking, the lance in Su Dingluan’s hand darted out, thrusted at Great Master True Compassion. True Compassion’s expression did not change. A look of praise flashed across his eyes. His left hand moved, while the right hand made a fist and punched out furiously, a basic move of the Shaolin Temple’s fist techniques, “Soaring the Heavens Cannon.” However, when used by Great Master True Compassion, it was bold and powerful beyond compare. With one look, it was obvious that no one would be able to block this strike.

Su Dingluan tensed up. However, he was ferocious by nature and did not have the slightest bit of fear as he pierced forward with the lance. The fist and lance met. Great Master True Compassion did not move in the slightest, whereas Su Dingluan was forced to take a step back. However, an ominous glint appeared in Su Dingluan’s eyes. Like a swimming dragon, his infantry lance once again stabbed forward.

Within a few blows, True Compassion’s palm slammed into Su Dingluan’s chest, sending the Northern Han general flying dozens of meters. Blood flowed from the corner of Su Dingluan’s mouth and he lost his grip on his infantry lance. His chest had a depression. With one look, it was clear that Su Dingluan would not have long to live. Fluttering his sleeve, Great Master True Compassion joined his hands together in prayer, reciting one of the many names of the Buddha before withdrawing behind the Prince of Yong’s horse and no longer making any sound.

One of the Prince of Yong’s household guards carefully walked over, using the saber in his hand to nudge Su Dingluan. Seeing that Su Dingluan did not move in the slightest, the guard stooped over and checked his breathing. No onecould have expected that Su Dingluan would choose this moment to open his eyes, and with a lightning move, forcibly wrest away the saber in the guard’s hands and chop down at the guard. Facing danger, the guard

was not ruffled, back flipping and avoiding the chop. When Su Dingluan chopped horizontally, the guard instantly rolled out of the way. At this moment, Great Master True Compassion's finger flicked. With a crack, the high-grade, well-tempered, steel saber was snapped.

The guard jumped to his feet. Filled with lingering trepidation, he withdrew to the side. Zhangsun Ji, grabbing a strong bow that he had been handed, notched an arrow and aimed at Su Dingluan. Zhangsun Ji warned, "General Su, if you dare move again, do not blame me, Zhangsun Ji, for being merciless."

Su Dingluan's expression became chilly. Laughing loudly, he replied, "Who am I? I am Northern Han's Vanguard General. Over these years, countless numbers of Great Yong's generals and soldiers have died at my hands. Now that I have failed in this assassination, what reason do I have to wait to be captured? Great Master True Compassion, you have the same status as my master. Surely, you won't make things difficult for a member of the younger generation and are adamant that I become a prisoner?"

Finished speaking, Su Dingluan gazed towards Great Master True Compassion. He was determined to commit suicide, but if Great Master True Compassion were to intervene, it was likely that he would be unable to die. Great Master True Compassion heaved a sigh and spoke, "This old cassock is acting on behalf of Great Yong's empire and thus lent a hand to His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong. If it were not for Benefactor Su trying to harm human life in front of this old cassock, this old cassock would be unwilling to worry about these matters of the mundane world."

Seeing that True Compassion had already indicated that he would not make things difficult himself, Su Dingluan smiled, pleased with himself, and replied, "Li Zhi, you were fortunate to escape today's catastrophe. If not for the presence of Great Master True Compassion, you would have died already. It is a pity that I did not know that Great Master True Compassion had already arrived in Chang'an, otherwise, I, your daddy, would have killed a few more of the generals of your Great Yong."

Although Su Dingluan's words were fierce and malicious, the soldiers of Great Yong respected brave warriors the most. Seeing that he, even with his

dying breath, continued to be heroic, looks of admiration filled their eyes. Although they would not be merciful towards Su Dingluan if they were ordered to personally kill this man, however, they were absolutely unwilling to humiliate and disgrace him. Therefore, they looked at the Prince of Yong, worrying that he would become infuriated.

Instead, however, Li Zhi laughed for a long period and stated, “General Su’s failure was this Prince’s luck. Do not worry, General, this Prince will agree to your request. Not only will I not force you to surrender, I will also deliver your body back to Northern Han to allow your King to give you a proper burial as befitting as a hero.”

As he spoke, Li Zhi displayed the entirety of his natural heroic quality, as if he were an imposing bird of prey, causing everyone to become convinced and subdued.

Su Dingluan laughed miserably. Shakily, he rose to his feet. Opening his mouth, blood gushed forth. Not paying this any mind, he took a few steps forward and stooped over to pick up his infantry lance. Everyone thought he would commit suicide, but surprisingly before Su Dingluan had even stood up again, he used all of his strength to throw the lance. Like a shooting star, the infantry lance shot through the air towards Li Zhi. Everyone could not help but cry out in alarm. However, Li Zhi had expected this long ago, moving sideways and dodging the infantry lance. All of the household guards immediately became indignant, their blades unsheathed and arrows notched, only waiting for the Prince of Yong’s command, after which they would hack Su Dingluan to mincemeat.

Without a hint of fear, Su Dingluan straightened his body and calmly declared, “I am a real man. I can only die under the blades of warriors. How can I commit suicide? If Your Imperial Highness is willing to personally kill me, it will be my honor and privilege. Dingluan will gift this infantry lance to Your Imperial Highness. Why have you dodged?”

The Prince of Yong stared back at him perplexed before he laughed and replied, “A disciple of the Devil Sect is truly formidable. This Prince is truly fond of your temperament. However, it’s trivial that you attempted to assassinate this Prince; it’s a grave matter that you slaughtered the innocent

commoners of my Great Yong. General Su's hands have been stained with the blood of my Great Yong's people. Please forgive this Prince for being unable to show you mercy. All soldiers, who is willing to send General Su to the underworld?"

Urging his horse forward, Sima Xiong declared, "Your Imperial Highness, this fiend desires to assassinate Your Imperial Highness. His sin is reprehensible and unpardonable. This general has not satisfactorily protected Your Imperial Highness and cannot escape punishment for failing my duty. Please allow this general to kill him."

The Prince of Yong nodded his head slightly. Urging his horse forward, Sima Xiong towered above and looked down upon[2] Su Dingluan. Raising his head, Su Dingluan gazed back at Sima Xiong, not a single shred of dread in his eyes. Sima Xiong also admired this man. Just as Su Dingluan raised his head, Sima Xiong chopped down with his blade. Only a flash was seen when Su Dingluan's head fell to the ground, blood spewing out in all directions. Just as his head was chopped off, Su Dingluan hollered, "Quite comfortable!"

Sima Xiong's expression did not change, returning back to the Prince of Yong's side. In a loud voice, Li Zhi stated, "Although this man's nature was savage and cruel, he was nevertheless a hero to the end. This Prince has already promised him that I would return his body to his homeland. Do you have any objections?"

All the soldiers yelled in unison, "We obey Your Imperial Highness's commands."

Only after making sure that this matter had been settled did Li Zhi lead his household guards and Great Master True Compassion back to his residence. While traveling, Li Zhi asked in a baffled voice, "Great Master, weren't you cultivating in the Cold Courtyard? How did you suddenly appear to save this Prince?"

True Compassion's horsemanship was mediocre. Although, based upon his martial arts, there wouldn't be any danger, he still had to be careful and cautious when riding. He answered, "Your Imperial Highness, this old cassock was entrusted with this matter by Sir Jiang. Earlier, Benefactor Jiang

hurriedly came to inform me that Your Imperial Highness had gone to the eastern marketplace to quell the unrest. He explained that after thinking it over, he could not figure out how the chaos in Chang'an would harm Great Yong. Seeing that there were some flaws in the plan, he became worried that this was all for the purpose of enticing Your Imperial Highness to leave the confines of your residence and increase the probability of a successful assassination. Therefore, he asked this old cassock to hurry to the eastern marketplace and secretly protect Your Imperial Highness. Unexpectedly, Sir Jiang was correct, hitting the mark with his words.[3] It is also Your Imperial Highness's benevolence that has moved the Heavens, being assisted by such an uncanny scholar."

Li Zhi could also not help but exclaim in astonishment. After mulling it over, he asked, "Doesn't that mean that Suiyun has no one by his side protecting him? What can be done if someone tries to assassinate him?"

Smiling, Great Master True Compassion responded, "Do not worry, Your Imperial Highness. Pei Yun is currently by Sir Jiang's side. Moreover, there are also fifty personal guards. Even if this old cassock were to act personally, it is extremely difficult to be successful without taking some time. Demonic Shadow Li Shun is currently in the residence. If something were to happen, he would be able to rush over in time. There is no need to worry, Your Imperial Highness."

Only hearing these words did Li Zhi relax. However, his brow remained furrowed and tensed. Before he had become the crown prince's enemy, the Fengyi Sect had also recommended several bodyguards to him. However, because he did not like having women in the army, so the only ones that he had kept were male. Even though this was the case, the Princess of Yong and his family were protected by the Fengyi Sect. After today, Li Zhi realized that if something were to happen, it would be inconvenient if his family did not have capable bodyguards by their side.

At this moment, Great Master True Compassion suddenly interrupted Li Zhi's thoughts, "Your Imperial Highness, this old cassock's original home has a pair of distant grandnieces. They are nineteen years old this year and have entered the Emei Sect to learn swordsmanship. They have already finished

their training and descended from Mount Emei. Although the moral character and swordsmanship of the two girls are fairly good, they are highly mischievous. This old cassock has heard that the Crown Princess is incomparably virtuous and kind. It will be the two girls' blessings if they can receive the Crown Princess's guidance and teachings for several years."

Li Zhi was overjoyed, promptly replying with gratitude, "Many thanks to Great Master!"

Smiling, Great Master True Compassion said, "Your Imperial Highness is being overly courteous. It is this old cassock who is asking Your Imperial Highness for help. How dare I accept Your Imperial Highness's gratitude?"

Li Zhi uttered a couple of polite words. The two had reached a tacit understanding. Neither openly stated that these two women were being dispatched to protect the Prince of Yong's wife, concubines, and children. Moreover, as these two women were from the Emei Sect, their arrival would also signify that the Emei Sect was supporting the Prince of Yong.

Arriving at the Cold Courtyard and seeing that Jiang Zhe was safe and sound, Li Zhi finally completely relaxed. Only after seeing off Great Master True Compassion and Pei Yun did Li Zhi address Jiang Zhe, "Fortunately, you invited Great Master True Compassion to go save my life, otherwise this Prince would likely have lost my life."

I blushed and replied, "This was because this subject did not think it through and was fortunate to act before it was too late."[4]

Smiling wryly, Li Zhi stated, "In reality, this time wasn't bad. Although this Prince narrowly escaped being murdered this time, we were able to kill Northern Han's Vanguard General. That in itself is pretty good compensation."

"Although that is the case," I explained with a sigh, "For the situation to reach such a state, the Prince of Qing will become enraged by the slaughter of his subordinates. If he dispatches men to investigation the perpetrator, it is likely that this chaotic situation will only worsen. The assassination attempt on Palace Attendant Zheng and the turmoil in the eastern marketplace, although Your Imperial Highness performed meritorious

service by suppressing the turmoil, is likely because of Your Imperial Highness making sacrifices at the secondary altar and causing the Heavens to send these disasters. Moreover, tonight's events will cover up the Crown Prince's filthy and illicit sexual relations with the harem that are an irreverent crime to the Heavens and the Earth and to all the divinities."

Hearing this, Li Zhi could not help but feel a chill in his heart. He wondered, "Don't tell me that this kind of deliberate distortion of the truth[5] will be believed?"

"It isn't that it is believable, but rather that there are those who are willing to believe," I clarified, glancing at the Prince of Yong,."His Imperial Majesty will give an opportunity to the Crown Prince. Your Imperial Highness's prestige has shaken the imperial capital. However, after hearing it, His Imperial Majesty will feel that Your Imperial Highness's prestige is too high. In order to suppress Your Imperial Highness, he will forgive the Crown Prince this time."

"Who would have thought that this Prince's painstaking efforts for the empire would suffer from suspicion and jealousy because of this incident?" pondered Li Zhi with a wry smile. "Alas, how could this Prince stand idly by and watch last night's incidents from unfolding?"

I smiled slightly and saluted the prince, stating, "Your Imperial Highness, you were right this time. The Emperor is suspicious towards you. However, of the common people, who does not admire Your Imperial Highness's morality and conduct? If news of this matter spread, it will only be of benefit to Your Imperial Highness. Further, if the Emperor seizes this opportunity to spare the Crown Prince, this will represent that the Emperor has already lost trust in the Crown Prince. As a result, the Crown Prince will become increasingly anxious and frightened. Because of this, the mutual suspicion between a father and son, a liege and vassal will only deepen. Having lost the Emperor's favor, the Crown Prince's position as the heir apparent will be in grave peril. As long as we send away the Prince of Qi, Your Imperial Highness will be able to do as you please. At present, everything is prepared for Your Imperial Highness, only missing one small detail.[6] Would Your Imperial Highness please order Shi *daren* to prepare to return to the

capital?”

A look of joy appeared on Li Zhi’s face. However, it quickly disappeared, as he said, “It is fine to pen a letter to Shi Yu. However, this Prince wishes to see how Imperial Father handles this matter. Alas, I hope that Imperial Father will be just, otherwise I, as a son and a subject, will be gravely and bitterly disappointed.”

I did not reply. The Prince of Yong was doomed to be disappointed. Gazing at the brightening sky, I felt somewhat tired and asked the Prince of Yong to go and rest. Returning to my chambers, I saw that Xiaoshunzi had returned prior. Seeing the displeasure on his face, I asked, “What’s going on? Why is your complexion so ugly?”

Xiaoshunzi complained, “Young master, it’s nothing if you sent me to protect the Princess of Yong, but why did you send Great Master True Compassion to rescue His Imperial Highness and not inform me?”

Smiling wryly, I responded, “There was no way for me to call you back. There is no need to worry. Great Master True Compassion had already made arrangements with the Prince of Yong. Next time, you won’t have to leave my side. However, you must do one thing for me today. The next few days, the talk in Chang’an will not be good. Have Xia Jinyi leave the city and hide to prevent him from being discovered. After all, he is not a nameless non-entity in Chang’an.”

Xiaoshunzi’s complexion became somewhat grotesque as he replied, “I have already thought of this long ago. However, Chiji reported that that an uninvited guest arrived at that residence.”

Surprised, I inquired, “An invited guest? That residence was a secret location that we meticulously prepared. How could an outsider find it?”

Xiaoshunzi’s complexion became even more contorted and he responded, “That man was Ye Tianxiu, His Highness, the Prince of Qing’s Imperial Bodyguard. Young master has met this man before.”

With this, I was truly left dumbfounded. How could things be so coincidental?

Footnotes :

About 6’9”

居高临下, jugaolinxia – idiom, lit. to live high and look down; to overlook, to tower above

一语中的, yiyuzhongdi – idiom, lit. to hit the mark with a comment; to say something spot on

亡羊补牢, wangyangbulao – idiom, lit. to mend the pen after sheep are lost; fig. to act belatedly, better late than never

颠倒黑白, diandaoheibai – idiom, lit. to invert black and white; fig. to distort the truth deliberately, to misrepresent the facts, to invert right and wrong

万事俱备，只欠东风, wanshijubei, zhiqiandongfeng – idiom, lit. everything is ready, all we need is the east wind; fig. lacking only one tiny crucial item

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 17: Each with Their Own Thoughts

Volume 3, Chapter 17: Each with Their Own Thoughts

Because of last night's turmoil in the eastern marketplace, the entirety of Chang'an was put under martial law. Although Ye Tianxiu was fortunate enough to escape with his life, because he had no energy to move any further, he had decided to randomly select a home to hide in even if he had to use force to control its owner. As long as he was able to rest for one night and take care of his injuries, then he would be able to make all efforts to run away tomorrow. However, the matters of this world were truly that coincidental. This home was the residence where Xia Jinyi was staying.

Xia Jinyi heard Ye Tianxiu as soon as he entered the courtyard. However, Xia Jinyi knew that it was inconvenient for him to handle this interloper and went to wake Chiji. When Chiji went to take a look, Ye Tianxiu had already fallen unconscious. After Chiji had bound and treated Ye Tianxiu's injuries and after Ye Tianxiu regained consciousness, he asked Chiji to request for help from the Prince of Yong's household. Ye Tianxiu understood that there was no way for him to escape from Chang'an with the current state of his injuries and the only way that he could preserve his life was to get help from the Prince of Yong. Because of the Prince of Yong's enmity towards both the crown prince and the Fengyi Sect, and considering the Prince of Qing's face, it was possible that His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, would save him.

If Ye Tianxiu had mentioned any other place, it was likely that Chiji would have been placed in an awkward position. However, when this man mentioned the Prince of Yong's residence, Chiji relaxed a bit. When he delivered the news to the Prince of Yong's residence, Xiaoshunzi hearing it also was left dumbfounded. Xiaoshunzi was one of those who knew that the guards of the Prince of Qing's secret base in Chang'an had been slaughtered. Surprisingly, Ye Tianxiu would be so fortunate and survive. But Ye Tianxiu appearing at Xia Jinyi's hideout was not something that Xiaoshunzi could

handle without permission.

I muttered to myself for some time. As an enemy of the Fengyi Sect, that made the Prince of Qing our ally. Moreover, it was better to have a friend than to have another enemy. Naturally, we would have to save Ye Tianxiu. However, Xia Jinyi could no longer remain in that residence. With the current state of affairs, it wouldn't be a good thing if Xia Jinyi's whereabouts were discovered. After Ye Tianxiu had been moved, it was likely that people would come to investigate that residence. Therefore, Xia Jinyi must also be moved. However, where could he go? Starting today, the city of Chang'an would panic at the slightest thing.[1] It would be difficult to hide him. After thinking it over, I stated, "Go take a trip personally. Have Xia Jinyi think of a way to change his appearance and have him leave Chang'an for a period of time. With the current state of affairs, even I am powerless. He should be able to understand this."

"Young master, allowing this man to remain alive will be a future calamity," replied Xiaoshunzi callously. "Why don't we kill him and silence him forever?"

Shaking my head, I explained, "That won't do. I have never performed anything that would give me a guilty conscience. This man has helped me considerably, risking his life. If I were to kill him, it would cause all those who know to sneer at me. Go, persuade him. In any case, since he is of no use remaining in Chang'an, it would be better if he left."

"Then I will personally make the trip," Xiaoshunzi obeyed, nodding his head. "I presume that Chiji will not allow Ye Tianxiu to see anything that he isn't meant to see."

Bringing along a carriage belonging to the Prince of Yong's household, Xiaoshunzi traveled to that secret hideout. At present, Chang'an was completely devoid of people. Imperial guards were on the street everywhere. However, the pendant of the Prince of Yong's household was quite useful and no one dared to block Xiaoshunzi's passage. Within the carriage, Xiaoshunzi was resolved to kill Xia Jinyi if he refused to leave regardless of the rebuke and censure from the young master.

It wasn't long before the carriage arrived at this house located in a remote alley. After Xiaoshunzi had ordered the accompanying servants to remain outside and wait, he entered the courtyard alone. After he had walked in, Xiaoshunzi's gaze suddenly began to exude an icy light. Because of his murderous aura, his pupils had shrunk somewhat. This was all because he saw a familiar, and yet unfamiliar youth. The youth's appearance was elegant; his skin was pale to the point of transparency. What was unique was that this youth carried a kind of aloof bearing. Although he was standing there, admiring the lotus flowers in the courtyard's pond, Xiaoshunzi could not see a hint of joy or even sorrow in his eyes, almost as if he did not have any emotions. Xiaoshunzi racked his brains trying to figure out where he had felt this familiar feeling before. Carefully sizing up this youth, understanding and surprise suddenly hit Xiaoshunzi. This man was actually Xia Jinyi. What was going on? Why hadn't Chiji informed him that Xia Jinyi had undergone such a transformation? Thinking of this, he shot a glare at Chiji who had appeared from a room to welcome him.

Actually, Chiji was also unable to make heads or tails of things. Although Xia Jinyi had changed greatly these last several days, Chiji had been in close proximity to him on a daily basis and had not noticed. Regarding the transformation of Xia Jinyi's temperament, Chiji marked it down as a result of Xia Jinyi's sorrow and as a result had not reported this to Xiaoshunzi. Although he found things odd, Chiji did not dare to ask too many questions. Advancing, he stated, "This Lord Night is an official in the Prince of Yong's household. Young master Ye is waiting in the room for you."

"Withdraw for now," Xiaoshunzi ordered, uncaring. "I have some words that I need to speak to young master Xia."

Chiji had an uneasy expression on his face as he silently withdrew. Xia Jinyi seemed like he was just seeing Xiaoshunzi, warmly stepping forward. Smiling, he asked, "So you have come personally. Has *daren* been well recently?"

Xiaoshunzi silently gazed at Xia Jinyi. He could sense that this man was truly happy to see him. However, what was strange was that Xiaoshunzi could also feel that this man's emotions did not fluctuate in the slightest.

Suddenly, Xiaoshunzi shot a palm strike at Xia Jinyi. Although Xia Jinyi's expression seemed to be somewhat panicked, he still very quickly raised a hand to meet Xiaoshunzi's attack. Xiaoshunzi could sense that Xia Jinyi's internal energy was yin-focused, and yet also yang-focused as well. After a loud collision, Xiaoshunzi did not move in the slightest, while Xia Jinyi was forced to take two steps back, a flustered look appearing on his fair and pretty face.

Xiaoshunzi did not continue to attack, while Xia Jinyi did not seem frightened, respectfully standing at attention with a slight smile on his face.

Xiaoshunzi casually asked, "What has happened to you?"

Light twinkled in the eyes of Xia Jinyi. Smiling, he answered, "It isn't much, only that it feels like I've completely become a different person and am no longer weighed down by the past."

"The young master ordered me to inform you," relayed Xiaoshunzi icily. "At present, Chang'an is extremely dangerous. If you are willing, you can temporarily leave the city to hide. If you are willing, I can act on behalf of the young master and allow you to freely depart."

Killing desire flashed across Xia Jinyi's eyes and he replied, "No, I will absolutely not leave if I cannot personally witness Li Hanyou be punished."

Xiaoshunzi frowned and responded, "The matter relating to the Fengyi Sect is not easily resolved. It is inconvenient for you to remain in the capital."

Xia Jinyi fell silent. After a while, he spoke, "Haven't you also noticed that I have changed greatly? Do you think it is likely that they will recognize me right now?"

Thinking it over, Xiaoshunzi responded, "At first glance, probably not. However, you stayed for quite some time in the Crown Prince's household. Many within that household will be able to recognize you."

With a respectful expression, Xia Jinyi replied, "Would Lord Li please transmit my intentions to the young master. I am willing to serve *daren* . It isn't difficult for my features to be changed. I believe that I won't be easily recognized."

Xiaoshunzi's heart was touched. He did not know what had happened to Xia Jinyi for his martial arts to advance by leaps and bounds. This man was clever and quick-witted. It wouldn't be a bad thing if he were allowed to stay by the young master's side. Although disguises couldn't completely change a person's features, with the sweeping changes to Xia Jinyi's temperament, it was possible for his identity to be hidden from others as long as he led a secluded life. Moreover, if he were to make trouble and were unwilling to depart, Xiaoshunzi knew that if he wished to kill him, it wouldn't be that easy. It would be a problem if Ye Tianxiu were to hear of this matter. It would be better to bring Xia Jinyi back to the Prince of Yong's residence. If young master were willing to retain him, then he could stay at the Cold Courtyard. If unwilling, then he could kill Xia Jinyi easily. Thinking of this, Xiaoshunzi's relaxed and he stated, "Follow me to the Prince of Yong's residence to meet young master."

It wasn't that Xia Jinyi did not understand Xiaoshunzi's thought process, however he believed that he would be able to see his long-cherished wish come to fruition. Thus he respectfully acknowledged, "This commoner obeys the lord's order."

Xiaoshunzi laughed helplessly, walking towards the room where Ye Tianxiu was recuperating. On the bed, Ye Tianxiu's face was deathly pale. Most of his body was covered with bandages. Seeing Xiaoshunzi, he sat up with difficulty. Smiling wryly, Ye Tianxiu said, "So it is Brother Li who has come personally. Tianxiu cannot thank you enough."

"Brother Ye was ambushed last night," replied Xiaoshunzi solemnly. "Both His Imperial Highness and my young master were extremely worried. Who would have thought that Brother Ye would turn misfortune into a blessing? To escape from certain death means that you will have fortune in the future. Does Brother Ye know who it was that attacked you last night?"

Smiling wryly, Ye Tianxiu answered, "The intruder's face was covered, his swordsmanship superb. I am ashamed to admit that I was inferior. I do not know that person's identity."

Xiaoshunzi's eyes narrowed and he continued to ask, "Do you know if the intruder was male or female? What swordfighting style did he use?"

Ye Tianxiu had repeatedly thought over what had happened. At this moment, he spoke without the slightest bit of hesitation, “That individual was a man. Although his facial features were exquisite, after having fought bitterly with him for some time, I can be certain that that individual was not a woman. If that wasn’t the case, there would be no need for me to guess as to his identity. His swordsmanship was exceptional, profoundly exquisite. It seemed quite similar to the Jade Maiden Sword Art.”

Xiaoshunzi’s brows twitched and he asked, “Are you suspecting Xiahou Yuanfeng? Doesn’t he train in the Jade Maiden Sword Art?”

Shaking his head, Ye Tianxiu replied, “I also suspected him. However, I once witnessed Xiahou *daren* ’s sword art. His sword was not as swift and fierce as the intruder. Moreover, although the Jade Maiden Sword Art is deep and profound, it is used by many factions and sects in *jianghu* . I cannot confirm that the intruder was Xiahou *daren* just from this single factor.”

Xiaoshunzi did not think further. This matter would surely come to light one day in the future. There was no need for him to be anxious and impatient. Thus, he smiled and said, “Imperial Bodyguard Ye, it would be better if you first came to the Prince of Yong’s residence. Your injuries need to be treated again. We will discuss this matter further in the future.”

Ye Tianxiu cheerfully nodded in agreement.

***

Over these days, the state of affairs in Chang’an gradually pacified. However, hidden waves surged violently in the dark. At first light, Li Hanyou had entered the palace to pay a formal visit to the Noble Consort Ji. Within Noble Consort Ji’s chambers, the two sipped tea. Li Hanyou’s state of mind was not fixed, while Noble Consort Ji’s expression was tranquil and calm. After the two had chatted vacuously for quite some time, Li Hanyou could not help but ask, “Martial Aunt, it originally was understandable for Master to come assume control. However, Hanyou did not know a single thing about what was going to happen in Chang’an last night. Martial Aunt, please tell me … is Master dissatisfied with Hanyou?”

Noble Consort Ji smiled faintly and replied, “You’re overthinking matters.

These years, you have done well. If the Sect Master truly felt that you have done wrong, she would absolutely not have let you off easily. It is only that it is inappropriate for you to get involved in this matter. Although you are a disciple of the Internal Hall, you are now married to Qin Qing. With this, you have nominally become an External Hall disciple. As a result, it isn't appropriate for you to get involved. To the Fengyi Sect, it is far more important for you to preserve your current honored position than any action that you may do."

Sighing, Li Hanyou expressed, "That day when the Sect Master arranged for me to be wed to Qin Qing, to speak the truth, I was unwilling. Martial Aunt, I truly wish to become the successor of Master's legacy. But …"

Although Li Hanyou did not speak any further, Noble Consort Ji was very clear as to the meaning behind her words. The authority of the Fengyi Sect Master could not be resisted. Moreover, under the pressure of riches and honor, glory and splendor, how many could resist such allure? While gently fanning the circular fan in her hand, Noble Consort Ji gracefully soothed, "In reality, there is no need for you to become too worried. Although there is no chance for you to become the next Sect Master, the Sect Master's intentions are quite clear. The decisions of the Fengyi Sect of tomorrow will not be made by the future Sect Master alone. Ziyan's martial arts cultivation is the highest and she is the most loyal to Senior Apprentice Sister. In addition, the majority of the military force developed by the Fengyi Sect rests in her hands. But because of her cruel and savage reputation, thus there is no hope of her becoming the Sect Master. Your Second Apprentice Sister Xiao Lan and Fifth Apprentice Sister Qin Zheng are both married and have lost the qualifications to become Sect Master. Although your Third Apprentice Sister Feng Fei is somewhat renowned in *jianghu* , there is no way for her to dominate the outstanding heroes of the lands and can only serve in a supporting role. Your Fourth Apprentice Sister Liang Wan's mind has been damaged. Your Seventh Apprentice Sister is too cavalier and reckless, and cannot be granted heavy responsibilities. There is only your Sixth Apprentice Sister Ling Yu and Eighth Apprentice Sister Yan Wushuang, one elegant and exquisite, the other a beauty surpassing all. Their martial arts are also superb. They conform the most to the Sect Master's criteria.

However, there is no need for you to worry. According to the present circumstances, Ziyan will take a supervisory role. We disciples in the court will naturally become a faction. Feifei, Yu'er, Xiaotong, Wushuang will become a faction. No one will be able to take arbitrary action.[2] Only you have sufficient ability to have Lan'er and Zheng'er listen to you. Why are you afraid that you won't be able to compete against those Internal Hall disciples?"

The more she listened, the greater the joy that Li Hanyou felt. She replied, "Many thanks to Martial Aunt for your advice. I hope that Martial Aunt will continue to advise me."

Noble Consort Ji smiled. "You are exceptionally intelligent. What are you confused about? As long as you do not reveal a hint of dissatisfaction, Senior Apprentice Sister will not abandon you. The turmoil this time was not our doing. As a result, we would naturally be able to speak justly and forcefully."[3]

Somewhat hesitantly, Li Hanyou inquired, "But this disciple has heard that Eldest Apprentice Sister planned the assassination of Zheng Xia? What can we do if this information were to spread?"

"What are you afraid of?" asked Noble Consort Ji with an icy smile before she continued, "Not only were you not involved, even if you were the assassin, there would be no need to worry. Wasn't the reason the Sect Master agreed to allow the Freezing Moon branch's people to slaughter the Prince of Qing's subordinates was to use them to cover up our assassination attempt on Zheng Xia? If all of the Prince of Qing's subordinates die, it is likely that everyone will suspect our involvement. However, suspicion is not enough. Who doesn't know about the mutual animosity between the Prince of Qing and us? As long as we do not directly go to kill the Prince of Qing, the Emperor will not blame us. Besides, there is no evidence pointing to our involvement. Who will suspect that our real target was Zheng Xia?"

"It is truly difficult to know Sect Master's thoughts," replied Li Hanyou with a sigh, "At present, this disciple does not understand why we attempted to assassinate Zheng Xia."

“Alas, Senior Apprentice Sister had no alternative,” answered Noble Consort Ji with a sigh. “Zheng Xia’s personality is stern and unyielding. This time, the Emperor is of mind to let the Crown Prince off after he returns. Like last time, Zheng Xia will inevitably and bluntly criticize the Crown Prince’s misconducts. Against reason, the Emperor greatly respects that Zheng Xia. If he is permitted to remonstrate before the Emperor, it is likely that the Crown Prince’s position as heir apparent will be unable to be preserved. For our ultimate objective, we can only sacrifice Zheng *daren* . It is only a pity that we did not succeed. However, he will not have the opportunity to shake the Crown Prince’s position this time.”

Smiling, Li Hanyou declared, “It is the Freezing Moon branch that was the most foolish, becoming our shield.”

***

“It isn’t clear who is being foolish,” stated Lu Jingzhong evenly, as he gently rocked the open folding fan.

Sitting across from him was the Minister of Rites, Xiahou Lan. He replied, “Junior Apprentice Brother, you should not underestimate the enemy. You know full well how difficult the methods of the Fengyi Sect Master are to deal with. In the past, many members of our Scorching Sun and Freezing Moon branches died at her hands.”

Lu Jingzhong’s expression became solemn. “Senior Apprentice Brother, I know full well how formidable this woman is. However, it is impossible for her to eradicate us. Although His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, cannot be considered as shrewd, he knows enough to safeguard against the Fengyi Sect. What’s more, the animosity between him and the Fengyi Sect is already quite deep. I am fully confident that we are able to make claims as an equal before the Fengyi Sect Master.”

“Junior Apprentice Brother, after the conference twenty years ago, the number of talented individuals within our Freezing Moon branch have dwindled away,” replied Xiahou Lan with a sigh. “There is no way for us to withstand any further losses.”

Lu Jingzhong icily retorted, “Senior Apprentice Brother is an Elder of the

Freezing Moon branch and naturally cherishes one's own plumage. However, I, Lu Jingzhong, received my master's teachings thirty years ago. Although I do not know my master's current position within the branch, the present situation is of my own making. I would absolutely not permit anyone to snatch it away."

Smiling wryly, Xiahou Lan returned, "I am also unclear about this matter. But from what my deceased master told me, our Freezing Moon branch has been passed down for seventeen generations. There were several instances when the inheritance was lost, but in general, the succession has been continuous. My deceased master once claimed that the Devil Sect inevitably has another branch charged with the task of ensuring the continuation of its legacy. My deceased master even suspected that this responsibility was given to the long-heard of, but never seen, disciples of the Concealed Star branch. My deceased master's inheritance was somehow luckily able to survive through the ages without interruption. Although there were some things that he did not understand, there were some things that my deceased master was very clear about. Every single generation of Freezing Moon branch disciples, adept at schemes and plots, have not met with a good end. That is why I have prevented Yuanfeng from becoming involved in the Devil Sect's affairs at all costs. However, you have always been unwilling to let him off. This time, you even sent him to kill the Prince of Qing's subordinates. Do you truly wish to oppose me till the very end?" As he asked the last question, the urge to kill flashed across Xiahou Lan's eyes.

"Senior Apprentice Brother, you can conceal yourself in the court," replied Lu Jingzhong calmly. "However nephew is still young. Possessing such character, ability, and wisdom, how can you allow him to be mediocre and complacent, and do nothing? Besides, since ancient times, how many of those possessing wisdom and bravery have been willing to live comfortably without purpose? Since he has such talent, then he must have his own position in this world. If not for ambitions and arrogance, how could the Freezing Moon branch's inheritance been passed down for so long without interruption? Everyone knows that after each conference, there will be a bloody slaughter for twenty to thirty years, and only one or two individuals have the qualifications to obtain riches, honor, and power. And yet, no one

has ever renounced this opportunity. Who does not wish to support a wise liege to unify the world and have one's portraits be honored for the rest of time?[4] Moreover, that individual has the ability to become the Sovereign of the Freezing Moon branch. With the Sovereign's pendant, one will be able to acquire the help of the Concealed Star branch and have the opportunity to take a look at the original *Hidden Talisman Classic* [5] Alas over these last thousand years, only the Thirteenth Generation Ancestor became Sovereign."

Fascinated, Xiahou Lan stated, "Moreover, that Sovereign reappeared half a year after he mysteriously disappeared, dying perfectly satisfied with a smile on his face. Unfortunately, he did reveal a word about what he had witnessed."

"I am willing to die for the opportunity to take a peek at the *Hidden Talisman Classic* in this life," proclaimed Lu Jingzhong, a look of fanaticism flashing across his eyes.

Xiahou Lan peacefully said, "That's right. I once had the same thoughts. The Ancestor's knowledge was as deep as the ocean, only passing along seven-tenths of what he had learned and was already able to allow the Freezing Moon branch to survive to this day. I was once willing to pay any price, to make any sacrifice, in order to take a look at the Ancestor's works. However, at present, I am completely discouraged and only wish to spend the rest of my life in peace. Therefore, it is best if you do not involve Yuanfeng."

"Does Senior Apprentice Brother think that this was my idea?" asked Lu Jingzhong, a hint of ridicule flashing across his eyes before he continued, "Nephew's intelligence is outstanding and you have even passed along all of our teachings to him. At present, he is filled with the impetuousness of youth. How is he willing to bend his head to another? Senior Apprentice Brother, it would have been fine if you had not educated him and taught him the sword. It is too late now."

Xiahou Lan's expression changed. It was some time before he replied, "What you say is true. It is truly too late."

Footnotes :

风声鹤唳, fengshengheli – idiom, lit. wind sighing and crane calling; fig. to panic at the slightest move, to be jittery

独断专行, duduanzhuanxing – idiom, lit. to decide and act alone; fig. to take arbitrary action, a law unto oneself

理直气壮, lizhiqizhuang – idiom, lit. in the right and self-confident; bold and confident with justice on one's side; to have the courage of one's convictions; just and forceful

画影凌烟, huayinglingyan – idiom, lit. to have one's portraits hung in the Lingyan Pavilion (凌烟阁); fig. to be honored through the histories; this is a bit of an anachronism as the Lingyan Pavilion was a pavilion where Tang Taizong, Li Shimin, hung the commemorative portraits that he commissioned to honor the twenty-four officials for their service and contributions to the Tang Dynasty

The *Hidden Talisman Classic* (陰符經, Yinfujing) is the name of a Daoist scripture associated with Chinese astrology and internal alchemy, and is also the name of a Chinese feng shui text and a military strategy manual.

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 18: The Yong Emperor Returns to the Capital

Volume 3, Chapter 18: The Yong Emperor Returns to the Capital

When Gaozu[1] returned, he praised Taizong for his diligence. When Taizong volunteered to patrol the frontier, the emperor did not approve it …—*Yong Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Taizong*

On the sixteenth day of the sixth month, at nearly 3 PM, Princess Changle returned to the imperial palace under the escort of the Imperial Guard and Imperial Palace Guard. While seated within her carriage, her beautiful face had a hint of anxiety and worry upon it. Just earlier, Xiahou Yuanfeng had requested an audience with her through her maid, Lü'e. Her original intention was to decline the meeting. But after recalling that, although Xiahou Yuanfeng was intent upon taking her as his bride, he did not continuously nag her after he was rejected. Thinking about this now, Changle considered Xiahou Yuanfeng to be more sensible compared to the gentle and cultivated Wei Ying. As a result, she had acceded to his request.

When she met with Xiahou Yuanfeng, he did not say anything in particular, only tactfully reporting, "Recently, this subject has received news that there are those who have been making a supreme effort to facilitate the wedding between Your Imperial Highness and Wei *daren* . Previously, after His Imperial Majesty bestowed the engagement, Your Imperial Highness rejected it, however, His Imperial Majesty has yet to retract his decree. As a result, there have been those who wish to compel the Princess to fulfill the engagement. Because Your Imperial Highness has been close to the Prince of Yong's household over this past year, even though Your Imperial Highness has never been willing to become involved in the struggle, in the eyes of some, Your Imperial Highness supports the Prince of Yong. Therefore, there are those who wish for the Princess to swiftly be married. If this were to happen, then the Wei family's position would remain neutral, while the Princess, as a virtuous married woman, would definitely not make trouble for your husband's family. Those individuals are taking drastic measures.

Who doesn't know about Your Imperial Highness's good relationship with the Prince of Yong's household? Moreover, the Emperor dotes heavily upon the Princess. They do not want to see the Princess influence the Emperor's decisions. Besides, the Crown Prince's position as heir apparent is in danger. This is the situation in which they dare not ignore even the slightest detail. As a result, they view Your Imperial Highness's wedding with great importance. However, they dare not use force. It is likely that they will use some underhanded methods. Princess must be extremely careful. Although Wei *daren* 's character is serious, he is deeply infatuated with the Princess and he could be easily manipulated by others."

Princess Changle gazed out through the thin muslin screen of the carriage window. The streets of Chang'an were solemn and overawed, with imperial guardsmen everywhere. As her carriage moved, Changle could not help but feel extreme disappointment and frustration in her heart of hearts, remembering the scene when she was rescued from the Southern Chu palace by Great Yong's intelligence network on the eve of Jianye's desperate crisis. That day, when she gazed out the window, she had seen the normally bustling and prosperous streets of Jianye filled with frantic crowds of people. Today, as she gazed out at the hostile and tense atmosphere of Chang'an, she could sense no difference from what she had seen before.

***

On the eighteenth day of the sixth month, Emperor Li Yuan returned to Chang'an. This time, it was quite clear that Li Yuan's mood was poor. Even when he accepted the kowtows of all of officialdom, his face remained ashen. After reluctantly stating a few words of praise to the Prince of Yong, Li Yuan hurriedly returned to the palace. Upon arriving, he immediately called for Wei Guan, Li Zhi, and Qin Qing to enter the palace for a conference. Conversely, the officials escorting the emperor back from Qiaoshan, Grand General Who Suppresses Distant Lands, Qin Yi, Duke of Wei, Cheng Shu, and the Prince of Qi, Li Xian, were all instructed to return to their residences to rest.

In front of the three men, Li Yuan angrily and violently threw a teacup onto the floor, shattering it into pieces. Li Yuan castigated, "You lot are truly

capable. It was only a few days and yet what has happened to Our Chang'an? Palace Attendant Zheng was attacked by an assassin, chaos in the eastern marketplace, and fires in Chang'an. Good! Speak! How should We punish you lot?"

The three hurriedly kowtowed and begged for forgiveness. In fear and trepidation, Wei Guan answered, "Following orders, this subject was responsible for government affairs. This is entirely this subject's dereliction of duty by allowing these incidents to happen. Your Imperial Majesty, please punish me heavily."

Filled with shame, Qin Qing stated, "This subject has failed Your Imperial Majesty's grace and was unable to ensure the peace in the imperial capital. First, the assassination attempt on Palace Attendant Zheng, followed by the turmoil in the eastern marketplace. Were it not for His Highness, the Prince of Yong, taking personal charge at the eastern marketplace, it is likely that the situation would have broadened and worsened. Your Imperial Majesty, please remove this subject from my office."

"This was all this child's failure to supervise," apologized Li Zhi, also greatly remorseful. "Several days ago, this child had received reports from the northern frontier. However, this child did not take those reports seriously. Now having investigated matters clearly, we can confirm that this was all the work of Northern Han spies seizing the opportunity to cause trouble. This child is Imperial Father's personally appointed Marshal of Heavenly Strategies. My guilt cannot be forgiven."

As Li Yuan stared at the three falling over each other[2] in begging for forgiveness, he suddenly felt extremely exhausted. He collapsed onto the throne. In his mind, he blamed these incidents on their struggle for power and authority. However, Li Yuan also clearly understood that this was all a result of his own machinations. Although he had nominally named his eldest son as heir apparent to adhere to proper rites, he had ulterior and selfish motives for doing so. He had always been jealous of Li Zhi's intelligence and capability. However, Li Yuan also knew that of his children only this son was capable of excelling him. But because of all kinds of reasons, he had still selected Li An. Could it be that he was wrong? Li Yuan suddenly recalled his

desire to kill after he had received an eight hundred *li* urgent message.[3] But now, he did not know who he could kill.

As a civil official, there was no point in blaming Wei Guan. Although Qin Qing was guilty of dereliction of duty, after thinking it over, Li Yuan realized that there was no way for Qin Qing to actually be able to take charge of the present Chang'an. Moreover, he had appointed Qin Qing to command the Imperial Guard because he was easy to use. As for the Prince of Yong, Li Zhi, how could Li Yuan blame him? Li Zhi had spent the last several years in a dangerous situation and had been forced to conceal his strength and bide his time. When these incidents had occurred, Li Zhi had just come out from the Fasting Palace. Further, without Li Zhi disregarding life and limb to save a desperate crisis, it was likely that aside from Chang'an being in ruins, the city would have become a slaughterhouse. In addition, he had nearly been assassinated as well. By rights, he should be commended. But if he were commended, what was to be done about the crown prince? Would he have to be deposed? Although Li Yuan was extremely disappointed about the crown prince, he was quite unwilling to have Li An deposed lightly. Li Yuan understood very clearly that if such a thing were to enter the official histories, it would only serve to blacken his own reputation, let alone the fact that a pompous and dignified reason was needed. However, there was no way that outsiders would be permitted to learn of the crown prince's current offenses.

Reaching this conclusion, Li Yuan tiredly waved his hand and declared, "Fine…. Wei Guan will forfeit a year's worth of his salary. Qin Qing will be demoted one rank and will continue to serve temporarily as the Commander of the Imperial Guard in order to use meritorious service to make up for his offenses. Having performed meritorious service by making sacrifices at the secondary altar and successfully quelled the turmoil, the Prince of Yong should, by rights, be rewarded heavily. However, since there is further room for advancement, We will bestow three thousand taels of gold upon you."

Li Zhi kowtowed. "This child thanks Imperial Father for this reward. However, this child does not lack gold and silver. There have been many

casualties among the common people because of this incident in Chang'an. This child hopes that Imperial Father will use these rewards to provide emergency relief to the commoners. This child would be greatly indebted."

Li Yuan gazed deeply at Li Zhi, both delighted and worried. Smiling, Li Yuan replied, "Zhi'er is truly deserving of the appellation of a virtuous prince. All right, We approve. You have suffered a shock from being attacked by an assassin, and should go back to your residence to rest properly."

"Imperial Father, from these incidents in Chang'an and the reports from the northern frontier, it is likely that Northern Han is stirring," stated Li Zhi promptly before explaining his request, "If Imperial Father permits it, this child wishes to inspect the northern frontier."

An indistinguishable light flickered across Li Yuan's eyes as he replied, "We will think this matter over. Go make preparations."

Li Zhi was overjoyed. Before he had come, Jiang Zhe had sat down with him and had a long talk. If the emperor had immediately agreed with his suggestion, then he, Li Zhi, would have no way to become the heir apparent in an aboveboard manner. Although it was said that a dragon prances in the abyss, the tiger roars in the jungle, to be carefree and leisurely, that also meant that Imperial Father had no intention of ever allowing him to become the heir apparent, otherwise he would absolutely not be permitted to leave the heart of the empire at this hour. If this was the case, Jiang Zhe believed that the throne could only be wrested through martial might. That was not what either Jiang Zhe or Li Zhi hoped for. However, if the emperor were to insist that Li Zhi remain in the capital, then it meant that Li Zhi had a fifty percent chance to be designated as heir apparent by the emperor. The other fifty percent was in the event that Li Yuan was jealous and suspicious of Li Zhi, and absolutely would not permit him to return to the army. But if the emperor were to hesitate, then *congratulations* , this meant that the emperor was gravely disappointed with the crown prince. As long as Li Zhi handled matters carefully and appropriately, then it wouldn't be difficult to obtain the position as heir apparent.

The aspect regarding Jiang Zhe that Li Zhi admired the most was Jiang Zhe's ability to see through another's thoughts at first glance. However, this

did not include the people by his side, such as Xiaoshunzi or Roulan. This was probably what it meant to be able to perceive the tips of an animal's hair and yet unable to see Mount Tai.[4] Jubilant and joyous, and yet unable to express it, Li Zhi hurriedly bade his farewell and returned home.

When he returned to his residence, Li Zhi was naturally delighted. When Wei Guan returned to his residence, no one dared to criticize him. Only Qin Qing was restless and jumpy.[5] He did not know how he would be punished by his father. After thinking it over, Qin Qing decided to seek out Qin Yong to accompany him to meet his father so as to reduce the punishment that he would receive. Thinking of this, Qin Qing did not return to his prince consort's residence and also did not go directly to pay his respects to his father. Rather, he first went to Qin Yong's residence. Although Qin Yong had been raised in Qin Yi's residence, ten years ago, he had moved out, reportedly because his mother was not used to the dignity of the grand general's residence. Before he had gotten married, Qin Qing would frequently spend time at Qin Yong's home. In reality, Qin Yong's residence was not far from the grand general's residence. Born impoverished, even though Qin Yong's mother was already aged, she was healthy, and was fond of cultivating a vegetable garden and raising chickens. Qin Yong had also hired several female servants to take care of his mother. As a result, both mother and son lived quite comfortably. Qin Qing was extremely fond of Qin Yong's mother's cooking, finding it tastier than the dishes prepared by the famed chefs of the grand general's residence. But after he had gotten married, Qin Qing had gradually distanced himself from this life.

As he was deep in contemplation, Qin Qing spurred his horse forward. It wasn't long before he arrived at Qin Yong's home. Hopping off his horse, Qin Qing stepped forward and knocked heavily upon the door. From within, a voice full of vitality called out, "Coming! Has big brother returned?"

Qin Qing was left stupefied. What was going on? Did Brother Yong move? Before he could think this through, the door had already opened and an elegant youth roughly sixteen or seventeen years of age stuck his head out. When he saw Qin Qing, he also stared stupidly at Qin Qing, asking, "Your Excellency, who are you looking for?"

Hesitating somewhat, Qin Qing inquired, “Is Qin Yong here? I’m his younger cousin.”

“Foster mother is always speaking of General, constantly saying that you are the fondest of her cooking,” responded the youth, his eyes brightening. Finished speaking, he turned his head and yelled, “Foster mother, foster mother! Qin Qing, General Qin has come!”

From within, the sound a cheerful voice could be heard. “What General Qin? Here, he’s your older cousin. Hua’er, why haven’t you allowed Qing’er to come in yet?”

The youth laughed happily and pulled the door open. Confused, Qin Qing led his horse into the home. After tying the horse to a large tree in the courtyard, Qin Qing spoke to the smiling, aged woman standing on the steps, “Auntie, I haven’t been able to come pay a visit recently. Have you been well?”

The old lady replied, “I’ve been well. It’s just your Brother Yong. So busy that he frequently can’t come home. Fortunately, I have Hua’er as company.”

Puzzled, Qin Qing inquired, “Is this little brother your foster son?”

“He is called Liu Hua,” answered the old lady with a smile. “He is originally from Jiangnan. He was orphaned at a young age and was left homeless. A few years ago, he worked for a merchant. As a result, he had the opportunity to study a bit and gained some experiences. Afterwards, he drifted to Chang’an, but unfortunately fell ill. Fortunately, your Brother Yong discovered him ill on the roadside and so brought him back. I saw that this child was clever and thoughtful, and so took him as an adoptive son. He doesn’t have any other attributes, aside from being thoughtful and hardworking. At present, he is a shop assistant at a silk weaver, and has already risen to become a foreman. Unlike your Brother Yong who only knows to hang out in the barracks and hasn’t found a daughter-in-law for me so that I can hold and embrace a grandchild.”

With this, Qin Qing understood and gazed towards Liu Hua. He saw that this youth had delicate features, his eyebrows like the moon, his eyes like the stars, a smile on the corner of his lips. Whoever saw him would find him

amiable and adorable. Qin Qing could not help but have a favorable impression. With a smile, he said, “Since you are auntie’s foster son, then you can call me Fourth Brother. Of our generation, Brother Yong is the eldest, while I am number four.”

Liu Hua cleverly spoke, “Little brother pays his respects to Fourth Brother. Is Fourth Brother here to find foster brother? Just now, the Grand General summoned foster brother.”

Starting to panic, Qin Qing inquired, “How was Brother Yong’s facial expressions? Was he worried about being punished by my dad?”

Almost bursting out in laughter, Liu Hua hurriedly expressed, “There were no abnormalities on Brother Yong’s face. He only said that he wouldn’t be returning this evening, having foster mother and I to not wait for him.”

Within his mind, Qin Qing felt apprehensive. Of course Qin Yong wasn’t coming back. At the very least, he would have someone to accompany him in kneeling within the ancestral hall. Thinking of this, Qin Qing did not dare to waste any more time and said, “Auntie, don’t worry about me. I need to go back to pay my respects to Father.”

Smiling, the old lady agreed, “That’s right. You two brothers are the same. Yong’er also said that he needed to see the Grand General today right before he was summoned.”

The more he listened, the more flustered Qin Qing became, promptly and hurriedly bidding his farewell. Mounting his horse, he spurred it to a gallop and headed to the grand general’s residence. What he did not see was that the youth who saw him to the door had a strange funny look in his eyes.

Qin Qing was completely weighed down by anxiety, wanting to return home as soon as possible to avoid his father’s temper from increasing, and yet, also worrying that once father saw him, he would be beaten and ordered to kneel in the ancestral hall. Like this, he returned to the grand general’s residence. Just as he walked through the door, a family retainer reported that the master had ordered that, upon arrival, the young master was to head straight for the study.

Qin Qing shivered. To him, his father’s study was the most terrifying place

in the entire residence. Each time he made a mistake, the first thing his father would do was to call him into the study. However, there was no way for him to slip away now. He had no alternative but to feign calmness, arriving at the door to the study. Just when Qin Qing finally summoned up the courage to push the door open and enter, he was left stupefied by what he saw. In casual dress, Qin Yi was poring over a map in deep discussion with Qin Yong. Seeing Qin Qing arrive, Qin Yi only glanced at him slightly before continuing to speak with Qin Yong. Listening carefully, Qin Qing discovered that his father and cousin were discussing how to rearrange Chang'an's defenses to prevent these incidents from happening again. Qin Qing could not help but feel shame. Not daring to interrupt, he listened to his father and cousin discuss how to arrange the defenses. Before, the primary duty of the Imperial Guard was to defend the Imperial City, while law and order within Chang'an was the responsibility of the Imperial Capital Magistrate. As a result, the Imperial Guard was left somewhat unprepared when the recent incident had erupted. Although this was partly a result of Qin Yi, the actual commander of the Imperial Guard, not being present, the Imperial Guard's ability to react was lacking. Therefore, Qin Yi was determined to rearrange the Imperial Guard's defenses and modify its training regimen.

After the two finished their discussion, Qin Yi picked up a teacup and took a sip. He casually asked, "Is there anything you want to say to your father?"

Qin Qing's heart jumped, as he promptly said, "Father, this is all due to Qing'er's incompetence. Father, please punish me."

Smiling slightly, Qin Yi remarked, "Now that you already are the Prince Consort of Jingjiang, I can no longer supervise you. I do not blame you for the recent incidents. You are still young and your prestige is lacking. Your handling of this to such a result can be considered as barely acceptable. What I want to ask you is why days earlier you stopped the carriage of Major Jiang of the Prince of Yong's household. These days, I have been waiting for you to come to explain the situation. However, until now, you have yet to explain yourself."

At first, Qin Qing was left dumbfounded. Afterwards, he suddenly clarified,

“So it was this matter … if Father did not raise it, I would have almost forgotten it. To speak of it, I am still a bit annoyed. That day, there was definitely a rebel hidden inside the carriage, but Jiang Zhe used the gold pendant to force me to cease my search. If Hanyou had not told me to cease causing further trouble, I would have secretly petitioned the Emperor …”

Qin Yi’s face bore a furious expression upon hearing Qin Qing’s words, his fingers trembling, almost unable to hold onto the teacup. It was a good while before he spoke, “I did not know that you had such ability and wisdom. Good. You are truly a good son.”

This time, Qin Qing was seriously frightened. He had been terrified of his father for a long time. He promptly kneeled on the floor. In a trembling voice, he atoned, “Please calm down, Father.” However, his expression revealed his bewilderment, clearly not knowing what he had done wrong.

With a heavy heart, Qin Yi shook his head. On this earth, there were no closer relations than between a father and his son. It wasn’t that he did not wish for his son to become outstanding, to become a leader of men. However, Qin Qing was so ignorant and stubborn, frequently unable to see things clearly. This kind of natural endowment was enough for a military officer, but not for someone who was in the middle of the political intrigue of the court. At present, with his help, Qin Qing would be safe and sound. But if he were to pass, who would take care of his son? Even if Li Hanyou would advise Qin Qing on the basis of their relationship as husband and wife, it was likely he would be no more than putty in her hands. If he had known this would happen, Qin Yi would absolutely not have agreed to transfer his son back to the capital. Resisting his anger with great difficulty, Qin Yi spoke, “You unfilial son. Are you truly that capable to provoke the Prince of Yong’s household without worrying? Regardless of whether there was a rebel aboard Major Jiang’s carriage, even if it was true, you do not have the qualifications to interfere.”

“But that was the truth,” stammered Qin Qing. “Hasn’t father always said that upon taking responsibility of the Imperial Guard, one must be fair and aboveboard, unafraid of influential bigwigs?”

“I had you be fair and aboveboard, unafraid of influential personages, in

order to protect the innocent!" screamed Qin Yi furiously. "Not to make trouble for the Prince of Yong! At present, who doesn't know that the Prince of Yong's meritorious contributions to Great Yong are unmatched, but because of the Crown Prince's fear, a wall has been built up between the brothers? We, as subjects, can only watch on without interfering. Since ancient times, there is no good or evil in the struggle to become heir apparent. As long as they do not harm the common people and innocents, why are you, the little fellow, getting involved? It's fine if you are helping the Princess of Jingjiang's close friend seek justice and make trouble for Pei Yun, even though Pei Yun did nothing wrong. However, you should not have publicly and openly caused trouble for the Prince of Yong's household. Furthermore, it is likely that there was someone in the carriage that was inconvenient for you to see. Even if there was no one and they permitted you to search it, wouldn't that cause the prestige of the Prince of Yong's household to cease to exist? When that time comes, no matter how magnanimous the Prince of Yong is, he will be unable to pardon your rudeness."

Qin Qing was not utterly stupid. Hearing Qin Yi's words, his face turned scarlet, not knowing what to say. Heaving a sigh, Qin Yi continued, "Besides, there are some things that aren't as simple as they appear. You say that man is a rebel, but you forget that man is also the Emperor's blood relative. If you were to report this matter, ought the Emperor get involved or not? How can you casually meddle in these matters? Fine. I won't say anything further. Go to the ancestral hall to reflect upon your actions. How can you be so obedient to the words of a woman? *Humph!* "

At this moment, someone reported from the other side of the door, "Older Brother Qin, the Emperor has issued an edict."

Dumbfounded, Qin Yi asked, "What edict?"

That man pushed open the door, revealing himself as the Duke of Wei, Cheng Shu. With a solemn expression, he proclaimed, "The Emperor has issued an edict. A few days earlier, the Crown Prince was recuperating within the Imperial Palace. Now that he has recovered somewhat, he can return to his residence to continue his recovery. For now, he does not need

to head to the Eastern Palace to handle government affairs. The Prince of Yong's contributions this time have been brilliant. Under normal circumstances, he would be heavily rewarded. But upon his request, his rewards are being used to relieve the suffering of those affected. In addition, the Prince of Qi will depart the capital tomorrow. On behalf of the Son of Heaven, he will inspect the northern frontier and safeguard against an offensive from Northern Han."

Savoring this information for some time, Qin Yi replied, "The Emperor's decision truly provides food for thought."

Footnotes :

高祖, gaozu – lit. supreme ancestor; refers to Li Yuan

争先恐后, zhengxiankonghou – idiom, lit. striving to be first and fearing to be last; fig. outdoing one another, falling over each other

China had an official post system that delivered messages. The most urgent required the messenger to travel eight hundred li per day (four hundred kilometers; although the speed was frequently a lot less and was typically around 4-500 li per day). For example, when An Lushan rebelled during the Tang Dynasty, the message reporting his rebellion traveled three thousand li and arrived at the capital in six days, averaging five hundred li per day.

察秋毫之末，却不见泰山, chaqiuhaozhimo, quebujian Taishan – idiom, lit. being able to perceive the tips of an animal's hair and yet unable to see Mount Tai; fig. can't see the forest for the trees

惴惴不安, zhuizhuibu'an – idiom, lit. to be on tenterhooks; fig. to be anxious and frightened

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 19: The Princess's Secret Remonstration

Volume 3, Chapter 19: The Princess's Secret Remonstration

On the nineteenth day of the sixth month, Gaozu issued an edict, allowing the Prince to return home, while removing the Prince's authority. The Prince was filled with fear and worry …—*Yong Dynasty Records* , *Biography of the Prince of Li*

The speed that Li Yuan's edict was issued naturally filled all with amazement. Virtually all assumed that this decision had been made long ago. However, they did not know that the decision to issue this edict was actually made overnight. That day, after the Prince of Yong and company had departed, Li Yuan was filled with anxiety and worry. Since long ago, whenever he ran into a Gordian problem that he could not resolve, he would discuss these matters with his top ministers. However, today's problem was completely different. Wei Guan was always neutral and would inevitably not say much. Qin Yi and Cheng Shu were all military men, and never had been willing to get involved in politics. Zheng Xia, alas … Zheng Xia's character was upright and outspoken, handling everything impartially, but at present, he was seriously injured and could not offer his advice. As Li Yuan's mind turned, he realized the only one he could discuss this matter with was Noble Consort Ji. However, Li Yuan was unwilling to speak with her. If Li Yuan had his heart set on ensuring the succession of his crown prince, then Noble Consort Ji's advice would naturally be of use. However, now that Li Yuan was utterly disappointed with the crown prince, the attitude of the Fengyi Sect was very clear. Reportedly, the Fengyi Sect master had already personally arrived in Chang'an. Although Fan Huiyao had not come to see him, Li Yuan knew from her conduct that she still supported the crown prince. With this, Noble Consort Ji's attitude was already set. At this moment, Li Yuan sincerely hoped for someone without selfish and ulterior motives to discuss the situation with. The more he thought, the more vexed he became. Within his harem, practically everyone was involved in politics. The sole exception was Noble Consort Zhangsun, unselfish and

undemanding. After thinking it over, Li Yuan decided to go to her chambers to idle away some of the time. Looking up at the sky to determine the time of day, Li Yuan did not dispatch someone ahead and walked in the direction of Noble Consort Zhangsun's Eternal Spring Palace Hall.

Entering the palace hall, the supervising eunuch promptly came over and kowtowed, informing Li Yuan that the noble consort and the princess were strolling in the palace hall's garden. Li Yuan walked towards the garden. Before he had even entered, he heard a peal of lively laughter. He could not help but feel his gloom reduce. Entering, Li Yuan saw Noble Consort Zhangsun sitting within a pavilion, while Princess Changle, dressed in the garb of northern barbarians, played *cuju* with Roulan and two palace maids. Although Roulan was still young, she was extremely nimble, running all over the garden, chasing after the ball. Helped by everyone yielding to her, she played quite well. Seeing her innocence, unaffected by the worries of the world, the vexations in his mind were reduced to nothingness.

At this moment, the eunuch declared in a loud voice, "His Imperial Majesty has arrived!"

Hearing this, everyone promptly came over to welcome the emperor. With a laugh, Li Yuan stated, "We are only here to take a look, there is no need for everyone to stand on ceremony." Finished speaking, he stepped forward and picked up the rosy-faced Roulan, asking her, "Little Roulan has played quite well. How are you free to enter the palace today? Every single time, you will come into the palace only if your Auntie Changle personally invites you."

With gleaming eyes and in an innocent voice, Roulan replied, "Imperial Grandfather, Roulan wishes to frequently come see Her Imperial Highness, the Princess, and Imperial Grandfather. However, some people have said that if Roulan comes too often to see Her Imperial Highness, the Princess, there will be people who get angry with the Princess, thus Roulan does not dare to come."

Li Yuan could not help but get angry. He naturally understood the meaning behind Roulan's words. There were those who were worried that Princess Changle would get too close to the Prince of Yong's household. The change in

his complexion caused Princess Changle to be frightened, promptly stepping forward and stating, “Imperial Father, Roulan is thoughtless, please don’t take offense.”

Heaving a sigh, Li Yuan waved his hand, dismissing all of the palace maids and eunuchs. Seeing this, Princess Changle had Lü’e also take Roulan away. Understanding that they needed to discuss a private matter, Leng Chuan and company also withdrew into the distance. Li Yuan unenthusiastically stated, “Changle, you’ve truly suffered greatly. It’s fine if your older brothers haven’t made something of themselves, but their conduct has even implicated you …”

Princess Changle promptly smiled and replied, “Imperial Father, it’s only second brother who is overthinking things. In reality, there is no one who would take out their anger upon this child over this matter.”

“That’s right, Your Imperial Majesty,” agreed Noble Consort Zhangsun. “Zhen’er is your most beloved daughter. Who would dare make things difficult for her?”

Li Yuan sighed again. “Alas, We are extremely disappointed with the Crown Prince. But how can he be deposed so lightly? At present, the entire court is either seeking to preserve the Crown Prince’s position to take credit in front of him or wish to set the Prince of Yong as heir apparent. We are in an extremely difficult situation.”

A look of worry flashed across Noble Consort Zhangsun’s eyes. Although she did not involve herself in the affairs of state, she knew full well what was presently going on. Speaking from the heart, the succession had barely anything to do with her. Although she had a somewhat favorable impression of the Prince of Yong because of Lady Gao, the Princess of Yong, it was not enough for Noble Consort Zhangsun to support him. Now that the emperor had openly spoken of this matter to her, if she were to say something, it was likely that her words would be known tomorrow. From this point forward, there was no way that she could continue to live in peace. Consequently, she could only speak obliquely, “There is no need for Your Imperial Majesty to worry. It is only natural that these subjects all have different thoughts. The decision regarding the heir apparent can only be made by you.”

Although these words were vague and shallow, when Li Yuan heard them, he felt comfortable. He could not help but declare, “Be that as it may, We are in an impossible situation. Although the Crown Prince is no good, he has been the heir apparent for many years. Although the Prince of Yong is good, his ambitions are too great. We understand the difficulties of founding an empire and are worried that he would be shortsighted and look for a fast return,[1] ultimately destroying the empire.”

Noble Consort Zhangsun wished to say something, but hesitated. Although she was extremely gratified that Li Yuan trusted her so much, involving the members of the harem would cause no end of trouble. Li Yuan understood the difficulties that she faced. From the beginning, he had no hopes that Noble Consort Zhangsun would be able to give him any suggestions and only wished to voice his complaints. As a result, he did not pry deeper, only voicing his difficulties to reduce the weight upon his heart. As he spoke, he noticed that Princess Changle was thinking pensively. Curious, Li Yuan asked, “Changle, do you have an opinion?”

Hesitating for a moment, Changle answered, “Imperial Father, although this child does not understand anything about the affairs of state, regardless of what Imperial Father thinks, the most important thing to do at present is to pacify the situation. Regardless of what Imperial Father decides, everything can be arranged in the future. For the situation to remain suspended like this, not only will the Crown Prince be worried and second brother vexed, even the entire court will be anxious and apprehensive, worried that they misinterpret the trend.”

Li Yuan’s heart leapt. Changle’s words were quite reasonable. As long as he continued to mull over how to handle this issue, the more the crown prince would be worried about his position as heir apparent, resentment stirring in his heart. Even the Prince of Yong would inevitably have expectations. If the end result did not conform to his intentions, he would also not be happy. If he could temporarily placate them until he had made up his mind and made the arrangements, wouldn’t it be the best of both worlds? Thinking of this, Li Yuan rose to his feet happily and proclaimed, “Changle speaks the truth. All right, We need to go issue an edict. You can do as you wish.” So

speaking, Li Yuan immediately returned to the Imperial Study, issuing the edict. Not tolerating the remonstrations of any of his subjects, he swiftly and decisively promulgated the edict.

The issue of this edict caused everyone to be delighted and satisfied. The crown prince was naturally overjoyed. When he kowtowed to accept the edict, Li An, moved to tears, vowed to the Heavens that he would turn over a new leaf.[2] The Prince of Qi was also overjoyed. These past two years, he had basically been confined to the capital. Aside from visiting brothels, he hunted with dogs or falcons. He had long itched to return to the borders to fight a few battles. With this opportunity, he was naturally very happy. Practically just after the edict was issued, the Prince of Qi did not even bother to say anything to the crown prince and immediately left the capital. Naturally, this left the crown prince furious.

Apart from this, it would be reasonable to state that the Prince of Yong, who originally had the opportunity to take the crown prince's place as heir apparent, had his hopes dashed and would inevitably be distressed. In reality, however, over the past few days, the Prince of Yong maintained a natural and poised bearing. He was the first to congratulate the crown prince. Of course, what he was congratulating was the crown prince's recovery from his "illness." Afterwards, the Prince of Yong personally saw off the Prince of Qi and then paid a visit to Palace Attendant Zheng to check on his recovery. Contrary to what one might expect, he was busy every day. Although he had a veneer of calm, there was not a hint of joy on his face. As a result, everyone concluded that he was resentful and annoyed. However, these same people also praised the Prince of Yong for his magnanimous bearing and the broadness of his mind. What they did not know was that without the veneer, joy would likely have covered the entirety of the Prince of Yong's face.

After he had received Li Yuan's imperial edict, Li Zhi was originally filled with gloom, blaming Imperial Father for being partial to the crown prince. He had not idea that as soon as he walked into the Cold Courtyard, Jiang Zhe would actually congratulate him. Li Zhi worriedly inquired, "Suiyun, Imperial Father's prejudice is clear. Why are you celebrating?"

With a smile, Jiang Zhe replied, “Your Imperial Highness, you are someone involved and thus cannot see things clearly. At present, the Emperor is extremely disappointed with the Crown Prince. If the Emperor had secretly reprimanded the Crown Prince, then the Emperor still holds out some hope for the Crown Prince. However, from what this subject has learned, the Emperor did not reprimand the Crown Prince. Like the proverb goes, ‘the deeper the love, the more intense the criticism.’ At present, in spite of everything, the Emperor did not reproach the Crown Prince in the slightest because the Emperor is unwilling to waste a single moment. In this subject’s view, Your Imperial Highness is only one step away from the position of heir apparent.”

In distress, Li Zhi worried, “Even if I am one step away, I am still worlds apart from it. At present, the Fengyi Sect Master has arrived at the capital, greatly increasing the Crown Prince’s strength. It is possible that they will try to assassinate us. Additionally, under her supervision, the Crown Prince will speak and act cautiously. For Imperial Father to not depose the Crown Prince means that there is still some ground for the Crown Prince. If this matter drags out, it is likely to be unfavorable for me. Besides, there needs to be a reason to depose the Crown Prince. If the Crown Prince does not err going forward, even if Imperial Father wishes to depose him, it will still be impossible.”

With a smile, I explained, “At present, it is likely that the Crown Prince does not think this way. Although the Emperor let off the Crown Prince this time, the Crown Prince is prohibited from handling affairs of state in the Eastern Palace. The alienation between them is already becoming clear. It is likely that the Crown Prince is presently full of anxiety and suspicion, worried that the Emperor would take action against him. In order to protect himself, the Crown Prince will likely only fall deeper and deeper into the abyss. At present, Your Imperial Highness need only spread rumors that the reason why the Emperor did not depose the Crown Prince is because of the strength of the Crown Prince’s backers. Afterwards, we can seize upon the offenses of the Crown Prince’s faction to launch an offensive. We will not attack the Crown Prince directly, only blaming his supporters for failing the responsibility of having the Emperor and the Crown Prince’s favor. With

Your Imperial Highness's prestige, it will be a piece of cake. For us to take these actions, on the surface, it will not harm the Crown Prince's safety. As a result, the Crown Prince will not believe that our actions are deliberate, believing instead that we have received a secret edict from the Emperor. Therefore, Your Imperial Highness needs to find the opportunity to hold a few private discussions with the Emperor, making sure that no one finds out the truth. In this way, the Crown Prince will become increasingly suspicious that the Emperor has already made up his mind to set Your Imperial Highness as the heir apparent, thus having arranged for Your Imperial Highness to eliminate the Crown Prince's supporters. This strategy will serve the purpose of inadvertently alerting the enemy.[3] As long as the Crown Prince is bewildered, he will rush indiscriminately and act blindly, naturally making mistakes. When the time comes, with the right conditions, success will occur without any effort,[4] and the Crown Prince will be deposed."

Hearing Jiang Zhe's words, Li Zhi accepted them wholeheartedly. He replied, "It could be said that Suiyun thoroughly understands the minds of others. That's right. Who would expect that our intentions for eliminating with great fanfare the Crown Prince's supporters is not to attack the Crown Prince's faction?"

Rising to my feet, I stated, "Your Imperial Highness, at present, the situation has reached the most critical state. Your Imperial Highness should recall Sir Ziyou back to Chang'an to preside over the present situation. Although this subject is resourceful, there are many matters that only Shi *daren* can handle properly. Shi *daren* has the talent to be a Prime Minister. It will be a great pity if he does not return."

"Suiyun speaks correctly," agreed Li Zhi, touched. "The present situation truly requires Ziyou to return. Right now, the state of affairs in Youzhou is already stabilized. Ziyou has already attracted a number of worthy talents. He is of no further use in Youzhou. It would be better if he returned. Ziyou handles matters with caution and care. Right now, this Prince truly needs him to come back to take charge of things." Finished speaking, Li Zhi mentally praised Jiang Zhe's broadmindedness in his heart. When Ziyou

returned, although Li Zhi would still rely upon Jiang Zhe to give advice and provide strategies, Li Zhi would trust and heavily utilize Ziyou slightly more. After all, in his thoughts, Shi Yu was his future prime minister, the head of the civil officials. However, Jiang Zhe was unafraid of the consequences of having Shi Yu recalled in the slightest.

What Li Zhi did not know was that I paid no attention to power, riches, and honor. Further, my health was poor. Many of the particulars were already being handled by Guan Xiu, Dong Zhi, and Gou Lian. Shi Yu's return would not affect me in the slightest. Besides, Shi Yu's return would also be of great benefit to me.

After discussing the affairs, His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, departed. Before he had gone far, Li Zhi caught sight of a youth in the uniform of an imperial bodyguard walk over. This man's appearance was handsome, his temperament apathetic. With one look, Li Zhi knew that this man was not normal. However, what was strange was that Li Zhi felt he had seen this man before. But no matter how he racked his brains, Li Zhi could not figure out when and where he had met this youthful imperial bodyguard with such a unique bearing.

I noticed as soon as Li Zhi's stride slowed. However, I did not make a single sound. His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, had met Xia Jinyi several times. This was the perfect opportunity to test whether Xia Jinyi's disguise was effective. Speaking of disguises, I had once been fooled by a story in the unofficial histories that it was possible for someone to be so disguised that even their closest friends would not be able to recognize them. However, this was actually impossible. First of all, there were many limitations to transforming a person's face. The nature of a person, no matter how handsome or ugly, was capable of giving people a harmonious feeling. If blindly changed, it would be easy to cause people to become suspicious. Moreover, to disguise someone, one's distinctive characteristics were extremely important. If there was something particular about someone's appearance and build, even if that person was disguised, it would be difficult to fool others. Even if one's facial features are successfully changed, one's manner of speech and bearing still needed to be changed. Many people

could identify their close friends and relatives based upon their figure and hearing their voice. Therefore, it was extremely hard to make it difficult for close friends to be fooled.

However, this time, I had complete faith in my methods. Although I was only familiar with the art of disguise and had not ever employed it, Xia Jinyi had used disguising methods before. It was enough for me to guide him. After careful study, I had him make small changes to his facial features—having him change his hairstyle and altering his eyebrows. Combined with his completely transformed bearing, it was enough to entirely change him into a different person. Then, I had spent some time teaching him how to change his movements and changing the tempo and pitch of his voice when he spoke. He was a quick study. His current display was the best evidence of this. The Prince of Yong did not recognize him. Moreover, since Xia Jinyi had already "died" from the emperor taking out his anger on him, as long as Xia Jinyi stayed in seclusion for a period of time, no one would be able to recognize him again. Besides, in a year or two, no one would even remember Xia Jinyi's death.

Seeing the hesitation on the Prince of Yong's face, I smiled and inquired, "Has Your Imperial Highness seen a stranger? He is called Dong Que and is a new imperial bodyguard that this subject has taken into my service. Although he is not from the military, there is no need for Your Imperial Highness to worry. There is no need to worry about this man's loyalty."

Nearly instantaneously, the Prince of Yong replied, "So it's one of your new imperial bodyguards. No wonder this Prince feels that he looks familiar and yet can't remember his name."

Xia Jinyi, now known as Dong Que, stepped forward and saluted the Prince of Yong, strictly adhering to proper etiquette.[5] However, his expression was extremely distant. Li Zhi did not pay much attention, only smiling and stating, "It is rare for Suiyun to accept a subordinate. Presumably, you are a talent. You must spare no effort to advance yourself so that Major Jiang's high regard is not in vain."

Dong Que respectfully acknowledged, "This subordinate solemnly obeys Your Imperial Highness's instructions."

Watching the Prince of Yong depart, I smiled faintly and stated, “You can stop worrying about your safety within the Prince of Yong’s residence. Xia, no, Dong Que, you are most familiar with that person. Tell me, what does that person wish to do the most right now?”

While Dong Que’s expression remained apathetic, he respectfully answered, “That person’s temperament lacks restraint. He will likely be able to endure for ten to fifteen days. However, there is absolutely no way he can endure for a month. At present, he is fondest of engaging in illicit sexual relationships with married women. Only through this can he satisfy his excitement and stimulate his desire. In reality, although Concubine Chun was beautiful, she probably did not surpass his concubines. It is only that his wife is inferior to his concubines, his concubines are inferior to his maid servants, his maid servants are inferior to those he snatches, those he snatches are inferior to those he cannot snatch. That was why he was so addicted.”

After thinking it over carefully, a strange smile appeared on my face, as I wondered, “You spent quite some time in the Crown Prince’s household. Who amongst the Eastern Palace’s officials and the Crown Prince’s trusted subordinates have the most beautiful wives and concubines?”

Dong Que’s expression changed. Spending some time in contemplation, he said, “Hanlin Academic Shao Yan’s wife, Lady Huo, is a peerless beauty. Half a year ago, the Crown Prince met her in a Buddhist temple and was extremely tempted. However, not long afterwards, the Crown Prince met Concubine Chun. Shao Yan has only recently joined the Crown Prince’s faction. He is talented and the Crown Prince regards him highly.”

I meticulously inquired, “How is Lady Huo’s character?”

Without the slightest hesitation, Dong Que replied, “The Crown Prince once dispatched me to find out. Lady Huo hails from an influential family, and is a wise and virtuous lady. She and Shao Yan are extremely harmonious and affectionate.”

Letting out a light sigh, I stated, “What a pity … If that is the case, then it is inappropriate for me to act.”

Frowning, Dong Que asked, “Why is *daren* taking pity over a mere woman? She isn’t someone important.”

“I have never lightly forced anyone to do anything,” I expressed with a slight smile. “Even if I want someone to die, I want him to die willingly.”

At this moment, Xiaoshunzi’s figure appeared. With a strange look, he stated, “Young master, I do not know if the Heavens are helping you, but the Ministry of Personnel, under orders from the Emperor, just dismissed all of officials of the Eastern Palace. Shao Yan has been promoted to become a Reader-in-Waiting assigned to the Eastern Palace.” So speaking, Xiaoshunzi handed a list of names, composed of the newly appointed Eastern Palace officials, to me.

As expected, I saw Shao Yan’s name. I could not help but laugh and say, “This is exceedingly coincidental. I had His Imperial Highness submit a secret memorial to the Emperor, stating that the Eastern Palace officials could not escape responsibility for the Crown Prince’s misconduct, and should be discarded and replaced. My original intention was to arrange several people from our side. However, I didn’t expect the Crown Prince’s backing to be truly dogged and strong, only arranging for the Crown Prince’s people in. The only thing that I wonder about is if Shao Yan was the Crown Prince’s own choice.”

“Young master has hit the mark,” responded Xiaoshunzi with a slight smile. “This is a list of names that the Crown Prince handed to Noble Consort Ji. I had people make a copy.”

Taking the silk paper that he handed over, I took a look. Of the names upon the paper, the first one was Shao Yan’s. I could not help but sigh and reply, “When man brings calamities upon himself, there is no hope for escape. I had not yet acted but he is unable to bear it.”

Dong Que icily declared, “At present, he may not yet have such intentions. He probably only desires to see Shao Yan and thus subconsciously arranged to have him come to his side.”

Glancing at Dong Que, I smiled. “The Eastern Palace Reader-in-Waiting is not a typical position. According to proper rites, since Lady Huo already

holds a title,[6] she is required to have an audience with the Crown Princess. Tell me, what would happen if the Crown Prince accidentally meets Lady Huo a few times? Can he restrain himself?”

Dong Que was speechless. It was some time before he replied, “He cannot.”

Footnotes :

急功近利, jigongjinli – idiom, lit. seeking instant benefit; shortsighted vision, looking only for a fast return
洗心革面, xixingemian – idiom, lit. to wash one’s heart and renew one’s face; to repent sincerely and mend one’s mistaken ways, to turn over a new leaf
打草惊蛇, dacaojingshe – idiom, lit. beat the grass to scare the snake; fig. to inadvertently alert an enemy
水到渠成, shuidaoqucheng – idiom, lit. where water flows, a canal is formed; fig. when the conditions are right, success will naturally follow
一丝不苟, yisibugou – idiom, lit. not one thread loose; fig. strictly according to the rules, meticulous, not one hair out of place
诰命, gaoming – in ancient China, women were not permitted to hold official positions in the bureaucracy, however there was a hierarchy of precedence that awarded them a rank that was equal or inferior to their husband’s position in court

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 20: Layer Upon Layer of Heavy Sins

Volume 3, Chapter 20: Layer Upon Layer of Heavy Sins

In the seventh month of the twenty-fifth year of Wuwei, Taizong was involved in the investigation of officials corrupt and negligent of their duties. As a result, many officials were dismissed and imprisoned, the majority of whom were the Prince's trusted subordinates. Taizong had several audiences with the Emperor, the resulting discussions secret. As a result, the Prince became suspicious, his hostility towards the Emperor deepening. …—*Yong Dynastic Records* , *Biography of the Prince of Li*

Crown Prince Li An wrathfully swept all of the documents on his desk onto the floor. Once again, the Prince of Yong had slyly taken action. These days, Li An could not understand what insanity had afflicted the Prince of Yong to go so far as to continuously submit memorials to impeach officials for their unlawful behavior. Originally, this was of no consequence to Li An. However, the Prince of Yong's actions were directed at the officials of his faction. Not only was the evidence complete, the methods were thunderous. In the morning, the official would still be working. In the afternoon, after he had been impeached, he would be imprisoned in the imperial dungeons. Right now, the entire court was trembling, everyone afraid of being implicated. After all, as officials, how many were truly honest and upright? Some of the officials even went so far as to express goodwill to the Prince of Yong. When all was said and done, the Prince of Yong's primary targets were the crown prince's trusted subordinates.

Frowning slightly, Lu Jingzhong stated, "Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong attacking you is within expectations. At present, in their eyes, it is an unprecedented, amazing opportunity. The Emperor is suspicious towards you. If the Prince of Yong did not seize this opportunity, then he wouldn't be the Prince of Yong. However, this subject worries that Your Imperial Highness was previously able to suppress the Prince of Yong because of the Emperor. If the Emperor has now devised a plan to depose

Your Imperial Highness, then Your Imperial Highness's position as heir apparent is in dire jeopardy."

"That's right. It is very likely that the Emperor has changed his mind," declared a beautiful sounding voice. However, both Li An and Lu Jingzhong frowned.

The door to the room was pushed open and two women, as beautiful as fairies, entered. In front was Li Hanyou. Behind her was Xiao Lan.

Enraged, Li An questioned, "Our study is now a location without security. Where are the Imperial Bodyguards?"

"There is no need for Your Imperial Highness to worry," replied Li Hanyou with a smile. "They dared not obstruct us because they saw Senior Apprentice Sister Lan."

Li An became even more aggravated. In his mind, he remembered the rigorous security when Zhang Jinxiong was the supervisor of his household's imperial bodyguards. Back then, who would have dared to barge into his study? As a result, he inquired, "Jingjiang. You should release Supervisor Zhang. Why have you had him under house arrest for so long?"

Li Hanyou's heart skipped a beat. She quickly answered, "Your Imperial Highness, Xia Jinyi cannot be absolved of blame for this past incident. Zhang Jinxiong is Xia Jinyi's Senior Apprentice Brother. My master worries that he is involved. For stability's sake, he can only be temporarily placed under house arrest. After some time has passed, if he has no problems, we will naturally release him."

Hearing her words, Li An grew even unhappier. Although in order to pass off responsibility he had pushed all of the blame onto Xia Jinyi, he had only done so because Xia Jinyi was already dead. Zhang Jinxiong was different. Not only did Zhang Jinxiong strictly adhere to his duties, Li An fundamentally did not believe that Xia Jinyi had any ulterior motives. As a result, Li An's favor was also transferred to Zhang Jinxiong. Just as he was about to speak, Lu Jingzhong gently nudged him. Li An immediately came to his senses. Now was not the time to be arguing over this trivial matter. As a result, he could only endure his anger and ask, "How do you know that

Imperial Father has changed his mind?”

Li Hanyou let out a light sigh. Sitting down, she explained, “Although we do not have any evidence, we have already found some clues. Your Imperial Highness, your pardon this time was not a result of anyone submitting memorials to preserve your position. My master originally intended to personally meet with His Imperial Majesty to plea for leniency on Your Imperial Highness’s behalf. However, before she could do so, Your Imperial Highness was pardoned.”

Li An was overjoyed. With this, he no longer needed to owe a favor to the Fengyi Sect. However, Lu Jingzhong’s brows furrowed and he observed, “This is highly unusual for the Emperor. To speak inappropriately, Your Imperial Highness’s crime this time is too grave. Even if His Imperial Majesty is willing to forgive Your Imperial Highness, it would only be after some time has passed and his temper has cooled. Further, it would require a petition submitted by someone the Emperor highly values. Only then would the Emperor’s pardon be genuine and sincere. At present, we have yet to move and still the Emperor has already pardoned Your Imperial Highness. If that is the case, then it is a problem. This is my carelessness. Would the Princess please explain?”

Li Hanyou smiled grimly. “From the palace, I have received information that before the Emperor made his decision, he discussed this matter with Princess Changle.”

“How is that possible?” exclaimed Li An with great alarm. “Princess Changle has never involved herself with politics!”

“That was our thought as well,” responded Li Hanyou, heaving a sigh. “As a result, although we wish to force her to be married, it is only to put some distance between her and the Prince of Yong’s household. Who could have expected that she would strike us so heavily at this critical juncture? Although we do not have any intelligence as to what she said to the Emperor, from the present situation, we can conclude that the Emperor has intentions to depose Your Imperial Highness. What he lacks is a reason. Furthermore, as Your Imperial Highness was the heir apparent for many years, you have many supporters and subordinates. During the Emperor’s

several private discussions with the Prince of Yong, none of our people had the opportunity to get close. It is likely that the Emperor has truly changed his mind."

Feeling as if a bucket of ice-cold water had been dumped on him, Li An felt chilled his bones. He had never been so terrified in his life. He knew clearly how and why he had attained his current position. Without the emperor's protection, how could he compete with the Prince of Yong? He had never regretted seducing Concubine Chun. Upset with himself, Li An could not figure out how he had been so insane as to infuriate Imperial Father.

Glancing at the callous smile on the corners of Li Hanyou's mouth, Lu Jingzhong became unhappy. He knew that the Fengyi Sect was going to seize this opportunity to blackmail the crown prince. However, Lu Jingzhong understood that the current predicament needed to be overcome first, and thus stated, "There is no need for Your Imperial Highness to worry too much. Although the Emperor has currently already begun to waver, he has yet to make his final decision. Therefore, Your Imperial Highness still has the opportunity to redeem the situation. The Fengyi Sect Master is not on good terms with the Prince of Yong. If the Prince of Yong were to become the heir apparent, it is likely that the most regretful individual would be someone else and not Your Imperial Highness."

Li An was a bit confused by Lu Jingzhong's words. However, Li Hanyou immediately understood the threats in Lu Jingzhong's words. If the crown prince were to lose his position as heir apparent, then the damage to the Fengyi Sect would be severe. It was best if they did not seize this opportunity to blackmail the crown prince. Although she was enraged, she knew that this was the irrefutable reality. At present, the Fengyi Sect and the crown prince were in the same boat. As a result, she smiled slightly and expressed, "Your Imperial Highness, the only thing that can be done right now is to ascend to the throne as early as possible."

Frightened, Li An sprang to his feet. Gazing upward, he saw the calm eyes of all three. At first, Li An wished to forcefully reject their proposal. However, after thinking it over, with his position as heir apparent currently in jeopardy, he could not utter a single word of refutation.

Exchanging glances, Li Hanyou and Xiao Lan rose to their feet and stated, “Although Your Imperial Highness has scrupulously abided by the laws of filial piety, vile characters have deceived the Emperor. If we are unfortunate and the Prince of Yong is permitted to ascend to the throne, then he will likely be a bellicose and militaristic tyrant. With this, Great Yong will never be at peace. If Your Imperial Highness is able to make this resolution, we will definitely support Your Imperial Highness in the ascension to the throne. The Emperor is already old. It is better that he retires to rest. What does Your Imperial Highness think?”

In a weak and feeble voice, Li An said, “But our present strength is too weak. Sixth brother has gone to the northern frontier. It is difficult for us to control the Imperial Guard. What’s to be done?”

“The Sect Master has already made all the arrangements,” replied Li Hanyou with a faint smile. “As long as Your Imperial Highness gives the mark of approval, our Fengyi Sect will take risks and act. Your Imperial Highness, do not worry. We will definitely be cautious and careful, and succeed in one go.”

Hemming and hawing, Li An finally asked, “What plan do you have?”

Proud of herself, Li Hanyou smiled and answered, “Your Imperial Highness, do not worry. We already came up with an appropriate plan. We will only need a few months and Your Imperial Highness will be able to ascend to the throne. However, Your Imperial Highness must speak and act carefully so as to avoid the Emperor’s rage. If the Emperor deposes Your Imperial Highness, I’m afraid that we can only slowly pull back.”

“This Prince will be prudent,” affirmed Li An, his face scarlet. “However, you must be careful. It is best to wait for the return of the Prince of Qi before acting.”

Smiling lightly, Li Hanyou replied, “Your Imperial Highness, do not worry. We have been preparing for this exigency for a long time. At the latest, His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, will return in the tenth month. When that time comes, it will be the perfect opportunity for us to act. Right now, we must take this opportunity to make arrangements. Presumably, Your

Imperial Highness also wants to completely take care of the Prince of Yong's faction?"

At this moment, Lu Jingzhong spoke up in an indifferent tone, "For the Fengyi Sect to place such high importance on Your Imperial Highness's great aspirations, one has to wonder what demands it has?"

"It is Junior Mentor Lu who understands reason," responded Li Hanyou, continuing to smile. "In reality, our demands aren't high. After Your Imperial Highness ascends to the throne and enfeoffs Senior Apprentice Sister Lan as the Empress, then our Fengyi Sect will be sure to wholeheartedly serve Your Imperial Highness."

A look of reluctance on his face, Li An asked, "Lady Cui has never lacked in virtue and has given birth to my heir. How can I demote her?"

Li Hanyou explained, "Your Imperial Highness, before, you have always refused to demote Lady Cui because of the Emperor. Now that the Emperor no longer supports you, if you are unwilling to agree to this condition, what reason is there for us to take such risks that would harm our good reputation? In addition, we are only requesting that you appoint Senior Apprentice Sister Lan as your Empress and not asking you to demote Lady Cui. It should be enough for her to become a noble consort."

Seeing the heartless smile on the corners of Li Hanyou's mouth, Li An understood that if he did not agree to this demand, then it would be impossible for Lady Cui and his heir to survive. How could he steel himself for such a result? Seeing Li An hesitate, Li Hanyou did not continue to force him, only stating, "Your Imperial Highness, please think carefully. This matter is not urgent. You can discuss this with Junior Mentor Lu."

Finished speaking, she rose to her feet and bade her farewell, "Your servant still has business to attend to. Your Imperial Highness, please think this over carefully. After making your decision, you can inform my Senior Apprentice Sister Lan."

After watching Li Hanyou and Xiao Lan leave, Li An was so infuriated that he threw a teacup onto the ground. Enraged, he shouted, "Junior Mentor, tell me, do they even treat me with proper respect? I fear that if I agree to

this demand of theirs, I would become their puppet."

With his expression severe and stony, it was some time before Lu Jingzhong spoke, "There is no need for Your Imperial Highness to worry. There is still room to save the situation. They have quoted a sky-high price.[1] Your Imperial Highness can haggle and make an extremely low counteroffer."

Hesitating for a moment, Li An replied, "Junior Mentor, now that We can't even ensure Our own safety,[1] it is better to sacrifice Lady Cui and the heir. If the Prince of Yong were to succeed the throne, they would likely be killed. Let's discuss this matter with the Fengyi Sect. I can depose the Crown Princess and give a principality to the heir."

Lu Jingzhong sneered in his mind. As expected, the Crown prince was a heartless individual to so easily discard his wife and child. However, not a single hint of scorn appeared on Lu Jingzhong's face. He only neutrally observed, "Although Your Imperial Highness is sacrificing the Crown Princess and the heir, you have acquired the entire support of the Fengyi Sect. However, if Concubine Lan were to become the Empress and her son became the Crown Prince, then if Your Imperial Highness fails to adhere to their intentions, it is likely they would assassinate Your Imperial Highness and have Concubine Lan's son take the throne. When that time comes, it will be too late for regrets."

Smiling ironically, Li An returned, "But if I do not agree, it is likely that they will abandon me. If that were to happen, wouldn't I become the Prince of Yong's prisoner?"

With a sinister smile, Lu Jingzhong expounded, "Your Imperial Highness is worrying too much. At present, even if Your Imperial Highness wishes to renounce your position as heir apparent, the Fengyi Sect will not agree. The Prince of Yong has clearly shown that he has no intention of working with them. Without Your Imperial Highness, they will not be able to legitimately rise in the court. Therefore, as long as Your Imperial Highness adheres to a hardline, the Fengyi Sect would absolutely not dare to fall out with Your Imperial Highness. It would be better to reject this demand and agree to appoint Concubine Lan as a noble consort. Moreover, you will agree to wait

to appoint an heir apparent. If Concubine Lan's son is eminently capable, then he can be the heir apparent. We should first delay this matter. Once Your Imperial Highness has succeeded to the throne, then it will be beyond their control. After all, without Your Imperial Highness, there is no way for those court officials to follow the Fengyi Sect and rebel."

"You speak the truth," acknowledged Li An, beaming with joy, before asking, "How should We inform Concubine Lan?"

"Your Imperial Highness should first console the Crown Princess," responded Lu Jingzhong respectfully and cautiously. "If the Crown Princess were to find out, it is likely that she would be extremely worried."

Nodding his head, Li An agreed, "Do not worry. Oh, that's right … have the newly appointed officials of the Eastern Palace arrived to pay their respects?"

"They have already arrived," answered Lu Jingzhong with a smile. "Although Your Imperial Highness is temporarily prohibited from handling affairs of state, these officials must still be carefully selected. In this way, we can ensure that others do not see the Emperor's dissatisfaction towards Your Imperial Highness."

Li An continued to nod his head. "You shall handle these matters. I'll pay a visit to the Crown Princess and the heir. She has been frightened during this period."

When he arrived at the inner residence, Li An saw several pairs and trios of women walk out, all of them accompanied by maids. Seeing Li An, they all kowtowed to pay their respects. One of the Crown Princess's maids stepped forward and announced, "Your Imperial Highness, these are the womenfolk of the newly selected officials of the Eastern Palace who have come to pay their respects to the Crown Princess."

"So that's who they are," said Li An, nodding his head. Without speaking any further, he proceeded inside to see the crown princess. But before he had taken several steps, he caught sight of a young woman with an elegant complexion in aristocratic garb, carrying an aura of dignified coquetry. Li An could not help but be infatuated. He recognized this woman. But because he

was infatuated with Concubine Chun, he had not made a move towards her. This time, when he was selecting new officials for the Eastern Palace, he could not help but pick Shao Yan's name. Although he did not have any definite intentions at the time, he did have a hint of an idea to coax the couple to his side to make it easier for him to act. It had not occurred to him that he would run into Lady Huo so soon. Having not seen her for half a year, she somehow seemed to be even more beautiful, especially her tender temperament. All those who saw her could not help but love and want to empathize with her. Feigning calm, Li An watched these women depart, a brilliant light dancing in his eyes. If Xia Jinyi were here, he would have immediately understood Li An's intentions. However, with Xia Jinyi dead, there was no one present who could arrange things for him.

After hurriedly consoling the crown princess, Li An returned to his study. At this moment, he was the only one in the room. Although he knew that he could not act at this moment, given the critical state of his position, after thinking it over, he believed that he did not need to do a single thing. Everything would be taken care of for him by the Fengyi Sect and Lu Jingzhong. He need only to follow their plan, actions that he was extremely adept at. If that was the case, then couldn't he let himself go a bit, and also make up for the terror that he had experienced these last few days?

After struggling with the decision for quite some time, Li An finally could no longer restrain himself. These days, he had been fasting or had been under house arrest. He was already dejected beyond belief. Although his household had dancers and songstresses, he did not have the slightest interest in them. Having indulged himself this past year, he had lost interest in those women who bent their heads towards him long ago. Li An began to calculate whether the situation would create any problems. After some time, Li An remembered that Concubine Chun was also reluctant at first. However, he had used threats and temptation to force her to yield. As long as he promised that Shao Yan would be promoted, why would he fear that that woman wouldn't yield as well? Besides, even if Imperial Father were to find out about the affair, he would not get too angry. It was just the wife of an official.

***

The next day, Lady Huo received a message from the crown princess, inviting her to go to the crown prince's residence. Lady Huo did not find this strange. Yesterday, when she had met with the crown princess, she could sense that the crown princess was in a poor mood. Aside from the scandal involving the crown prince, one of the crown princess's beloved maids had died. The crown princess had been very affectionate towards Lady Huo and was very appreciative of the embroidery that Lady Huo had gifted her. As a result, Lady Huo did not find anything strange. In addition, her husband was the Eastern Palace Reader-in-Waiting. If she were able to receive the favor of the crown princess, it would be benefit to her husband. As a result, Lady Huo went without any worries.

Under the guidance of several maids, Lady Huo was led into an elegant building. She felt something was off. This location did not seem to be the crown princess's chambers. Although it was refined, it seemed to lack in grandeur. Entering the reception hall, Lady Huo immediately cried out in fear. This was an extremely gorgeous private chamber. Thick carpet was laid out on the floor. The entire room was filled with gorgeous furnishings. In one corner of the room was a spacious bed veiled by pink muslin curtains. As for the four walls, they were covered with erotic art. After taking one look, Lady Huo did not dare to look any further. Fear consumed her. Just as she was about to withdraw, she saw a man standing by the doorway. Lady Huo immediately recognized him as the crown prince and shivered. Although information about the latest scandal was not spread, she had still heard some rumors. Resisting her fear with great difficulty, she stated, "This subject has barged into this place by mistake. Your Imperial Highness, please forgive me."

Li An smiled ambiguously. "It was I who dispatched someone to invite you here. How can I not forgive you?"

Greatly alarmed, Lady Huo replied, "Your Imperial Highness, this does not comport with proper etiquette." As she spoke, Lady Huo began to retreat out of the room, but was stopped by Li An.

Having trained a bit in martial arts, Li An was very easily able to wrap his arms around Lady Huo's waist. Just as Lady Huo was about to continue

struggling, Li An suddenly, fiercely declared, “If you don’t stop, I will send someone to immediately murder your husband.”

Lady Huo quickly ceased her struggling, an expression of alarm and terror clear on her face. Li An continued icily, “If you are obedient, then your husband will see rapid promotions to a high post.”

Lady Huo’s mind was already lost. Taking advantage of this, Li An dragged her to bed. After allowing the pink muslin curtains to fall, the sound of crying could be heard coming from within.

***

On the afternoon of the second day, when Lady Huo boarded her palanquin and returned home, a pair of eyes sized her up. After seeing everything clearly, a ruthless light flashed in the eyes.

Not long afterwards, Dong Que returned to the Cold Courtyard. After removing the disguise that concealed his identity, he callously stated, “The Crown Prince has already become successful.”

Fanning the folding fan in my hand gently, I replied, “Are you sure?”

“There is no one more clear about these things than I,” replied Dong Que, revealing a hint of a smile. “The woman has definitely been violated as much as the Crown Prince desired.”

I smiled. “I naturally trust your judgment on this matter. What do you think will happen to Lady Huo?”

Without the slightest hint of sympathy, Dong Que answered, “According to the Crown Prince’s customs, he will not become tired of her for the time being. As a result, even if Lady Huo wishes to commit suicide, there is nothing she can do. From her facial expression, she wants to weep, but she has no tears. For now, she does not have any intention of dying. For the time being, I believe she won’t commit suicide. Moreover, Lady Huo is not someone who can be cowed using martial might.”

“Would she inform her husband?” I inquired offhandedly.

Shaking his head, Dong Que responded, “In the short-term, she won’t say anything. Additionally, Hanlin Academic Shao is an old-fashioned

intellectual. It will be difficult for him to forgive her. I believe that she won't be that foolish."

I sighed lightly. "Honestly, we could have told that woman to be careful."

Without any remorse or sympathy, Dong Que replied, "Young master, it is useless to be so merciful. Even if you warned that couple, they would only believe that you were seeking to frame the Crown Prince. In addition, such an act would inadvertently alert the enemy."

"I understand well this argument," I remarked with a wry smile. "Thus I have watched this tragedy unfold with the cool eye of a bystander.[3] Dong Que, right now, I truly feel like the mission that I assigned to you before was too cruel."

Dong Que remained silent for a while. "I was willing to take up that mission. The Crown Prince is the one doing these kinds of things. What does it have to do with us?"

Footnotes :

漫天, mantian – lit. to fill the whole sky; everywhere; as far as the eye can see; sky high
自身难保, zhishennanbao – idiom, lit. powerless to defend oneself; fig. cannot even ensure one's own safety, helpless
冷眼旁观, lengyanpangguan – idiom, lit. the cool eye of a bystander; a detached point of view

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 21: A Sudden Change in the Situation

Volume 3, Chapter 21: A Sudden Change in the Situation

I frowned slightly as I read the military report before me. This was information provided by the Prince of Yong's intelligence network. It would still be a few days before the actual military report would arrive.

On the sixteenth day of the seventh month, the Prince of Qi inspected the frontier up to Zhenzhou.[1] The Northern Han army approached the frontier. The Prince of Qi sallied forth with an army, winning the first battle. The twenty-first day of the seventh month, Flying Tiger General, Shi Ying, arrived with an army. The Prince of Qi held fast to the battlements and refused to sally forth. When Shi Ying withdrew, the Prince of Qi led an army to give chase and was ambushed by the Ghost-Faced General, Tan Ji, and was forced to retreat in defeat. On the twenty-sixth day of the seventh month, Shi Ying approached again. Feigning weakness, the Prince of Qi lured a portion of Shi Ying's army into the city and wiped them out. On the third day of the eighth month, the two armies fought before the city. Disguising herself as an enemy general's royal bodyguard, Ling Yu of the Fengyi Sect violently attempted to assassinate Tan Ji, gravely wounding the general and causing Northern Han to retreat in defeat. On the fourteenth day of the eighth month, confirmation was received that Northern Han had retreated. The Prince of Qi thus submitted a memorial to announce his victory.

Setting down the intelligence report, I worriedly inquired, "Who could have thought that the Prince of Qi would be able to so quickly stabilize the northern frontier? It seems that he will return soon."

The Prince of Yong and the just returned Shi Yu exchanged glances. Shi Yu replied, "Your Imperial Highness can submit a memorial to temporarily prevent the Prince of Qi from returning to the capital. Why is Suiyun so worried?"

"The Fengyi Sect must surely have put in much effort to allow the Prince of Qi to so quickly pacify the northern frontier," I spoke with a sigh.

“Infiltrating an army to assassinate its commander is extremely dangerous. Unlike the previous battles for hegemony over the Central Plains where as soon as a general was killed, his soldiers would surrender, the soldiers of the two states would fight to the death. If a general suffered an injury, it was the result of all-out attacks that risked one’s life. The Fengyi Sect disciple likely only narrowly escaped with her life. The Fengyi Sect already urgently desires for the Prince of Qi to participate in the mutiny.”

“What Suiyun is saying is that if His Imperial Highness were to prevent the Prince of Qi from returning,” wondered Shi Yu frowning, “They will take even greater risks out of desperation?”

I smiled wryly and clarified, “It would be fine if they were to take even greater risks out of desperation. The problem is that they’re suspicious of whether the Emperor has firmly decided to depose the Crown Prince. There is something that we are clear about. Although the Prince of Qi is His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince’s supporter, without the Emperor’s intention, the Prince of Qi would not be so determined in his support for the Crown Prince. From certain perspectives, the Prince of Qi is more of a loyal subject. That is one of the reasons why the Emperor brought along the Prince of Qi as an escort to the Mausoleum of the Yellow Emperor. Although it would be more convenient for us with the absence of the Prince of Qi, if we were to receive the Emperor’s support, then the Prince of Qi would be unable to make too much trouble for us. Therefore, if we are determined to prevent the Prince of Qi from returning to the capital, then the Fengyi Sect will have already calculated this eventuality.”

With a heavy frown on his face, Li Zhi said, “According to this Prince’s calculations, within a few days, the Prince of Qi will return to the capital. If we do not stop him, then the state of affairs in Chang’an will be irremediable. If this happens, then the military will likely suffer disastrous losses.”

Picking up another piece of paper, I reported, “There is another matter. Through Your Imperial Highness’s channels, Ye Tianxiu has reported his survival to the Prince of Qing. However, the Prince of Qing was extremely indignant, dispatching several of his subordinates into the capital.”

Heaving a sigh, Li Zhi expressed, “Truly troublesome. The Prince of Qing has always been so impetuous. If it weren’t for his recklessness, how would he have been exiled to the Hanzhong region?”

“In this subject’s view, the Prince of Qing is an intelligent individual,” I explained with a faint smile. “If he were to remain in Chang’an, it is likely that the Fengyi Sect would inevitably make trouble for him as often as they could. As a result, he is better off far away, as a subordinate warlord garrisoning a vital, strategic location.”

The Prince of Yong and Shi Yu exchanged glances, their faces revealing expressions of embarrassment and regret. My heart jumped and I inquired, “Is there something that Zhe does not know?”

Li Zhi glanced at Shi Yu. Smiling wryly, Shi Yu responded, “There is something that His Imperial Highness and I have long suspected. The Prince of Qing’s martial arts have roots from the Devil Sect.”

Shaken, I asked, “Don’t tell me it’s Northern Han’s Devil Sect?”

The Prince of Yong answered, “In reality, the Devil Sect is not a singular entity. Reportedly, when Jing Wuji departed from the Central Plains, many disciples of the Devil Sect left the sect and remained in the Central Plains. They are adept at concealment. In addition, we have been unwilling to excessively coerce the Devil Sect and infuriate Jing Wuji.”

“This is also why His Imperial Majesty and Your Imperial Highness do not trust the Prince of Qing, correct?” I assumed with a faint smile.

With a wry smile, the Prince of Yong affirmed, “That is indeed the case. This Prince cannot ascertain to what degree he is willing to go in order to exact vengeance.”

“If that is the case, the Hanzhong region is a vital, strategic location,” I observed, suspicious. “Are His Imperial Majesty and Your Imperial Highness truly not worried?”

Smiling slightly, Li Zhi replied, “As long as the Prince of Qing does not wish to rebel, he can do whatever he pleases in the Hanzhong region. However, if he intends to rebel …” The Prince of Yong smiled and did not finish his sentence.

Understanding the meaning behind his words, I did not pry further. It seemed like the Prince of Qing had someone by his side monitoring him. This was probably a secret that very few people, even within the imperial clan, knew. However, the problem still remained. I asked, “Can Your Imperial Highness convince the Prince of Qing to not enter the capital?”

After thinking it over, the Prince of Yong remarked, “This Prince will write a letter to him and have Gou Lian deliver it. He should definitely have a way to convince the Prince of Qing to not enter the capital.”

With a sigh, I replied, “A pity that the Prince of Qi isn’t so easily to send away.”

***

After several days, under the suggestion from the crown prince and the important ministers of the court, the Prince of Qi began his journey back to the capital under imperial edict to report his achievements. This was as expected. As a result, the Prince of Yong did not make any attempts to prevent it from happening. However, His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, had already come to the decision to arouse the Fengyi Sect Master’s suspicion by preventing the Prince of Qi from entering the capital. I was planning an assassination attempt so that the Prince of Qi would be prevented from being involved in the struggle for the position of heir apparent. Even if it would raise suspicions, it was unimportant, as it would be better than an open battle between the armies of the Princes of Qi and Yong.

While the Prince of Yong and Shi Yu were discussing how to arrange the assassination attempt, an imperial bodyguard entered and reported in. “Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi has dispatched a secret envoy who requests to meet with Your Imperial Highness.”

When we heard this report, we were all dumbfounded. Why would the Prince of Qi dispatch someone to meet with the Prince of Yong? Regardless of the reason, Li Zhi had to meet with this envoy. As a result, the Prince of Yong received this envoy in his study with Shi Yu and I standing to his left and right, respectively.

It wasn't long before one of the Prince of Qi's valiant, personal imperial bodyguards entered the study. After saluting, he handed over a letter. After taking a look, the Prince of Yong's expression changed, and he passed the letter to me. Reading its contents, I discovered that it was an invitation for the princes to have a secret meeting at a Buddhist temple about a hundred *li* away from Chang'an on the second day of the ninth month. The Prince of Yong indifferently stated, "Please inform the Prince of Qi. This Prince will definitely make the meeting."

After the envoy departed, Shi Yu hesitatingly asked, "His Highness, the Prince of Qi's conduct is too abnormal. Is Your Imperial Highness truly going to make the trip?"

The Prince of Yong replied, "If there is an opportunity to change sixth brother's position, this Prince is willing to take the risk."

Fanning the folding fan in my hand, I said, "The Prince of Qi is not someone who shirks difficulties.[2] It is likely that he won't change his position. However, this is a good opportunity. If the Crown Prince learns that Your Imperial Highness is having a secret meeting with the Prince of Qi, then they likely won't implicitly trust the Prince of Qi. At the very least, we should be able to reduce the pressure upon us."

After hesitating, the Prince of Yong spoke, "We can use this discord strategy, but I am worried that sixth brother will suspect this Prince."

"The Prince of Qi was already an opponent of Your Imperial Highness," I replied with a smile. "There's nothing if not even more rancor. There originally was suspicion between the Crown Prince and the Prince of Qi. If this were to happen, then this would truly be a good method of harming others for one's personal benefit."

Moved, the Prince of Yong added, "But we still need to secretly transmit this information to the Crown Prince."

Laughing humorlessly, I replied, "Based upon the abilities of the Fengyi Sect, as long as Your Imperial Highness pretends to be extremely careful, they will definitely have someone monitoring you. When the time comes, we can allow them to catch sight of the meeting from a distance. As there is no

way for them to know what is really happening, when the time comes, they will naturally expect the worst."

The Prince of Yong smiled slightly. "If it is possible to keep sixth brother out of it, then everything will be worth it. After all, sixth brother is a talented field commander."

***

At dusk on the second day of the ninth month, the Prince of Yong departed Chang'an with little luggage. Aside from the over a hundred imperial bodyguards, who had departed before and after him, were Xiaoshunzi and I. I insisted upon accompanying the Prince of Yong because I was curious as to the Prince of Qi's intentions. Moreover, my decision-making was needed to cope with any contingencies. As for Xiaoshunzi, without his protection, how would I feel safe to take such a long journey? Under these circumstances, aside from the Fengyi Sect Master personally taking action, my safety was assured.

The meeting location was a rundown temple in an extremely desolate location. It had already been abandoned and there was no one presiding over it. It was daybreak when we arrived. The Prince of Qi's personal guards had already cleaned this temple up, setting up heavy security. However, all of them were in commoner's clothing. Aside from the carriage beside the temple, there was nothing conspicuous about this temple.

After they arrived, the Prince of Yong's household guard quickly established a defensive perimeter. With hostility, both sides stared at one another. Coincidentally, the two sides were equally balanced, ensuring that the temple was impenetrable. I shot a glance at Xiaoshunzi. Understanding my intentions, he moved to a position that would allow him to keep an eye on the entire temple. This would prevent anyone else from reaching a spot that would enable them to see what was going on within the temple. Following in the wake of the Prince of Yong, I entered the small temple. Within the swept clean main hall and before the shabby Buddhist statue, a man dressed in silk brocade robes stood with his arms behind his back. His head was proudly raised, gazing upon the Buddhist statue. I stopped walking. The current Prince of Qi was very different from the Prince of Qi

that I had last seen.

Four years ago, when we first met in Southern Chu, he was a domineering imperial prince soaring in the clouds, covered head to toe in death, causing all those who saw him to give way in the face of superior strength.[3] The second time we met, he had been injured and poisoned. As he was dying, he could not hide his outspoken and straightforward attitude. The third time we met in the Yong capital. He was filled with fervor. If I had not been moved by his intentions, there was no way that I would have used him as a tool to disengage myself from the Prince of Yong's household. After that, while the struggle between the Prince of Yong's household and the crown prince's faction was like a raging storm, although the Prince of Qi was a member of the crown prince's faction, he was constrained and could not return to the army. Even if he was arrogant, aggressive, and domineering, he could not hide the disappointment that he felt. The previous aggressive, domineering aura had gradually vanished. Meeting him today, because of the baptism by fire of the successful campaign on the northern frontier, the already thirty-year-old Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, had a sort of restrained and natural domineering aura, somewhat similar to the Prince of Yong of years past.

While I was letting my imagination run wild, the Prince of Yong had already walked forward and stated, "Sixth brother, I've arrived. What do you wish to say to me?"

Li Xian slowly and evenly turned around, a faint smile appearing on his face, as he replied, "Second brother, the situation is already on a knife-edge, correct?

Li Zhi's expression wavered. He did not respond. Turning around again, Li Xian continued, "Who doesn't want to seize the Imperial Throne? With big Brother sinning on his own and now suspecting everyone, it seems like the throne will be second brother's."

"If you are willing to wholeheartedly support me," replied Li Zhi unhurriedly, "I will treat you as I have in the past."

"Like the past?" Li Xian burst out into loud laughter. "Once upon a time, my

youthful self admired you. After entering the military, without second brother's teachings, it is likely that I would not have lasted long. However, I have always wanted to escape second brother's shadow. Therefore, I stopped on the path to become the next second brother, but rather became today's Prince of Qi. However, second brother, I may have easy morals and perhaps I am foolish, but I am not fickle or a turncoat.[4] Since I am supporting the Crown Prince, I will not betray him even if I have to die."

Unable to suppress his anger, Li Zhi declared, "If big brother is plotting a rebellion, are you going to follow him to commit outrages?"

Li Xian was startled. Instantly, he changed his tack and replied, "So that is the case. Second brother intends to force big brother to rebel. In this way, you can perfectly and legitimately become the heir apparent."

"Sixth brother, I have always admired your intelligence," spoke Li Zhi, heaving a sigh. "But why are you presently unwilling to cover things up? Right now, the arrow is already notched. I'm afraid that I cannot allow you to enter the capital."

The Prince of Qi smiled faintly. "Second brother, do not worry. I am not a fool. I am clear about the present state of affairs. I will not prevent you from doing what you intend to do. I also will not inform big brother. However, unless big brother truly rebels, I will not betray him. If second brother does not believe me, there is someone in the carriage outside. Once second brother has seen who it is, then you will immediately understand that I will not reveal a hint of what has happened today."

The Prince of Yong's expression shifted, as he shot a glance at me. I, who had remained silent throughout, withdrew from the main hall. Walking to the front of the carriage, I lifted up the curtain. Within the carriage were two individuals, one seated and one lying down. The seated individual was a fifty-year-old, middle-aged man. His facial expression was respectful and calm. Lying down was a delicate looking youth, his skin color blackened. Although he was in a coma, his expression looked disturbed and uneasy. In a low voice, the middle-aged man spoke up, "This is my little master, Jiang Haitao."

Stunned for a second, I then smiled and introduced myself. “I am Jiang Zhe.”

The middle-aged man happily exclaimed, “You’re Jiang *daren* ! The medicine brought back by General Fang stabilized my little master’s injury.”

In a soothing voice, I replied, “Your distinguished self, do not worry. At present, His Highness, the Prince of Yong, is still waiting inside the main hall for my report. Please wait a moment.”

Returning to the temple, I respectfully glanced at the Prince of Qi and walked to the Prince of Yong’s side. In a low voice, I whispered, “It’s the son of Marquis Jiang.”

The Prince of Yong’s expression changed greatly, and he stared in astonishment at the Prince of Qi. Li Xian’s expression was icily arrogant and yet he did not speak a single word. Becoming softer, the Prince of Yong spoke, “You must know that by becoming involved in this matter, I can coerce you, right? It’s fine if news of this matter were to spread. The Crown Prince and the Fengyi Sect won’t let you off.”

In an aloof and detached voice, Li Xian replied, “I don’t care what they think. This child called me uncle. I would be too heartless if I were to stand idly by. I wonder if second brother has the courage to take over?”

The Prince of Yong suddenly lightly saluted. “This Prince is ashamed to admit that he is inferior to sixth brother’s chivalry. Do not worry. Since this child has already arrived in Chang’an, I will do my utmost.”

Turning around once more, Li Xian requested, “Take him away. When he is completely healed, send him back. If that is inconvenient, then I will take him back.”

Li Zhi gazed solemnly at the Prince of Qi and asked, “Are you truly unwilling to change your mind? You must know that once everything begins, things will only conclude when one of us is dead.”

Li Xian smiled faintly, his smile exuding ridicule. Icily, he countered, “Many thanks for second brother’s kind intentions. Even if I were to support you, would you truly trust me?”

The Prince of Yong was left speechless. He truly wished to state that he would implicitly trust the Prince of Qi. But remembering his frequent opposition and the Princess of Yong, Qing Zheng, Li Zhi ultimately only weakly stated, “I believe that sixth brother has his ways to express his sincerity.”

Turning to the side, Li Xian said in a low voice, “Although Zheng’er has her faults, she is after all my wife, the mother of my child. Li Xian is untalented and cannot kill my wife in order to obtain riches and honor.”

Li Zhi heaved a heartfelt sigh, replying, “Then good luck, sixth brother.” Finished speaking, he turned and departed.

I glanced at the Prince of Qi. Cupping my hands together in front of my chest, I stated, “Before, Zhe only knew that Your Imperial Highness was outspoken and straightforward. Today, I learned that Your Imperial Highness dares to act with courage and determination.[5] Would Your Imperial Highness please be careful going forward? The Crown Prince is a fool, while the Fengyi Sect is ambitious to the extreme. Why does Your Imperial Highness wish to be buried alongside them?”

Li Xian glanced at me. In a dull voice, he replied, “Suiyun is an incomparable talent in the entirety of the world. If I had ruthlessly killed you, it is likely that I would still have fallen into today’s dire straits.”

Hearing his words, I grew distressed. With these words, I fully understood that this proud and arrogant imperial prince had already given up control over his destiny, willingly allowing himself to be drowned in the blood of this struggle to become heir apparent. However, I was powerless to help him. Reaching today’s state, regardless of what kind of person the Prince of Qi was, neither the Prince of Yong nor I would be willing to let go. Were it not for the opportunity to use today’s meeting to sow discord between the Prince of Qi and the Crown Prince, I would absolutely not allow the Prince of Qi to return to Chang’an.

Bidding my farewell, I departed. When I boarded the carriage, the Prince of Yong’s face was frosty. Even when the carriage started moving, he did not speak. It was a good while before he listlessly stated, “A pity about the

Prince of Qi."

I knew that the Prince of Yong's killing intent had been stirred. However, I could also hear the deep and profound regret in his voice. This had not been present when we were discussing assassinating the Prince of Qi. Thus, I replied, "Your Imperial Highness, do not worry. It looks like the Prince of Qi won't follow the Crown Prince into rebellion. At the very least, there is no need for Your Imperial Highness to worry that the Prince of Yong's army will rise in revolt."

Shaking his head, the Prince of Yong recited, "One cannot afford to take the chance.[6] If we cannot reliably control sixth brother, this Prince cannot rest easily. Suiyun, do you have any solutions?"

After considering over a hundred, a thousand possible approaches, I could only regretfully shake my head and answer, "Other than killing the Prince of Qi, this subject does not have any ways of controlling him."

The Prince of Yong let out a light sigh, speaking no further. Only then did I continue, "Unless we can cause the Prince of Qi to suddenly fall seriously ill. Without the Prince of Qi personally commanding them, his troops are the same as a pack of wolves without an alpha."

Li Zhi raised his eyebrows and he stated, "Let's first take a look. However, we have to make preparations now. We can't wait before acting."

Smiling slightly, I replied, "I wonder what the Fengyi Sect is going to think of all this."

After the Prince of Yong's carriage had traveled into the distance, the head of the Prince of Qi's personal guards walked in and reported, "Your Imperial Highness, we should also get going. If the Crown Prince learns of this matter, the Crown Prince will likely become suspicious."

"That doesn't matter," replied Li Xian, nodding his head. "I have already fulfilled my obligations as a subject and as a brother. There is nothing I can do if the Crown Prince were to become suspicious."

The personal guard suddenly asked, "This subordinate doesn't dare doubt Your Imperial Highness's decision, but is that man truly deserving of Your Imperial Highness's loyalty?"

The Prince of Qi then expressed contempt. “This isn’t something that you can question.”

Although that personal guard had a look of terror on his face, the unbending resolve in his eyes did not change in the slightest. Glancing at him, Li Xian sighed and explained, “Seeing the Crown Prince’s nature exposed, I am also extremely disappointed. However, I have the tiger by its tail.[7] Even if he is heartless, I cannot be faithless. Regardless of what happens, without the Crown Prince’s previous help, I absolutely would not have today’s accomplishments.”

Not long after the Prince of Qi’s carriage departed, a woman in the clothes of the commoners stood up on top of a knoll. Although her clothing was simple, it was exceedingly elegant. Watching the Prince of Qi depart, she smiled icily. Although her smile was callous and ruthless, it was like the dazzling radiance of the morning sun, quite moving.

Footnotes :

镇州, a prefecture that is now modern-day Zhengding County in Hebei province

知难而退, zhinan’ertui – idiom, lit. to sound out the difficulties and retreat to avoid defeat; fig. to back out of an awkward situation, to get out after finding out what it’s really like

退避三舍, tuibisanshe – idiom, lit. to retreat three day’s march; fig. to give way in the face of superior strength

朝秦暮楚, zhao Qin mu Chu – idiom, lit. serve Qin in the morning, Chu in the evening; this is an idiom regarding the many officials of the Qin Dynasty who surrendered as the dynasty fell; fig. quick to switch sides

敢作敢为, ganzuoganwei – idiom, lit. to do something without fear of the consequences; fig. to dare to do anything

不怕一万，只怕万一, bupayiwan, zhipawanyi – idiom, lit. we’re not afraid of the ten thousand times that it turns out okay, we’re only afraid of the one time that it turns out bad; fig. one cannot afford to take the chance

骑虎难下, qihunanxia – idiom, lit. if you ride a tiger, it’s hard to get off; fig. impossible to back down; have a tiger by the tail

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 22: The Fengyi Sect's Plot

Volume 3, Chapter 22: The Fengyi Sect's Plot

Within the Roosting Clouds Nunnery, when that peerless beauty reported to the Fengyi Sect Master, Fan Huiyao unenthusiastically said, "It is difficult to control the Prince of Qi. This is something that this seat long ago knew. Were it not that he had no chance of succeeding the throne, this seat would absolutely not have permitted him to be so willful and unruly. It is simply that he chose this moment to have a secret meeting with the Prince of Yong. Wushuang, do you think it is possible that the Prince of Qi will change his support to the Prince of Yong?"

After hesitating a moment, Yan Wushuang answered, "In this disciple's view, the Prince of Qi won't completely place himself in the hands of the Prince of Yong. There is no traitor who can genuinely be valued and trusted. Even if the Prince of Qi were to surrender to the Prince of Yong, it will only be enough to preserve his life after the Prince of Yong seizes the throne. If the Prince of Qi were to support the Crown Prince's ascension to the throne, then he will be only under one man in the future. It is unlikely that the Prince of Qi does not understand this principle. Master, should we have Senior Apprentice Sister Zheng ascertain the intentions of His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi?"

The Fengyi Sect Master shook her head. "We cannot take the risk to warn him. Alas, Qin Zheng is the most useless of my personal disciples, not only unable to constrain the Prince of Qi, she has even given her heart away. Originally, the most important teachings I taught to you disciples were to absolutely not experience true feelings. Regardless of intelligence or resourcefulness, or ambitious ability and sagacity, we women are not lacking when compared to men. Our only shortcoming is that we easily lose our sense of self because of those cheap emotions."

"Master worries too much," replied Yan Wushuang. "Although Senior Apprentice Sister Qin does not have the power to constrain the Prince of Qi,

this is also because of the distinctive personality and the respected status of the Prince of Qi. If Master is resolved, Senior Apprentice Sister Qin will certainly be able to obey orders and execute your commands, and take control over the Prince of Qi."

With a cheerful expression, the Fengyi Sect Master expressed, "Wushuang is truly outstandingly intelligent. This time, Yu'er successfully injured the Ghost-Faced General and you have discovered such important intelligence. This seat is extremely gratified. You have to perform your tasks properly and allow this seat to take a good look at your efforts."

"This disciple will definitely not betray Master's high hopes," acknowledged Yan Wushuang with a bow. Hesitating for a moment, she continued, "Master, does this matter need to be reported to the Crown Prince?"

"What's the use of reporting to him?" asked the Fengyi Sect Master, smiling callously. "To have him become suspicious of the Prince of Qi? At present, the Crown Prince is likely easily frightened. There is no need to give him another psychological blow. Besides, if we get ahold of material to blackmail them, when the Crown Prince ascends to the throne, it will be easier for us to control the Prince of Qi in the future. Presumably, he would understand what would happen if the Crown Prince were to learn of his dealings with the Prince of Yong and was of mind to betray the Crown Prince."

"The Sect Master's strategies are far-reaching and profound. This disciple admires them greatly," said Yan Wushuang with veneration. Pausing, she inquired, "However, there is one matter that this disciple does not understand. Princess Changle is usually never concerned with politics. Why is the Sect Master determined to force her to marry? If the Prince of Yong's dissatisfaction is aroused because of this, it is likely that our gains will not make up for our losses."

The Fengyi Sect Master sighed softly. "You will understand in the future. However, there is a reason that you must understand now. Who is Princess Changle's beloved? Although that man's intelligence, ability, and wisdom are matchless in this world, he is a bright and frail individual. We all know that he was once both mentally and physically exhausted during the invasion of

Shu, requiring several years of recuperation. This seat has dispatched people to investigate in Southern Chu, confirming that his health was truly critical at the time. A famous doctor diagnosed that his heart had sustained injuries, and he was near death on several occasions. Last time I went to the Prince of Yong's residence, I paid especial attention to his condition. As reported, his arteries and veins have sustained heavy injuries. Over this last year, Princess Changle and he have sent secret messages back and forth, inevitably creating deep-seated feelings of love and affection. If at this moment, Princess Changle were to marry another, given his health, he would inevitably be bedridden and perhaps even be in danger of losing his life. You know full well how useful his incapacitation would be to us."

A look of admiration appeared on Yan Wushuang's face. "Once this man entered the Prince of Yong's household, we have met with adverse situations at every step. Now that we can't attempt to assassinate him again, if we are still able to eliminate him, it is worth it to take the risks."

"In fact, this would be of benefit to Princess Changle," observed the Fengyi Sect master with a slight smile. "Wei Ying's character and appearance are both fairly decent. It is already quite a good outcome for her in attaining such an excellent husband. What is the point of yearning for a sickly and short-lived individual?"

I have heard that Princess Changle appears to be yielding, but is in actuality firm," replied Yan Wushuang, worried, before asking, "I wonder how Sect Master will get her to agree?"

Smiling lightly, the Fengyi Sect Master did not answer her disciple's question. At this moment, a clear and melodious voice came from outside. "Reporting to the Sect Master, His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, has entered the capital. The Crown Prince has led the court to the outskirts to welcome him."

***

After the grand welcoming ceremony concluded on the outskirts of Chang'an, Li Xian was invited aboard Li An's carriage to head straight for the palace for an audience with the emperor. Upon hearing this invitation, Li Xian sneered inside. He wasn't an idiot. Although the crown prince could do

nothing to him before, unless the crown prince wished to use him, the crown prince would never be so courteous. It seemed like second brother was correct; the crown prince was already itching to rebel. Should he explain that the Prince of Yong was bluffing? After thinking it over, Li Xian decided that if the crown prince were to sincerely inquire after his well-being, then he would not conceal a single thing. However, if the crown prince only wished to exploit him, then he would not utter a single word. As long as he was not forced to mobilize his army to rebel, Li Xian was resolved to listen to the crown prince's commands.

Aboard the crown prince's carriage, Li An hesitated momentarily before speaking, "Sixth brother, you also understand the present state of affairs. The Prince of Yong is close on my heels, while Imperial Father does not understand. My position as heir apparent is already in grave danger. Sixth brother, you have always been my man. If I were to lose my position as heir apparent, even if the Prince of Yong wouldn't charge you with a crime because of Imperial Father, there would be no further opportunity for you to lead an army into battle. When that time comes, even if you aren't placed under house arrest, you will be dismissed from your present offices. At that point, it will be too late for regrets."

Li Xian's expression darkened. How did he not understand this? But regardless of what was happening, he could mobilize his army and rebel. Wouldn't that be a betrayal of Imperial Father's trust?

Not waiting for Li Xian to respond, Li An continued, "I won't say much. You must know that at present, you do not have any path to retreat. If I can ascend to the throne, I will enfeoff you as a Supervisory Imperial Prince. When that time comes, you will be second only to me. Sixth brother, what do you think?"

"Then where will big brother place the Fengyi Sect?" inquired Li Xian icily, before continuing, "Big brother must be well aware of why they have supported you so wholeheartedly."

Li An then appeared awkward. "Of course they have some demands. However, I can handle those demands. Sixth brother, you and I are brothers. In the future, if we join hands and act together, we will definitely have ways

to restrict the Fengyi Sect."

Li Xian sighed softly and replied, "This younger brother understands. There is no need for Your Imperial Highness to worry. As long as Imperial Father's intentions do not waver, this younger brother will absolutely not permit harm to Your Imperial Highness."

Li An frowned. This was not the result he wanted. He desired that Li Xian express the willingness to help him rebel. However, Li An could not bring this subject up himself. If he were to utter such intentions, it would cause no end of trouble. After hesitating for a moment, seeing Li Xian's indifferent expression, Li An ultimately was unwilling to take such a risk. At present, he already could not do as he willed.

After the Prince of Qi concluded his audience with the Yong emperor, as he walked out of the imperial palace, Li Xian saw a gorgeous carriage waiting outside. As he hesitated, a trusted personal guard by his side spoke up in a low voice, "Your Imperial Highness, the Princess of Qi has personally come to welcome you back. If you don't see her, it would be a bit too excessive. It is better to do it half-heartedly."

Thinking it over, Li Xian walked towards the carriage. A maid within raised the curtains, revealing the Princess of Qi's radiant smile. With a hint of teasing and slipperiness, Li Xian smiled and stated, "So Zheng'er has come to personally welcome this Prince's triumphant return? Truly an honor."

Blushing, Qin Zheng replied, "The Prince is always so lighthearted."

Li Xian laughed and leapt aboard the carriage. The curtain fell, hiding the happy lovemaking within.

***

In comparison, Li An returned to his residence with a calm and collected face. After he had informed the result of his meeting with the Prince of Qi to Lu Jingzhong, he only hurriedly stated, "I will hand this matter to you to take care of."

Afterwards, he returned to the inner residence. A short while later, an invitation extended under the name of the crown princess to Madam Shao, Lady Huo, was sent out. After an hour, a gloomy Lady Huo entered the

crown prince's residence and was led to crown prince's private rooms where he indulged in degenerate vices. As the crown prince vented his moodiness with a berserk fury, the blood and tears of an innocent woman flowed.

In the afternoon of the same day, the Fengyi Sect Master entered the palace and met with the empress. Not long after, Empress Dou dispatched a female palace official, her lady-in-waiting, Lady Zhao, to summon Princess Changle.

Princess Changle's elegant eyebrows wrinkled, as she gazed at the female palace official issuing an edict from the empress to summon her to an audience. This was not a good portent, especially with the empress's lady-in-waiting coming personally. According to the harem's regulations of Great Yong, aside from highest maids of the empress and the noble consorts that were known as ladies-in-waiting, the head maids of the other palace halls were a rank lower. These female palace officials were mostly relatively older palace maids. Like her own head maid who was once a trusted maid of her mother and was thirty years old. Regardless of their rank as head maid, their position in the harem was quite high. This kind of edict should not be served by such a high-ranking maid. Moreover, lady-in-waiting Zhao was tight-lipped, only explaining that the empress was inviting the princess over and refused to explain anything. Although she was worried, Changle knew that she could only adopt measures appropriate to the actual situation. She was a greatly favored princess. Even the empress could do nothing to her. As a result, a look of unswerving determination appeared on her face. Smiling, she replied, "Lady-in-Waiting Zhao, please lead the way."

Lady-in-waiting Zhao led Princess Changle to a high pavilion. The furnishings within were delicate and refined, and had a chessboard and zither. The empress was playing *weiqi* with a woman wearing a snow-white dress and veiled face. Seeing Princess Changle enter, the empress pushed aside the chessboard and stated, "Fine,. We concede defeat. Come over, Changle, and pay your respects to the Fengyi Sect Master."

Princess Changle's heart pounded, and she advanced and kowtowed. She stated, "Changle pays her respects to Your Imperial Majesty and the Sect

Master.”

A cloudy expression appeared in the woman in snow white’s pair of clear and icy eyes. Rising from her seat, she walked over and helped Princess Changle to her feet. With a smile, she replied, “The last time I saw you, you were still a small baby. Now your graceful, jade feet are on the floor.”

The empress sighed. “It is unfortunate that this child was born under an unlucky star. Before, her Imperial Father married her off to Southern Chu. Now she lives the life of a widow at home.”

The woman in snow white smiled and remarked, “Changle is dignified and elegant. How can she be permitted to live a solitary existence? I have heard that the Emperor has already selected a worthy husband for you. Presumably not long in the future, you will be able to enjoy marital bliss and harmony.”

Not permitting Princess Changle to even utter a single word, Empress Dou was already smiling and stating, “The son-in-law that her Imperial Father has selected is Prime Minister Wei’s son. Although the date of the wedding has not been set, this matter cannot be allowed to drag out for long. Changle, don’t you think so?”

Although Princess Changle has long been prepared for this eventuality, her heart could not help but tremble. Tightly gripping the folding fan that had been by her side for years, feeling like that man was with her, she smiled and replied, “The Queen Mother is overthinking matters. Changle is now accompanied by the Buddha and am at peace with myself. There is no need for Your Imperial Majesty to worry. Changle has already declined this betrothal with Imperial Father.”

Hesitating somewhat, the empress glanced at the Fengyi Sect Master. Fan Huiyao spoke in praise, “Changle speaks the truth. We, women, do not necessarily need to be accompanied by a husband. Her Imperial Majesty is only taking pity on your youth. You should still think this matter over. Your folding fan is quite elegant. Would you permit me a look?”

Changle tensed up, but she could only hand the folding fan over, acquiescing, “For Sect Master’s appreciation.”

The Fengyi Sect Master took the folding fan and took a look at the poetry written upon it, reciting it softly, "'The cold water of the pond is fresh in the autumn, *The distant road is exhausted when it arrives at the crossing.* Fortunately, the painting could not be painted, / The completion of the painting is a life's regret.' An excellent poem, truly deserving of his reputation as the most gifted scholar of Southern Chu."

Finished speaking, her chilling gaze fell upon Princess Changle and she questioned, "Is Princess truly unwilling to get married?"

Princess Changle felt her breathing quicken and tense, almost as if pressure akin to Mount Tai was assailing her. Although she was usually delicate, with a yielding exterior, her temperament was firm and unyielding. Obstructed by her status, the Fengyi Sect Master could only use her aura to assail Changle. As a result, Changle was surprisingly able to endure the pressure. The Fengyi Sect Master's clear and cold voice reached her, "Princess, Wei Ying is a husband that the Emperor painstakingly selected for you. If you are to comply with the Will of Heaven and the people, not only will the rest of your life be filled with happiness and bliss, you will also calm the worries of your Imperial Father and Noble Consort mother."

Princess Changle could feel her mind being hypnotized[1] by Fan Huiyao's words. The intense pressure was almost enough to have her open her mouth and agree. However, from deep within her mind, an image materialized of that ashen and weak-looking scholar in azure robes. Her gaze falling upon his folding fan, she spoke in a trembling voice, "Many thanks to the Sect Master for your concern and care. At present, Changle has no intentions to remarry. Although Wei Ying is good, he is not my husband to be."

The Fengyi Sect Master's long, shapely eyebrows rose slightly. Softly shaking the folding fan, she stated, "For the Princess to refuse the Emperor and Empress's kind intentions in such a manner, presumably your intentions are firm and unyielding. It is inconvenient for this seat to continue to try to persuade you." So speaking, she suddenly used force, crushing that exquisite folding fan into powder.

Princess Changle let out a miserable cry, a hint of tears appearing in her

beautiful eyes. Faking remorse, the Fengyi Sect Master apologized, “This seat slipped up and destroyed your folding fan. How about this? Allow this seat to compensate you with another one?”

Princess Changle could feel a fire ignite in her. Furiously, she declined, “There is no need. It is only a folding fan. There is no need for the Sect Master to blame herself.” Although her words were polite, her eyes emitted a rancor and hatred that would be etched in one’s memory.[2] Even the Fengyi Sect Master could feel herself tremble inside.

At this moment, Empress Dou opened her mouth and spoke, “Changle, your health is poor. Seeing that your complexion is pale, presumably you are exhausted. It is better if you go back and rest.”

Resisting with great difficulty the grief and indignation in her heart, Changle withdrew, adhering to the proper etiquette and ceremony. As she walked away, her steps became a bit unsteady. Having stood at a distance, Lü’e came over to help, but did not detect anything off, only feeling that the princess’s expression was ugly. She promptly lent her arm to support the princess and helped her back to her chambers.

Before they had gone far, a voice exclaimed, pleasantly surprised, “Your Imperial Highness, why are you also here?”

Tiredly, Princess Changle looked up and saw Wei Ying standing there beside a young eunuch. If it was as before, Changle would have definitely made an excuse and departed. However, right now, she had not the energy to ponder and instead asked, her heart palpitating with fear, “Why is Wei *daren* here?”

His face carrying a hint of happiness, Wei Ying answered, “This subject has already entered the Imperial Secretariat and is waiting upon the Emperor. Just now, the Emperor learned that the Fengyi Sect Master had come to visit and specially dispatched this subject to report to the Empress, inviting the Fengyi Sect Master to stay within the palace longer and have dinner with the Emperor.”

Hearing the words “Fengyi Sect Master” Princess Changle could not but feel the raging fury in her ignite again. Just as she was about to depart, she

felt dizzy. Her delicate body weakly collapsed. Lü'e cried out in surprise. She was not that strong. Although she could hold up the princess with some difficulty, and her spirit was willing, however her flesh was weak.[3] For this audience with the empress, Princess Changle had not brought many maids with her. In addition, for some odd reason, there were no other eunuchs and maids present, aside from quite young eunuch. There was no way to help the princess back to her chambers. Without any other options, Lü'e could only shoot a glance at Wei Ying. Although Wei Ying was a man, he was, after all, the princess's fiancé. Although Lü'e knew that the princess loved another, there was no way that she could allow the princess to lose consciousness and collapse to the ground.

Wei Ying hesitated momentarily before rapidly walking forward and holding out his hands. He asked, "Is there a room nearby to allow the Princess to rest temporarily and permit the Imperial Physicians to take a look?"

Lü'e happily replied, "Many thanks for Wei *daren* 's reminder. This is the western part of the Imperial Gardens. Nearby are Concubine Duan's chambers. Would *daren* please help me deliver the Princess there?"

Wei Ying picked the princess up. "Then would Miss Lü'e please lead the way?"

To the little eunuch, Lü'e commanded, "Go report this quickly to Noble Consort Zhangsun. Tell her that the Princess suddenly fainted. Please invite the Noble Consort to Concubine Duan's chambers."

The little eunuch immediately replied in the affirmative, turning and running off. With Princess Changle in his arms, Wei Ying followed behind Lü'e. Although Lü'e was walking quickly, she paid close attention to the one behind her, seeing looks of pity and love appear on Wei Ying's face. Lü'e could not help but feel sympathy for him. If the princess were to change her mind because of this incident, then the end result wouldn't be too bad. Before they had gone far, Lü'e slipped and fell, probably because she was in such a rush. She could only hold her ankle and cry out in pain. Wei Ying anxiously inquired, "Miss Lü'e, are you okay?"

Forcing a smile, Lü'e responded, "Wei *daren* , this servant can't go on."

Wei Ying yelled loudly, "Is there anyone nearby?"

Lü'e also shouted. But ultimately, Lü'e could only helplessly state, "Wei *daren* , can I trouble you to follow this path forward? Not far off are Concubine Duan's chambers."

After hesitating, Wei Ying replied, "It is already inconvenient for me to be within the harem."

Worried, Lü'e asked, "Can't you see the seriousness of the situation? If you are still apprehensive, it is likely that the Princess's condition will worsen. Also, you are engaged to the Princess. There shouldn't be any problems."

Wei Ying helplessly responded, "Miss Lü'e, please wait here for a moment. I will go get someone to come and rescue the miss." Finished speaking, he followed the path forward. It wasn't long before Wei Ying became confused. Before him, the path split off in two. Which one was he to take? After thinking it over, he took the left hand path. Not long afterwards, a palace hall appeared in front of him. He happily walked forward and knocked on the door. An elderly eunuch came out to greet him. In panic, the elderly eunuch exclaimed, "How did this *daren* arrive here?"

Smiling wryly, Wei Ying replied, "I am Wei Ying. Princess Changle suddenly fainted nearby. I want to deliver her to Concubine Duan's chambers. I didn't expect that I would go the wrong way."

In fear and trepidation, the elderly eunuch said, "This place has long been uninhabited. Wei *daren* , please bring the Princess inside to rest. This elderly servant will go to report this situation."

Wei Ying could only consent, "Then I'll have to trouble you to find someone to tend to the Princess."

After the elderly eunuch departed, Wei Ying was alone with the princess in this quiet palace hall. Gazing at the beautiful woman with a pale face, lying in bed, Wei Ying felt his mind roil. As a descendant of a prestigious house and possessing innate intellect, he received the respect of others. However, Princess Changle obstinately rejected him. Thinking of this, Wei Ying could not help but grow angry. But when his gaze fell upon Princess Changle, he

immediately became tender and warm. Although he was filled with regret, Princess Changle was a woman that he deeply admired. The gloom of the tightly closed doors pervaded, giving off a sense of ambiguity. Wei Ying could feel his heartbeat accelerate. From the corner of the palace hall, the scent exuded from the incense in the burner became increasingly thick. Wei Ying could feel that he could no longer hold back his desire, as his gaze towards Princess Changle became increasingly dark and murky.

Footnotes :

心神恍惚, xinshenhuanghu – idiom, lit. be ill at ease and full of dread; fig. perturbed and spellbound
刻骨铭心, kegumingxin – idiom, lit. carved in bones and engraved in the heart; fig. etched in one's memory, unforgettable
力不从心, libucongxin – idiom, lit. not as strong as one could wish; fig. the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 23: What Else Cannot be Endured?

Volume 3, Chapter 23: What Else Cannot be Endured?

Ultimately, Wei Ying walked towards Princess Changle. Just as he arrived at the princess's side, he suddenly heard the sound of rushing footsteps outside. Wei Ying jumped with surprise, promptly retreating off to the side. At this moment, the palace hall's door was pushed open vigorously. With ten maids and eunuchs, Noble Consort Zhangsun barged into the palace hall. Seeing the scene before her, a scowl appeared on Noble Consort Zhangsun's face. She did not utter a single word, only waving her hand. A eunuch walked over and covered the incense burner, while several maids walked beside the bed and helped Princess Changle up. Afterwards, a palanquin, for use within the palace, was brought in. The maids helped Princess Changle within and swiftly took her away. Confused, Wei Ying stepped forward and spoke, "Noble Consort has finally arrived. Has that little eunuch reported the Princess's fainting? Did Noble Consort see Miss Lü'e and realize that this subject took the wrong path?"

Suspicious, Noble Consort Zhangsun replied, "We received a report that Changle ran into danger. As a result, We hurriedly rushed over to surprisingly find Wei *daren* not worrying about rumors and staying alone in the same palace hall with Changle. Why have you s poken such words just as We were about to hold you responsible?"

As Wei Ying calmly explained everything that happened, Noble Consort Zhangsun's facial expressions changed several times. Eventually, she stated, "So that is the case. Wei *daren* also had kind intentions. However, Changle is a widow which means it is inconvenient for her to be alone with men. By rights, *daren* should have stayed outside to avoid arousing suspicion. Head Maid Zhou, go bring Lü'e back to the Jade Phoenix Palace Hall. Wei *daren* , you carry an imperial edict and thus should go complete your duties."

When Noble Consort Zhangsun finished speaking, and was about to turn and depart, Wei Ying quickly spoke up, "I wonder if this subject is permitted

to come by later to pay my respects."

Noble Consort Zhangsun hesitated momentarily, but remembering the incense wafting out from the burner was an aphrodisiac, she finally icily replied, "There is no need. *Daren* is an outside subject and should, by rights, avoid arousing suspicion."

Gazing at the departing Noble Consort Zhangsun, Wei Ying felt his entire body grow cold. He knew that he had lost forever the beautiful woman that he yearned for in his dreams.

***

Returning to the Jade Phoenix Palace Hall, Noble Consort Zhangsun summoned an imperial physician to check on Princess Changle's condition. After taking a look, the imperial physician reported that anxiety and fury had struck the princess's heart. Combined with the princess's frail condition, she had fainted. Although Noble Consort Zhangsun found this diagnosis strange, since Changle had been in quite good health this past year, she could be at ease after learning that there was no danger to her daughter's life. However, at this moment, she absolutely loathed Empress Dou. For her good daughter to be like this after an audience with the empress, how could she not feel unbearable distress? However, there was no way for her to exact vengeance. That woman was the empress. The crown prince was her son. What could Noble Consort Zhangsun do? The more she thought, the more infuriated she became. At this moment, seeing Lü'e be brought in by her head maid, Noble Consort Zhangsun indignantly cried out, "Lü'e! We have trusted you implicitly to allow you to personally attend to the Princess. Although you are still young and have yet to be raised to the position of head maid, We have not treated you poorly. Why have you bitten the hand that feeds you and set up the Princess?"

Lü'e repeatedly proclaimed her innocence, explaining, "This servant has never had such a thought. Your Imperial Highness, it was because of the urgency of the situation. In addition, Wei *daren* is a consort approved by the Emperor. This servant truly had no intention of setting up the Princess."

Noble Consort Zhangsun ferociously and furiously reprimanded, "You dare to quibble? Regardless of the Wei Ying's status, you have been by the

Princess's side for quite some time now. Do you not know the Princess's intentions? If We arrived a second too late today, Changle's reputation and integrity would have likely been irreparably damaged. Even if she were unreconciled and unwilling, she could only marry Wei Ying. Regardless of Our and the Emperor's intentions, attaining Changle's consent is of the utmost necessity. You lowly servant, behaving so unscrupulously! If Changle's reputation and integrity were damaged, even if you were to die a thousand times, you would have to bear the full brunt of the blame. Head Maid Zhou, drag this lowly servant out and have her beaten well."

Several eunuchs dragged the weeping Lü'e out. Head Maid Zhou followed them to supervise Lü'e's punishment. Tiredly, Noble Consort Zhangsun sat down. Gazing at the nearby lady-in-waiting Tian, she spoke, "That girl Lü'e has always been doted upon by Us and thus was specially dispatched to serve upon Zhen'er. Who could have thought that she would be so foolish? We intend to have her driven out tomorrow. What do you think?"

Lady-in-waiting Tian's raised her eyebrows in surprise. In a low voice, she murmured, "Your Imperial Highness, Lü'e has accompanied you for many years and has waited upon the Princess for such a long time. She certainly knows some of the Princess's intentions. If she is driven out, she is likely to babble nonsense and harm the Princess's pure reputation. To handle this matter, Your Imperial Highness brought along experienced and honest maids and eunuchs. They will definitely not talk nonsense. Right now, aside from Lü'e, only Wei *daren* knows of this matter. This servant believes that Wei *daren* has not the courage to talk nonsense. If rumors were to spread, the Emperor surely wouldn't let him off lightly. As for this Lü'e, she cannot be permitted to leave and speak irresponsibly."

Although Noble Consort Zhangsun was amiable and kind by nature, having spent so many years in the depths of the palace and holding the position of noble consort, how could she not understand that lady-in-waiting Tian's words were reasonable? She hardened her heart. In order to preserve Changle's reputation and integrity, she did not care if Lü'e was innocent or guilty. Noble Consort Zhangsun did not say a word, only glancing slightly at lady-in-waiting Tian. Understanding, lady-in-waiting Tian left the palace

hall, shooting a look at Head Maid Zhou who took the hint.[1] Not long afterwards, the miserable shrieks from outside came to an abrupt end. Head Maid Zhou returned and disclosed, “Reporting to Your Imperial Highness, Lü’e could not endure the punishment and has already died.”

Sighing, Noble Consort Zhangsun replied, “Have her buried properly. Publicly report that she became ill and died. Be sure to properly provide financial support to her family.”

Lady-in-waiting Tian, having returned, spoke up again, “Your Imperial Highness, the little eunuch who came to report this matter, Xiaoliuzi,[2] should also be transferred to Your Imperial Highness’s side to prevent him from leaking anything.”

Noble Consort Zhangsun’s jaw quivered and she stated, “That child. Fortunately he was there. If he did not come to report, it is likely … Alas … Changle is willing to die to preserve her chastity. When she wakes, she would likely rather die in order to wash away this humiliation than to marry. Go make arrangements. Since this child was so intelligent and faithful, arrange to have him stay by Changle’s side and have him keep an eye on things and ensure that these double-crossing servants don’t harm Changle.”

Lady-in-waiting Tian smiled. “This servant will go make the arrangements. Your Imperial Highness, do not worry.”

At this moment, a palace maid entered and reported, “Your Imperial Highness, the Princess has awoken.”

Noble Consort Zhangsun promptly entered Changle’s sleeping quarters. She saw Princess Changle’s complexion was dark and gloomy. Seeing her mother alive, tears fell from Changle’s eyes like rain. Feeling piercing pain in her heart, Noble Consort Zhangsun walked over. Pulling Changle into her embrace, Noble Consort Zhangsun spoke, “Zhen’er, what wrongs have you experienced? Tell your mother. If someone dared to be rude towards you, even if mother has to sacrifice my life, I will take revenge for you.”

Princess Changle was pained for quite some time before she finally stemmed her tears, explaining everything that had happened. The more she

listened, the more enraged Noble Consort Zhangsun became. She knew that her daughter had entrusted all of her pining into her folding fan. Now that it was destroyed, it was no wonder that she fainted from grief and indignation. But the perpetrator was the Fengyi Sect Master. Not even the emperor could do anything to her. Thinking it over, Noble Consort Zhangsun came to a decision and stated, “Zhen’er, do not worry. Your second brother has irreconcilable differences with them. You will have the day when you will be able to exact your revenge. It is only a folding fan. I will have the Prince of Yong gift you with another one.”

Princess Changle sobbed, “Mother Concubine, it is better if we don’t cause trouble. Jiang … his health is poor. If he were to hear of this, he would inevitably become enraged, harming his body and causing this child to be very worried. It is best if this matter is concealed from him.”

Noble Consort Zhangsun smiled wryly and replied, “You, child … always thinking of others. Fine, mother won’t go tell them. However, I have to inform your Imperial Father of what has happened. You cannot be so wronged. Even if we can’t take revenge for you, we can ensure that your Imperial Father won’t force you to get married again.”

Continuing to weep, Princess Changle said, “I will rely upon Mother Concubine to make all the decisions.”

Leaving the Jade Phoenix Palace Hall, Noble Consort Zhangsun sobered from her indignity and wrath. Regardless of how the emperor doted upon Changle, neither Empress Dou nor the Fengyi Sect Master were people that she and her daughter could offend. If she were to go and search for justice, it would only cause the emperor to be placed in an awkward and embarrassed position. The more she thought, the sadder she became. Ultimately, Noble Consort Zhangsun decided that she had to inform the emperor of this matter. She knew that the emperor was handling government affairs in the Imperial Study at this moment. And so, she hurriedly rushed to the Imperial Study. After receiving permission, she stepped in. But seeing Noble Consort Ji seated beside the emperor, Noble Consort Zhangsun could feel herself tremble inside.

Watching Noble Consort Zhangsun arrive, Li Yuan smiled and stated,

"*Aiyah* ! Why has beloved concubine has also come today? It just so happens that We are going to have dinner with the Fengyi Sect Master in a little while. Beloved concubine should come along. You are also an old acquaintance of the Fengyi Sect Master and can take the opportunity to reminisce."

The indignation that Noble Consort Zhangsun had felt froze. She knew that the emperor would definitely not give her and her daughter justice. She could only force a smile onto her face and report, "Your servant is here to report to Your Imperial Majesty that Changle suddenly collapsed. Your servant hopes to deliver Changle to the Dustless Nunnery to recuperate for a few days."

With great alarm, Li Yuan replied, "When We saw her a few days ago, her face was glowing.[3] How did she suddenly fall ill? Has an imperial physician been summoned?"

Just as Noble Consort Zhangsun was about to reply, Noble Consort Ji spoke up, "Your Imperial Majesty, Changle's health was always poor. In your servant's view, would it not be better to wed Changle and use the luck from the marriage to counteract her bad luck?"

Hearing her words, Li Yuan nodded his head slightly. "Beloved concubine speaks reasonably. Zhangsun, what do you think? Changle's wedding has already been dragged out. It would be good if her luck can be improved."

In an icy voice, Noble Consort Zhangsun answered, "The Emperor's intentions are good, however, Changle's temperament is obstinate. She has always refused this engagement. It is likely that if Your Imperial Majesty is to issue this edict, Changle will take to her bed and never leave it again.[4] If Your Imperial Majesty is thinking of Changle, it is better to allow her to leave the palace to be nursed back to health."

Li Yuan was not slow to react. Seeing the indignation on Noble Consort Zhangsun's face that she dared not openly express, Li Yuan could not help but think back to the empress and Noble Consort Ji who constantly urged him to have the princess be wed these last few days. With this, he understood clearly. At the time, when Changle was wed to distant Southern

Chu, she did so without any complaints or discontent, causing him to feel guilty to this day. Now, he naturally was unwilling to force her to marry again. After careful consideration, Li Yuan could not but grow angry. Thus, he instructed, “Beloved concubine, please send Changle to convalesce in the nunnery. Also, pass along my edict. Have Roulan accompany Changle. Changle has always been fond of that child. This should help relax her heart.”

Overjoyed, Noble Consort Zhangsun acknowledged, “Many thanks to Your Imperial Majesty. Your servant will send Changle out of the palace to convalesce.” Finished speaking, she turned and left the imperial study.

Noble Consort Ji was a bit unhappy. Li Yuan glanced at her and spoke plainly, “Changle has already sacrificed much for Great Yong. We only desire that she spend the rest of her life according to her wishes. In the future, do not speak of this wedding ever again. Allow her to make her own decision. I believe that Changle won’t do anything that is improper.”

***

Although Changle did not wish for Jiang Zhe to learn of what had happened that day, things did not turn out as she wanted. I had already learned, in detail, what had happened. In the harem, where the Fengyi Sect was extremely powerful, there were several little eunuchs who had the courage to disturb the trap that the Fengyi Sect had set. Xiaoliuzi, originally named Liu Jie, was one of the honorary disciples that Xiaoshunzi had taken.

At the time, I had wanted to plant a few people in the imperial palace. However, this was easier said than done. At present, power and influence in the harem was controlled by the crown prince and the Fengyi Sect. If the spy’s identity were exposed, not only would I be punished, even His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, wouldn’t be able to escape responsibility. Just over a month after I found myself in a difficult position and discussed this matter with Xiaoshunzi, he informed me that he had already completed this task. His method was simple. On the outer ring of the palace, in the remote palace halls, he had selected a number of little eunuchs with satisfactory aptitude. Xiaoshunzi came from such a background himself and naturally understood their suffering. As a result, based upon his status

and martial arts, he was able to quickly acquire their adulation and approval. Afterwards, he had taught them some martial arts. With this, they became Xiaoshunzi's honorary disciples. Knowing some martial arts, and with Xiaoshunzi's frequent advice, they were like pieces of sculpted jade, revealing lustrous radiance. Very quickly, they were able to take responsibility and perform duties. Although this method wasn't the best and had the potential for future trouble, I could only approve it in the face of a lack of better alternatives.

When I had learned that the emperor had once discussed the crown prince's scandal with Changle, I specially had Xiaoshunzi make arrangements for his honorary disciples to be mindful of the princess's safety. That was how they were able, at the moment of imminent peril, to warn Noble Consort Zhangsun to save the princess. And also because of this reason, I learned of what had happened that very night. Although there were some things that were impossible for Xiaoliuzi to witness firsthand, it was enough for me to guess what had happened.

Hearing of this incident, I felt a sharp stabbing pain in my heart, continuously vomiting blood. Xiaoshunzi was greatly frightened, promptly summoning a doctor. My condition only stabilized in the middle of night. Lying in bed, I was reminded of Piaoxiang's tragic death. The grief in my heart was difficult to endure. *Fengyi Sect, oh Fengyi Sect ... that day, you murdered my Piaoxiang ... today, you wish to harm the princess. If I cannot eradicate you, I will not die in peace!*

Waking up the next day, I saw on Xiaoshunzi's expression that he was blaming himself for informing me of this incident. In truth, I would have found out sooner rather than later. After some time had passed, the Prince of Yong and Shi Yu came to visit. His face etched with deep concern, Li Zhi anxiously inquired, "Suiyun, how did you suddenly fall ill?"

Seeing the Prince of Yong's worried complexion, I could not help but be touched by his anxiety. However, the wound that was causing such grief and pain was hidden in the deepest and most hidden parts of my heart. It was almost my most forbidden sore spot. I was absolutely unwilling to reveal this matter to anyone. As such, I could only smile and reply, "I have caused

Your Imperial Highness to be worried. It is only Zhe's old ailment recurring. As long as I rest a few days, I will get better. How are the current state of affairs outside, I wonder?"

Li Zhi anxiously answered, "Suiyun should rest well. There aren't any urgent matters that need to be taken care of."

Smiling wryly, I responded, "I'm afraid that things will have to be delayed a few days. Although I have diagnosed and treated the Little Marquis's poisonous wound, I am right now powerless to use acupuncture on him. Xiaoshunzi, use the acupuncture techniques that I taught you to first treat Little Marquis. In this way, the effects of the toxicity can be postponed. Feed him the prescription that I prescribed yesterday for seven days. Afterwards, I will personally expel the toxins in his body. These days, the Crown Prince and the Fengyi Sect will be discussing their coming rebellion with the Prince of Qi. Your Imperial Highness should keep a close watch on their activity. Although this subject's illness has recurred, there won't be any major problems. Would Your Imperial Highness please not worry? Please deliver the intelligence reports as usual every day. If this subject were to relax and become complacent right now, it is likely that the situation would become uncontrollable. If that were to happen, then I will have failed Your Imperial Highness's kindness to me."

Helpless to refuse, Li Zhi could only reply, "Suiyun, only do what you can.[5] Ziyou, discuss things with Suiyun and see if you can share some of the burden. His health cannot fail at this time."

Nodding his head, Shi Yu concurred, "Your Imperial Highness, do not worry. This subject will be sure to provide all my help to Suiyun."

During the days that I was recuperating, the intelligence continued to flow. Since the return of the Prince of Qi, the crown prince's faction had wholeheartedly thrown themselves into the plan, while the Prince of Qi had secretly begun to mobilize and move. It seemed like the Prince of Qi was now a participant of the crown prince's faction. Although this was a bit unexpected, it was mind-numbingly obvious that the Fengyi Sect was preparing a mutiny and rebellion. As a result, we did not abandon our plan.

The Prince of Qi's abnormal moves could not be concealed from the Prince of Yong and Grand General Qin. However, the two could also not prevent it from happening, as the Prince of Qi's troops in Chang'an were mobilized and moved using all sorts of dignified and pompous reasons, and no one could ascertain their objectives. As a result, the armies of the Prince of Yong and Grand General Qin all raised their alertness levels. Storm clouds were approaching[6] Chang'an.

***

Within the Cold Courtyard, after my health had gradually improved, I exhausted myself treating Jiang Haitao with acupuncture to the point that I almost collapsed again. However, this time, the Prince of Yong prohibited me from exhausting my mental and physical strength. After trying to argue, I helplessly rested. In any case, the Prince of Yong was knew well about the troop dispositions around Chang'an. As a result, I could focus on my recovery. If there were anything truly urgent, the Prince of Yong would still have to come and seek my advice.

On this day, I was going over the intelligence that had been collected in the last few days. Dong Que walked in and reported, "Young master, Little Marquis Jiang has come to request an audience."

Setting down the scroll, I wondered, "What is it? He can already climb out of bed? He truly has good foundations. He recovered surprisingly quickly. Oh, that's right, how is that situation developing?"

A hint of ridicule on his face, Dong Que replied, "It likely can't be concealed any longer. His frame of mind is probably poor. As a result, Lady Huo has returned home with wan and sallow appearances. The Eastern Palace Reader-in-Waiting Shao Yan, Shao *daren* , has already gotten suspicious."

I smiled placidly and ordered, "Since that is the case, conclude this business. Remember, it is best if this scandal leaves the capital abuzz."

Bowing, Dong Que responded, "This subordinate understands. There is also another matter. Lord Li just returned before he rushed off again, stating that the Prince of Qi is being controlled."

Hearing this, I was first dumbfounded before I laughed. "So that's why the

Prince of Qi's subordinates have been so lively recently and yet completely lacked the Prince of Qi's experienced and ferocious style. So he is being held hostage to control his subordinates.[7] Fine. This way is also good. When the time comes, it'll be easier to sweep them away. When Xiaoshunzi returns, have him come see me. Tell him that I won't die so easily. If there is anything, he should inform me. At most, I shall have him handle matters and I won't waste my breath."

Speaking to this point, I could not help but smile wryly. At present, the Prince of Yong and Xiaoshunzi had combined forces to prevent me from seeing reports from the outside. Although they were doing what they thought was best for me, how could I rest easy?

Dong Que bowed and voiced his agreement, turning and departing. Not long afterwards, Jiang Haitao walked in. Although he had only just recovered from the toxins, his face had a healthy, rosy color. In addition, his stride still had a sense of frivolity. He seemed to already be extremely lively. After he had entered, he bowed and saluted me, stating, "Haitao greatly thanks Jiang *daren* for the grace of saving my life, causing *daren* 's old illness to recur. Haitao is truly uneasy. As a result, have come specially to pay my respects."

Pointing at a nearby chair, I replied, "Normally, the Little Marquis is a blood relative of His Imperial Highness. Thus, Zhe should not accept such great courtesy. However, I have toiled mentally and physically to treat you. It wouldn't be improper to receive such great courtesy from you. Little Marquis, please sit. Is anything that the Little Marquis wishes to discuss with me?"

Footnotes :

心领神会, xinlingshenhui – idiom, lit. to understand tacitly; to understand thoroughly
小六子, Xiaoliuzi – lit. little six
容光焕发, rongguanghuanfa – idiom, lit. one's face glowing with health; fig. looking radiant, all smiles
一病不起, yibingbuqi – idiom, lit. take to one's bed and never leave it again; fig. to fall ill and never recover
量力而行, liangli'erxing – idiom, lit. to assess one's capabilities and act

accordingly; fig. one does what one can
风雨欲来, fengyuyulai – idiom, lit. storm clouds approaching; fig. trouble lies ahead
挟天子以令诸侯, xietianziyilingzhuhou – idiom, lit. to hold the Son of Heaven hostage in order to control the vassals; this idiom speaks of the Three Kingdoms warlord, Cao Cao (曹操), who took Emperor Xian (汉献帝) under his protection to take control of the imperial court during the last years of the Han Dynasty

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 24: Prepared for Everything

Volume 3, Chapter 24: Prepared for Everything

On the fourteenth day of the ninth month of the twenty-fifth year of Wuwei, the Emperor issued an edict to hold the Autumn Hunt. With this, the rebellion began …—*Yong Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Gaozu*

With a look of high esteem, Jiang Haitao gazed at Jiang Zhe. Although still young, he knew full well this man's value. Over these days, he had been recuperating in the guest courtyard. The Princess of Yong would frequently stop by to see him. She inevitably would speak of some things to him. Jiang Haitao was most curious about this sickly youth who seemed liable to die at any moment. Clearly, this scholar was on the verge of dying and yet he still did his utmost to save Jiang Haitao's life. Moreover, apparently his uncle, the Prince of Yong, listened closely to his advice. As a result, Jiang Haitao had used the need to personally express his thanks as justification to enter the Cold Courtyard. Upon entering the Cold Courtyard, Jiang Haitao could immediately tell that the Prince of Yong valued this Jiang *daren* extremely highly. The defenses around the Cold Courtyard were strict and tight, likely even surpassing the defenses around the Prince of Yong himself.

With a faint smile, I gazed upon this youngster. He was still young and carried a childish innocence about him. I could immediately see through his intent from his pair of clear eyes. I could not help but have a favorable impression of this kind of lively youngster. However, at the same time, I also became suspicious. As the son of the Marquis of the Eastern Sea, how could he have such limpid eyes? After thinking it over, I skillfully inquired, "The Little Marquis is a tiger cub of a martial family. Presumably, you are adept at naval warfare. Have you come today to borrow the copy of *Illustrated Treatise of the Seas* in my collection?"

This question I posed was quite clever. To an ordinary individual, the *Illustrated Treatise of the Seas* was nothing more than an abstruse and difficult to understand, useless book. However, to the Jiang family, skilled at

naval warfare and shipbuilding, it was absolutely priceless. This book had originally been lost. Prior to coming in first in the imperial examinations and becoming the *zhuangyuan* , I had accidentally chanced upon a fragment of the book. As far as I was concerned, this kind of rare book was priceless beyond measure. After I had entered Southern Chu's Hanlin Academy, I had searched the academy's extensive[1] book collection and was able to collect some fragmentary records. Using my erudition and extensive knowledge as a basis, I fully repaired and completed the fragment. When I had presented this book to the Southern Chu court, no one paid it any particular attention, only delivering it to the Sublime Culture Palace Hall. Originally, this book, akin to buried treasure, would never have seen the light of day again. However, when Great Yong and Southern Chu were negotiating peace, the Prince of Yong included a demand for Southern Chu to present a portion of its collection of books and records. As a result, this book, the *Illustrated Treatise of the Seas* , returned to my hands. I had deep feelings of attachment to this book. As a result, I had deliberately kept it with me.

I did not know how, but news of the Prince of Yong's possession of a solitary extant copy of this book spread like wildfire.[2] In addition, news that the Prince of Yong had bestowed this book to me was also known. There were many learned and experienced individuals in Great Yong. As a result, there were many who visited to seek a look at this book. However, as I did not accept outside visitors, their wishes were unable to be fulfilled.

Today, this question that I was posing to Jiang Haitao was actually quite profound. If that man who fled to the Eastern Seas and proclaimed himself the Marquis of the Eastern Seas truly was as adept at naval warfare and farsighted as the intelligence reports proclaimed, then the existence of the *Illustrated Treatise of the Seas* would definitely catch his attention. If Little Marquis Jiang knew of this book, then Jiang Yong regarded this beloved son of his with great importance. If that was the case, then the expressions being revealed by this youth were fake. If he did not know a thing about this book, other than undeserving of training, it meant that Jiang Yong had deliberately indulged and pampered this son of his. However, I had seen that this child was sincere and innocent, possessing top-quality aptitude, a diamond in the rough.[3] I would find it very difficult to believe either of those reasons.

Jiang Haitao sprang to his feet in excitement, exclaiming, “The *Illustrated Treatise of the Seas* ! I have heard Daddy speak of it many times. Daddy even lamented that he could not take a look with his own eyes. Are you truly willing to lend it to me?” His expressions were impassioned, containing the gazes of a youth seeing an object that he loved. This caused him to appear to be even more open and candid.[4]

I was now full of curiosity. What kind of person was this little marquis? Thus, I commanded, “Dong Que, bring over that copy of the *Illustrated Treatise of the Seas* .”

After a short while had passed, the *Illustrated Treatise of the Seas* that I had compiled and edited was brought over. Before handing it to Jiang Haitao, I smiled and stated, “However, I can’t lend it to you for nothing. Every section that you finish reading, I will ask you some questions. If your answers are acceptable, I will allow you to continue reading. If you can’t answer my questions, then I won’t let you continue to read.”

Composed, Jiang Haitao replied, “Although Haitao is young, I have followed Father for years. Although there are some things that I am not clear about, I do know a little about them. As long as Jiang *daren* ’s questions aren’t too difficult, Haitao is confident that I will be able to answer.”

“I naturally won’t make things deliberately difficult for you,” I confirmed, smiling slightly. So speaking, I gestured for Dong Que to take the book out of its box and place it on the desk. Jiang Haitao knew he could not personally flip through the pages of this kind of precious book. Excited and filled with expectation, he moved a chair over to the desk, while Dong Que stood at his side, turning the pages for him.

After he had finished reading a section, I asked him a few questions. As expected, he was ready with his answers.[4] Although some of his answers were superficial, it was already quite outstanding for someone of his young age. What left me greatly astonished, however, was that he had his own understanding and views about several sections. During the compilation and editing process, I ran into a significant amount of areas where information was lacking. Even though I was able to add information about maritime affairs from other sources, there were several sections that I was

unsure about. As a result, I had marked those sections clearly, identifying the source of the information, as well as including my own understanding and judgment. I deliberately questioned him about these sections. Several of his answers were far more accurate compared to my determinations. Over the next few days, we would discuss these sections daily, feeling boundless joy.

Ultimately, not only did I learn that Jiang Haitao was naturally suited as being a naval commander, I also arrived at another conclusion. Aside from maritime affairs, he was a straightforward individual with virtually no other interests. If assigned to explore or fight on the seas, he would be an extremely capable commander. However, regarding other matters, there was no point in counting on him. Presumably, Jiang Yong was both gratified and vexed at his son's interests. Smiling slightly, I wrote a short note and had Dong Que collect it, which he did so in an exasperatingly slow fashion. Over these last few days, I had written several notes that I had him collect. However, Dong Que was extremely intelligent, not peeking at a single note or asking me my intentions.

***

This day, I was within the garden, appreciating the beauty of the blooming chrysanthemums. The Prince of Yong walked towards and faced me. In a gloomy voice, Li Zhi said, "Suiyun, things could happen at any moment."

I smiled faintly and replied, "Your Imperial Highness, please explain."

"Imperial Father has announced that the day after tomorrow, the court will proceed to the Hunting Palace to hold the Autumn Hunt," answered Li Zhi. "All of the imperial kinsmen in the capital are to attend. The Prince of Qi has submitted a petition begging off due to illness, however, Imperial Father has demanded that he take the journey even if he is ill."

I pensively observed, "It seems like the Emperor is also being very careful. I wonder why the Emperor is holding the Autumn Hunt now."

Sighing, Li Zhi revealed, "These last few days, many seemingly inconsequential events have occurred. It truly is difficult to explain in a few words … This Prince originally believed that there was no need to bother

Suiyun … but now, looking back, I do have to trouble you."

"For Your Imperial Highness to treat Zhe so affectionately," I replied properly, "If Zhe cannot help Your Imperial Highness at the critical moments, then wouldn't I be letting down Your Imperial Highness's great kindness? Your Imperial Highness, please speak forthrightly."

Sighing again, Li Zhi explained what had happened these last few days. Since I fell ill on the third day of the ninth month, while I was recuperating, the Prince of Qi only made small moves without end. However, as a military expert, the Prince of Yong soon discovered that the sole objective of the Prince of Qi's troops was to lay in ambush.

Today, Li Yuan had issued an edict to hold the Autumn Hunt. The accompanying Imperial Guard numbered twenty thousand and would be commanded by Grand General Qin Yi. Of these numbers, ten thousand were from the Eastern Barracks, commanded by Qin Qing and assisted by Huang Sha and Sun Ding. Both of these assistant commanders each led five thousand imperial guardsmen. Of the rest, five thousand guardsmen from the Southern Barracks were commanded by Yang Qian, assisted by Huyan Jiu; and five thousand guardsmen from the Northern Barracks, commanded by Pei Yun and assisted by Xiahou Yuanfeng. The crown prince, the Prince of Yong, and the Prince of Qi were required to accompany the procession. In addition to this, Empress Dou, Noble Consort Ji, Noble Consort Zhangsun, Noble Consort Yan, Princess Changle, Li Zhen, and the Princess of Jingjiang, Li Hanyou, all accompanied the emperor. Left behind to defend the capital were Prime Minister Wei Guan and the recovered Palace Attendant Zheng Xia. Responsibility for the capital's security was left to the Commander of the Western Barracks of the Imperial Guard, Tan Yi. In addition, the number of court ministers accompanying the imperial procession were innumerable. Of those deserving of my attention were the Duke of Wei, Cheng Shu, the Princess of Qi's father, Attendant Gentleman of the Imperial Secretariat Qin Wuqi, the newly appointed to the Imperial Secretariat, Wei Ying, and the Crown Prince's Junior Mentor, Lu Jingzhong.

And there was more … The emperor's edict only permitted the Princes of Yong and Qi to bring a hundred household guards with them, and also

declared that during the Autumn Hunt, everything would adhere to military discipline with the Grand General Who Suppresses Distant Lands, Qin Yi, as the commander-in-chief. It seemed like the emperor understood clearly the tense circumstances.

After the Prince of Qi had failed in his attempt to be excused from the Autumn Hunt, his army ceased to make movements. However, the Prince of Yong believed that the army could force march a hundred *li* in one night without problems and could ambush the emperor as he returned to Chang'an. In addition, the reasons given by the Prince of Qi for mobilizing and moving his troops were actually quite ample. Of course, the Prince of Yong had also made his own preparations, ready to check the Prince of Qi's forces at a moment's notice. However, if this were to happen, then it would lead to all-out civil war.

However, the Prince of Yong and his subordinate commanders were confused as to why had the Prince of Qi had agreed to accompany the emperor and take part in the Autumn Hunt. With him not present, there was no one else that could command his army to attack the emperor.

Looking at the intelligence reports in my hands, I could not help but frown. The occurrence of such a result was within my expectations. Just yesterday, the Prince of Yong had sent a secret letter to Grand General Qin, explaining Li Hanyou's suspicious history. Although there was no clear evidence, it was obvious that Li Hanyou was separated from childhood from her parents before being discovered by the Fengyi Sect Master and delivered to the Prince of Jingjiang's household. At the very least, this information would raise Grand General Qin's suspicions. There were some things that one would rather believe existed than not. I had already learned the result. Once the letter reached the grand general's household, Cheng Shu was invited over. Afterwards, Qin Yong was also summoned. Although there was no way for me to know what was discussed, Qin Yong was dispatched to hurry to Grand General Qin's army to take command. In reality, during the Autumn Hunt, the troops that Qin Yi could mobilize were those that Qin Yong now commanded. Originally, I had no hopes that they would believe the contents of the letter, only desiring that they make preparations. This result was

already beyond my expectations.

In addition, just yesterday, the wife of Eastern Palace Reader-in-Waiting Shao Yan, Lady Huo, hung herself from the ceiling. Then, overnight, news broke of the crown prince raping the wife of a subject, causing the woman to commit suicide. Although it was only gossip on the streets, when compared with the crown prince's previous conduct, practically everyone believed it to be true. Although the emperor had not yet learned of this scandal, it was impossible to keep it hidden once the Autumn Hunt concluded. As a result, if the crown prince could not force the emperor to abdicate during the Autumn Hunt, then i it would likely be extremely difficult to escape his fate of being deposed.

I sighed. Although the crown prince was being forced by me to rebel, why were the arrangements made by the Fengyi Sect so odd?

Initially, I had suspected that the Fengyi Sect would arrange for the Prince of Qi's forces to break into the emperor's temporary residence. After all, the crown prince and the Fengyi Sect could probably control at least a portion of the twenty thousand imperial guardsmen. In the face of a sudden attack from within and without,[6] my plan was to allow Grand General Qin to discover signs beforehand and be given the opportunity to set a trap. Once the Prince of Qi's troops arrived, with the appearance of both Grand General Qin and the Prince of Yong, there would be no way that the Prince of Qi could control the situation. Afterwards, with the cooperation of experts from all of the sects of *jianghu* , we would eradicate the Fengyi Sect in one fell swoop.

However, the current situation was very different from my predictions. The nearest troops under the Prince of Qi were more than two hundred *li* from the Hunting Palace, while Grand General Qin's closest troops were within a hundred *li* . The Prince of Yong's troops were also more than two hundred *li* away. If this was the case, I absolutely did not believe that the Fengyi Sect would be able to rebel successfully with just its sect master and disciples. Moreover, the Fengyi Sect Master was still at the Roosting Cloud Nunnery and had made no preparations to take part in the Autumn Hunt. In my predictions, the Fengyi Sect Master would accompany the emperor. With

the current situation completely different, I was embarrassed and at a complete loss.[7] How would the situation develop? As expected, the Fengyi Sect Master was truly out of the ordinary. The Prince of Qi's forces were numerically inferior to the Prince of Yong's. If the two armies were to fight, and without the presence of the Prince of Qi, then it would be impossible for the Prince of Qi's army to win. At present, with the Imperial Guard controlled by Grand General Qin, it was impossible for an armed rebellion to become successful. If that was the case, what was the Fengyi Sect Master relying upon to rebel?

I could not compare to the Prince of Yong and his subordinate commanders when handling the military. After repeated discussions, we could not find a trace of how the crown prince would successfully rebel and force the emperor to abdicate. However, if the rebellion were doomed to fail, then they would absolutely not take such risks. Ultimately, I could only suggest for Zhangsun Ji to take command of a unit of the Prince of Yong's troops and prepare to advance at a moment's notice to stop the Prince of Qi's army, while Jing Chi and Sima Xiong would accompany the imperial procession. Shi Yu and others would remain in the capital to oversee everything. Great Master True Compassion dispatched fifty experts from various sects to serve as the Prince of Yong's guards, expressing that this was the shared intent from all of the major sects in *jianghu* . At the same time, he would personally take responsibility for keeping an eye on Fan Huiyao. In reality, for experts of their level, even if they were separated by several *li* , they could still detect each other's presence. As a result, we were not worried that the Fengyi Sect Master would suddenly disappear. As for Xiaoshunzi and Dong Que, both of them were to accompany me. Although I had not fully recovered from my illness, the coming storm was too important to remain behind in Chang'an. How could I not go?

Although we could only wait and see how the situation would develop, I still had Xiaoshunzi transmit my order. The entire Secret Camp was mobilized, ready to respond to any changes at any moment. I was not worried about this. They were all experts who could respond readily to any situation. Moreover, I gave the Prince of Yong's household command pendants, allowing them to move as they pleased.

Firmly clenching my fists, I reminded myself that I needed to believe in myself. Even if the situation were to suddenly change, I would be able to remedy the situation or turn the tide.[8] Moreover, I could not identify any flaws in the arrangements that the Prince of Yong and I had made.

***

Within the Roosting Clouds Nunnery, Fan Huiyao stood with her hands behind her back under the moon. Behind her, standing on both sides, were her trusted disciples—Wen Ziyan, Xiao Lan, Feng Feifei, Xie Xiaotong, Yan Wushuang, and Li Hanyou. Aside from the insane Liang Wan, the wounded Ling Yu, and Qin Zheng accompanying the imperial procession, everyone else was present. Behind these disciples stood a hundred swordswomen. All of them wore snow-white clothing. These women were the core force that the Fengyi Sect Master had painstakingly trained, all of them adopted by the Fengyi Sect Master at a young age. The *Moon Heart Sutra* that they trained in was missing a key component, leading them to become emotionless and desireless, their hearts as cold as ice. In their eyes, there were only loyalty and slaughter.

It was a good while before the Fengyi Sect Master spoke in a neutral voice, “The Autumn Hunt is when we will act. This operation must be successful, otherwise my Fengyi Sect will be consigned to eternal damnation.”

Wen Ziyan callously replied, “Master, do not worry. All of the proper arrangements have been made. If we still do not succeed, then it will be because destiny was against us.”

“I have never believed in destiny,” expressed Fan Huiyao grimly. “Ziyan, remember, although I cannot participate personally, all of you have to work together sincerely. Hanyou and Xiaotong, you two will be responsible for the Emperor. When the time comes, Qin Zheng will listen to your orders. Xiao Lan and Feifei, you must cooperate with the Crown Prince to suppress and eradicate all those who oppose him. Ziyan and Wushuang, you two will be responsible for besieging and annihilating the Prince of Yong’s faction. This seat still has to take care of that meddling busybody, True Compassion, and cannot go with you.”

Everyone kneeled with one knee on the ground, proclaiming, “Disciples

obey."

Fan Huiyao did not indicate for them to rise, continuing, "There is someone else who will cooperate with you. He is an honorary disciple that this seat took."

When she finished speaking, a man walked out from a room within. When the gaze of Ziyan and others fell upon his uncovered mask, all of them revealed looks of astonishment.

Fan Huiyao distantly stated, "He is a Protector of the Fengyi Sect. This time, you must listen to his suggestions."

Wen Ziyan and the others swiftly understood something that they had been puzzled about for some time. However, they did not express this understanding, only showing their respectful and solemn agreement.

Gazing out upon the vast and indistinct landscape veiled by the night, Fan Huiyao spoke again, "No matter how the Prince of Yong and his subordinates try to guess, they will not be able to anticipate this seat's arrangements. *Humph* ! Do they really think that this seat does not know of their desire to compel the Crown Prince to rebel? Only the Crown Prince and Lu Jingzhong would believe that the Emperor is preparing to depose the Crown Prince. How can they forget that this seat has had dealings with Li Yuan for so long? I understand Li Yuan's personality. Although he already has the intent to depose the Crown Prince, he has yet to come to the final decision. However, this will be fine. If Li Yuan wavers, it will undeniably be detrimental to our interests. Further, even if the Crown Prince is successful in his rebellion, there will be no end to the troubles. In the future, he will be forced to rely even more heavily upon our sect. All of you, listen up … after this operation succeeds, our Fengyi Sect will be the behind-the-scenes master of Great Yong. Therefore, all of you must do your utmost."

Wild ambition welled up in the eyes of Wen Ziyan and others. As women, they were about to complete an undertaking that no one else had been able to accomplish. Was there anything else that could fill them with more pride and arrogance?

***

Within the Prince of Qi's residence, behind multiple layers of screens, Li Xian languidly laid on a soft couch. His expression was completely aloof and detached. Uneasy, Qin Zheng walked over, holding a bowl of ginseng soup. She stated, "Your Imperial Highness, please take some ginseng. Tomorrow, you will set out to take part in the Autumn Hunt. It is best if you turn in early."

Li Xian gazed at Qin Zheng. With a smile of ridicule, he replied, "Good! Princess of Qi, you are truly formidable. With one bowl of medication, you leave me without the strength to even truss a chicken. It seems that you are truly loyal and devoted to your sect and have forgotten the Confucian moral injunctions for women."[9]

Shedding tears, Qin Zheng cried, "Your Imperial Highness, your servant is truly acting for your benefit. Before, although your servant approached Your Imperial Highness under orders, your servant has always treated Your Imperial Highness with wholehearted sincerity. However, I cannot rebel against my master. Moreover, she is correct. If the Crown Prince were to ascend to the throne, then Your Imperial Highness would be able to reach the highest position in court. Your servant and our child will be safe and sound. If the Prince of Yong were to ascend to the throne, not only would the lives of your servant and our child be in danger, even Your Imperial Highness would be harmed by the Prince of Yong sooner rather than later. If not for Your Imperial Highness's sake, your servant would never harm you."

Li Xian laughed agonizingly. "Am I really so duplicitous? Although I am scolding you, I also hope that you succeed, otherwise, our entire family will truly journey together to the underworld."

Moved, Qin Zheng murmured, "That won't happen, that won't happen. We will definitely succeed. Master definitely will not fail."

Li Xian sighed. Would it really be so easy? He suddenly recalled that thin, weak, and scholarly face.

It was impossible to know how many found it difficult to sleep on this night.

Footnotes :

浩如烟海, haoruyanhai – idiom, lit. vast as the open sea; fig. extensive (library)
不胫而走, bujing'erzou – idiom, lit. to get around quickly even though it doesn't have legs; to spread like wildfire
浑金璞玉, hunjinpuyu – idiom, lit. unrefined gold and unpolished jade; fig. a diamond in the rough
胸无城府, xiongwuchengfu – idiom, lit. having nothing hidden within the bosom; fig. open and candid
对答如流, duidaruliu – idiom, lit. able to reply quickly and fluently; having a ready answer
里应外合, liyingwaihe – idiom, lit. to act in concert within and without; fig. to act together
不知所措, buzhisuocuo – idiom, lit. not knowing where one had gone wrong; fig. embarrassed and at a complete loss
力挽狂澜, liwankuanglan – idiom, lit. to pull strongly against a violent tide; fig. to try hard to save a desperate crisis
三从四德, sancongside – the Confucian moral injunctions are namely: to obey in turn, three men: father, husband, and son, and adhere by the four virtues of morality (德), charm (容), courtesy in speech (言), and proficiency in needlework (功)

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 25: Missed the Decisive Opportunity

Volume 3, Chapter 25: Missed the Decisive Opportunity

On the twenty-first day of the ninth month of the twenty-fifth year of Wuwei, when the Emperor arrived at the Hunting Palace, as night fell, Crown Prince An rebelled. The Prince of Yong fell into grave jeopardy…. —*Yong Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Gaozu*

On the twenty-first day of the ninth month of second year of Tongtai, traitors faked an imperial edict that summoned the Prince of Yong to an audience, which was seen through by Zhe. Facing death, Zhe took command and came up with a plan that enabled the Prince of Yong to break the encirclement and escape….—*Southern Chu Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Jiang Suiyun*

Experiencing vertigo, I slept the entire journey to the Hunting Palace. The Hunting Palace was used by the Yong imperial clan every year for the Autumn Hunt as the temporary imperial residence. It was located at the foot of Mount Li[1] and had several dozen palace halls and courtyards. The Imperial Guard set up their encampments on three sides, surrounding the temporary imperial residence. The emperor naturally resided at the main palace hall, the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall. The empress, and Noble Consorts Ji and Yan, resided in the nearby palace halls. Noble Consort Zhangsun and Princess Changle resided in the Cherishing Fragrance Park located on the eastern side of the Hunting Palace. There were chrysanthemums everywhere in the park. Li Yuan was intentionally seeking to mitigate the depression that Princess Changle had been experiencing these last several days. The crown prince took up residence at the Jade Qilin Palace Hall on the eastern side, while the Prince of Yong took up residence at the Elegant Peace Pavilion located on the western side. The Prince of Qi took up residence in the Announcing Magnificence Park on the west side.

Knowing that I could not bear to be constantly on the move, I specially took medication so that I was in a deep sleep the entire journey. Only after

we had settled down in the Hunting Palace did I finally awaken.

Xiaoshunzi informed me that the emperor had already issued an edict proclaiming that due to the fatigue from the journey, he excused all of the princes and ministers from going to pay their respects. It would be sufficient for everyone to pay their respects tomorrow morning at the beginning of the Autumn Hunt. I inquired, “Is there any intelligence about the Crown Prince or the Fengyi Sect?”

“Nothing yet,” replied Xiaoshunzi, “Aside from Grand General Qin leading General Qin to personally set up the defenses, there isn’t anything else abnormal.”

Accepting the deployment map from Xiaoshunzi, I took a look. Grand General Qin was deserving of his reputation as a famous general. The defenses that he had laid out were nigh impregnable. Protecting the emperor were three thousand imperial guardsmen from the Eastern Barracks commanded by General Qin. Protecting the eastern side of the Hunting Palace was Commander Yang of the Southern Barracks of the Imperial Guard. Protecting the western side of the Hunting Palace was Commander Pei Yun of the Northern Barracks of the Imperial Guard. Responsible for the palace itself was Supervisor Leng Chuan of the Imperial Palace Guard. Passage from the western side of the Hunting Palace to the center of the palace required one to pass through the Moonlight Gate, while passage from the eastern side of the Hunting Palace required one to pass through the Concentrated Assembly Gate. Both of these gates were strictly controlled by the Eastern Barracks of the Imperial Guard and the Imperial Palace Guard. It would be extremely difficult to rise in revolt.

However, I smiled wryly. Grand General Qin was still too partial to his son. With these arrangements, although Qin Qing was under his control, Grand General Qin was also giving his son the opportunity to perform meritorious service if something were to happen.

In the dead of night, the Prince of Yong and I sampled tea and discussed the current state of affairs. I was a bit uneasy, while the Prince of Yong was actually quite calm and steady. He had experienced a countless number of risks and would not be overly vexed by such events. As the first watch of

evening passed, Sima Xiong suddenly came in and reported, “Your Imperial Highness, Wei *daren* has come to issue an edict.”

The Prince of Yong and I were both left dumbfounded. Wei Ying had come. After thinking it over, this wasn’t surprising. This time for the Autumn Hunt, the emperor had only brought along Wei Ying to help draft edicts for him. All of the other civil officials had not been brought along. Further, in recent years, Wei Ying was greatly favored by and always accompanying the emperor. The number of edicts that Wei Ying had drafted for the emperor was innumerable. The Prince of Yong did not find this the least bit strange. If his Imperial Father had promulgated an edict, it would naturally be Wei Ying who would come to deliver it. I accompanied the Prince of Yong and walked to the main hall. We saw Wei Ying standing there in a set of purple robes with a ribbon. He was elegant and had a graceful bearing. Seeing the Prince of Yong, Wei Ying smiled and stated, “Your Imperial Highness, this subject has come with His Imperial Majesty’s oral directive to issue His Imperial Majesty’s command. Would Your Imperial Highness please kowtow to accept the edict?”

After glancing at me, the Prince of Yong kowtowed. I swiftly followed behind him. While Jing Chi and Sima Xiong also kneeled as well, they glared at Wei Ying like a tiger stalking its prey. With the present situation, no one dared to be slack. Wei Ying did not react at all to the tense situation, only stating, “The Emperor’s oral directive, summoning the Prince of Yong, Li Zhi, to an audience with the Emperor at the Dawn’s Frost Palace Hall.”

Li Zhi voiced his acceptance of the emperor’s order. Rising to his feet, he smiled and inquired, “Wei *daren* , does Imperial Father have any instructions? Earlier today, didn’t Imperial Father tell all of us that there was no need to pay our respects?”

Wei Ying responded, “Originally, the Emperor was extremely exhausted. However, after napping, his vigor was restored. The Empress and several Noble Consorts are accompanying him right now, jointly sipping tea and chatting. Just now, the Emperor thought of something and decided to summon the Princes and Princess Changle to attend a family feast. This subject has already gone to issue the edict to the Crown Prince and Princess

Changle. Now, I'm going to invite the Prince of Qi."

Feeling a bit reassured, the Prince of Yong replied, "Wei *daren* , please go to issue the edict. This Prince will go immediately to see Imperial Father."

Finished issuing the edict, Wei Ying saluted and departed. With a smile, the Prince of Yong turned to me and said, "Wei Ying has the talent to be a prime minister. In the future, he can be placed in an important position."

Just as I was about to agree, I could feel a chill fall over my body for some odd reason. Wei Ying's performance could be said to have been perfect. However, why did I feel like something was inappropriate? In my subconscious mind, I had bent my ear and listened attentively with all my strength. At this moment, Wei Ying had already walked out of the Elegant Peace Pavilion. Just then, I heard the sound of his breathing relax. Afterwards, I heard a soft laugh. That was a laugh filled with satisfaction.[2]

I suddenly began to think of many things. Why was the neutral Wei family always deathly calm, while the Fengyi Sect used all of its strength to entice the Qin family? Although it could be because the Qin family had control of a section of the military, this should not mean that they would make no moves towards the Wei family. I then remembered that after the fire in the Eastern Palace, the crown prince's imprisonment was supervised by Wei Ying. In a meeting before the Imperial Presence, Palace Attendant Zheng had clearly and definitely denounced the crown prince. Soon afterwards, he was nearly assassinated at the Vermillion Bird Gate. The night of slaughter in Chang'an, the ones who attacked the Prince of Qing's subordinates and attempted to assassinate Palace Attendant Zheng were both men. Wei Ying's martial arts were actually quite good. This was something that Xiaoshunzi had unintentionally revealed during one discussion. The more I thought, the more I felt that we had fallen into a trap. What would happen if Wei Ying or even the Wei family was collaborating with the Fengyi Sect?

I resolutely issued a command, "Xiaoshunzi, go take a look outside and see if there is an ambush. Remember, do not reveal your presence."

Hearing my words, the expressions on the Prince of Yong and company's faces all changed greatly. Xiaoshunzi's complexion grew cold and his figure

disappeared into the night. After a short while, he returned. His complexion somewhat pale, he dryly reported, “There are imperial guardsmen from the Eastern Barracks lying in ambush at the Moonlight Gate. There are Fengyi Sect disciples present everywhere. I managed to catch sight of Wen Ziyan, but I did not dare get any closer.”

The Prince of Yong’s complexion rapidly paled. It was some time before he stated, “Wei Ying is colluding with the Fengyi Sect.”

During this short period of time, I had already understood many things. My expression grew distant and calm, and I lightly fanned myself with my fan. I placidly replied, “This was my miscalculation. Wei Ying’s status means that many individuals in the Hunting Palace will take his words as the Emperor’s edict. In addition, I have already seen through the Fengyi Sect’s plan. They used the Prince of Qi’s army to draw our attention, while their real plan is to use the Imperial Guard.”

Li Zhi’s bladelike eyebrows rose and he asked, “How could the Imperial Guard be used by them?”

“Your Imperial Highness and I both made a mistake in our thinking,” I answered, smiling wryly. “If they cannot obtain control over the Imperial Guard, then the Fengyi Sect cannot urge them into rebellion. The only ones that can control the Imperial Guard are Grand General Qin and Qin Qing. At present, I know full well that Qin Qing cannot possibly exercise control over the entirety of the Imperial Guard and so overlooked one detail. There is another individual who can control the Imperial Guard … that individual is the Emperor.”

Both Sima Xiong and Jing Chi cried out in alarm. Ignoring them, I continued, “As an imperial princess and as the daughter-in-law of the Qin family, if Li Hanyou were to carry the Emperor’s edict and claim that she has been granted control over the Imperial Guard, what do you all think will happen?”

Everyone shivered. I continued, “Li Hanyou is already quite influential in the Imperial Guard. Over these last two years, even though Qin Qing could not command the entirety of the Imperial Guard, at the very least, the

Eastern Barracks rested in his direct control. Li Hanyou, as an Imperial Princess, could easily bribe several thousand guardsmen since those imperial guardsmen are the Qin family's direct subordinates. In addition, Wei Ying is a ranking minister who is accompanying the Emperor to draft edicts. The Crown Prince is also the heir apparent. As long as they take control over the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall, they will prevent the Emperor's edicts from being transmitted. If that is the case, then Your Imperial Highness will become isolated and without help. At present, Your Imperial Highness's army is over a hundred *li* away. We are at the tender mercy of others."[3]

Sima Xiong, Jing Chi, and company were greatly alarmed. However, the Prince of Yong coolly observed, "Since Suiyun has already seen through the arrangements made by the Fengyi Sect, presumably you already have a way to fight back."

Sighing, I responded, "Sure enough, Your Imperial Highness knows well the mind of this subject. The only flaw in their plan is that they absolutely cannot arouse our suspicions. As a result, they have not dared to eliminate General Pei beforehand. At present, the only path before Your Imperial Highness is there. This is also why they have faked an edict, summoning Your Imperial Highness to the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall. They intend to ambush Your Imperial Highness at the Moonlight Gate, killing Your Imperial Highness with one blow. If that time comes, General Pei can only bend his head and follow orders. After all, General Pei is responsible for the lives of his entire family. Right now, due to Your Imperial Highness's good fortune, this subject was able to see through their plan. As a result, we have an opportunity ahead of us. Your Imperial Highness, please follow this subject's instructions to proceed."

"Suiyun, this Prince trusts that you have a way," replied Li Zhi serenely. "At present, this Prince's life is in your hands. Issue the commands."

Bowing, I said, "This subject's failure to detect the enemy's ruse was all due to this subject's grief. This subject is already quite fortunate that Your Imperial Highness has not blamed me for failing my duties. Many thanks to Your Imperial Highness for believing in this subject's judgment."

Li Zhi returned my bow, soothing, “Would Suiyun please not worry excessively? Today’s danger is also a result of this Prince prohibiting Suiyun access to some of what was going on. Suiyun, please issue your commands. This Prince will definitely obey orders.”

I straightened my back and detailed my plan, “If that is the case, then this subject will exceed my place and take matters into my own hands.[4] At present, Your Imperial Highness must break out of the encirclement and escape. Before breaking out, Your Imperial Highness must rendezvous with General Pei. This subject believes that General Pei is still safe and sound. According to the Fengyi Sect Master’s conduct, she will not inadvertently alert us to the danger that we face. General Pei’s martial arts are quite good and he has the trust and support of his imperial guardsmen. If they were to use force, Your Imperial Highness would likely become suspicious. As a result, right now, Xiaoshunzi will immediately go to see Pei Yun, so that he can rendezvous with Your Imperial Highness, combining forces to break out of the encirclement. There will definitely be assassins from the Fengyi Sect hidden by General Pei’s side. Xiaoshunzi must ensure General Pei’s safety, otherwise there will be no hope for Your Imperial Highness to escape. Right now, the fake edict should not yet have been issued to the entire Imperial Guard. As such, there shouldn’t be any problems for Your Imperial Highness to escape. However, before rendezvousing with General Pei, Your Imperial Highness must rely upon your household guard and the experts from the major sects of *jianghu* . The decision of the rendezvous location should be Your Imperial Highness’s.”

Pointing at the deployment map, Li Zhi stated, “At present, we can only break out from the southwestern corner. Xiaoshunzi, inform General Pei that we will rendezvous here. A bonfire will be the signal for action.”

Nodding his head, Xiaoshunzi once again disappeared into the night. I spoke again, “After Your Imperial Highness escapes, deliver this item to the closest army commanded by Qin Yong. This item was originally prepared by this subject for the worst.[5] I did not expect that it would come into play. With this item, at the very least, Qin Yong will not attack Your Imperial Highness.”

At this moment, Sima Xiong walked in and reported, “Your Imperial Highness, we are all ready. It is only that …” He looked at me, wanting to say something, but hesitating.

With a faint smile, I spoke, “Your Imperial Highness, this subject will not be able to accompany Your Imperial Highness and escape.”

The Prince of Yong was greatly alarmed. Grasping one of my hands, he replied, “Suiyun, what rubbish are you saying? You don’t even have the strength to truss a chicken. If you stay behind, you will inevitably be harmed. How can you not leave with me?”

“Your Imperial Highness, Suiyun is debilitated,” I explained, smiling sardonically. “For Your Imperial Highness to escape, it will inevitably require everyone to go as fast as possible. If this subject were to accompany Your Imperial Highness, it is likely that I will die on the road.”

Shaking his head, Li Zhi tried to change my mind, “Do not worry, this Prince will convey you using a carriage. Besides, you will only have the opportunity to live if you escape with this Prince. If you stay behind, there is no doubt that you will die. The Fengyi Sect will absolutely not let you off!”

I smiled peacefully. Walking beside the Prince of Yong, I whispered a sentence into his ear, leaving him dumbfounded. An expression of contemplation appeared on his face. Not waiting for him to comprehend fully, I declared, “Your Imperial Highness, you absolutely must not tarry! I will have Dong Que stay behind to protect me. If Your Imperial Highness is able to fight your way out of the encirclement, even if this subject were to fall into enemy hands, I will survive by a thread. Your Imperial Highness, right now, both the Prince of Qi’s and your armies are too far away. Grand General Qin’s army has become the crux of our plans. Please believe that this subject will do my utmost to win over the Grand General’s assistance. The Grand General is an experienced military commander. He will not resign himself to being constrained.”

At this moment, Sima Xiong walked closer and reported, “Your Imperial Highness, it’s already close to the scheduled time. Your Imperial Highness, please make a quick decision.”

I solemnly stated, “General Sima, His Imperial Highness’s safety is in your hands. Zhe places this important responsibility into your hands.”

Saluting me, Sima Xiong acknowledged, “Even if this general’s body is ground to dust, I will protect and ensure that His Imperial Highness will be able to fight his way out of the encirclement.”

Gazing at Jing Chi, I declared, “Jing Chi, you are a ranking general at His Imperial Highness’s side. This time, you carry a heavy responsibility. You cannot slack.”

With an agonized smile, Jing Chi replied, “If I do not strive my utmost, Sir, please punish me by ordering that I copy several books.”

Although everyone had heard me claim that I had a way of ensuring my survival, they all knew that there was no guarantee. While they fought their way out, they had a thirty percent chance of survival. If I stayed behind, my chance of survival was virtually nil. Searching their souls, they understood that they could not bring me along and escape. The guilt in their hearts filled them with rage and bloodlust.

Li Zhi gazed at Dong Que, this taciturn youth. In a heavy voice, he stated, “Dong Que, if you are able to ensure that Suiyun is reunited with this Prince, this Prince will definitely bestow hefty rewards upon you. Even if you have committed any crimes before, this Prince will not punish you for them.”

His expression unchanging, Dong Que did not speak a word in response, only saluting lightly. In comparison, I was smiling ironically. It seemed like the Prince of Yong had become suspicious of Dong Que’s identity.

With big strides, Li Zhi walked out of the palace hall. Sweeping his eyes over his armed-to-the-teeth subordinates, he declared, “It is this Prince who has implicated all of you. Right now, the Crown Prince is plotting treason and intends to murder this Prince. Everyone accompany this Prince in breaking out of the encirclement! This will be extremely difficult and there will be few survivors. There is no way that Zhi can repay all of you for your loyalty and service, and can only vow today that if this Prince is able to escape, all of you will be this Prince’s blood brothers[6] and will be heavily rewarded. If anyone is afraid, you can stay behind and surrender. This

Prince will absolutely not blame you."

Everyone knew that they could not cry out in loud voices in response. In heavy and low voices, they resounded, "The Crown Prince is tyrannical, the Emperor is being hoodwinked. Your Imperial Highness carries Great Yong's empire upon your shoulders. We subjects will offer our lives as sacrifice, ready to risk life and limb."

Li Zhi waved his hand. Under Sima Xiong and Jing Chi's protection, he mounted his horse. Spurring it into a gallop, he sped away. The only ones left in this large Elegant Peace Pavilion were Dong Que and me. Glancing at Dong Que, I smiled and asked, "Are you afraid?"

Dong Que uncaringly replied, "If even young master is unafraid, what is there for Dong Que to be afraid of? What are young master's arrangements?"

At this moment, deafening war cries could be heard in the distance. Picking up a torch, I ignited the flammable materials that Sima Xiong and company had prepared. Under the light of the fire, my pale complexion seemed to have a bit of color.

Outside of the Elegant Peace Pavilion, Wen Ziyan and Yan Wushuang were lying in wait with fifty Fengyi Sect swordswomen. They were monitoring this palace hall. Wei Ying had already returned to the Moonlight Gate, carrying the fake edict to order the imperial guardsmen stationed there to prepare to ambush the Prince of Yong. Based upon the Wei family's prestige and the emperor's edict, although these imperial guardsmen had misgivings in their hearts, they could only comply. After all, to them, the object of their loyalty was the emperor. Even so, at this location closest to the Elegant Peace Pavilion, Wei Ying had still arranged for these Fengyi Sect disciples to take charge of this unit of Imperial Guard so as to reduce the chances for the Prince of Yong to escape.

Just as they were anxiously waiting for things to develop, the main gate to the Elegant Peace Pavilion suddenly burst open. In golden armor and carrying a lance, the Prince of Yong shouted in a loud voice, "The Crown Prince is plotting a rebellion and intends to murder me! This Prince is the

Marshal of Heavenly Strategies; how can I be harmed by such vile characters!?! All those who are citizens of my Great Yong must not be instigated by those crafty scoundrels!”

Finished speaking, under the escort of Sima Xiong and Jing Chi, Li Zhi led a hundred cavalry and charged out. This Hunting Palace was only used for the Autumn Hunt. As a result, the roads within were acceptable for horses to travel upon. Wen Ziyan was startled watching these men charge out.

Wen Ziyan was able to react quickly. Determining the direction of their charge to be the Moonlight Gate, she believed that the Prince of Yong intended to plead his case before the emperor. Coming to this conclusion, she decided to cut off their retreat and attack them from behind. She whistled lightly and led the imperial guardsmen to encircle the Prince of Yong’s cavalry from behind.

Laying in ambush at the Moonlight Gate, Wei Ying heard the Prince of Yong’s shouts and Wen Ziyan’s light whistle. Shivering inwardly, he immediately issued the order to prepare their bows. He personally led a thousand imperial guardsmen forward to meet the Prince of Yong’s charge. After all, he had to guard against and prevent the Prince of Yong from breaking out in another direction. The Prince of Yong was adept at the art of war. Wei Ying did not believe that Li Zhi would take this path.

Under the moonlight, a black arrow slammed into the azure armor of an imperial guardsmen. Jing Chi let out a loud cry, the lance in his hands flickering through the air, blasting aside those mounted imperial guardsmen who blocked his path. Sima Xiong’s lance was not idle either, causing blood to splatter in all directions. The Prince of Yong screamed, “This Prince is Li Zhi! Who dares block my path!?!” The saber in his hand flickered, beheading an imperial guardsman. The imperial guardsmen behind him naturally stepped into the breach to replace his fallen comrade,[7] without a hint of fear. However, facing Great Yong’s military deity that they admired, their combativeness was quite low. In a just a few minutes, the spearhead formation that the Prince of Yong commanded had broken through the Imperial Guard’s blockade. Standing in a distance, Wei Ying frowned. It was inappropriate for him to take action as he had to maintain his status as an

imperial emissary. At this moment, Wen Ziyan's figure appeared. As swift as lightning she neared the Prince of Yong's flank in a few steps. Then her sword stabbed towards the Prince of Yong.

Just then, the Prince of Yong issued an order. The cavalrymen clearly approaching the Moonlight Gate suddenly and unexpectedly changed directions and charged towards the southwest. If an experienced military officer were in command, he would likely have prepared a contingency for this. However, neither Wei Ying nor Wen Ziyan were experienced military commanders. They also did not expect that the Prince of Yong would discover the conspiracy and so rapidly break out of the encirclement. As a result, they were both left dumbfounded, watching as the Prince of Yong broke the Imperial Guard's weak rear defensive line.

In a loud voice, Wen Ziyan cried out, "The traitor is seeking to rendezvous with Pei Yun. We cannot let him off! Give chase!"

At this moment, a fire erupted in the Elegant Peace Pavilion. The blaze spread quickly, smoke and dust covering the eyes. The Prince of Yong's spearhead formation charged past the Elegant Peace Pavilion, directly galloping towards the gate located at the southwest corner of the Hunting Palace. Just as the Prince of Yong passed the Elegant Peace Pavilion, a sword, like lightning, appeared, directly lunging at the Prince of Yong. One of the Prince of Yong's household guards jumped, chopping down with the saber in his hands. The light of the sword and saber were extinguished. The guard fell from midair, blood splattering everywhere. As for that sword, it was too late for it to attack again. The Prince of Yong had already escaped the encirclement of the Elegant Peace Pavilion.

The sword returned to its sheath. A woman dressed in plain, unadorned clothing swiftly retreated, dodging the strikes from the guards following behind the Prince of Yong.

Wen Ziyan shivered. Yan Wushuang's attack had failed. At this moment, if they were to mobilize all of the Fengyi Sect's swordswomen, although they could entangle the Prince of Yong, the losses suffered would definitely be disastrous. She would not begrudge these casualties. Further, there was likely no hope for the Prince of Yong to rendezvous with Pei Yun. When that

moment arrived, when the Prince of Yong was trapped in an impossible situation, it would be the perfect opportunity for her to utilize the swordswomen of the Fengyi Sect. As a result, Wen Ziyan did not send out the swordswomen but instead allowed the Prince of Yong to fight his way southwest.

Footnotes :

骊山, lishan – Mount Li is part of the Qinling (秦岭) mountain range and is located northwest of Xi'an (西安), Shaanxi Province; at the foot of the mountain is located Qin Shi Huang's tomb and the Terracotta Army

志得意满, zhideyiman – idiom, lit. fully content with one's achievements; fig. fully satisfied or contented

任人宰割, renrenzaige – idiom, lit. allow oneself to be sliced up by others; fig. to be trampled at will, at the tender mercy of others

越俎代庖, yuezudaipao – idiom, lit. to go beyond the sacrificial altar and take over the kitchen; fig. to exceed one's place and meddle in other people's affairs, to take matters into one's own hands

以防万一, yifangwanyi – idiom, lit. to guard against the unexpected; fig. just in case, prepared for any eventualities

患难之交, huannanzhijiao – idiom, lit. a friend in times of tribulation; fig. companion in adversity

前仆后继, qianpuhouji – idiom, lit. one falls, the next follows; fig. stepping into the breach to replace fallen comrades, advancing wave upon wave

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 26: Escaping the Hunting Palace

Volume 3, Chapter 26: Escaping the Hunting Palace

At the time, Taizong feigned an attack to the east before turning to the southwest. He was only fortunately able to escape with support from Pei Yun. The rebel army pursued him for a hundred *li* . On several occasions, Taizong was almost surrounded, only escaping with the protection and sacrifices of his subordinates …—*Yong Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Taizong*

Just before the Prince of Yong had broken out of the encirclement, Commander Pei Yun of the Northern Barracks of the Imperial Guard ran into an unprecedented crisis. While he was surrounded by layers of his fellow soldiers, he could only meet this enemy by himself.

With a light sigh, Pei Yun tore a piece off of his battle gown, binding the wound on his shoulder. Facing him was a graceful and handsome youth with a face like jade—Xiahou Yuanfeng. This youth was smiling as he faced Pei Yun. At Xiahou Yuanfeng's side were four of the Fengyi Sect's swordswomen. One of the swordswomen's swords was covered with blood.

Surrounding these six individuals were Xiahou Yuanfeng's subordinate imperial guardsmen. Beyond them, surrounding them were the imperial guardsmen loyal to Pei Yun. At this moment, the two sides were at an impasse. As a result, Xiahou Yuanfeng did not dare to excessively compel Pei Yun, otherwise the enraged imperial guardsmen loyal to Pei Yun would grind their bodies into pulp. At the same time, Pei Yun did not dare to order his subordinates to attack, as he would likely lose his life before they could break through.

Xiahou Yuanfeng smiled and stated, "Why is General Pei so obstinate? You were originally a subordinate of the Prince of Qi. His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, is a supporter of His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince. How can the small kindnesses from the Prince of Yong match His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi's heartfelt affection? If General is willing to pull

back at the precipice, this subordinate can guarantee His Imperial Highnesses, the Crown Prince and the Prince of Qi, won't make things difficult for you."

Pei Yun smiled callously and replied, "This general is a military officer of Great Yong and do not accept indiscriminate orders. I do not believe that the Emperor would issue an edict to put the Prince of Yong to death. As such, there is no need for you, Xiahou Yuanfeng, to waste your words. Who doesn't know that you and the Fengyi Sect are both members of the Crown Prince's faction? The Crown Prince wishes to rebel, probably because he is worried that he would be deposed by the Emperor because of his notoriety."

Two of the swordswomen suddenly twirled their swords, streaking through the air. Pei Yun's figure twisted, dodging the blade edges. The two other swordswomen also attacked. The saber in Pei Yun's hand formed an impenetrable defense. The five of them fought, the four swordswomen surrounding Pei Yun. Taking this opportunity, Xiahou Yuanfeng also pounced towards Pei Yun. The dazzling glint of steel was incomparably beautiful. The swords in the hands of the four swordswomen struck once again. Pei Yun's martial arts were on par with Xiahou Yuanfeng's. Facing five attacks, he was overwhelmed. At this moment, the imperial guardsmen nearby suddenly cried out. A wry smile appeared on Xiahou Yuanfeng's face and he could only slow his offensive, allowing Pei Yun to just barely hold on.

Just at this moment, an azure figure penetrated through the encirclement, speeding by. Xiahou Yuanfeng felt as if a falcon or a wolf was targeting his rear. Hurriedly, he tried to turn his body sideways and fall back. A gust of wind created by a palm strike slammed into his back. Xiahou Yuanfeng was powerless to fight back, while the azure figure had already charged into the center of the four women's sword formation. Pei Yun felt a yin-principled palm send him out of the formation. At this moment, the four swordswomen simultaneously let out a soft cry, striking with their swords, absolutely unrestrained as they attacked that azure-clothed individual. The azure figure flickered, his empty hands completely suppressing the four swordswomen's ferocious and enchanting attacks. In less than ten

exchanges, the azure-clothed man's figure tore through the air. It was a feast for the eyes.[1] Afterwards, four blood-curdling screams could be heard. The four swordswomen had been struck at their vital points, falling to the ground and dying. However, the four swordswomen's crazed attacks also left their marks upon the azure-clothed individual's body. The hems of his robes had been slashed into pieces.

Xiaoshunzi frowned, looking down at the dead swordswomen. Their attacks were crazed and ferocious. If several of them acted together, their might would be greater than Li Hanyou and company. It seemed like these women were the Fengyi Sect Master's trump card. Xiaoshunzi's gaze fell upon Xiahou Yuanfeng, killing intent concentrating.

Xiahou Yuanfeng shivered. By this point, his internal energy had already been restored. He promptly stated, "Fine," before he charged outwards.

As Xiaoshunzi was about to raise his fists and follow, Pei Yun had already shouted out, "Lord Li! Now is not the time! It is more important to save His Imperial Highness!"

Not saying a word, Xiaoshunzi frowned again. Pei Yun did not make a move to stop him. The Imperial Guard and Imperial Palace Guard under Xiahou Yuanfeng's command were all martial art experts. There was no need to make their move here. If they were entangled, they would likely be too late to save the Prince of Yong. Pei Yun was extremely clear. If that side had not already made their move on the Prince of Yong, there was no way that Xiahou Yuanfeng would not have acted against him. Moreover, hadn't Xiaoshunzi arrived to ask for help? Was there any other reason?

Xiaoshunzi then immediately informed Pei Yun, "Wei Ying is a part of the Crown Prince's faction and issued a fake edict. His Imperial Highness wishes to break the encirclement and wants you to go provide support."

Pei Yun immediately issued the order to depart. He was highly knowledgeable about the terrain of the Hunting Palace. Combined with Xiaoshunzi's guidance, it wasn't long before they were able to catch sight of the raging bonfire and the sounds of battle. Pei Yun looked behind him. Earlier, Commander Huang of the Eastern Barracks had delivered the

deployment map that scattered the four thousand imperial guardsmen supporting Pei Yun around the western side of the Hunting Palace, while concentrating the thousand imperial guardsmen supporting Xiahou Yuanfeng. Although Pei Yun had misgivings, he did not foresee that a full-scale revolt would actually happen. As a result, even though he had issued the order to mobilize, there were only a little over two thousand imperial guardsmen following him to go protect the Prince of Yong. Would they be able to help the Prince of Yong break out of the encirclement with such few troops? Pei Yun was deeply worried.

Pei Yun and Xiaoshunzi arrived at the corner gate located at the southwest of the Hunting Palace just when the Prince of Yong's advance had been blocked by the outermost defensive line of imperial guardsmen. The imperial guards here had been directly under the command of Grand General Qin and were commanded by Vice Commander Sun Ding of the Eastern Barracks. Sun Ding did not have any ties with the Fengyi Sect. However, as he was deploying his troops earlier, one of Qin Qing's personal guards had come with Qin Qing's command tally to issue strict orders. Regardless of the night's events, not a single soldier was permitted to leave from this direction. As a result, although they were half believing the shouts from the Prince of Yong's soldiers that the crown prince was rebelling, since the Prince of Yong did not have an imperial command or Grand General Qin's command, the imperial guardsmen positioned here could absolutely not permit the Prince of Yong to leave from here. The two sides began to argue vehemently before fighting erupted. However, the situation was at an impasse.

The Prince of Yong only had slightly over a hundred cavalry with him. No matter how formidable they were, there was no way for them to break through the defensive line that the turncoat Imperial Guard had established. Just as the skirmish reached its climax, the figure of Wen Ziyan and company, chasing after the Prince of Yong, appeared.

Pei Yun did not have time to care that he was outnumbered. In a loud voice, he shouted, "Your Imperial Highness, this general, Pei Yun, has come to escort you!"

A look of relief flashed across the Prince of Yong's grave and stern face. Without Pei Yun's imperial guardsmen, it would likely be nigh impossible for him to escape from the Hunting Palace. He roared back loudly, "Pei Yun! Cut open a path for this Prince!"

Accepting the order, Pei Yun signaled with his hand. Numerous imperial guardsmen surrounded and protected the Prince of Yong and his household guard, charging towards the palace gate.

Seeing Pei Yun, Wen Ziyan immediately knew that the situation was dire. She repeatedly leaped through the air, moving in the direction of the Prince of Yong. Her martial arts were excellent and she had, in the past, regularly fought on the battlefield. As a result, she was able to dodge all efforts by the Imperial Guard to block her. Very quickly, she was able to close in on the Prince of Yong. Right then, an azure figure dropped down from high up in the sky. Wen Ziyan stabbed up with her sword. With his bare hands, that azure figure reached out to try to catch Wen Ziyan's sword. Wen Ziyan exploded with anger at being so underestimated, concentrating her internal energy at the swordpoint. She suddenly heard a crunch. Her treasured sword, capable of slicing any metal and chopping jade, had actually shattered. While Wen Ziyan was still paralyzed by the shock, that man's palm smashed into her chest. Possessing a steel mind, Wen Ziyan thrust again with her broken sword, in the hopes of ensuring that both sides suffer. The man's attacks became somewhat sluggish.

In the midst of the battle, the two began to fight. Wen Ziyan could finally clearly see the man's appearance. He was the Demonic Shadow, Li Shun. Wen Ziyan shook. If he were killed, then the Prince of Yong would not have any reliable experts by his side. As a result, she steeled her heart and concentrated fully on fighting him. At this moment, one of the snow-white robed swordswomen threw her sword to Wen Ziyan. Taking the sword, Wen Ziyan fully exhibited the prowess of the Fengyi Sect's heaven-shaking Gale-Wind Sword Style. The swift sword that enabled the transcendence of the limits of the human body quickly covered up the heaven-soaring flames and reflections of the other weapons in the battle. As for Xiaoshunzi, his movements were uncanny and peculiar, barely discernable within the

glinting of steel. This kind of duel, under normal circumstances, would naturally leave spectators filled with admiration and a desire to submit. However, currently, everyone was too occupied to notice.

Under Jing Chi, Sima Xiong, and Pei Yun's assault, the Imperial Guard positioned at the perimeter of the Hunting Palace could no longer hold on. Although Commander Yang was a fierce general, facing the attacks of three of the top thirty of Great Yong's most ferocious generals, he ultimately could not hide the flaws in his defensive lines any longer, as his formation revealed an opening. The Prince of Yong and his subordinates were all veterans of many battles. With one glance, Jing Chi let out a yell and galloped forward, his lance sweeping away all those who opposed him, killing an Imperial Guard officer. With this, the turncoat Imperial Guard's morale dropped. Taking advantage of this opportunity, the Prince of Yong issued an order for everyone to charge forward. And so, a thousand or so cavalry were able to break through and escape from the Hunting Palace, disappearing into the night. In less than an hour, more than half of Pei Yun's subordinate imperial guardsmen were killed within the walls of the Hunting Palace. At this moment, several Fengyi Sect disciples had closed in. Wen Ziyan hardened her heart, determined to ensure that Xiaoshunzi not be allowed to escape.

Xiaoshunzi's heart was quite calm. Although his martial arts were excellent, he would likely lose in the face of the brutal assaults by so many swordswomen. Moreover, those imperial guardsmen assisting the Fengyi Sect had gradually surrounded him as well. It would be too late if he did not take this opportunity to leave. Thinking of this, his figure strangely and suddenly floated into the sky. Having not expected this, the swordswomen's attacks missed and revealed openings. By this time, Xiaoshunzi had already hurtled towards Wen Ziyan. At rapt attention and with a calm aura, Wen Ziyan struck with the power of thunder. Xiaoshunzi's right hand raised, a hairpin clenched between his index and middle fingers. At the same time that Wen Ziyan's sword streaked past Xiaoshunzi's ribs, the hairpin streaked past Wen Ziyan's cheek. Wen Ziyan only felt a cold air assault her senses and subconsciously turned her head away. In this way, she was able to escape losing one of her eyes, while Xiaoshunzi had seized the

opportunity to zoom past her. Kicking a mounted imperial guardsman off of his horse, Xiaoshunzi jumped on and spurred the horse onwards, chasing after the Prince of Yong.

Fury blazing from her eyes, Wen Ziyan shouted, “Staunchly follow them! Even if you have to chase them a hundred *li* , the Prince of Yong must die!” Finished speaking, she accepted the handed-over reins of a horse. Mounting, she took the lead to chase after the Prince of Yong.

Standing atop the walls, Wei Ying frowned slightly. Within this Hunting Palace, the Imperial Guard under their direct control merely numbered five thousand. All of the other Imperial Guard forces could simply be used to help them defend. The tasks of surrounding the Dawn’s Frost Palace Hall and trying to kill the Prince of Yong could only be assigned to trusted and loyal imperial guardsmen. With this, the numbers were a little tense. Thinking it over, he had still sent two thousand imperial guardsmen to follow Wen Ziyan and chase the Prince of Yong. The remaining three thousand imperial guardsmen ought to be enough to control the Dawn’s Frost Palace Hall and keep an eye on the other imperial guardsmen.

What a pity! Gazing at the roiling dust charging off into the distance, Wei Ying wondered how the Prince of Yong had discovered the trap, allowing him to escape from the Hunting Palace. The hiccup with the Prince of Qi had thrown all of the original plans into disarray. Although Qin Zheng had managed to steal the Prince of Qi’s command tally, which mobilized the army, it was insufficient to have them directly attack the Prince of Yong’s army or surround the Hunting Palace. They would definitely refuse such orders, declaring that they would need to see the Prince of Qi’s direct orders, otherwise they would absolutely disobey. Wei Ying decided that he needed to ply the Prince of Qi. Now that the Prince of Yong had escaped, if he were to rendezvous with Grand General Qin’s army, it would be impossible for his side to win without the reinforcement of the Prince of Qi’s army. As he contemplated, Wei Ying frowned gravely. Seemingly every contingency had been planned for before this rebellion. However, no one could have foreseen that the Prince of Yong would have so quickly seen through the fake edict. How did this happen?

As dawn approached, hoofbeats and the snorting of horses could be heard from within the mist. Wen Ziyan had relentlessly led the turncoat imperial guardsmen in pursuit of the Prince of Yong throughout the entire night, unwilling to let the prince escape. Even though the Prince of Yong was a skilled military tactician, he had no other alternative but to continue fleeing. Initially, the Prince of Yong wanted to travel without worrying about pursuers. However, he had broken out of the encirclement in a hurry. There were even instances when two men shared a horse, while those pursuing had commandeered horses from other Imperial Guard units. On average, each of the pursuers had two horses and could switch horses at any time. With this, their speed was far faster than the Prince of Yong's escort. Without any other choice, the Prince of Yong could only take a circuitous route, repeatedly setting ambushes and raids against those chasing, hoping to annihilate them. However, the two commanders leading the charge were Commander Huang and Wen Ziyan. Huang Sha was a veteran general, while Wen Ziyan was an assassin that had appeared and disappeared at will on the battlefield. Of the two, one was cautious and skilled at the art of war, while the other had transcendent martial arts and was the perfect scout. The entire journey, the Prince of Yong could find nothing to take advantage of.

It was impossible to make something out of nothing.[2] The Prince of Yong was at a disadvantage regardless of military strength or speed. His better tactics were canceled out by the opponent's merciless military force. The Prince of Yong had never been in such a difficult situation before.

Only at daybreak, when the Prince of Yong had deployed all of the experts in an ambush at the mouth of a valley was he able to inflict comparatively heavy losses upon his pursuers, allowing the Prince of Yong, who had been fleeing through the night, to breathe a sigh of relief.

The Prince of Yong thoroughly understood. The pursuing Imperial Guard were definitely those who would loyally listen to the Fengyi Sect's commands. Although they were not many in number, in comparison, his troops were even fewer. Unless he could rendezvous with the rest of his household guard, it would be extremely difficult for him to escape this most dangerous situation in his life. The present priority was to meet up with his

own troops. The Prince of Yong could not bring himself to believe that Qin Yong would help him. Right now, the Fengyi Sect had clearly seized control of the command tally. When the time came, Qin Yong could likely only listen to the Fengyi Sect's fake edicts and act. As such, the most important objective right now for the Prince of Yong was to converge with his personal troops commanded by Zhangsun Ji and Dong Zhi.

At this moment, a horse galloped over from the distance. Seeing the horse near, everyone trembled. Although it was only a single horseman, if it were Wen Ziyan or one of the Fengyi Sect's swordswomen acting as scouts, then their whereabouts would immediately be discovered. If they could not rest for a moment, they would likely collapse from exhaustion. As the horseman approached, an imperial bodyguard with sharp eyes cried out, "Your Imperial Highness, it's Li Shun, Lord Li!" Only then did everyone relax.

Xiaoshunzi was initially far behind. In addition, his riding proficiency paled in comparison to those following the Prince of Yong. As a result, he had decided to remain hidden. Changing into the armor of an imperial guardsman, he had followed behind Wen Ziyan and company. Although he only had one horse, he had used *qinggong* to lighten the horse's burden. Only in this way was he able to keep up with the Imperial Guard commanded by Wen Ziyan. He originally had planned to seize the opportunity to assassinate Wen Ziyan. However, these imperial guardsmen were elite soldiers of Great Yong and it wasn't that easy for him to infiltrate them. Although Xiaoshunzi had seized a couple of opportunities to kill, when the imperial guardsmen were trying to find the Prince of Yong's whereabouts and when they were watering and feeding their horses, the results weren't that great. The last time he had attacked, he had been surrounded and besieged by Wen Ziyan, the Fengyi Sect disciples, and the Imperial Guard. Fortunately, he was skillful and sly and had prepared an escape route beforehand, enabling him to escape. Seeing that his attacks weren't having any effect, Xiaoshunzi resolved to catch up with the Prince of Yong. Based upon his superior tracking skills and luck, Xiaoshunzi was finally able to catch up to the Prince of Yong. From a distance, he was overjoyed when he caught sight of the Prince of Yong's golden armor. Finally, he would be able to see the young master again. He was extremely

worried that Jiang Zhe would be harmed during the chaos of battle.

But the closer Xiaoshunzi got to the Prince of Yong and his escort, the more uneasy he became, while his complexion became increasingly merciless and severe. Arriving before the Prince of Yong, he asked bluntly, “Why isn’t the young master here?”

If anyone else were asking in such a manner, even if the Prince of Yong was of mind to explain, he would have exploded with anger. After all, the difference between a liege and his vassals, between a superior and his subordinates, needed to be adhered to. However, not even the Prince of Yong could become angry at Xiaoshunzi for asking this question in such a severe tone. Everyone knew that this man had only one master. He had obeyed Jiang Zhe’s orders to transmit an order to Pei Yun. Only with this was everyone able to successfully break out of the encirclement. As of now, Xiaoshunzi was covered with blood. Compared to his usual spotless appearance, this left everyone unable to become angry with him. Calmly, the Prince of Yong answered, “Suiyun stayed behind in the Hunting Palace.”

Hearing these words, Xiaoshunzi’s expression greatly changed and killing intent exploded forth. A merciless light suddenly shone in his eyes, and he ferociously glared at the Prince of Yong. Everyone subconsciously moved forward to protect the Prince of Yong. At this moment, Jing Chi stepped forward and stated, “Lord Li, this was Sir Jiang’s own decision.”

Xiaoshunzi glanced at Jing Chi, his gaze softening. After all, this Jing Chi had spent years within the Cold Courtyard. He had personally monitored Jing Chi’s studies and was quite familiar with this man’s character.

Seeing that Xiaoshunzi’s mind gradually calmed, Jing Chi urged his horse forward and whispered some words. A strange look flashed across Xiaoshunzi’s face. After bowing and saluting, he stated, “This servant has offended Your Imperial Highness. Your Imperial Highness, please forgive me.”

“That you are able to understand is enough,” replied Li Zhi with a smile. “This Prince was also worried that even if we were able to bring Suiyun along, he likely wouldn’t survive. In this way, he still has a chance of

surviving. If you are worried, there is no harm for you to rush back to the Hunting Palace. Based upon your martial arts, you should be able to ensure Suiyun's safety."

With a stern countenance, Xiaoshunzi placidly requested, "No, this servant asks for the order to personally go see Qin Yong."

Startled, Li Zhi inquired, "Why is this? Are you not worried about Suiyun's safety?"

In a heartless voice, Xiaoshunzi explained, "If something were to happen to my young master, this servant would sacrifice my own life to slaughter the families of all of his enemies. However, now that young master's fate hangs in the balance, if young master's plan is to fail and he has already fallen into the enemy's hands, then he will have no way of surviving. It would be useless for me to rush to his side. If the young master is still alive, then this servant cannot rescue him by myself. Since that is the case, I can only do my utmost to let the young master escape danger at the earliest opportunity. At present, Your Imperial Highness is alone with a small force here. Your pursuers will arrive within an hour. It is likely impossible for either Your Imperial Highness's or the Prince of Qi's army to arrive. Both sides are keeping an eye on the other, leaving neither able to break away. As such, Grand General Qin's army is Your Imperial Highness's only chance of survival. However, it is impossible for Your Imperial Highness to command the Qin army. If the Crown Prince's faction is able to seize control of the command tally and imperial edicts, even the Qin army will become Your Imperial Highness's enemy. The only thing that can be done now is to force the Qin army to obey Your Imperial Highness. Only then can victory and the rescue my young master be attained. This matter can only be handled by me, Li Shun. My young master has already arranged someone beside Qin Yong. I am the only one knowledgeable about this. Although the young master did not speak of this, I understand full well his intentions."

Li Zhi's spirits were roused and he responded, "So that is why … The two of you, master and servant, are both individuals filled with wisdom and bravery. Since that is the case, this Prince will place this heavy responsibility onto your shoulders." So speaking, he handed a silk pouch to Xiaoshunzi.

Accepting it, Xiaoshunzi did not open it, only neutrally remarking, “Your Imperial Highness, be careful. Even if the Qin army is able to mobilize to assist Your Imperial Highness, it will still take some time before they can arrive. Although Your Imperial Highness’s art of war and strategy are superb, Wen Ziyan has a well-trained and powerful force under her command. She also has extremely outstanding martial arts. Your Imperial Highness is in for an exceedingly arduous journey. However, if Your Imperial Highness is able to survive for two days, this servant can guarantee that the Qin army will arrive to rescue Your Imperial Highness. There is no need to speak of what would happen if this servant were to fail. This servant and my master will accompany Your Imperial Highness in death.”

“This Prince has always known of your abilities,” replied Li Zhi. “You only need to do your best. This Prince is somewhat certain that we will survive two days.”

Saluting lightly, Xiaoshunzi turned and spurred his horse, departing. Watching his figure recede into the distance, Li Zhi shouted in a loud voice, “We’ll rest for a while longer before we hurry onwards. If we can rendezvous with General Zhangsun, at the very least, we can be safe and sound. Even if we cannot rendezvous with the main army, we definitely cannot fight Wen Ziyan head on.”

Everyone simultaneously voiced their affirmative, all of them seizing this opportunity to rest. Gazing towards the rising sun, Li Zhi murmured, “Suiyun, this Prince can only rely upon you …”

***

Concurrent with the instant the Prince of Yong had broken out of the encirclement and escaped, the entirety of the Hunting Palace had been disturbed. At the time, Li Yuan was dining with the empress and his noble consorts. Frowning, he stated, “Leng Chuan, what is going on outside?”

Complying, Leng Chuan walked out of the palace door. Seeing the blazing flames in the distance, he trembled with fear. A fire erupting in the Hunting Palace was definitely not a normal occurrence. Further, he could hear the sounds of battle. Promptly returning inside, he reported, “Your Imperial Majesty, it seems like a rebellion has broken out. Your Imperial Majesty, is

there a need to summon Grand General Qin?”

At this moment, heavy footsteps came approaching from without. A solemn voice rang out with a request. “Qin Yi and Cheng Shu request an audience with Your Imperial Majesty.”

Li Yuan immediately replied, “Come in!”

Following Li Yuan’s command, Qin Yi and Cheng Shu hurriedly walked in. Getting straight to the point, Li Yuan inquired, “Lord Qin, what is going on?”

Wearing a grave face, Qin Yi asked, “Your Imperial Majesty, is Wei Ying here?”

Startled for a second, Li Yuan then responded, “Tonight, We have had no need for his services to draft any edicts and had him retire to rest.”

His expression changing greatly, Qin Yi stated, “Just now, Wei Ying came to issue an edict, stating that Your Imperial Majesty summoned this subject and the Duke of Wei. However, just as we arrived here, we discovered that turmoil has engulfed the western side of the palace.”

Li Yuan furiously questioned, “What is going on? We did not have Wei Ying issue any decree! Lord Qin, did you see an edict?”

Smiling wryly, Qin Yi replied, “He claimed that it was Your Imperial Majesty’s oral directive, summoning this subject to discuss the defenses of the Hunting Palace.”

Cheng Shu hurriedly interjected, “Your Imperial Majesty, it is likely that someone is intending to rebel. We must quickly mobilize the Imperial Guard and Imperial Palace Guard to protect Your Imperial Majesty.”

Qin Yi’s expression sank. The individual responsible today for the protection of the Dawn’s Frost Palace Hall was Qin Qing. Why had he not seen this son of his when he had arrived? Not caring to even ask Li Yuan for instructions, Qin Yi charged out of the palace hall. Bellowing, he roared, “Qin Qing! Qin Qing! Quickly get your ass over here!”

However, Qin Yi quickly discovered that aside from the responses from the imperial palace guards, the imperial guardsmen did not utter a single word, as they stood with their hands resting on the hilts of their sheathed

sabers. As for Qin Qing, he had disappeared without a trace. Qin Yi's mind gradually became heavy. He had never before so hated himself for his overindulgence. How could he not have expected that the Fengyi Sect had likely extended their tendrils into this unit of imperial guards after being commanded by Qin Qing for so long. What an incompetent, unfilial son!

By this point, Li Yuan had walked out of the door to the palace hall. In a loud voice, he shouted, "Why aren't you going to summon General Qin Qing?"

At this moment, beautiful laughter floated over from a distance. A group of women neared, led by Li Hanyou. At her side was Qin Zheng and another beautiful young woman. All three wore bluish-white, close-fitting clothes and had swords in their hands. Behind them were thirty-six swordswomen in snow-white clothing, formed into four columns. Each woman emitted bone-chilling killing desire. Moreover, their strides were vigorous and in perfect unison, serving to multiply their killing intent.

Li Hanyou walked to the steps leading to the palace hall. Kowtowing, she stated, "Your Imperial Majesty, under the Crown Prince's command, your servant is currently suppressing the Prince of Yong's rebellion. His Imperial Highness was worried about Your Imperial Majesty's safety and has dispatched your servant to come to protect Your Imperial Majesty."

His complexion gloomy and cold, Li Yuan grimly asked, "Do you truly believe that you will be successful?"

Leng Chuan walked to the emperor's side. Li Yuan grimly continued, "It is impossible for you to control the entire Imperial Guard. As long as We make a public appeal, those imperial guardsmen will immediately change sides!"

Li Hanyou sneered. "Your Imperial Majesty speaks the truth. The Grand General has been strict with the soldiers under his command. As a result, it is true that we do not have any way of controlling the entire Imperial Guard. Even right now, we can only control roughly five thousand imperial guardsmen and still need to dispatch two thousand of them to chase after the Prince of Yong. However, they are enough. As long as we prevent Your Imperial Majesty from leaving the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall, then your

servant can control the entire Imperial Guard."

Li Yuan's complexion changed greatly. He replied, "You have stolen Our golden pendant?"

"Your Imperial Majesty is truly wise," mocked Li Hanyou, smiling. "The only ones who can completely control the Imperial Guard are Grand General Qin, himself, and Your Imperial Majesty's golden pendant. At present, Grand General Qin is confined here, while Your Imperial Majesty's golden pendant is in our hands. Your Imperial Majesty, you are already powerless. Once we have exterminated the rebels, the Crown Prince will naturally personally come to beg for forgiveness."

Li Yuan's entire person trembled. An incomparable wrath almost left him unable to stand steadily. He sternly asked, "Who was it that stole Our golden pendant?"

At this moment, the empress and three noble consorts walked out of the palace hall. The empress's face was as cold as ice, Noble Consort Ji's face had a slight smile upon it, Noble Consort Zhangsun quaked, while Noble Consort Yan expressed alarm and terror all over her face. Li Yuan's gaze fell upon Noble Consort Ji. Impossible! He was always on strict guard against her. If so, who was it? Noble Consort Zhangsun would absolutely not perform such an act, as she did not have any reasons to do so. Noble Consort Yan was tender and gutless. If so, then there was only one possibility … Li Yuan's gaze fell upon the empress.

Note :

In China, there are multiple ways of saluting. In *jianghu* and common usage, a typical salute involves making a fist with the right hand, while either using the left hand to wrap around the right fist or the right fist is held against the open left palm . Females switch this around. It's also switched around to denote the start of an argument or fight. In polite society, salutes were made holding the two palms forward together, the fingers overlapping somewhat .

Footnotes :

目不暇接, mubuxiajie – idiom, lit. too much for the eyes to take in; fig. a

feast for the eyes

巧妇难为**无米之炊**, qiaofunanweiwumizhichui – idiom, lit. the cleverest housewife cannot cook without rice; fig. you can't make something out of nothing

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 27: Blood Splatters the Imperial Residence

Volume 3, Chapter 27: Blood Splatters the Imperial Residence

A look of guilt flashed across Empress Dou's face. However, it was quickly replaced with pride and conceit. Li Yuan replied, "*Zitong* ,[1] you have the honor and glory to be the Empress. Why would you do such a thing?"

Empress Dou laughed sardonically and shouted, "The honor and glory of an Empress? *Humph* ! Your servant only knows that if my son is unable to ascend to the throne, then the only path before us is death! Now that Your Imperial Majesty has the intention of deposing the Crown Prince and enfeoffing the Prince of Yong, in what position will you place your servant and my son?" As she finished, her voice grew hoarse from the shouting, her tone hardening with intensity.

Li Yuan was astonished before he angrily inquired, "When have We stated that the Crown Prince is to be deposed? Who incited you with such words?"

Shame filled Empress Dou's eyes and she avoided Li Yuan's gaze. Noble Consort Ji laughed lightly and answered, "Everyone in the court knows that your mind has been wavering. In addition, the Crown Prince has committed a wrong and is worried of your punishment. As such, I had no choice but to persuade the Empress to take this action."

Li Yuan's eyes radiated disdain and he gazed at Qin Yi. In embarrassment, Qin Yi stated, "Your Imperial Majesty, this subject has also heard the rumors that the Crown Prince raped the wife of one of the subordinate ministers of the Eastern Palace, ultimately causing her death. However, this matter was inappropriate for this subject to bring it up. This is the authority of the censors."

"What a bastard!" cursed Li Yuan furiously. "I had just ordered him to meditate and he still goes and performs such a shameless act! Since ancient times, if a liege is not a liege, a vassal not a vassal ... We will definitely …" Li Yuan abruptly fell silent.

He gazed at the empress. Her complexion pale, Empress Dou replied, “An’er tearfully complained to me claiming that if this matter were to reach the Emperor’s ears, it would likely be extremely difficult for him to maintain his position as heir apparent. Your servant only has this one son. Whatever happens, I cannot watch him stride into the abyss.”

Li Yuan gave a miserable laugh. “Good, good … married for so many years and yet you only care about that unfilial son. Fine … Fine …” His expression gradually grew grim, as he continued, “Ji Xia, Li Hanyou, if We are able to leave the Dawn’s Frost Palace Hall, your plan will likely fail.”

Smiling sweetly, Noble Consort Ji replied, “Your servant knows that Your Imperial Majesty has a hundred palace guards here. However, your servant will definitely not allow a single one of them to escape.”

Li Yuan laughed harshly. In a loud voice, he commanded, “Execute all of these rebels for Us!” As soon as Li Yuan’s voice rang out, the palace guards hidden around the palace hall charged out. Originally, Li Yuan empathized with them. All those palace guards not on duty were permitted to rest in the side halls of the palace. As a result, though the palace guards outside of the palace hall had already been eliminated, many palace guards still remained alive. Under Li Yuan’s command, Qin Yi and Cheng Shu stood before the emperor and Zhangsun, protecting the two of them. Leng Chuan leaped at Noble Consort Ji. Shrugging aside her court robes, Noble Consort Ji revealed a set of black-colored, close-fitting clothes. The two began to exchange blows, while the yellow-garbed imperial palace guards began to fight with the Fengyi Sect swordswomen. In an instant, the grounds before the Dawn’s Frost Palace Hall became an abattoir.

In terror, Noble Consort Yan watched the scene play out. At this moment, Qin Zheng sprang forward, shouting out, “Mother Concubine, quickly retreat with the Her Imperial Majesty, the Empress, into the palace hall!”

Although Noble Consort Yan was ordinarily weak-willed, in this moment, she hesitated. She shouted, “Your Imperial Majesty, your servant did not know about this matter.” Finished speaking, she threw herself towards the emperor.

Qin Zheng was surprised. She began extending her hands to stop Noble Consort Yan, but ultimately could not bring herself to do so. Li Yuan frowned, gazing upon the frightened face of Noble Consort Yan. He knew that this concubine of his was always meek and weak. It was definitely impossible for her to become involved in this rebellion. Sighing, he allowed her into his embrace. Qin Yi and Cheng Shu went to intervene, but as subjects, they could not do anything to harm Noble Consort Yan. As a result, neither made any movements. With some hesitation, Noble Consort Yan entered Li Yuan's embrace. Afterwards, Li Yuan handed her into the care of Noble Consort Zhangsun. The two noble consorts clung to each other for support, gazing down in fear at what was happening on the grounds before the palace hall.

Qin Zheng stamped her foot before turning and joining Ji Xia in her fight against Leng Chuan. Having had the responsibility of ensuring Li Yuan's safety for years, Ji Xia frequently collaborated with Leng Chuan. As a result, she was extremely knowledgeable about Leng Chuan's martial arts. As for Qin Zheng, while she did not frequently use her martial arts, she had innate intelligence and her swordsmanship was excellent. The two trapped Leng Chuan. Although they could not defeat him, Leng Chuan could also not escape.

Currently, the imperial palace guards were in an extremely dangerous predicament. Although all of them had great martial arts skills and mostly hailed from the military, thus trained to fight cooperatively, the sword formation employed by the female disciples of the Fengyi Sect were truly ferocious and sinister, allowing them to coordinate their attacks and provide mutual support. Their vicious moves divided the imperial palace guardsmen. It wasn't long before the grounds were covered by corpses and blood.

Li Yuan was deeply worried. He didn't expect that the Fengyi Sect's sword formation would be so formidable. What's to be done?

While Li Hanyou was commanding the attack, she herself was also astonished by the martial arts of these swordswomen. It was a pity that there was no way for her to lead them in the future. Didn't this mean that

she was ultimately no more than a tool? As she calculated how to seize command of these swordswomen, she kept a close watch on everyone present. She saw that although Leng Chuan held the advantage against Ji Xia and Qin Zheng, he had no way of getting out. As for the thirty-six swordswomen that Li Hanyou had brought her, the "Heavenly Dipper Sword Formation" that they were using was quickly massacring the Imperial Palace Guard. It seemed that only way to end this quickly would be to take the emperor hostage. Leading Xie Xiaotong, Li Hanyou walked towards Li Yuan, their faces stone-cold.

Looks of worry appeared on both Qin Yi and Cheng Shu's faces. If they were in battle, they would have nothing to fear. But this kind of *jianghu* fight was not their specialty. As a result, they had not even a shred of certainty that they would be able to handle Li Hanyou and that other disciple from the Fengyi Sect. Great Yong was very different from other states. The majority of the martial art experts were in the army, while the number of experts in the palace weren't that many. Under normal circumstances, this wasn't a problem, as the Fengyi Sect bore the burden of a significant portion of the protective duties. As a result, as soon as the Fengyi Sect rebelled, the defenses around the Yong emperor immediately weakened considerably. Of course, one of the main reasons why the Fengyi Sect had such an advantage was because of the brilliance of the swordsmanship of its disciples.

At this moment, Xie Xiaotong suddenly pulled on Li Hanyou's sleeve and whispered, "Someone is raising a racket outside. Junior apprentice sister, we need to go take a look. Right now, no one can know that we are trying to coerce the Emperor."

Li Hanyou frowned and replied, "You stay here, I'll go take a look."

Finished speaking, she rushed to the gates, almost as if she was flying. Outside were the three thousand imperial guardsmen that the Fengyi Sect controlled, tightly guarding the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall and its environs. Right now, outside of the gates stood a woman dressed in palace dress. In a stern voice, she declared, "We are an imperial princess and wish to go pay our respects to Imperial Father. Who dares to block my path?" This woman was Princess Changle. Behind her were several palace maids and eunuchs.

Li Hanyou's eyes brightened. If she were able to take the princess hostage, then there would be no need to fear Li Yuan's uncompromising attitude. Li Hanyou walked to Princess Changle's side. Laughing humorlessly, she asked, "Why has Your Imperial Highness, the Princess, come here? Did no one try to stop you on the way?"

Princess Changle gazed at Li Hanyou, her eyes having an indescribable feeling to them. In a somber voice, she stated, "Witnessing the turmoil of the palace, We are worried about Imperial Father and Mother Concubine, and thus have come to pay our respects. Although there were those who dared to try to stop me along the way, who truly dares to make things difficult for Us? Li Hanyou, why are you here? Are Imperial Father and Mother Concubine well?"

Li Hanyou gazed upon Princess Changle, seeing that her usually clear and neutral complexion had suddenly added some of the majesty and prestige of an imperial clansman. No wonder no one dared to stop her progress. After all, the imperial guardsmen outside had only been duped by her fake orders. No wonder Princess Changle was able to arrive at the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall. However, this was also good. Li Yuan doted heavily upon Princess Changle. It was likely that she could utilize the princess to force Li Yuan to surrender. If Li Yuan truly wished to fight to the death, the situation likely could not be settled. Consequently, Li Hanyou bleakly stated, "The Prince of Yong has rebelled, Jingjiang has specially come to protect the Imperial Presence. Your Imperial Highness, the Princess, please …"

An inhospitable and severe look flashed in Princess Changle's eyes, as she replied haughtily, "Good, We were just about to go see Imperial Father."

Finished speaking, Princess Changle moved forward, walking into the grounds of the palace hall. The several palace maids and eunuchs behind her hurriedly followed in her footsteps. The imperial guardsmen moved to obstruct them, but were prevented from doing so by Li Hanyou. She concluded that it was better for them to come in rather than be left outside to babble nonsense.

Entering through the gate, as soon as Princess Changle saw the blood and bodies on the grounds, her pampered body was on the verge of collapse. At

this moment, Noble Consort Zhangsun caught sight of her daughter. In alarm, she cried out, “Zhen’er!” Just as she was about to descend the steps, she was blocked by Li Yuan.

Li Yuan gazed at Li Hanyou, standing beside Princess Changle. Furiously, he bellowed, “Li Hanyou! You are also a member of the imperial clan! We have even bestowed the title of Imperial Princess upon you! None could have guessed that you would be so filled with ingratitude!”

Hearing the emperor’s words, the faces of Qin Yi, Cheng Shu, and Princess Changle all abruptly changed. As for Li Hanyou, although she was humiliated and angry, she carefully expressed herself. Smiling, she replied, “Your Imperial Majesty, if you are willing to back down, your servant would rather die ten thousand times than dare to offend you. Otherwise …” Li Hanyou’s eyes fell upon Princess Changle.

By now, Princess Changle had regained her composure. She did not even glance at Li Hanyou. In a loud voice, she shouted, “Imperial Father! This child has something to report! Would Imperial Father please temporarily restrain your anger.”

Li Yuan’s heart jumped. Seeing that the current state of affairs was to his disadvantage, he heaved a heavy sigh and replied, “Fine … Changle, let’s hear what you have to say. Everyone, withdraw!”

Li Hanyou was overjoyed. After all was said and done, she did not fear that Li Yuan would have the opportunity to escape. She waved her hand. The swordswomen all quickly retreated behind her. The imperial palace guardsmen fortunate to survive withdrew to the front of the steps to the palace hall, protecting Li Yuan and company. Only Empress Dou stood all alone off to the side.

After glancing at Li Hanyou, Princess Changle gravely stated, “This matter can’t be discussed in public. Jingjiang, if you don’t have any objections, there is no harm for us to enter the palace hall to discuss this matter.”

Li Hanyou only desired the situation be resolved as quickly as possible. As such, she was more than happy to show her magnanimity. She smiled and replied, “Rightly so.”

Li Yuan, Qin Yi, and company were all jubilant. With this, they could use the building to set up a defense. All of them could not help but respect Princess Changle. Immediately, the swordswomen of the Fengyi Sect surrounded the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall. With great care, Li Hanyou entered the palace hall. The remaining imperial palace guardsmen took positions controlling all of the entrances. Li Yuan took his seat upon the dragon throne with Qin Yi and Cheng Shu on his left and right, respectively. Standing before them were Li Hanyou and Noble Consort Ji. The atmosphere in the hall was oppressive. No one knew what to say.

At this moment, Princess Changle rose to her feet. After paying her respects to Li Yuan, she stated, "Princess of Jingjiang, regardless of how you are quibbling, you are presently besieging Imperial Father. This behavior is an act of rebellion against the Emperor.[2] Regardless of whether it is the Crown Prince or second brother, neither would be willing to tolerate such an act. Moreover, isn't your motive to temporarily force Imperial Father to stay within the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall? If you use force, Imperial Father will likely not be able to accept coercion. What good would that be to you? If you are able to calm your heart and discuss this situation with Imperial Father, and make a few demands, wouldn't that be superior to continuing the fight? What's more, second brother has already escaped. The most important task before you isn't to be entangled here."

Li Hanyou's expression changed. She naturally understood the meaning behind Princess Changle's words. However, would Li Yuan be willing to accept her demands? She glanced at Noble Consort Ji, a questioning look in her eyes. Noble Consort Ji smiled and replied, "Changle is truly a sensible individual. We do not have many demands and only ask that Your Imperial Majesty and Grand General Qin hand over your command tallies, allowing us to mobilize and command Grand General Qin's army. After everything is settled, the Crown Prince will naturally come to ask for Your Imperial Majesty's forgiveness."

Li Yuan and company all looked furious. Just as they were about to reject the demands, Princess Changle spoke up, "This matter is of utmost importance. The decision cannot be made without careful consideration.

How about you first go outside and wait for a moment, allowing us the time to discuss this matter."

Thinking it over, Li Hanyou agreed, "I will give you the time it takes for a stick of incense to burn.[1] Is that enough?"

Although Li Hanyou's demand were very onerous, Princess Changle immediately voiced her acceptance, "That is enough time. Would you please wait outside and allow Us to persuade Imperial Father? Noble Consort Yan, don't you wish to inquire of sixth brother's situation?"

At present, Noble Consort Yan was truly at wit's end. Hearing Princess Changle's words, she asked, "Zheng'er, where is Xian'er? We do not believe that he would participate in such a despicable enterprise."

With a look of shame and embarrassment, Qin Zheng glanced at Li Hanyou. Li Hanyou indifferently ordered Qin Zheng, "Go explain things to Her Imperial Highness." Finished speaking, Li Hanyou turned and walked out of the palace hall. Smiling, Noble Consort Ji called for Empress Dou and Noble Consort Yan to talk in a side hall. At present, the only ones left in the palace hall were Princess Changle, Li Yuan, and company.

Seeing that everyone else had left, Li Yuan inquired, filled with misgivings, "Changle, what are you trying to do?"

Smiling slightly, Princess Changle answered, "Imperial Father, the present situation is extremely dangerous. However, second brother has already escaped. Soldiers coming to save the Emperor will soon come. If something were to happen to Imperial Father, then the empire will truly be thrown into disorder. As such, there is no harm for Imperial Father to temporarily bear with this patiently. Presumably, before they manage to capture or kill second brother, they will not dare to act against Imperial Father. As such, Imperial Father can temporarily preserve a portion of our fighting strength in the event that they are driven to desperate action and harm Imperial Father and Mother Concubine."

Li Yuan sighed. "How do We not understand this principle? However, their demands are too severe. If We were to hand over the command tallies, not only would your second brother's life be in peril, even We would be in

danger."

"Imperial Father, there is no need to worry about this," replied Princess Changle. "We can give them the command tallies and imperial edicts that they require. However, the man commanding Grand General Qin's army has to be a trusted subordinate of the Grand General. Don't tell me that there isn't a private token? When the time comes, combined with Imperial Father's secret edict, wouldn't that be enough?"

Qin Yi suddenly raised his eyebrows, his eyes wide, and stated, "Your Imperial Majesty, this is feasible. Qin Yong is my nephew and is absolutely loyal to the imperial household. Your Imperial Majesty, please write a secret edict with Your Imperial Majesty's private seal. He will definitely recognize it as real. Combined with a private token from me, he will definitely mobilize to come rescue Your Imperial Majesty."

Li Yuan was overjoyed and praised, "Good! Changle is truly meticulous." However, when he took a look, he could not find brush or paper nearby.

From within her bosom, Changle removed a white damask silk handkerchief and said, "Imperial Father, it is enough to use your private seal. In a little while, there will naturally be someone who will compose the edict."

Li Yuan's expression was filled with hesitation. At this very second, he could not bring himself to trust anyone. Seeing this, Princess Changle hurriedly reported, "Imperial Father, this child has no other way. If Imperial Father were to write this edict, then it would not see the light of day. Imperial Father, you must know that this child has always been at loggerheads with the Crown Prince. Don't tell me that I would work with them."

Li Yuan glanced at Princess Changle. At long last, he plucked the ornamental signet thumb ring from his hand. After dipping it in ink, he pressed it upon the damask handkerchief. Princess Changle quickly picked up the handkerchief and glanced at Qin Yi. Without hesitating, Qin Yi handed a jade pendant to Princess Changle. This piece of jade was extremely ordinary. Princess Changle could not help be filled with misgivings.

Qin Yi explained, “This was a birthday present from Yong’er to me. He will definitely recognize it.”

With this, Princess Changle relaxed. “Grand General, it is likely that General Qin Qing has already been imprisoned by the Fengyi Sect. In a moment, there is no harm to request that he be delivered here.” Qin Yi’s expression darkened and did not reply.

At this moment, Li Hanyou shouted, “Time is up, We are coming in.” Coming in this time, Li Hanyou’s face was as cold as ice. It seemed that she definitely wanted an outcome.

Neither servile nor overbearing, Princess Changle spoke, “Jingjiang, Imperial Father has already agreed to your demands. However, we also have our own conditions.”

“As long as they are reasonable and fair, they can be discussed,” replied Li Hanyou surprised, her eyebrows raising.

Smiling, Princess Changle said, “These conditions aren’t difficult to meet. Number one, before second brother returns or the Fengyi Sect returns with second brother’s head, you may not come and harass Imperial Father again.”

Li Hanyou straightforwardly accepted, “There is no problem with this condition. Before the rebels are eradicated, we would naturally not come to harass His Imperial Majesty.”

Princess Changle serenely continued, “As for the second condition … it is likely that General Qin Qing is under your control. There shouldn’t be any problems in delivering him here, right?”

Li Hanyou laughed callously. To the Fengyi Sect, Qin Qing was already useless. As such, she granted, “This also won’t be a problem. In a little while, We will deliver him.” Although she did not reveal any of her expressions, everyone within the palace hall who were experts at reading body language immediately saw through her thoughts. As a result, their loathing only grew.

Smiling slightly, Princess Changle continued, “This third condition is for Us. Mother Concubine and Our maids are all within the Cherishing Fragrance Park. At present, the entire Hunting Palace has fallen into chaos. We wish for those maids to be brought to the Dawn’s Frost Palace Hall. I

wonder, is this possible?”

Li Hanyou, herself, knew that Princess Changle could not be permitted to return to the Cherishing Fragrance Park. Nodding her head, she agreed, “This is only natural. We will immediately dispatch someone to bring them here.”

Princess Changle interjected, “Wait a moment! Please bring this one along. When We departed the Cherishing Fragrance Park, We gave the order that without Our orders, none of them are permitted to take even half a step from the Cherishing Fragrance Park. Have this servant transmit my command so as to prevent any unnecessary arguments.”

Li Hanyou was going to object, but hearing this last sentence, she found it reasonable. There were some things that were better to allow people to know about and hear, but definitely not allow them to see. If these things were known by everyone, it would be an inconvenience to kill and silence all of them in the future. Li Hanyou glanced at Noble Consort Ji. Seeing her nod her head lightly, Li Hanyou replied, “That’s fine. We’ll bring him along.”

Princess Changle smiled. “Then would Jingjiang please go fulfill these conditions. If there aren’t any problems, once General Qin Qing and Our maids arrive, Imperial Father will hand over the command tallies.”

Rage flashed in Li Hanyou’s eyes as she asked, “What will happen if We fulfill Our promises and the Emperor reneges on the deal? What will happen then? We do not have that much time to be entangled by you.”

Li Yuan coldly snorted. Remaining calm, Princess Changle expressed, “If that is the case, then We will put Our life into your hands.”

Pleased with herself, Li Hanyou smiled and conveyed, “Good, a word spoken can never be taken back.”[4] Finished speaking, she held out her right hand. Smiling faintly, Princess Changle walked over and raised her slender, white hand. The two clasped their right hands together, signifying the sealing of the vow. As they exchanged glances, their eyes met, both revealing grim and heartless looks.

Princess Changle smiled faintly. Taking out a jade pendant wrapped in a snow white damask silk handkerchief, she handed them to Xiaoliuzi,

instructing, “Tell Head Maid Zhou, tell her to bring our people over here.”

Li Hanyou looked carefully. The majority of the handkerchief was revealed openly. There was no sign of characters or ink. As a result, she did not step forward to examine it. After all, it was inappropriate for her to overly offend the imperial household. Whatever else happened, the Fengyi Sect still needed the imperial household to exercise control over the empire.

Accepting the jade pendant and handkerchief, Xiaoliuzi respectfully withdrew. Gesturing with her hands, Xie Xiaotong followed the little eunuch with two of the swordswomen.

Princess Changle could finally breathe. She had finally finished the task that that man had entrusted to her. With a smile on her face, she gazed at Li Hanyou and stated, “It’ll probably take a bit. Would Jingjiang like to drink a cup of tea?”

Footnotes :

梓童, zitong – is an appellation of the empress by the emperor
犯上作乱, fanshangzuoluan – idiom, lit. defying one’s superiors and starting a rebellion; fig. to rebel against the emperor
Roughly five minutes
君子一言，快马一鞭, junziyiyan, kuaimayibian – idiom, lit. a gentleman’s word goes faster than a swift horse; fig. a gentleman never goes back on his words

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 28: Panicked Cherishing Fragrance - Gravity Tales

Volume 3, Chapter 28: Panicked Cherishing Fragrance

The Hunting Palace had gradually calmed down. Although the Prince of Yong's escape was a major problem for the Fengyi Sect, it also greatly reduced the strength of the resistance within the Hunting Palace. Wei Ying, controlling the Imperial Guard, very quickly seized control of the entirety of the palace. Of the remaining imperial guards, aside from the three thousand imperial guardsmen that the Fengyi Sect directly manipulated and used to control the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall, Xiahou Yuanfeng's one thousand imperial guardsmen took over responsibility for defending the Jade Qilin Palace Hall where the Crown Prince resided. The other Imperial Guard units had been completely mixed up and dispatched to separately guard and exercise control over various parts of the Hunting Palace. All of the ministers that had accompanied the Imperial Presence were placed under house arrest, even those supportive of the Fengyi Sect were no exception. Of course, none of these ministers wanted to be involved in the turmoil and harm their reputations.

Wei Ying dispatched squads of Imperial Guard to patrol the grounds of the palace. He had to make sure that there weren't any remnant resistance forces. The originally refined and elegant features carried with them a faint bloodlust, completely devoid of his previous composed poise.

At this moment, he was extremely anxious. However, he could not help but think about what had happened earlier. The relationship between the Wei family and the Fengyi Sect was a secret known to no one else. Who would believe that Madam Wei was actually the sworn sister of the Fengyi Sect Master? After Wei Ying was born, the Fengyi Sect Master took a fancy to him, secretly passing martial arts to him. Wei Ying did not fail to live up to the Fengyi Sect Master's expectations, becoming an outstanding talent skilled

with both brush and sword. Because the Wei family had always taken a neutral stance, no one knew that Wei Ying was the Fengyi Sect's only male honorary disciple.

As Wei Ying grew up, he had gradually drifted apart from the Fengyi Sect. After all, as the son of the prime minister and as an acclaimed outstanding youth, his future prospects were boundless. If he maintained an intimate relationship with the Fengyi Sect, it would likely arouse suspicion from and exclusion by the imperial household. As a result, he practically never displayed his martial arts, wholeheartedly focused on becoming a ranking minister. However, just as he was flushed with success, a previously unimagined psychological shock occurred.

Regardless of whether it was the crown prince's plan or the Fengyi Sect abusing its position for private gain, he had become the prince consort selected by the emperor, Princess Changle's fiancé. Honestly speaking, he did not have any feelings for Princess Changle. After all, to his modest exterior and arrogant heart, Princess Changle was not the wife that he yearned for in his dreams. But he knew full well what it meant to take a princess as his bride. As a result, he cheerfully accepted the emperor's arrangements. However, with this, the psychological shock arrived. Princess Changle would rather become a nun than marry him. This caused the always successful Wei Ying to be filled with an unprecedented anger. It was during this year that he began to once again become close with the Fengyi Sect. However, during this entire process, he had always kept his face hidden. Outside of the Fengyi Sect Master, no one else knew that this Wei *daren* who received the emperor's grace would actually become the Fengyi Sect Master's personally appointed protector.

At the beginning, Wei Ying did not want to rebel, going so far to delay implementing the Fengyi Sect Master's decisions on several occasions. It was very easy for him to become the prime minister in ten years. There was no need to risk his life and his entire family. However, when the Fengyi Sect Master first proposed that plan, there was no way for him to refuse. Obtaining Princess Changle had become the only way for him to advance his status in the imperial household. As a result, he had followed the Fengyi Sect

Master's plan and participated in that farce. He went so far as to use his elegant and refined scholarly exterior and bearing, his soft and sweet words to win the affection of Lü'e. This was all because whenever Princess Changle deliberately avoided him, she would send Lü'e to make excuses. Wei Ying seized these opportunities to steal the young maid's heart. On that day, Lü'e, intent on ensuring Princess Changle's marriage to the Wei family, pretended to be confused. Were it not for the timely arrival of Changle's mother, Princess Changle would likely have been forced to marry him. However, after the events of that day, Wei Ying knew that he had lost the opportunity. Seeing that his road to a lofty position be cut off halfway, Wei Ying finally made the difficult decision. As long as he was able to ensure the crown prince's ascension, then based upon his meritorious service, it would be extremely easy for him to marry a princess.

However, the results were undesirable. He did not know how the Prince of Yong had seen through his flawless performance and had surprisingly and successfully broken out. This caused him great panic. Although Li Hanyou had already gone to force the emperor to surrender the command tallies in order to mobilize the Qin army and pursue the Prince of Yong, what would happen if things were to fail? Wei Ying had never experienced this kind of vexation and anxiety. As a result, as the resistance was being eliminated, he was unprecedentedly ruthless. On the road, he had already executed a dozen or more officials who had the courage to resist. Blood completely covered the entirety of the Hunting Palace.

What made Wei Ying enraged was that Li Hanyou, Xiao Lan, and company had privately discussed and decided to imprison the Crown Prince's Junior Mentor Lu Jingzhong within the Jade Qilin Palace Hall without informing him. The reasoning of these female disciples was that Lu Jingzhong would definitely become an enemy in the future. Rather than permit Lu Jingzhong to disrupt things, harming the Fengyi Sect's interests, it was best to take this opportunity to have him killed. Fortunately, Wei Yin had arrived in time. But what was done could not be undone.[1] Since they had already offended Lu Jingzhong, he could not go on to offend Li Hanyou and Xiao Lan. Helpless, Wei Ying could only agree to have Lu Jingzhong placed under house arrest. Seeing how the female disciples of the Fengyi Sect did not carefully consider

the present conditions, cutting off an arm before success had even been attained, Wei Ying was filled with implacable hatred.

As he patrolled, Wei Ying racked his brains to come up with a way to control the situation. When he arrived before the Cherishing Fragrance Park, his heart suddenly skipped a beat. To him, regardless of the benefits that he would receive from a successful rebellion, none of it was as important as taking Princess Changle as his bride. Arriving here, he suddenly realized that Princess Changle was probably extremely frightened and anxious with the chaos outside. If he were to seize this opportunity to comfort her, he may be able to ease the princess's worries. Thinking this, he made a detour and headed for the Cherishing Fragrance Park's entrance. The imperial guardsmen stationed there weren't controlled by the Fengyi Sect or part of the crown prince's faction. However, seeing Wei Ying, no one dared to obstruct his progress. After all, none of them were fools. They were well aware of what had happened within the Hunting Palace. But with the emperor and Grand General Qin missing, these imperial guardsmen did not risk any rash moves. After all, this was internal strife within the imperial household. If they supported the wrong person, they would likely lose their lives. In their eyes, Wei Ying was the emperor's emissary. After all, he had jurisdiction over the golden pendant that controlled the Imperial Guard. Entering the Cherishing Fragrance Park, Wei Ying felt a bleak chill in the air. The chrysanthemums within the park carried a hint of desolate death. Walking to the steps leading to the princess's sleeping quarters, he shouted, "This subject, Wei Ying, seeks an audience with Her Imperial Highness, the Princess."

The quarters within were silent. It was a good while before a pretty and dignified palace maid of more than thirty years age walked out. She replied, "Head Maid Zhou of the Jade Phoenix Palace Hall pays my respects to Wei *daren* . Her Imperial Highness, the Princess, has already gone to the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall and is no longer here."

Wei Ying was startled. "The Hunting Palace is in chaos right now. Why would Head Maid Zhou permit the Princess to go to the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall?"

Head Maid Zhou kowtowed to the ground and answered, “How would this servant dare to obstruct the Princess’s movements? The Princess was worried about the safety of His Imperial Majesty and the Noble Consort, thus headed towards the Dawn’s Frost Palace Hall.”

A look of disappointment crossed Wei Ying’s face. Suddenly, he discovered that Head Maid Zhou’s expression was somewhat frenetic. Wei Ying suddenly recalled that although the Prince of Yong had escaped, Jiang Zhe did not accompany him. At the very least, no one had seen him. Wei Ying had personally overseen the search of the charred ruins of the palace hall that the Prince of Yong had taken up residence and had not discovered a single corpse. If that was the case, then it was highly likely that Jiang Zhe was still within the Hunting Palace. Part of the reason for his personal inspection and patrol of the palace grounds was to find that person’s whereabouts. However, what he could not determine was whether the man had really stayed behind. As a result, he did not conduct a full scale search. After all, the Fengyi Sect’s current dominance was no more than an unrealistic rosy view.[2] If someone were to make a clarion call, the Imperial Guard would likely become uncontrollable. Recalling the rumors of the love affair between Princess Changle and that Jiang Zhe, Wei Ying realized that if the rumors were true, Jiang Zhe likely hid within the Cherishing Fragrance Park. Thinking this, a sneer appeared on Wei Ying’s face and he declared, “Since that is the case, allow this official to search the Cherishing Fragrance Park. At present, the rebels within the palace have not been fully eradicated. This official cannot bear the responsibilities if the Princess were to be frightened.”

Hearing this, Head Maid Zhou was greatly alarmed. She knew that the Cherishing Fragrance Park could not be searched. Just as the fires erupted, an unexpected guest had suddenly arrived at Princess Changle’s sleeping quarters. Although Head Maid Zhou had never met this guest before, she knew of this person’s identity—Jiang Zhe, Major Jiang. He was a gifted scholar of Southern Chu and a trusted adviser of the Prince of Yong, and was also the man in Princess Changle’s heart. Supporting him was a handsome-looking youth with an icy aura. Head Maid Zhou had heard that Jiang Zhe had a former Southern Chu eunuch by his side. However, no matter how she

considered, this youth did not seem like a eunuch.

The two had come secretly and had surprisingly directly barged into the princess's sleeping quarters. At the time, Head Maid Zhou was the only one accompanying the princess. After arriving, that pallid and feeble-looking scholarly youth had her and his servant wait outside, while he had a secret and long conversation with the princess. Afterwards, Princess Changle had brought along a few palace maids and that little eunuch, Xiaoliuzi, and departed for the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall. As she departed, she exhorted Head Maid Zhou to take good care of Major Jiang and to ensure that he wasn't discovered. However, now that Wei Ying wished to search the Cherishing Fragrance Park, what was to be done? The princess had stated that Wei Ying was a part of the rebels.

The changing expressions on the head maid's face were all observed by Wei Ying. He was both overjoyed and deeply jealous. If he could capture Jiang Zhe, then he would be able to grasp all of the Prince of Yong's secrets. When he was about to enter the palace hall to conduct the search, he suddenly remembered the existence of Demonic Shadow Li Shun. If the Demonic Shadow was by Jiang Zhe's side, then wouldn't he be walking into a trap? Wei Ying had not received Wen Ziyan's report and did not know that Xiaoshunzi also had already escaped. The Demonic Shadow was only loyal to Jiang Zhe. This fact was known by virtually everyone. The people who wrung their hands at this fact were innumerable. Wei Ying did not have the courage to face that kind of expert. Steeling his heart, Wei Ying commanded, "Assemble the Imperial Guard and have this palace hall surrounded. Also go to Concubine Lan and transfer over a few swordswomen."

At the start, in order to avoid suspicion, Wei Ying had not left any of the Fengyi Sect's swordswomen by his side. However, right now, without those fierce and tough swordswomen, he did not dare to barge into the palace hall.

Within the Cherishing Fragrance Park, in the princess's sleeping quarters, I sat on the soft couch, calculating the probability of success. However, with the tangled and complicated state of affairs, it was extremely difficult to determine. Although I did not exactly know why the Imperial Guard had changed sides, I believed that this was all a result of the Fengyi Sect

mobilizing their strength in the harem, stealing the command tallies and isolating the emperor from the outside world. With this, the Fengyi Sect would be able to seize the advantage. Afterwards, they could use fake edicts to mobilize the emperor's entire strength to encircle and annihilate the Prince of Yong. No one could have expected that something like this could happen at a location where the emperor had assembled all of his forces. This was probably the result of my underestimation of the Fengyi Sect's power within the harem after being so successful in our previous confrontations. However, this was not the moment to be thinking about this. Princess Changle was the only way for me to completely reverse the current, undesirable situation. Otherwise, no matter how I exerted myself, the only result that I could hope for was a zero-sum scenario where neither side won. Great Yong would not be able to survive such a result.

In addition, having gotten my hands on the emperor's secret edict and Grand General Qin's token, the most important thing to do now was to how to safely deliver these items. Although I had already chosen a candidate, I did not have the least assurance of success. If it failed, then everything would be consigned to eternal damnation. That wouldn't do. A ruthless look shone in my eyes. If the man was inappropriate, I must immediately have him killed and absolutely not give him the opportunity to divulge any secrets. When the time came, I could only have Dong Que take care of things. However, Dong Que's safety was not assured. He would likely be stopped and killed by the Fengyi Sect.

Just as I was racking my brains, the window frame rattled and Dong Que nimbly entered. In a low voice, he reported, "Young master, everything is settled. He will arrive shortly."

In a grave voice, I asked, "Is he reliable?"

"Young master, do not worry," soothed Dong Que. "After undergoing the incident at the Eastern Palace, my senior apprentice brother was placed under house arrest by Li Hanyou. He was only released today by the Crown Prince. My senior apprentice brother has already been disheartened by the Fengyi Sect and the Crown Prince. As a result, using righteousness and responsibility, I was able to acquire his agreement."

Relaxing, I inquired, “Did he recognize you?”

Smiling wryly, Dong Que responded, “It seems like my transformation was truly enormous. Although senior apprentice brother had misgivings, he was unable to recognize me. He would not have believed a word I said if I did not have the Prince of Yong’s golden pendant.”

I smiled slightly. “That’s good. Moreover, in a moment, please do not take offense. I need to place some restrictions on your senior apprentice brother’s body. I have no choice in the matter. This is the only way for the Prince of Yong to reverse the present state of affairs. I cannot treat this lightly.”

Nodding his head, Dong Que replied, “Senior apprentice brother will understand. Moreover, I’m greatly understand. As long as the Prince of Yong is able to escape, even if he is temporarily inferior, he will be able to reverse the desperateness of this situation shortly. It is only that the losses will be quite severe. Considering the Kongtong Sect’s interests, senior apprentice brother will agree with young master’s arrangements.”

Just as I was about to reply, I heard the sounds of footsteps and Head Maid Zhou’s anxious voice. She said, “Wei *daren* , you can’t search the Princess’s sleeping quarters. This is truly too discourteous!”

A mournful sound issued from my mouth. Why was Wei Ying here? Was I fated to die? I promptly considered the sleeping quarters. I was single-mindedly focused on dealing with the Fengyi Sect, completely forgetting the need to find a hiding spot. A slight, wry smile appeared on Dong Que. Stepping forward, he grabbed ahold of me, pointing lightly at the bed. With a look of bafflement, I looked at him. He stepped forward quietly and patted his palm several times on the picturesque disarray of the bed. Then the bed board silently slid open, revealing the secret compartment underneath. The compartment was barely enough to fit a single person. My eyes widened. Why was there a secret compartment here? Ignoring my puzzlement, he picked me up and sealed several of my acupoints. I only felt my consciousness grow hazy, barely able to discern being shoved into the secret compartment. Afterwards, I slipped into darkness.

Wei Ying had imperial guardsmen shoo all of the Cherishing Fragrance Park's palace maids and eunuchs into a side hall, while he personally led people to begin the search. Receiving his command, Xiao Lan had dispatched Feng Feifei over. The crown prince's location was currently tranquil and calm. Naturally, there was no need to leave so many people there. Wei Ying and Feng Feifei supervised the search, but did not find anything. At long last, the two's eyes fell upon the princess's sleeping quarters. Wei Ying hesitated. If he were to truly search the princess's sleeping quarters, regardless of whether he was able to find anyone, Princess Changle would likely harbor resentment towards him. At the same time, however, if he were able to find someone, then it was likely that he could force the princess to surrender. Consequently, Wei Ying spoke to Feng Feifei, "This is the Princess's sleeping quarters. It is inconvenient for me to search it. Third Miss, please do so in my place."

Feng Feifei smiled slightly, a soft and graceful smile appearing on her elegant face. Lightly arranging the hair on her temples, she softly replied, "If we can capture Jiang Zhe, Master will be extremely pleased." She believed that Wei Ying was afraid of Demonic Shadow Li Shun, and thus she felt scornful. Wielding her sword, she entered the sleeping quarters.

The Cherishing Fragrance Park had always been used as the residence for noble consorts or princesses. With lower statues, concubines and imperial clansmen did not have the qualifications to reside here. Entering the sleeping quarters, Feng Feifei felt that these chambers were magnificently decorated, refined, and noble. Feng Feifei smiled faintly. Although she was nominally also a princess, Junior Apprentice Sister Hanyou's assigned residence was far inferior to these chambers. Feng Feifei carefully searched the entire sleeping quarters, but did not make a single discovery. Although she was not adept at concealed mechanisms and weapons, she could confirm that there weren't any secret rooms or hidden passageways. At last, her gaze fell upon the bed. This bed was made from sandalwood and was extremely fine, exuding a graceful fragrance. Walking close to the bed, Feng Feifei carefully examined it. This entire bed was blended together into one piece. There was no chance that there were any secret mechanisms. Feng Feifei gazed upon this bed with a look of envy in her eyes before finally

walking out of these chambers.

Seeing Wei Ying, she shook her head. Vexed, Wei Ying frowned. He had once again, for no reason, offended Princess Changle. Truly, his losses exceeded his gains. Just at this moment, Xie Xiaotong and two Fengyi Sect swordswomen arrived with a little eunuch. Seeing Feng Feifei, Xie Xiaotong excitedly reported, “Third sister, we are close to success on our end!” So speaking, she hurriedly explained everything that had happened in the Dawn’s Frost Palace Hall. Her words were clever, explaining everything clearly.

A hint of joy flickered in Feng Feifei’s eyes, as she replied, “It is hard to imagine that Princess Changle is so sensible. Alas, our side has just searched the entirety of the Cherishing Fragrance Park. Could things change because of this?” As she spoke, she worriedly and resentfully glanced at Wei Ying.

Wei Ying smiled slightly. When all was said and done, Feng Feifei and the other members of the Fengyi Sect were only women. Although sufficiently savage, they were insufficiently firm and unyielding. No wonder the Fengyi Sect Master did not have them take charge of this rebellion. At the same time, however, Wei Ying did not want to offend them. As such, he dimly replied, “If we warn these servants, what do we have to fear that they will divulge this? After a few days have passed, it would be useless if they say anything. In addition, it is impossible for Princess Changle to return here. As a result, she temporarily won’t learn of what has happened here.”

Nodding her head, Xie Xiaotong spoke, “Go handle matters.” These words were directed at Xiaoliuzi. Nodding his head in panic, Xiaoliuzi rapidly ran to see Head Maid Zhou.

So instructed, the maids and eunuchs of the palace hall quickly began to pack. Noble Consort Zhangsun and Princess Changle had brought a lot of items along with them. It would take some time for everything to be packed. Disinclined to watch them work, Wei Ying and Feng Feifei spoke a few words to Xie Xiaotong before departing. After Wei Ying and company left, the Imperial Guard also withdrew. At this moment, within the chrysanthemum thickets, a figure rose to its feet. He had a thin silk cloak wrapped around him, its color extremely close to that of the chrysanthemums. Those

imperial guardsmen and Wei Ying did not pay it any attention. After all, their goal was to find a feeble scholar without the strength to truss a chicken.

Quietly, the man slipped into the princess's sleeping quarters. When he arrived, Xiaoliuzi and Head Maid Zhou were already waiting. Seeing the man come in, Xiaoliuzi asked in a low voice, "Where is the young master?"

Dong Que pointed at the bed. Head Maid Zhou relaxed. This bed had been secretly manufactured in the palace and had a secret compartment inside. However, this fact was not known by everyone. Furthermore, the Cherishing Fragrance Park was rarely used each year. As a result, there were even fewer people who knew of the existence of a secret compartment. Noble Consort Zhangsun was one of those who knew. She had jokingly revealed its existence to Princess Changle. Last night, when Jiang Zhe had sought refuge here, even though he did not think of the possibility, Princess Changle had anticipated that the palace hall would be searched. As a result, she had revealed the secret compartment's existence to Dong Que. So focused on reversing this desperate situation, Jiang Zhe did not pay any attention to this conversation.

Relaxing, Head Maid Zhou nodded her head. Now was not the time to let Jiang Zhe out. Xiaoliuzi handed over the white handkerchief and jade pendant given him by Princess Changle to Dong Que, explaining simply the situation. Afterwards, he helped Head Maid Zhou pack the princess's belongings and quickly left the sleeping quarters. It wasn't long before they followed Xie Xiaotong and departed the Cherishing Fragrance Park. Behind them, the gates were locked and no one paid any further attention to this location.

Only then did Dong Que pat the bed again. The feebly breathing Jiang Zhe was brought out of the secret compartment. Seeing Jiang Zhe's pale complexion, Dong Que hurriedly released his acupoints, murmuring, "I hope that there aren't any problems. This method was already the gentlest possible."

As I regained consciousness, I saw Dong Que's anxious face. Shaking my head, I whispered, "Have they left?"

Dong Qure replied, “Young master, do not worry. Wei Ying has already left. This is what the Princess delivered.” So speaking, he handed over the white handkerchief and jade pendant.

I unfolded the handkerchief and looked at the seal stamped upon it. Smiling slightly, I instructed Dong Que to bring me a brush and ink. Swiftly, I wrote a few words upon it:

The Crown Prince has rebelled, Qin Yong is to obey the Prince of Yong and proceed to the Hunting Palace to rescue the Imperial Presence. There is no need to adhere to other fake edicts and command tallies.

Setting down the brush, I smiled and stated, “There will be no need to worry as long as these two items are delivered into Qin Yong’s hands. That’s right, can your senior apprentice brother serve as the emissary to issue this edict?”

Just as Dong Que was about to reply, we heard the sound of footsteps outside. We were both alarmed. Could it be that Wei Ying had come back?

Footnotes :

木已成舟, muyichengzhou – idiom, lit. the timber has been turned into a boat already; fig. what is done cannot be undone

镜花水月, jinghuahuiyue – idiom, lit. flowers in a mirror and the moon reflected in the lake; fig. an unrealistic rosy view, viewing things through rose-tinted spectacles

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 29: Overt and Covert Messengers - Gravity Tales

Volume 3, Chapter 29: Overt and Covert Messengers

The footsteps stopped before the door to the sleeping quarters. After a moment, a sweet sounding was heard to speak, “Xiahou Yuanfeng requests a meeting.”

I grew slightly fearful. Glancing at Dong Que dropping a dagger into his right hand, I sighed. If Xiaoshunzi were present, Xiahou Yuanfeng would naturally be captured easily. But with only Dong Que was present, it was unlikely to happen, nigh impossible. According to Xiaoshunzi’s reckoning, Dong Que’s martial arts were only second-rate. Although they had greatly improved, if weapons were involved, his skills would be lacking. I only had him stay behind, not only because no one else was suitable, but was also because he had a bag full of useful tricks. This was what I was going to rely heavily upon. In any case, if a fight were to genuinely break out, Xiaoshunzi would likely be useless as well. As such, I figured that it was best to let Dong Que stay behind. However, the present situation was quite difficult.

I gave Dong Que a meaningful glance and replied, “Xiahou *daren* , please come in.”

The door opened and Xiahou Yuanfeng, in the yellow uniform of an imperial guardsman, walked in. After entering, he saluted and stated, “Last time, Xiahou will never forget *daren* ’s grace of pardoning my life previously.”

I somberly replied, “Xiahou *daren* is being too courteous. Last time, *daren* reported the true culprit that attempted to assassinate me. This was *daren* ’s kind intentions. How can I repay kindness with ingratitude? At present, *daren* is controls my fate. What is the point of mentioning matters of the past?”

A smile appeared on Xiahou Yuanfeng's face, making him even more handsome and beautiful. He answered, "Although Wei Ying and company are quite intelligent, they are still quite lacking. If I were to conduct the search, I would definitely dispatch several individuals to monitor this palace hall, on guard against someone hiding in secret. At the very least, I would send someone to come back to search."

Dong Que frowned. He understood this reasoning. However, time was pressing. He was afraid that Jiang Zhe would be harmed from having his acupoints sealed for too long.

Seeing this, Xiahou Yuanfeng's expression became even gentler. His gaze fell upon the white damask silk handkerchief and jade pendant on the desk. He innocently inquired, "May I ask Jiang *daren* what you discussed with the Princess? In reality, at present, although the Prince of Yong has temporarily escaped from danger, Wen Ziyan is currently in pursuit. Without reinforcements, the Prince of Yong will inevitably be trapped sooner rather than later. This lowly official truly wishes to understand how Jiang *daren* would reverse this desperate crisis so as to live up to your status as the Prince of Yong's chief adviser."

The expression on my face gradually became tranquil. Always, whenever the situation became urgent, the calmer I became. Selecting a random chair, I sat down. Smiling, I replied, "Xiahou *daren* is the Crown Prince's trusted subordinate. Why haven't you brought the imperial bodyguards and imperial guardsmen to capture me? This would truly be an act of great merit!"

"Now that the Crown Prince is relying upon the Fengyi Sect," explained Xiahou Yuanfeng with a smile, "Even when the Fengyi Sect placed Junior Mentor Lu under house arrest, the Crown Prince did not even dare to question that act. It would be useless even if I were to perform great meritorious service. Further, the Demonic Shadow is still alive. If I were to present you to the Crown Prince, it is likely that it wouldn't be long before my life would end."

I immediately went on high alert. This wasn't a good enough reason for him to let me off. Time was of the essence. I had no intention of being

entangled by him and thus said, “Although Xiaoshunzi’s martial arts are excellent, he is only one person. In the future, Xiahou *daren* ’s position and rank will be lofty and prominent. What do you have to be afraid of? So what does Xiahou *daren* desire I do for you?”

A look of joy flashed across Xiahou Yuanfeng’s face. He answered, “My request is very simple. If Jiang *daren* is willing to gift the Demonic Shadow as my slave, then today, I will definitely risk my life to preserve *daren* .”

My mind exploded, and I nearly losing all reason. Fortunately, Dong Que nudged me in a timely manner. Enduring my rage, I responded, “Although Xiaoshunzi and I are nominally master and servant, we are as close as blood brothers. Xiahou *daren* ’s request is too excessive.”

Xiahou Yuanfeng smiled slightly. “The Demonic Shadow treats Jiang *daren* as his father and older brother, devoted and loyal. Xiahou is extremely envious. Presumably if Jiang *daren* were my subordinate, the Demonic Shadow would obey my commands.”

“Xiahou *daren* , you’re too pleased with yourself,” I sternly declared. “You should not have come personally.”

Xiahou Yuanfeng glanced at Dong Que. Shaking his head, he knew. “He is not my match. If I did not know that Li Shun had not guarded the Prince of Yong and escaped, I would not have come alone to capture you. Jiang *daren* , do not worry. I will definitely not deliver you to the Fengyi Sect or the Crown Prince. Jiang *daren* ’s ability and wisdom are outstanding. Xiahou only desires to respectfully listen to your advice.”

At this moment, Dong Que suddenly made his move. A glint of steel flashed, piercing towards Xiahou Yuanfeng. Calmly and nonchalantly, Xiahou Yuanfeng unsheathed his sword to meet this attack. The two dueled within the sleeping quarters, crisscrossing the room. The swords resembled shooting stars and lightning. However, neither individual wanted to disturb anyone else. As a result, they constrained themselves. It wasn’t long before Dong Que was gradually pushed onto the back foot. His specialties weren’t in martial arts. Against an expert like Xiahou Yuanfeng, Dong Que didn’t have a single chance for victory.

After several exchanges, Xiahou Yuanfeng had pierced Dong Que's thigh. The moment that Dong Que fell to the floor, Xiahou Yuanfeng suddenly saw from the corner of his eye that Jiang Zhe had a dagger in his hands, stabbing it towards his own chest. Anxious, Xiahou Yuanfeng immediately jumped and threw himself at Jiang Zhe. To him, Jiang Zhe could not die. At this moment between life and death, Xiahou Yuanfeng suddenly glimpsed a cold glint shoot out from Jiang Zhe's waist. Xiahou Yuanfeng was greatly startled. When he went to evade, he realized that he was in midair and it was impossible for him to dodge. Moreover, that glint was not only as fast as lightning, the angle that it shot out from was extremely difficult to handle. Although Xiahou Yuanfeng made every effort to evade it, he was still hit. Xiahou Yuanfeng subconsciously slammed out with his palm. Jiang Zhe fell over backwards. Xiahou Yuanfeng suddenly felt his entire body grow limp, painful, and powerless, and collapsed to the floor. At this moment, Dong Que hurried over in a panic, bending over to check on Jiang Zhe.

It was some time before I awakened. Seeing Dong Que's panicked expression, I whispered, "I'm fine. Has he been captured?"

Dong Que smiled. "Young master's concealed weapons are truly ferocious and difficult to deal with. Xiahou Yuanfeng could no longer move even a finger after being hit."

Only then did I relax. Just now, I had racked my brains, trying to figure out a way to escape the present predicament, especially since I understood that Dong Que was not Xiahou Yuanfeng's match. The only advantage that we could exploit was that Xiahou Yuanfeng was alone. I wasn't a fool. Xiaoshunzi's martial arts and intelligence were both rarely seen in the present age. This kind of talent was wasted as my subordinate. There were undoubtedly countless individuals who found this unfair for Xiaoshunzi and wanted to recruit him. The only reason most of them did not act was because of the Prince of Yong. Xiahou Yuanfeng was wildly ambitious and unexpectedly wished to try to scheme to acquire Xiaoshunzi's services. However, it was because of this reason that he could not hand me over to the Fengyi Sect. Since he had come alone, then the only thing that I could do was capture him. Only then would I be safe. At the same, however, this was

also the most difficult to accomplish. How could I, a weak and feeble scholar without the strength to even truss a chicken, capture an expert?

Fortunately, I had finally come up with a plan. Since he had something he wanted from me, then he couldn't allow me to commit suicide. As such, just when Dong Que was defeated, I raised the dagger to kill myself. To him, my actions were in accordance with my status as the Prince of Yong's chief strategist—rather die than be humiliated. As a result, he had come quickly to stop me. Even if he were to use some other methods to knock the dagger from my hands, he would still rush over to ensure that I didn't continue to commit suicide. I had seized the opportunity to fire a poisoned needle from the jade belt at my waist. Originally, the poison on the needle was highly toxic. However, a few days ago, I switched to a newly concocted numbing agent, capable of forcing a person to collapse weakly to the floor in one breath. The only issue was that its effectiveness was rather brief. Of course, I also needed to run into suitable danger before I could use it. Even though Xiahou Yuanfeng was able to hit me with his strike, fortunately, he had already lost all of his strength, allowing me to preserve my life.

Rising to my feet, I glanced at Xiahou Yuanfeng's sinister looking face. I was still a bit worried. I had given my beloved hairpin made of metal from a meteorite to Xiaoshunzi. Normally, he did not use weapons, but for his safety, when he broke out of the encirclement last night, I had given him my hairpin. To him, that hairpin was far more formidable than any other weapon in the world. As a result, I plucked a hairpin that was thirty percent gold and seventy percent steel. I pricked several of Xiahou Yuanfeng's hidden acupoints. With this, I could guarantee that Xiahou Yuanfeng would not be able to strike back. Right now, I was the one in control of the situation.

After a while, Xiahou Yuanfeng was able to move again. However, he could feel that his entire body did not have an ounce of strength. Smiling wryly, he stated, "I did not expect that Jiang *daren* would have such methods."

I modestly replied, "I was only successful because I was able to catch you off guard using a vile character's tricks."

Xiahou Yuanfeng had a calm expression on his face, almost as if I was his

prisoner rather than the other way around. He smiled and asked, “I wonder how Jiang *daren* wishes to handle me? If this lowly official were to suddenly disappear, it is likely that people will not let matters be.”

I glanced at him serenely. “There is no need for you to worry. After I kill you, I can hide you in the secret compartment here. In this way, there is no need for you to worry that your corpse will be discovered. Maybe they will even believe that you secretly ran away. With the Prince of Yong’s escape, there are those who are truly afraid.”

Hearing my words, Dong Que immediately opened the secret compartment of the bed. I instructed, “Dong Que, avoid shedding blood to prevent the suspicion of others being aroused by the stench of blood.”

Smiling, Dong Que acknowledged, “This subordinate obeys.” Finished speaking, he extended a finger and unhurriedly moved to seal Xiahou Yuanfeng’s death acupoint.

Xiahou Yuanfeng clearly understood that these two were only trying to frighten him, otherwise there would have been no need for Jiang Zhe to place restrictions upon his martial arts. However, fear still rose from deep within. That Dong Que had a cold-hearted expression. With one look, Xiahou Yuanfeng could tell that he was a ruthless character.

At this moment, Jiang Zhe spoke up again, “I have never killed anyone with my own hands. How about you kill him?”

With this, Xiahou Yuanfeng was unable to bear it any longer. He understood that these strategists were typically those who stayed away from these affairs.[1] If he were to die like this, then it would truly be a shame. Beads of sweat flowing, he cried out, “Jiang *daren* , please spare my life. This lowly official is willing to surrender.”

Jiang Zhe did not make a single sound, only smiling indifferently. Dong Que’s finger closed in on until it reached Xiahou Yuanfeng’s death acupoint. Xiahou Yuanfeng could feel his courage disappear. When he was about to open his mouth to speak, Dong Que covered Xiahou Yuanfeng’s mouth with one of his hands. Xiahou Yuanfeng felt himself grow dizzy. It was a moment before Xiahou Yuanfeng recovered his senses. Dong Que had only used

twenty percent of his strength. Because of this, Xiahou Yuanfeng did not die, although his complexion was deathly pale. He had never, ever before been this close to death.

Sitting back down, I gazed at Xiahou Yuanfeng, watching him regain his composure. I could not help but sigh with admiration. This man was truly talented. He had profound schemes, able to take temporary setbacks.[2] It was a pity that he was a member of the crown prince's faction. Somewhat pityingly, I gazed at him. Now was not the time for me to be merciful. If there was even the slightest accident, then the Prince of Yong would truly be consigned to eternal damnation.

Seeing that Jiang Zhe's indifferent eyes carried a hint of pity within them, Xiahou Yuanfeng trembled. Although he had been frightened half to death, he could tell that Jiang Zhe was only trying to vent his rage. However, right now, he could tell from Jiang Zhe's eyes that he was going to die. He quickly shouted, "Jiang *daren* , please consider the kind intentions behind my revelation of the assassin's identity that day and also consider Yuanfeng's loyalty to the Princess."

I had originally issued the execution order. Hearing his words, I could not help but be startled. Xiahou Yuanfeng hurriedly continued, "It was this lowly official who reported to the Princess that the Fengyi Sect had designs upon her. When the Princess met with danger in the palace, although it was not this lowly official who rescued her, if the Princess had not been prepared in advance, how would she have been so fortunate to escape?"

Hearing this, I softened. That day, Princess Changle had informed me of the Fengyi Sect's designs via the Princess of Yong. However, the Prince of Yong and I had both assumed that the Fengyi Sect would use threats and promises, not expecting that they would employ such a despicable method. Were it not for the preparations that Xiaoshunzi and I had made beforehand, it would have been very difficult for the Princess to escape from the trap. With this, I would have to thank Xiahou Yuanfeng's kind intentions. I once again gazed at Xiahou Yuanfeng. I sighed and stated, "Xiahou *daren* , you have truly performed meritorious service for the Princess. However, you must also understand that with the present state of affairs, what can

you use to persuade me to let me feel that letting you off would be of benefit to me?"

Xiahou Yuanfeng racked his brains for a method to survive. It wasn't long before his eyes fell upon the desk and the square handkerchief with a secret edict written upon it. His eyes brightening, he suggested, "Outside of this lowly one, there is no more suitable candidate to deliver those items. That is the Emperor's secret edict, correct? With the Princess's intelligence, there is no way that she would perform any worthless task."

I placidly replied, "However, you aren't the only one who can deliver those items."

Xiahou Yuanfeng laughed. "Although they have already gotten their hands onto the Emperor's edicts and Grand General Qin's command tallies, for them to mobilize the army requires someone to issue the edict. I do not know who the Prince of Yong's spy beside the Crown Prince was. However, the Crown Prince will only allow one of his most trusted subordinates to go issue the edict. It would be inconvenient for the Fengyi Sect to appear. At present, the Crown Prince does not have many trusted subordinates. Of them, the foremost is Junior Mentor Lu Jingzhong. I am the apprentice nephew of Lu Jingzhong. Aside from me, who would be the most suitable to perform this task?"

Hearing his words, I could not help but frown. He was correct. Although Zhang Jinxiong had offered to undertake the task, he was not as appropriate of a candidate as Xiahou Yuanfeng. But how was I to trust this Xiahou Yuanfeng? I gave him a look of suspicion. At this moment, a bird call came from outside. Dong Que's expression changed. Glancing at me, he stated, "Young master."

I knew immediately that Zhang Jinxiong had arrived. I nodded my head lightly as a signal.

Dong Que walked out of the sleeping quarters. A large man with a grand and heroic appearance stood under the moonlight. Seeing Dong Que, his expression relaxed. He whispered, "I only have a moment. Just now, His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince began discussions with Junior Mentor

Lu. They plan to dispatch Xiahou *daren* to issue an edict. I will accompany him as an escort. Using the excuse of finding Xiahou *daren* , I was able to come here."

Dong Que's heart leapt, as he whispered back, "Would Supervisor Zhang please wait a moment? As of now, Xiahou Yuanfeng is being controlled by my young master. *Daren* , please come to a side chamber to speak."

Zhang Jinxiong was greatly surprised. He understood how powerful Xiahou Yuanfeng's martial arts were. If the two of them were to fight, although he wouldn't lose, it would also be extremely difficult to defeat Xiahou Yuanfeng. Surprisingly, Xiahou Yuanfeng was now controlled. He could not help but feel even more admiration for that Jiang Zhe, Jiang Suiyun.

Dong Que led Zhang Jinxiong into a side chamber before he returned to the princess's sleeping quarters. He whispered a few words into Jiang Zhe's ears.

I was deeply astonished when I heard his words. I did not know if this was the Heavens showing concern. Thinking it over, I removed several pills from a secret compartment on my jade belt. After looking at them for some time, I selected one of the pills. Gazing at Xiahou Yuanfeng, I stated, "Once you have taken this pill, I will be convinced that you are truly forsaking the darkness for the light. You must know that I am a disciple of the Medical Sage. It isn't that this kind of poison doesn't have an antidote, but without ten to fifteen days, it is impossible to be concocted. While the Crown Prince can give you the prestige and wealth that you desire, so can the Prince of Yong. But if you wish to survive, then you only have one road before you."

Xiahou Yuanfeng hesitated for a moment. However, he was always an unwavering individual. Further, if he did not take this poison pill, he would likely never have the opportunity to leave the Cherishing Fragrance Park. Consequently, he immediately took the proffered poison pill and swallowed it. Seeing that he swallowed the pill, I continued, "There is something else. Since both you and the Fengyi Sect are working together for the Crown Prince, then you must know Liang Wan, correct?"

Xiahou Yuanfeng was stunned for a second. He replied, “This lowly official knows her. However, reportedly, Liang Wan has completely lost her mind. Although the Fengyi Sect has not breathed a word of this to anyone,[3] I heard Junior Mentor Lu speak of it.”

I smiled faintly. “This one is the one who used medicine to poison Liang Wan’s mind that day.”

Xiahou Yuanfeng’s eyes widened noticeably. In disbelief, he gazed at me and declared, “That’s impossible! Don’t tell me that you were already in the service of the Prince of Yong!?!”

I was a bit confused by his words, but soon understood the meaning behind his words. Thus, I smiled and answered, “That matter is unrelated to His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong. Liang Wan was my personal enemy who murdered my wife. I dealt with her for the sake of revenge.”

Xiahou Yuanfeng’s heart trembled as he gazed at Jiang Zhe. At this moment, he sincerely believed that Jiang Zhe had the power to kill him with a single move. However, with this, he actually calmed down. He inquired, “But how this one can serve?”

Somewhat distrustful, I responded, “Why is Xiahou *daren* speaking in such a manner? It seems that you are even more concerned about this matter than me.”

“At present, since I am basically controlled by *daren* ,” replied Xiahou Yuanfeng with a smile, “Then I have boarded the Prince of Yong’s boat. Since that is the case, I would naturally hope that the boat I am on is as steady as possible. It would be best if I am able to perform as much meritorious service as possible, so that I will not lose this opportunity to be promoted.”[4]

Relieved, I smiled. If Xiahou Yuanfeng wished to be promoted and be given a noble rank, I would be a lot more reassured. I signaled to Dong Que and had him bring over that handkerchief, solemnly handing it to Xiahou Yuanfeng. With a sober expression, Xiahou Yuanfeng accepted the handkerchief. With a deep salute, I stated, “This is His Imperial Majesty’s secret edict. You must deliver it into General Qin Yong’s hands and have him come rescue the Imperial Presence.”

Xiahou Yuanfeng returned the salute. "*Daren* , do not worry. Xiahou Yuanfeng will definitely not fail this matter entrusted to me. *Daren* , please speak some words to the His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, on my behalf."

After Dong Que saw Xiahou Yuanfeng off, he returned and asked, "Young master, he really left?"

To him, I replied, "Please invite Supervisor Zhang here."

After Zhang Jinxiong had also departed, I finally breathed a sigh of relief. It would be fine if Xiahou Yuanfeng did not betray me. But if Xiahou Yuanfeng was keeping his real intentions to himself,[5] then there was no way that he would believe that I would have arranged for another messenger. Only in this way would I not need to worry about Zhang Jinxiong's safety. Moreover, my original intentions to place restrictions upon Zhang Jinxiong's body had been canceled. Since I charged him with the task of being a covert messenger, I had to express my trust in him. To a disciple hailing from famous and upright sect, this would cause him to do his best. Already having an overt messenger in Xiahou Yuanfeng, there was no need to place any restrictions to control the covert messenger. Besides, after all was said and done, Zhang Jinxiong was worth trusting, regardless of his moral character or his sect. The Kongtong Sect had already drifted away from the Fengyi Sect. Not long ago, the major personages of the Kongtong Sect had contacted the Shaolin Temple, expressing their willingness to cooperate. Even if Xiahou Yuanfeng ultimately returned with people to take me captive, there was no need for me to worry. As long as Qin Yong could be summoned, my safety wasn't too important. In addition, I believed that Grand General Qin's jade pendant would be more convincing than the emperor's secret edict. Aside from there, there were still the measures that I had prepared beforehand.

Feeling that all of my strength had been drained, I lay down on the bed, thinking about whether there were any further plans that I could make. In any case, the best option for me was to stay here. Only in this way would Xiahou Yuanfeng believe that I trusted him. Even if he were to betray me, he would not suspect that there would be another messenger.

Footnotes :

君子远庖厨, junziyuanpaochu – idiom, lit. a nobleman stays clear of the kitchen; fig. a nobleman who has seen a living animal cannot bear to see it die, hence he keeps away from the kitchen

能屈能伸, nengqunengshen – idiom, lit. able to stoop or stand erect; fig. able to take temporary setbacks

讳莫如深, huimorushen – idiom, lit. carefully concealed and avoid mention; fig. not breathe a word to anyone

加官进爵, jiaguanjinjue – idiom, lit. be promoted and made a noble; fig. to be advanced in rank and made a higher official

心口不一, xinkoubuyi – idiom, lit. heart and mouth at variance; fig. keeping one's real intentions to oneself, saying one thing but meaning something else

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 30: Mobilizing Troops to Rescue the Emperor

Volume 3, Chapter 30: Mobilizing Troops to Rescue the Emperor

His entire face filled with stupefaction, Qin Qing sat within a room. Just now, after he had been delivered by Li Hanyou to the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall, once his acupoints had been released by his father, Qin Yi had slapped him. Qin Qing truly had something that he could not explain. What could he say? On multiple occasions, his father had warned him to prohibit Li Hanyou from having any contact with the Imperial Guard. However, he had failed to do so, allowing her to easily seize his military authority. Without the Imperial Guard under his command, then it would have been impossible for the Fengyi Sect to launch this coup d'état. Seeing that his son's face was as pale as ash, Qin Yi's fury only rose, fiercely and bitterly flogging him. Fortunately, the Duke of Wei had been able to intervene. Qin Qing remembered the comforting words spoken by the Duke of Wei to his father.

"Old Qin, there is no point in getting angry. After all, worthy nephew is young and ignorant. That Li Hanyou is a Princess. It is inevitable that worthy nephew was not wary. This is also your fault. You never properly guided him. Besides, this wedding was bestowed by the Emperor. For you to so deeply reproach him, the Emperor would inevitably be embarrassed if the Emperor were to learn of this."

After this, his father had locked himself in a room and ignored what was happening. However, the pain in Qin Qing's heart only intensified. He carefully recalled the period of time that he spent with Li Hanyou. That was a period of unending tender sentiments. That beautiful and dazzling woman had completely intoxicated him. He forgot the hardships of the bloody battlefield, forgot the bonds forged in blood with his fellow soldiers. With one glance from Li Hanyou, he could not bear to disobey her. However, Li Hanyou … she was always truly hypocritical in her affection towards him. If

this weren't the case, why hadn't she even asked if he was willing to join her in rebellion? She had no intention of having him join the conspiracy. This was probably because she believed that he would absolutely not betray his family. This shouldn't be the case … Didn't she complain about this earlier?

Qin Qing didn't know how he would answer if Li Hanyou were to ask him to join the rebellion. However, she had never posed this question. This was just like how she had delivered him back into his father's care. Her eyes were filled with indifference, almost as if she treated him as a lifeless object. A difficult-to-restrain loathing welled up from his heart. Qin Qing blustered in a low voice, tightening his hands into fists. He gritted his teeth until blood flowed.

***

Within the Cherishing Fragrance Park, I had sunk into a predicament. This location had become forgotten by everyone. Although the Imperial Guard occasionally patrolled its grounds, they were not attentive and actually quite negligent. It seemed like the Fengyi Sect's control over the Imperial Guard wasn't strong. What's more, Her Imperial Highness, the Princess, had prepared some food in advance, enough to feed Dong Que and I. As a result, I could wait out the conclusion of this rebellion in the Cherishing Fragrance Park. However, I unexpectedly fell ill. Thinking it over, there was nothing strange about it. When I arrived at the Hunting Palace I was already ill. After experiencing last night and today's events, if it were a normal person, they would be fine. However, I could not prop myself up. Probably because I felt I had done everything that I needed to do, my spirit relaxed. As a result, I fell gravely ill.

However, after hurrying to the Cherishing Fragrance Park last night, although I could evade the patrols of the Imperial Guard controlling the palace gates, there was no way for me to bring along a large quantity of pharmaceutical drugs. Even a famous doctor would be powerless without medicinal ingredients. As a result, I could only take a few pills that I had concocted and fell into a coma. When I awoke, I saw Dong Que sitting off on the side, looking uneasy. In a whisper, I asked, "Dong Que, has Xiahou Yuanfeng left yet?"

Dong Que calmly replied, “Yes, he has. My senior apprentice brother accompanied him as an escort. Throughout, no one has come to the Cherishing Fragrance Park to arrest us. As a result, it seems like the young master’s plan was successful.”

Sighing, I wondered, “Didn’t I have you go hide somewhere else?”

“If I were to allow you to be captured,” answered Dong Que indifferently, “In the future, Lord Li would likely be the first person to find me and settle accounts.”

Smiling wryly, I spoke, “Surely, Xiaoshunzi isn’t that unreasonable of a person, right?”

“If you two are to meet again,” observed Dong Que, laughing, “Young master should be worried about how to explain staying behind. You sent him off to rescue General Pei, but didn’t tell him that you were staying behind. I believe that Lord Li is probably infuriated right now.”

My heart trembled in fear. It wasn’t much if Xiaoshunzi became angry, however, what I was interested in was what he was doing at this moment. However, he was not one to worriedly rush back. After all, if the Prince of Yong failed, then I would truly have no place to escape, no matter how large the world was.

“Young master, at present, the state of your illness is quite serious,” stated Dong Que, hesitating a moment. “Even if Qin Yong is able to rush over and rescue the Imperial Presence, at the very least, it will take at least a day before he can arrive. Moreover, without several days, it will be impossible to pacify this rebellion. If your illness continues, it is likely …”

I understood his anxiety. However, there were no means currently to get treatment. We were not presently within the Prince of Yong’s residence. I was presently preserving my life. Feeling dizzy, I collapsed once again back onto the bed. Concerned, Dong Que stated, “Young master, this can’t continue. If this drags out a few more days, your life will likely be lost.”

I laughed helplessly, not having the energy to utter any more words. I fell unconscious again.

***

At midday, Qin Yong walked out of his main tent, stretching his muscles and bones. This time, the Grand General had handed over all of his authority to himself. He could not be remiss in the slightest. He wondered the situation of the Autumn Hunt. Their Imperial Highnesses, the Prince of Yong and the crown prince, were already archenemies. If it weren't for this reason, the emperor would not have issued an edict to Uncle Yi to station his army a hundred *li* from the Hunting Palace.

Qin Yong looked to the skies determine the time. Just as he was about to return to his tent, a soldier suddenly came to report. Someone named Li Shun had come to see him. Qin Yong was greatly alarmed. He knew who Li Shun was. But why had a trusted subordinate of the major of the Prince of Yong's household come to see him? It had to be known that this army of his could only listen to the commands of the emperor. Hesitating, he stated, "Invite him to the main tent to meet me."

Qin Yong believed that it would be sufficient for him to gather together all of his personal guards for him to survive if that man were here to assassinate him. As long as he prepared archers, it would even be possible to kill that man.

When Li Shun walked into the main tent, Qin Yong shivered when he caught sight of the state of the youth's clothes. The usually elegant and clean youth was completely covered in dried bloodstains. His face was heavy. After gazing at his surroundings, Li Shun's revealed a merciless and unfeeling light. Qin Yong forced a smile and declared, "Lord Li, please take a seat. I wonder why Lord Li is not at the Hunting Palace attending to Jiang *daren* and, instead, here within my camps seeking a meeting with me? Furthermore, arriving in such a sorry state?"

Xiaoshunzi grimly gazed at the guards on both sides of the tent and replied, "I have not come to assassinate you. If General Qin is willing to speak in private with me, then that would be for the best. Otherwise … I'm afraid that I can only commit offenses."

The guards on both sides erupted in anger, simultaneously drawing their weapons, waiting for Qin Yong's command before acting. However, Qin Yong knew Li Shun's formidability. If this eunuch were annoyed, it was possible

that he would immediately kill Qin Yong. Qin Yong knew that even if he was fortunate to escape, his personal guards would all die miserably. Further, behind this person were Major Jiang of the Prince of Yong's household and the Prince of Yong himself. He could not afford to offend either of them. Besides, having seen Li Shun's sorry appearance, Qin Yong knew that something perilous had happened. As a result, Qin Yong waved his hand and ordered, "All of you, withdraw."

The personal guards rapidly withdrew from the tent. Rising to his feet, Qin Yong walked right in front of Li Shun and asked, "Lord Li, please tell me the truth. What has happened in the Hunting Palace?"

Xiaoshunzi stared at him and answered, "The Crown Prince has rebelled. The Prince of Yong has already managed to escape and has specially dispatched me to invite General to go and rescue the Imperial Presence."

Qin Yong sucked in a breath and asked, "How is this possible? Command of the Imperial Guard rests in the hands of uncle."

Xiaoshunzi explained everything that had happened. Although there were many conjectures in his explanation, they were all based upon fact. Learning of the urgency of the situation, Qin Yong crumpled into a chair. Problems occurring with the Imperial Guard … a rebellion instigated by the Fengyi Sect … Without thinking, Qin Yong knew that if all this was true, then the problems likely all stemmed from Qin Qing. However, was this all real? He could not mobilize his uncle's army based upon a single person's testimony. If the rebel was the Prince of Yong, then this was all likely a trap.

Xiaoshunzi could clearly see Qin Yong's hesitation. An austere chill flashed in his eyes, as he ruthlessly stated, "What is General Qin still thinking about? His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, only wants you to go rescue the Imperial Presence, not save the Prince. Although His Imperial Highness is in a dire situation, if you were to rescue the Imperial Presence, then His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, would also be able to escape from danger. Moreover, Grand General Qin and General Qin Qing are both within the Hunting Palace. I'm afraid that their lives hang in the balance.

Hesitating, Qin Yong replied, "Without the Emperor's edict and the Grand

General's command tally, it is a death sentence if this general were to mobilize these troops without explicit approval."

"A death sentence?" sneered Xiaoshunzi. "Right now, the Emperor and the Grand General are both in the hands of the enemy. If General Qin is a stickler for protocol,[1] it is likely that it will be too late for regrets."

Firmly, Qin Yong declared, "I will dispatch men to investigate. Please forgive this general for being unable to immediately dispatch troops."

Xiaoshunzi's head drooped, killing intent flashing across his eyes. However, he knew that if he used force, it would definitely arouse Qin Yong's disgust and would further delay the rescue of the Hunting Palace. However, with each passing moment, the greater the danger increased for the young master. It was a long while before Xiaoshunzi removed a brocade pouch from within his bosom, handing it to Qin Yong. With a sigh, he stated, "General Qin, please take a look at its contents."

Accepting the brocade pouch, Qin Yong opened it and took a look. His complexion abruptly paled. Within were a silver hairpin and an ordinary green jade pendant. His entire body trembling, he asked, "You … how do you have these things? This is my mother's hairpin and the jade pendant that my mother gifted to my adoptive brother, Liu Hua. Are you threatening this general?"

With a hint of exhaustion, Xiaoshunzi replied, "We have never been fond of using this kind of method. However, we have no other choice right now. Liu Hua's real name is Hualiu and is a subordinate of my young master."

Qin Yong's entire body shook, very fiercely questioning, "Liu Hua … he is your spy? Who could have expected that the Prince of Yong would be concerned about a nonentity such as me?"

Xiaoshunzi neutrally explained, "General Qin is too modest. The importance that the Grand General attaches to you is greater than Qin Qing. Qin Qing is leaning towards the Crown Prince and has deep ties to the Fengyi Sect. My young master was worried that the Grand General would abandon his neutrality and thus arranged for someone beside the General. General is the most trusted subordinate of the Grand General. If something

were to happen to the Qin family, in order to reassure your honored mother, you would inevitably divulge some things. The young master has no wish to disturb the Grand General and thus ordered me to arrange for someone by your side. Moreover, my young master thinks highly of you. He has stated that your competence exceeds Qin Qing. That is also why he had Hualiu come to your side. Hualiu is one of the 'Eight Stallions' in the service of my young master. Unless it were someone critical, my young master would not dispatch one of them to monitor."

Qin Yong had a hint of gloom in his eyes. He somberly inquired, "Are you telling me that the youngster that my mother and I love and cherish is actually a swindler and a spy?"

"That is not the case," sighed Xiaoshunzi. "In reality, before we departed, I paid a visit to Hualiu. He begged me to not harm your mother no matter what happened. He told me of your past. He was aware of his helplessness, but your mother treats him as her own. He is willing to accept any punishment so that we do not make things difficult for your mother. As a result, he fetched these two items, so that we do not disturb your mother."

Qin Yong relaxed a bit. Although Li Shun's words were not backed by any evidence, he could sense that this man felt that lying was beneath his dignity. Somewhat reassured, he put away the brocade pouch. He could not trust Li Shun's words as confirmation that his mother would not be threatened. However, at the very least, he could confirm that Li Shun was not someone who casually killed others. At the same time, Qin Yong also knew that neither Li Shun's master, Jiang Zhe, nor the Prince of Yong were these kinds of people. But what would happen if he were to refuse to mobilize his army?

Seeing the deep worry etched onto Qin Yong's face, Xiaoshunzi sternly stated, "I know that I'm placing you in an awkward situation by having you mobilize. However, if someone is dispatched from the Hunting Palace to issue an edict, what would you do? You must not follow orders."

Qin Yong frowned and inquired, "Are you going to have me reject the orders even if it is the Emperor's imperial edict and the Grand General's command tally?"

Xiaoshunzi callously responded, “If you are unwilling to consent to this point, then there is nothing more to discuss.”

Raising his head, Qin Yong saw the clear signs of killing intent in Li Shun’s eyes. Helplessly, he stated, “I will first dispatch someone to pay my respects to Uncle. If everything is normal, even if you are to coerce me, I will not mobilize.”

Xiaoshunzi’s expression grew frosty and stony. He had known long ago that Qin Yong wasn’t someone that could be easily threatened. At present, the only thing that he could do was to strive for the best outcome. By ensuring that Qin Yong didn’t comply lightly with the orders from the Hunting Palace meant that his task was basically completed. In addition, if Qin Yong were to dispatch men to the Hunting Palace, then they would quickly be able to discover the abnormal state of affairs. Although this would delay the mobilization by one day, they could still have the chance to rescue the young master. Right now, the only thing that he could do was hope that his young master and the Prince of Yong would both successfully survive this rebellion.

Glancing outside for the time, Xiaoshunzi neutrally declared, “If tomorrow at this time, you still refuse to mobilize, then I can only offend you.”

Qin Yong callously replied, “I know that your distinguished self’s martial arts are high. However, I will definitely not commit any rebellious acts. If my men do not discover any abnormalities, even if your distinguished self uses force, I will not submit. I have tens of thousands of troops here. If your distinguished self tries to cause trouble, even if I will inevitably die, your distinguished self will also be buried here.”

Xiaoshunzi laughed pitilessly. “Prepare quarters and food for me. I am already extremely tired.”

Helplessly, Qin Yong shouted, “Someone, come!” Several of Qin Yong’s personal guards entered the tent. In a severe voice, Qin Yong ordered, “Prepare a tent for him and follow his orders. Remember, without this general’s express orders, no one is to take a single step into his tent.”

Xiaoshunzi laughed faintly. Rising to his feet, he walked out, stating, “There

is only one day and one night. General Qin should quickly dispatch someone."

Heaving a sigh, Qin Yong ordered, "I will immediately dispatch someone to the Hunting Palace to pay my respects to the Grand General."

***

At nightfall on the twenty-first day of the ninth month, the present Hunting Palace was completely under the control of the Fengyi Sect. Although the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall remained in the emperor's control, everyone knew that if the Fengyi Sect were to launch an attack, it would be impossible for the emperor to escape. However, the Fengyi Sect had its own difficulties. If the emperor were to die, the Prince of Yong could righteously mobilize the entire empire to eradicate rebels. As a result, the Fengyi Sect had to preserve Li Yuan's life until the abdication ceremony was completed. Consequently, the Fengyi Sect had not the courage to excessively coerce Li Yuan. As for Li Yuan, he was in an unprecedentedly vulnerable position. Although he had brought plenty of imperial palace guardsmen with him this time, they were at a severe disadvantage when compared to the Fengyi Sect. Surrounded by the turncoat Imperial Guard that the Fengyi Sect had painstakingly acquired, Li Yuan and his court were completely cut off from the outside world. As for the loyalist Imperial Guard, their commanders had been gathered by a fake edict from Wei Ying and placed under house arrest. Without their commanders, these imperial guardsmen did not dare to act on their own initiatives. With this, Li Yuan, who held supreme authority within Great Yong, was completely incapable of transmitting his edicts beyond the walls of the palace hall he currently was in. Even though he could dispatch his Imperial Palace Guard to force their way out and transmit his orders, if they were assaulted by the Fengyi Sect, even if Li Yuan were able to preserve his life, Noble Consorts Zhangsun and Yan, Princess Changle, and others would not survive. As such, both sides reached a stalemate. Before changes in the outside world had occurred, there was no way that there would be activity here within the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall.

Within the Announcing Magnificence Park, the Prince of Qi lay in bed. He had a dull expression. Qin Zheng walked in. With a wave of her hand, she

dismissed her two trusted maids. For Li Xian's safety, she did not allow Fengyi Sect disciples to monitor him, assigning instead two of the maids who she had trained to attend to and monitor the Prince of Qi. Removing the sheathed sword from her waist, she sat down in a chair. Her eyes were filled with bafflement. After a long time, seeing that Li Xian refused to open his mouth, Qin Zheng smiled wryly and asked, "Does Your Imperial Highness not wish to know Mother Concubine's present situation?"

A stony light flashed across Li Xian's eyes and he replied, "Mother Concubine scrupulously abides by the womanly virtues and would definitely not betray Imperial Father."

Forcing a smile, Qin Zheng confirmed, "It is as Your Imperial Highness stated. Mother Concubine did not even hesitate when she chose His Imperial Majesty. Your servant does not understand. To a mother, isn't the most important thing her son? Don't tell me that Mother Concubine doesn't take your life and death, honor and disgrace seriously?"

Smiling faintly, Li Xian asked, "For a wife, are there things that are more important than being loyal to her husband? Imperial Father is Mother Concubine's husband and is also Great Yong's monarch. How could Mother Concubine betray him?"

Qin Zheng retorted, "But hasn't Her Imperial Majesty, the Empress, betrayed His Imperial Majesty? In addition, why must women be loyal to their husbands, while men can take as many concubines as they want, leading a loose lifestyle?"

Seeing Qin Zheng's accusing gaze, Li Xian could not help smile. He recalled their first meeting and how fond this woman was of arguing. However, that sliver of tender sentiment immediately disappeared. He was unwilling to argue over these trivial matters. Changing the subject, he asked, "How is the frame of mind of His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince? Now that second brother has escaped, the Crown Prince is likely extremely vexed right now, correct?"

Collecting herself, Qin Zheng answered, "Senior apprentice sister Wen has lead several thousand men to pursue the Prince of Yong. No matter how

formidable they may be, it will be impossible for them to escape. As for you, what's to be done? After the Crown Prince ascends to the throne, if he recalls how you refused to help at this hour, your position as an imperial prince will likely be unstable."

Li Xian glanced at Qin Zheng with a look of indifference. He inquired, "Has Li Hanyou and company sent you to lobby me? Haven't you already taken my command tally? Shouldn't you be able to mobilize my troops?"

Qin Zheng grew embarrassed. It was a long while before she responded, "It is enough to mobilize and move the army.[2] However, your trusted lieutenants have all stated that only with your personal presence in the army will they be willing to go encircle the Prince of Yong's army. You must know that the Prince of Yong is thinking of ways to rendezvous with his troops. If you are to personally write a letter, even if the Prince of Yong is able to rendezvous with his troops, then victory is still possible without your direct assistance. Your Imperial Highness, you are now in the same boat as us. Don't tell me that you still refuse to submit?"

Li Xian stirred. After a moment, he replied, "Allow me to meet with the Crown Prince. If we are able to have a proper discussion, then I will write this letter for you. You surely must understand that I have arranged code words with my subordinates. It is impossible for you to forge a letter from me."

A look of joy appeared on Qin Zheng's face. "If Your Imperial Highness is willing to obey the Mandate of Heaven, there is nothing that your servant will not comply with."

Li Xian smiled distantly, hints of ridicule appearing on his face.

Footnotes :

抱残守缺, baocanshouque – idiom, lit. to cherish the outmoded and preserve the outworn; fig. conservative, stickler for tradition/protocol

调兵遣将, diaobingqianjiang – idiom, lit. to move an army and send a general; fig. to deploy/mobilize an army

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 31: The Prince of Qi's Methods

Volume 3, Chapter 31: The Prince of Qi's Methods

A palanquin brought the Prince of Qi slowly and sedately to the Jade Qilin Palace Hall that served as the crown prince's abode. Now that he was restrained by drugs and could move with difficulty, Li Xian was unable to walk long distances. The Jade Qilin Palace Hall was on the eastern side of the Hunting Palace. The palace hall that the Prince of Qi resided in, the Announcing Magnificence Park, was located on the western side. There was several *li* between the two. As such, he could only take a palanquin. The warriors carrying the palanquin were four of the Prince of Qi's trusted subordinates. Even the Princess of Qi could not casually order them about. Leading two of her maids, Qin Zheng walked in front of the palanquin, guiding it along.

The group arrived at the Jade Qilin Pavilion Hall. The security here was strict. Hearing of the Prince of Qi's arrival, Xiao Lan personally came out to welcome them dressed in close-fitting clothes. Seeing Qin Zheng help Li Xian out of the palanquin, Xiao Lan stepped forward and saluted. "Sixth brother-in-law's arrival will definitely make His Imperial Highness extremely happy."

Uncaringly, Li Xian said, "At present, Li Xian is no more than a prisoner. How am I worthy of such great courtesies?"

Xiao Lan then appeared to be awkward. However, she immediately wiped it away with a smile and replied, "Sixth brother-in-law, this is our error. Sixth brother-in-law, please forgive us. His Imperial Highness is waiting inside for you."

Li Xian entered the palace hall, seeing Li An standing at its center with his hands behind his back. The Crown Prince's Junior Mentor Lu Jingzhong stood in attendance to the side. Although Lu Jingzhong had already been placed under house arrest by the Fengyi Sect, with the urgency of the

present situation and under the crown prince's request, the Fengyi Sect could only release him. They could only limit him to the Jade Qilin Palace Hall. Probably because of this reason and because the crown prince had not cared enough to protect him, Lu Jingzhong's seemed somewhat aloof and haggard.

Seeing Li Xian arrive, Li An amicably walked over. Grasping his brother's hand, Li An stated, "Sixth brother, you've come. This time, you have to help your older brother. You understand that your older brother can't turn back anymore. If I do not ascend to the throne as emperor, I will be imprisoned and forced to commit suicide. Your wife is also a rebel. If you aren't willing to do your utmost when the time comes, there is no way that you will be able to escape responsibility if your older brother were to unfortunately fail."

With an even expression on his face, Li Xian replied, "Your little brother is aware of the present state of affairs. However, hasn't Crown Prince already dispatched a fake edict to mobilize the Qin family army?"

Li An was startled. Blushing with shame, he answered, "When all is said and done, the Qin family isn't under my personal command. If something unexpected happens, they will be extremely difficult to control. Your older brother's seat upon the Imperial Throne will only be safe once your troops arrive, sixth brother."

With a smile that wasn't a smile, Li Xian replied, "Since that is the case, would the Crown Prince please remove the poison in my body and allow me to take command of my army?"

When Li Xian spoke those words, Li An was immediately left speechless. He glanced at Xiao Lan, a look of awkwardness on his face. At this moment, Lu Jingzhong spoke up, "Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi's body is priceless. At present, the Prince of Yong is still at large. If Your Imperial Highness were to take risks with your life, if something unexpected were to happen to you, wouldn't it cause the Crown Prince concern? It is better to stay here. So long as Your Imperial Highness provides a letter ordering your army to undertake a forced march to rush here, it will be enough. I wonder if Your Imperial Highness is willing to serve the Crown Prince."

Li Xian grimly returned, “Who doesn’t know that the Prince of Yong’s army is keeping a close eye upon my troops? If my troops were to move, they would likely be disturbed. Isn’t Junior Mentor worried about overreaching?”

“The Prince of Yong’s personal army is stubborn and pigheaded,” observed Lu Jingzhong with a smile. “Although the Crown Prince has already dispatched people to pursue the Prince of Yong and the Qin family’s army will soon become involved, if the Prince of Yong is regrettably allowed to rendezvous with his troops, it will undoubtedly severely complicate the situation. Only because of this does the Crown Prince desire that Your Imperial Highness dispatch troops to help annihilate the troops under the Prince of Yong’s command. The army under Your Imperial Highness’s command is close in number to those of the Prince of Yong. The quality is also equal. We believe that Your Imperial Highness will definitely be able to attain success quickly, perhaps even in the first battle.[1] Even if Your Imperial Highness is unable to attain an immediate victory, since the Crown Prince has already dispatched an edict commanding the Qin family army to capture and kill the Prince of Yong, once successful, they will bring the Prince of Yong’s severed head to help Your Imperial Highness’s subordinates pacify the rebellion. When the time comes, Your Imperial Highness will have performed the greatest meritorious service in saving the empire from danger. The Crown Prince will surely reward you heavily.”

Li Xian stared intensely at Lu Jingzhong, mentally cursing the man’s maliciousness, the man who desired to force his army to fight against the Prince of Yong’s elite soldiers. Even if his troops were fortunate enough to win, they would suffer disastrous casualties. The majority of the troops commanded by himself and the Prince of Yong were on the frontiers. The only other troops stationed near the capital and its environs were the Qin family’s army, loyal only to the emperor. As long as they controlled Imperial Father, they could guarantee Li An’s ascension to the throne. However, Li Xian did not lay bare the man’s malicious scheming, merely stonily replying, “Fine. This Prince will write a letter to mobilize my troops. However, Your Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, must agree to a few of this younger brother’s conditions.”

Li An was overjoyed, as he agreed, “Sixth brother, don’t hesitate and reveal them.”

With an icy expression on his face, Li Xian stated, “First, regardless of how we struggle for the Imperial Throne, calamity should not fall upon the women and children. I do not care about the fate of second brother, but second sister-in-law and nephew may not be touched.”

“Pulling out weeds without digging up the roots,” mentioned Li An, frowning slightly. “Sixth brother is too tenderhearted. If second brother were to win, the only path for our women and children is death.”

Li Xian was silent and did not speak. Seeing Lu Jingzhong give him a meaningful look, Li An could only acquiesce reluctantly, “Fine, I’ll listen to you.”

Li Xian smiled slightly and continued, “The second condition: if elder brother ascends to the throne, you cannot depose sister-in-law and the heir because of the Fengyi Sect’s contributions.”

Frankly and straightforwardly, Li An consented, “There is no problem. We also think this way.”

Li Xian imperviously continued, “The third condition. I know that Your Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, was frequently dissatisfied with this younger brother. I ask that Your Imperial Highness not settle accounts afterwards.”

Li An awkwardly replied, “Why would I do such a thing? Sixth brother’s help will be invaluable for my ascension to the Imperial Throne. We will definitely not return kindness with ingratitude.”

Nodding his head, Li Xian continued, “There is also another small condition. Right now, I am being controlled by drugs. It is challenging for me to even climb out of bed. I want the poison in my body to be removed.”

Li An glanced at Xiao Lan. After hesitating for a moment, Xiao Lan spoke, “Your servant only has an antidote that will temporarily alleviate Your Imperial Highness’s condition. If Your Imperial Highness desires to regain your martial arts, I’m afraid that you will have to wait until my master arrives.”

Li An glanced at the Prince of Qi, worried that they would fall out because of this reason. Surprisingly, Li Xian only uncaringly replied, “This Prince is only melancholic about being forced to lie in bed and is in no rush to recover my martial arts.”

Xiao Lan relaxed, taking out a pill and handing it to Li Xian. Accepting it, Li Xian swallowed the pill. After a short while, he felt his energy gradually recover. Walking to the desk, he wrote a letter. Finished, he turned and left.

Walking on the imperial pathways, Li Xian’s expression looked relaxed and comfortable, almost as if he didn’t have any cares in the world. He did not deign to sit in the palanquin, walking at a leisurely pace back towards the Announcing Magnificence Park. Seeing him in a cheerful mood, Qin Zheng also felt delighted, accompanying him as they slowly walked back.

As a result, no one paid attention to the four warriors carrying the palanquin. They deliberately slowed down their pace and even actually diverted from the path, approaching the Cherishing Fragrance Park. This location was already quite desolate and isolated. There weren’t many imperial guardsmen stationed here. Picking out a hidden spot, the four warriors hid the palanquin before jumping over the wall into the Cherishing Fragrance Park. After they entered, one of the four waited outside as a lookout while the other three entered the palace hall. After searching carefully, one of the men arriving at the princess’s sleeping quarters made a signal. The other two quickly came over. One of three lightly pushed open the door before immediately jumping out of the way.

Within, Dong Que had heard a noise. Trembling from head to toe, he turned to look. Two warriors had already jumped into the chambers. Cursing his luck and wondering if their location had been betrayed, Dong Que was confused as to why there were so few warriors. Not daring to make a sound and unable to worry about the unconscious Jiang Zhe, Dong Que unsheathed his sword and attacked.

Both of the warriors were first-rate experts, simultaneously drawing sabers and counterattacking. Both sides were silent as they exchanged several blows. Dong Que gradually began to bleed from the injury that he had sustained at the hands of Xiahou Yuanfeng, unable to keep up. The last

warrior had also leaped into the room. Avoiding the three fighting, that warrior dodged to the bedside. He lowered his head to check Jiang Zhe's appearance. After a short moment, he raised his head and signaled with his hand. The expressions of both warriors shook, their bladesmanship becoming even more ruthless and severe. The last warrior whispered, "We are the subordinates of His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi. Regardless of your status within the Prince of Yong's household, you must know that His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, has never held any malice for Jiang *daren* . Right now, you are in grave danger. Why not temporarily rely on His Imperial Highness's protection?"

Dong Que's jaw quivered, his swordsmanship becoming messy. Observing this, the two warriors stayed their hands and stopped attacking, only on guard against Dong Que. Dong Que also stopped, gazing at the warrior beside the bed. Although that warrior had spoken in an amiable manner, Dong Que saw that his hand rested upon his saber's handle as he stood by Jiang Zhe's bedside. Dong Que understood that he did not have any way of resisting. However, he also knew that his identity could not be exposed to the light of day. Meeting the Prince of Qi would bring more harm than good.[2] After pondering for a moment, he suddenly turned and rushed out of the sleeping quarters. All of the warriors were surprised, not expecting that this man would flee. When two of the warriors chased after Dong Que and reached the door, they discovered that Dong Que had already disappeared without a trace. After discussing the situation, the three warriors determined that regardless of anything, Dong Que would not go to inform anyone. Since Jiang Zhe was already in their hands, it was best that they return quickly.

They picked the unconscious Jiang Zhe up and hid him inside the palanquin. Afterwards, they nonchalantly[2] carried the palanquin back to the Announcing Magnificence Park. No one paid them any attention throughout their journey.

Returning to the Announcing Magnificence Park, they followed the Prince of Qi's instructions and hid Jiang Zhe in a side chamber. Then one of the warriors went to report to the Prince of Qi. Qin Zheng had already returned

to the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall. As a result, the only ones left beside the Prince of Qi were Qin Zheng's two maids. Because of the Prince of Qi's cooperative attitude, they did not dare to oppose Li Xian and were shooed out.

After listening to the warrior's whispered report, Li Xian frowned slightly. Although he was trapped here, his access to information was not restricted. Not only did Qin Zheng keep him up to date, he had several trusted subordinates within the Imperial Guard. Naturally, he had known long ago about the Prince of Yong's escape, Princess Changle's mediation, and Wei Ying's search of the Cherishing Fragrance Park. As a result, he was able to judge that it was very likely that Jiang Zhe hid in the Cherishing Fragrance Park. Therefore, he had borrowed the opportunity of meeting with the crown prince to send his subordinates to search the Cherishing Fragrance Park. However, the current situation was extremely strange. Why had Jiang Zhe's guard deserted? This did not make any sense.

Before he was able to speak, the warrior whispered, "Your Imperial Highness, Jiang *daren* 's breathing is incredibly weak. If he is not treated, his life will likely be in danger."

Li Xian was shaken. "Have the imperial physician diagnose and treat Jiang Zhe. Remember, be careful. Make sure that the Princess of Qi doesn't find out."

Nominally ill, Li Xian had brought along an imperial physician with him to the Hunting Palace. At present, the physician was resting in a side chamber. At this moment, the imperial physician was greatly vexed. He was not a member of the crown prince's faction. Now that he had fallen into such a predicament, if something were to happen, he would likely be treated as a rebel. However, he did not dare to violate the Prince of Qi's orders. When he arrived in the chambers that Jiang Zhe was resting in and saw Jiang Zhe, the imperial physician's entire body trembled. That year when Jiang Zhe was nearly assassinated, he was one of the imperial physicians who had gone to treat Jiang Zhe. Naturally, he recognized the Prince of Yong's trusted adviser. The present situation was confusing. The Prince of Qi was clearly a member of the crown prince's faction. Why was he hiding one of the Prince

of Yong's advisers? However, he knew that it was best to pretend to be deaf and mute. Stepping forward, he checked Jiang Zhe's pulse. His brows immediately furrowed, and he stated, "This *daren* was originally already ill, and did not properly convalesce. At present, his heartbeat is extremely feeble. If he is not given proper treatment, he likely won't survive the night. I'll make a prescription using liquefied ginseng. As long as he rests properly, his illness should be treatable."

The warrior was overjoyed, replying, "Imperial Physician Qiao, please treat him properly. If something were to happen to this man, His Imperial Highness wouldn't let you off."

Imperial Physician Qiao repeatedly voiced his promises. He had brought a complete collection of medicinal ingredients with him for this trip. As expected, after feeding Jiang Zhe some medicine, Jiang Zhe's complexion gradually improved and became ruddy. His breathing also deepened, his expression becoming tranquil. Wiping the sweat from his brow, Imperial Physician Qiao remarked, "Finally out of the woods … However, *daren* 's body is extremely weak and requires careful nursing."

The warriors exchanged glances. They had heard of the poor health of an adviser of the Prince of Yong. In addition, their master esteemed him exceedingly highly. Who could have expected that it would be a feeble scholar like this who could die at any moment?

A night passed without incident. At dawn, Jiang Zhe's eyes finally opened. The warriors immediately reported this to the Prince of Qi, Li Xian.

Feeling as if someone was calling my name, I opened my eyes with difficulty. In reality, when I fainted last time, I doubted that I would wake again. Although I was completely without strength at this moment, I still had to thank the Heavens. In a whisper, I muttered, "Dong Que … Dong Que …"

From my side, a voice came over, "Suiyun, you've awoken."

I shook inside. This voice was very familiar, but it was definitely not Dong Que. Turning my head, I looked, seeing the Prince of Qi quickly walking in. I subconsciously glanced at my surroundings. Smiling wryly, I observed, "So Zhe has already become a prisoner. I do not know how I arrived at Your

Imperial Highness's residence."

Li Xian laughed bitterly before he sat down in a chair beside the bed. He replied, "Meeting you today—it feels like a lifetime has passed since our last meeting. Presumably, Suiyun has already planned everything and victory is already within second brother's grasp."[3]

I tried to sit up with difficulty, but was unable to do so, feeling my limbs completely lacking in strength. The Prince of Qi hurriedly came over to prop me up. Only then was I able to sit up. I asked, "What time is it right now?"

Li Xian casually remarked, "Today is already the twenty-second day of the ninth month. It is almost 7 AM."

I breathed a sigh of relief. It seemed like the troops coming to rescue the emperor would arrive soon. I hoped that the Prince of Yong would be safe and sound. With a calm expression on my face, I inquired, "How did I come here? What happened to the guard at my side?"

Li Xian smiled and responded, "Yesterday, I dispatched men to the Cherishing Fragrance Park. As expected, they found you hiding there. Right now, aside from this Prince and a few trusted subordinates, no one else knows that you are here. As for your guard, he acted strangely. Seeing you fall into my subordinates' hands, he actually fled."

I breathed another sigh of relief. If Dong Que were to meet with the Prince of Qi, based upon Li Xian's supreme intuition, Dong Que's identity would likely be exposed and he would be in danger.

Somewhat lamenting, Li Xian declared, "Suiyun, you have shed your blood, sweat, and tears for my second brother. But if weren't for the timely arrival of my men, you likely would have lost your life. Why go to such ends? If you had followed this Prince that day, it would have been impossible for you to fall into such a state."

I smiled faintly. "Zhe has received extraordinary favor from His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong. At this moment, if I relaxed, wouldn't I betray the Prince of Yong's grace?"

An unhappy look appeared on Li Xian's face. "This Prince is confident that if you are willing to enter my service, this Prince's grace to you will not be

less than that of second brother's."

I could not help but recall my efforts to force the Prince of Yong to act and his ultimate decision to let me off. It seemed like just yesterday. After a moment, I replied, "Your Imperial Highness's natural disposition is straightforward and outspoken, possessing talents surpassing others. Zhe admires you greatly. It is a pity that Your Imperial Highness made a misstep and is now trapped in an impossible situation. However, with regards to matters of the past, there is no point in discussing them. I wonder. Has Your Imperial Highness taken steps this time to make up for your mistake?"

Li Xian smiled wryly and stated, "Last night, I agreed to their request, writing a letter ordering my troops to mobilize."

Startled, I said, "Your Imperial Highness must know that at present, your troops are already powerless."

Li Xian heaved a sigh. "My actual order was for them to not make a move. They won't do a thing. As for who will win between big brother and second brother, it'll be based on themselves."

"Your Imperial Highness was able to pull back from the precipice," I respectfully conveyed, "Garnering this subject's complete admiration."

Somewhat melancholic, Li Xian expressed, "After this ends, regardless of who wins, there would be no difference to this Prince's destiny. If second brother were to win, this Prince would like to request something of *daren* ."

With a grave and solemn expression, I agreed, "Your Imperial Highness has saved this subject's life. If this lowly subject is able to accomplish it, even if I have to sacrifice my life, I will not hesitate in the least. Your Imperial Highness, please speak your request."

"I know that to the victors go the spoils," professed Li Xian with a sigh. "If the Crown Prince is victorious, second brother's entire family will definitely perish. Although the Crown Prince agreed yesterday to let them off, I know the Crown Prince's character. Even if he will temporarily hold off because of me, he will always seek an opportunity to exterminate them. At the same time, if second brother were to win, nothing good will happen to big brother's family. However, they are all my blood. I honestly cannot stand

aside and do nothing. I hope that Suiyun can advise second brother to let off the Crown Princess and the heir, simply demoting them to the status of commoners. Second brother has always been magnanimous. He may agree. If second brother agrees to this condition, I am willing to hand over my military authority to him."

Silent for some time, I then asked, "Your Imperial Highness won't spare a thought for your own consort and heir?"

Li Xian's complexion changed greatly, not speaking a word for some time. Finally, he answered, "I know that this is an impossibility. Zheng'er is directly involved in the rebellion. If second brother is victorious, regardless of the empire's laws or family regulations, Zheng'er will not be able to escape. Even our son will also be implicated. Perhaps Imperial Father will spare my life after taking note that I did not participate in the rebellion. But with the death of my wife and child, what right do I have to continue to keep living, enjoying peace, riches, and honor?"

I stared at Li Xian, knowing that he spoke the truth. Neither the Princess of Qi nor his heir could escape being punished. However, it was inappropriate for me to say so. I could only state, "Right now, victory and defeat have yet to be determined. There is no need for Your Imperial Highness to be overly worried."

"This Prince does not dare to have any extravagant hopes," said Li Xian, smiling wryly. "Seeing that you, Suiyun, are so calm and composed, I can tell that the Crown Prince's chances of victory are slim."

Seeing off the Prince of Qi, my mind began to contemplate a million different things. Before today, all my efforts had been focused on how to increase the Prince of Yong's bargaining chips. I did not pay attention to anything else. The development of the present situation already had nothing to do with me. If the Prince of Yong were to be defeated, then naturally, there would be nothing that I could say, only die for his cause. But if the Prince of Yong were victorious, how should the future be handled? When the time comes, the Prince of Yong would definitely ask for my opinions. My views would affect the life and death of thousands, if not tens of thousands, of lives. I could not be careless.

I believed the crown prince naturally deserved death, while the Fengyi Sect could not be permitted to continue to exist. Because of Wei Ying's involvement, regardless of Wei Guan's stance and awareness, he would still be implicated. However, if the prime minister, possessing countless students, were not handled properly, the foundations of the empire could be shaken.

And there was still the most crucial individual, the Prince of Qi. Even though the Prince of Qi's support allowed the crown prince to become arrogant and unbridled, causing the entirety of the Prince of Yong's household to bear deep resentment towards the Prince of Qi, the Prince of Qi's temperament was straightforward and upright, valuing friendship and righteousness. Furthermore, he had the hard to come by talent to become a commander-in-chief. It would be Great Yong's loss if he were executed or demoted. However, the Princess of Qi's personality was fierce, and she was also a vicious and merciless individual. As a result, the Princess of Qi would become an intractable problem between the Princes of Yong and Qi. If the Prince of Qi were to be let off lightly, then it likely would cause no end of trouble in the future. Truly an impossible situation. After careful consideration, I suddenly smiled. These matters would naturally be handled appropriately by the Prince of Yong and Shi Yu. There was no need for me to trouble myself over it. Thinking this, I gradually relaxed, drowsily falling back to sleep. *Everything should be concluded tomorrow or the day after.*

Footnotes :

旗开得胜, qikaidesheng – idiom, lit. to win a victory on raising the flag; fig. to start on something and have immediate success, speedy success; win in the first battle

有害无益, youhaiwuyi – idiom, lit. harmful and without benefit; fig. more harm than good

稳操胜券, wencaoshengquan – idiom, lit. grasp it and victory is assured; fig. have firm assurances of success

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 32: Demonic Shadow and Rakshasa

Volume 3, Chapter 32: Demonic Shadow and Rakshasa

Exhausted after days of fighting, less than half were left from the over thousand men who had escaped from the Hunting Palace. Those survivors were all injured. Forcing himself to smile, Li Zhi shook his head. He did not expect that he would be reduced to such a state after gaining control of a magnificent army of thousands of men and horses. The two thousand imperial guardsmen commanded by Wen Ziyan and the thousand men commanded by Pei Yun were Great Yong's most elite troops. Every single individual was brave and skillful in combat. Wen Ziyan not only had superior numbers, her troops' speed was also much faster. In addition, aside from the two thousand imperial guardsmen, she had fifty swordswomen from the Fengyi Sect. All of these women were suicidal maniacs who did not fear death, all with capable martial arts. Although they were women, all of them had excellent swordsmanship, accomplished at archery and horsemanship. Although they were not experts at frontal assaults, they rained down arrows when the turncoat imperial guardsmen engaged Pei Yun's imperial guardsmen. In close combat, they used their superb swordsmanship and equestrianism to murder the generals and experts under the Prince of Yong's command. All of these women wielded treasured swords, easily able to pierce through the armor of the Prince of Yong's subordinates. As a result, they inflicted heavy losses upon the Prince of Yong's subordinates. As for the Prince of Yong's subordinates, all of them were either adept at fighting hand-to-hand on the battlefield or skilled in *wulin* dueling. Compared to the unpredictability and rapidness of the women swordswomen, the Prince of Yong's subordinates were quite inferior. Were it not for Li Zhi's remarkable command capability, Wen Ziyan would have likely succeeded already.

Li Zhi turned his head to gaze at the smoke and dust kicked up in the distance. He sighed once again. The Fengyi Sect Master was truly not

ordinary. This unit of women that she had trained was truly incomparably without equal. Even the horse archers of the northern barbarians weren't as formidable as these women. Li Zhi believed that he was a master at training his troops, but had never thought to train such a unit of light cavalry. Of course, although the cost of training such a unit was quite high, it was worth it to acquire such a crack unit of light cavalry. As for Wen Ziyan, this female rakshasa that caused him the biggest headache, Li Zhi could only sigh with praise. Although Wen Ziyan's performance was barely acceptable[1] when trying to obstruct Li Zhi's escape—probably because even if she was responsible for their training, she was not responsible for their military training—he could not help but admire this woman's ability. At the beginning, she was flustered in command. But by now, she had learned quickly. If Wen Ziyan had been given the opportunity to command troops before, she would have become a famous general.

Li Zhi could not help but think that the Fengyi Sect Master had chosen the wrong path. If she had not devoted herself to controlling the court politics and harem, then based upon Wen Ziyan's abilities and these swordswomen, Great Yong would have had an astonishingly capable army of women. Although that road would be bumpy and complicated, it was an aboveboard method.

After sharing the remaining rations with his subordinates, Li Zhi once again mounted his horse. He shouted, "Let's hurry. If we can cross the Bitter Cloud Ridge, and obstruct the rebel army's pursuit and attack, then we can rendezvous with our reinforcements." Although this was what he said, Li Zhi was still deeply worried. Wen Ziyan had detoured and was barring the way, preventing him from fleeing towards his reinforcements. If this were to continue, Li Zhi knew that his head would be presented as a gift to the crown prince. A look of resentment flashed across Pei Yun's eyes as he stood by Li Zhi's side. The troops that he had so painstakingly drilled had been crushed[2] by these swordswomen. Although much of these losses were a result of their numerical inferiority, he had still lost much face.

After everyone had galloped for some time, they caught sight of a small but steep mountain ridge before them. Everyone's vigilance increased. They had

reached this location yesterday, but had unfortunately been blocked by Wen Ziyan, and they had ultimately been forced to break out of the encirclement. This time, they had used all of the available methods to conceal their whereabouts, dividing their troops to entice the enemy, once again returning here. As long as they were to climb over this ridge, the following seventy *li* of road were composed of ancient roads winding through the hills. As long as they left behind troops in ambush to serve as the rearguard, then they would be able to guarantee that the Prince of Yong would be able to reach his household guards. No matter how formidable the pursuing turncoats, there was no way for them to harm the Prince of Yong within an army of tens of thousands.

Gazing at the mountain ridge before them, Li Zhi signaled with his hand. Two experts with excellent *qinggong* dismounted from their horses. Like apes and monkeys, they climbed the mountain ridge. Their figures disappeared from everyone's eyes. Afterwards, a scream could be heard. Li Zhi and company immediately tightened their grips on their weapons. An azure-clothed woman mounted on a fine horse appeared on the mountain ridge. Although her appearance was ordinary, the disdainful spirit she had for the entirety of the world caused this woman to become quite vivid and memorable in everyone's eyes. Sure enough, the Fengyi Sect Master's head disciple was truly not ordinary.

Wen Ziyan urged her horse forward, joined by forty swordswomen to her left and right. Wen Ziyan shouted, "Li Zhi, this seat had long foreseen that you would return here. Therefore, regardless of how you divided your troops and tried to entice me, this seat was determined to reach this location before you. Right now, you are in a certain death situation. Why have you not dismounted and surrendered? Perhaps the Crown Prince will be merciful and spare your life."

Heaving a deep sigh, Li Zhi replied, "It is truly a pity that Miss Wen has never before led troops into battle. You have this Prince's admiration. However, it will require your own skills to take this Prince's life. Li An has rebelled against the Emperor, having neither father nor sovereign in his eyes. Your Fengyi Sect inciting the Crown Prince to rebellion is an

unpardonable crime. If you wish to seek this Prince's head, come take it yourself."

Wen Ziyan loudly laughed for a long time. Waving her hand, innumerable horsemen appeared on both sides. Occupying the high ground, they charged down. Recognizing that the terrain was unfavorable to him, Li Zhi knew that if he were too impatient and fled right away, he would be attacked in the rear by Wen Ziyan. At the same time, if he were to fight to the death, the losses that he would suffer would be disastrous. However, there was still a slim chance of survival. If they were able to defend against the charge, then they would be able to find the opportunity to get away.

Consequently, Li Zhi drew his sword and pointed at the enemy. He commanded, "Fight to the death! No retreat! Kill!" Finished shouting, Li Zhi took the lead and charged forward. Seeing him, Li Zhi's personal guard were all inflamed, all of them seeking to cover the Prince of Yong. The two elite units slammed together, enemies meeting face to face,[3] carnage ensuing.[4] Based upon his unparalleled command talent, Li Zhi was able to blunt the first attack.

At this moment, Pei Yun discovered that Wen Ziyan had charged down with the Fengyi Sect swordswomen right down the steep mountain ridge. It was clear that they intended to hit the Prince of Yong's flank. Hardening his heart, Pei Yun shouted, "Brothers! Follow me and serve as the rearguard! Your Imperial Highness, quickly flee!"

Once Pei Yun's order transmitted through the ranks, formidable fighting strength erupted from the three hundred of the remaining loyalist imperial guardsmen, tenaciously intercepting the rebel army. Li Zhi was briefly startled, watching as Pei Yun took the lead and charged straight at her. Lamenting, Li Zhi shouted, "Let's go!" Although this had not been planned, the Prince of Yong was a veteran commander. Naturally, he understood that this was his only opportunity to escape. Li Zhi had to cut his losses and flee. Everyone knew that if the Prince of Yong did not live to rendezvous with his personal troops, then the only path before everyone was death. As a result, the remaining imperial guardsmen and some of the Prince of Yong's personal guards did not hesitate, protecting the Prince of Yong in retreat.

Wen Ziyan exchanged several blows with Pei Yun. Pei Yun was an expert from the Shaolin Temple and was also a valiant general who had fought numerous battles. At this very moment, he had no fear of death. As a result, in spite of everything, he was able to hold off Wen Ziyan. Beside him were his own personal guards and many experts from the major sects of *jianghu* . Although these martial artists were inexperienced in war, based upon their valor, they were surprisingly able to hold off the onslaught of the Fengyi Sect's swordswomen.

Wen Ziyan's sword arced through the air like a rainbow, the snow-white sword finally having the opportunity to stab towards Pei Yun. Seeing that the experts by his side had already been defeated, Pei Yun ceased to dodge, instead counterattacking, chopping his saber back at Wen Ziyan. How was the all-out counterattack from a youthful expert from the Shaolin Temple easy to block? It was too late for Wen Ziyan to evade. Although she wore light armor underneath, she was still wounded on the right arm. As for Pei Yun, he was stabbed several times by the circling swordswomen. He fell off his horse. Although she saw that Pei Yun was not yet dead, Wen Ziyan ignored him, continuing to pursue the Prince of Yong. Trilling a long whistle, she led her forces to pursue the Prince of Yong's routed troops.

This chase was different from before. Wen Ziyan had recklessly galloped forward. Regardless of how he tried, the Prince of Yong could not shake off his pursuers. After he had sped along for some twenty-odd *li* , the speed of Li Zhi's horse gradually reduced. Li Zhi steeled his heart, lifted his personal sword, and prepared to stab the buttocks of his horse. At this moment, he saw smoke and dust roil before him, signaling that a large force was approaching. Li Zhi could not help but become disheartened. For a moment, he was at his wit's end. However, he was a once-in-a-generation hero. Seeing that attackers both in front and behind w0uld arrive simultaneously, Li Zhi decided he might as well rein in his warhorse. Thinking back on these last two days of fighting and rushing, he was already battered and exhausted. How could the Great Yong's military deity die in such a sorry state? Using his personal sword as a mirror, Li Zhi rearranged his appearance and straightened his armor. The imperial guardsmen and household guard by his side all lost heart, tightening their grips on their weapons, preparing to

welcome their last moments.

Behind them, Wen Ziyan's pursuing troops gradually closed in. Right then, Li Zhi was able to clearly see the incomparably handsome face of the man at the head of the army advancing from ahead. It was Xiahou Yuanfeng. The armored soldiers behind him seemed to be Qin Yi's subordinates. Li Zhi's heart sank. Did Jiang Zhe's plan fail? Had the Crown Prince gained control of Qin Yi's troops? At this moment, facing death, Li Zhi was actually at peace with himself. Looking left and right, Sima Xiong and Jing Chi were covered with cuts and bruises. All of those following him had dark and gloomy appearances, their armor smashed to pieces. Li Zhi could not help but smile and state, "A manly man born in these troubled times carries a three *chi* long sword to perform meritorious service. If we are unsuccessful in our ambitions, there is only death! It is a pity that I have implicated all of you."

Sobbing, everyone replied, "To accompany Your Imperial Highness to the underworld, we will die a glorious death!"[4]

At this time, the troops that Xiahou Yuanfeng led suddenly spread out to the side, forming a crescent formation. Li Zhi and company were left dumbfounded. Taking this formation meant that the enemies before them weren't seeking to scatter them, but seeking instead to surround them. Could it be that they were seeking to capture the Prince of Yong alive? Before Li Zhi was able to think it through, Xiahou Yuanfeng's troops had already split in half, passing by the flanks of Li Zhi's remaining troops, meeting Wen Ziyan's pursuing soldiers. One side was rested and prepared, while the other was a spent force. Upon contact, superiority was determined. Wen Ziyan's troops were surrounded by the five thousand soldiers that Xiahou Yuanfeng commanded.

"Xiahou Yuanfeng!" shouted Wen Ziyan in a sharp, piercing voice filled with indignity from within the encirclement.

Li Zhi's face twitched. Although he did not know what was going on, he immediately understood that at this moment, victory was already within his grasp.

At this moment, a group of the commanders of the reinforcements came to

the Prince of Yong's side. Remaining mounted, a heroic and brave looking general gave a military salute, shouting, "Under His Imperial Majesty's secret edict, General Qin has dispatched the army to search and provide assistance to Your Imperial Highness. This general is Zhang Xiong and has accompanied Commander Xiahou the entire way. Fortunately, we were able to encounter Your Imperial Highness. Please forgive us, Your Imperial Highness, for arriving so late."

Overjoyed, Li Zhi replied, "General, there is no need to be overly courteous. What is going on? Please explain slowly."

The general respectfully and cautiously explained, "Last night, Commander Xiahou arrived at the Qin family's army's camps, conveying His Imperial Majesty's secret edict and the Grand General's command, stating that the Crown Prince had rebelled and that His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, was being pursued and attacked by a rebel army. General Qin Yong issued orders, splitting the army into eight to search for Your Imperial Highness's whereabouts. Your Imperial Highness, please allow this general to issue the signal to notify the separate forces of Your Imperial Highness's position."

After thinking it over, Li Zhi answered, "Use the military communication methods to inform the separate forces to rendezvous at the town of Pingyuan."

The town of Pingyuan was fifteen *li* from the Hunting Palace, perfectly suitable to establish encampments for the armies seeking to rescue the emperor. A look of admiration flashed across this general's eyes, and he personally went to send the message, employing fireworks to transmit the Prince of Yong's orders.

Li Zhi raised his gaze and looked around, seeing that although Wen Ziyan had been encircled, she had become even more dauntless. The attacking soldiers had suffered countless casualties. Li Zhi could not help but lament mentally. To Zhang Xiong, he asked, "Are there any friendly forces nearby?"

Hesitating somewhat, Zhang Xiong first gazed at the battle. He then responded, "Your Imperial Highness, the central army personally

commanded by General Qin Yong should be twenty *li* away."

Overjoyed, Li Zhi replied, "Quickly summon General Qin over. After we have annihilated this rebel army, we'll join together and march towards the town of Pingyuan."

Zhang Xiong promptly went to pass the order. Another group of fireworks shot into the air.

In just under an hour, after Wen Ziyan's troops had attempted to break the assault several times, but were blocked by the loyalists risking life and limb. Under the assistance of the Prince of Yong's subordinate experts and the brave warriors of his army, Xiahou Yuanfeng was able to counter the Fengyi Sect's spearhead though with difficulty. During this period, they were truly able to experience the formidability of the Fengyi Sect. Before, although they were previously extremely afraid of the Fengyi Sect's tyranny, they now viewed these women with contempt. But the gorgeous, and yet heartless and ruthless swordsmanship of Wen Ziyan and company caused all of them to hover on the boundary between life and death.

Although Li Zhi was worried sick, there was something that filled him with joy. The men that he had dispatched to rescue his rearguard had discovered that Pei Yun was still alive. Although the conditions of his injuries were grave, the secret cultivation methods of the Shaolin Temple were extremely wondrous, surprisingly able to preserve Pei Yun's life.

After a spell, although the Fengyi Sect had suffered heavy casualties, Wen Ziyan was still on the verge of escaping. In the distance, smoke and dust could be seen. At the head of reinforcements, Qin Yong arrived. At this moment, Wen Ziyan was finally able to take the lead and charge out of the blockade.

Helpless, Xiahou Yuanfeng shook his head. After fighting bitterly for half a day, he was powerless to do anything. He could not back down if he wished to not die at Wen Ziyan's hands. All this was completely outside of his expectations. Although Xiahou Yuanfeng was fond of currying favor on both sides, he was most skilled at distinguishing between situations. When the Prince of Yong had escaped, Xiahou Yuanfeng knew that the situation was

already out of the Fengyi Sect's control. As a result, under Jiang Zhe's coercion and his disappointment with the Fengyi Sect, he had quickly decided to support the Prince of Yong. He mocked himself—although the Prince of Yong was difficult to serve, requiring the use of actual meritorious service to obtain rank and his confidence, it was better than being dependent on another's whim to live.[5] Since he had switched his support to the Prince of Yong, then the most important thing he needed to do now was to contribute as soon as possible. Fortunately, the Heavens had blessed him, allowing him to be the first to find the Prince of Yong. The greatest achievement one could contribute was to rescue someone in danger. Xiahou Yuanfeng was naturally overjoyed at the turn of events. As for the annihilation of Wen Ziyan and her allies, it was originally another opportune contribution that the Heavens had given him. But right now, he had discovered that Wen Ziyan and the Fengyi Sect's swordswomen were extremely formidable.

At this point, Xiahou Yuanfeng finally paid attention to the distant reinforcements. He had no intention of bickering over the contributions in annihilating Wen Ziyan's troops. After all, he knew that the Prince of Yong had already seen his contributions in rescuing the prince and grinding down the Fengyi Sect's strength. As a result, he only gave the order to ensure that the traitorous imperial guardsmen did not escape. After all, wiping them out was no small contribution in and of itself.

From the ranks of the arriving reinforcements, a pitch-black horse broke forward from the formation, heading directly for Wen Ziyan. A heaven-soaring killing intent was being exuded from the young man in martial attire mounted upon this horse. Seeing the arriving reinforcements, Wen Ziyan reined in her horse. She closed her eyes. After a few moments, she reopened them. Her hopeful eyes had seemed to fall into the abyss of despair and were now dull and calm. The Fengyi Sect swordswomen, whose snow-white clothes had been dyed crimson by the blood, all silently checked the weapons in their hands. The previous two days, only a few of these swordswomen had perished. In this last engagement, most of them had fallen. Their supply of arrows was exhausted. Their clothes were ragged, revealing the black, light armor underneath. The edges of their treasured

swords, capable of dicing any metal and cutting jade, were blunt and stained dark. However, there wasn't a hint of terror or weakness on their faces.

Wen Ziyan waved her hand, signaling for the swordswomen to stay still, while she personally rode forward, welcoming the lone person that was charging straight for her. Prior to this, the traitorous imperial guardsmen had all lost the will to fight. Xiahou Yuanfeng guided his horse to the Prince of Yong's side. Just as he was about to report in, he saw that Li Zhi's gaze was fixated ahead. There, were no soldiers within a hundred paces, only Wen Ziyan and Li Shun battling. Xiahou Yuanfeng smiled faintly and did not speak, ignoring the warning glances from the Prince of Yong's personal guards. Currently, other than the moans of the dying and the neighing of the masterless horses, there were no other sounds. It seemed that everyone had stopped moving, attentively watching the two top experts with similar reputations fight—the Demonic Shadow, Li Shun, and the Bloody Handed Rakshasa, Wen Ziyan.

Everyone had the same thoughts in their minds: allow this kind of enemy deserving of respect to die in a duel against an evenly matched[6] opponent. Everyone knew that if Wen Ziyan were to be defeated, then these Fengyi Sect swordswomen would lose their ability to resist. But if Li Shun were to lose, then there was no one on the Prince of Yong's side capable of rescuing the situation. It was likely that even if they were able to kill Wen Ziyan, she and her Fengyi Sect swordswomen would be able to heavily damage the morale of the Prince of Yong's troops.

Slightly earlier, Wen Ziyan smiled slightly, dismounting from her horse. With affection, she patted her horse's neck before driving it away. She gazed at Li Shun. Li Shun's original clothes had already been torn into shreds during the escape. As a result, he wore a military uniform, although he did not don armor. His gaze fell upon Wen Ziyan, revealing a look of respect and deep-seated hatred. Seeing Wen Ziyan's actions, he also lightly stepped off of his horse and drove it away. Under the autumn breeze, they stood opposing each other, the surging killing intent rocketing to the heavens.

While everyone was shaken by the killing intent, the two moved, their figures tangling. A dazzling glint of steel twinkled through the air. Li Shun

twirled a jade hairpin in his hands. In the wake of his multitudinous, ever-changing style, Li Shun's attacks created ear-piercing, popping sounds. The more the two fought, the more committed they became. All the spectators could no longer clearly see the movements of the two dueling. This astonishing duel did not last long. Wen Ziyan was already exhausted.[7] As a result, she did not conserve any of her internal or physical energy, seeking to win in the shortest amount of time possible. As Li Shun had always had a proud temperament and wanted to gauge the fighting abilities of the other disciples of the Fengyi Sect, he did not try to use guerrilla tactics against Wen Ziyan. The two used all of their strength to fight. After several dozen exchanges, victory and defeat were decided. Like a puppet with its string cut,[8] Wen Ziyan's body collapsed. Although he had few small wounds on his body, Li Shun was glowing with health and vigor. After going all out during his duel with Wen Ziyan, he was confident that he could deal with all of the other experts in the Fengyi Sect aside from the Fengyi Sect Master.

At this moment, Wen Ziyuan slowly sat up. Although blood flowed freely from her body, she did not seem to notice. Unsteadily, she got to her feet. Her eyes haltingly and unhurriedly glanced over her surroundings before falling upon Li Shun. After whispering something, she raised her sword up high and shouted, "To the victor go the spoils! Li Shun! I'll be waiting for you in the underworld!" Finished speaking, she slit her throat. A generational female heroine, who was not in the least bit inferior to men,[9] thus died, buried in the loess of northwestern China.

At this moment, Qin Yong signaled with his hand. Several thousand archers notched arrows to their bows. Qin Yong gazed at the Prince of Yong and saluted, waiting for his order.

The swordswomen exchanged looks of dismay. Although through the bitter training and the flawed cultivation methods they had lost their normal emotions, but in the face of these circumstances, they recognized that they definitely would not have any hope of survival. The distinct shadow of death had enveloped them all. As a result, Wen Ziyan, who they all respected and obeyed, became their object of imitation. All of them simultaneously looked forward, raised their swords, and committed suicide.

Afterwards, their bodies dropped from their horses.

The fall of the Fengyi Sect had begun …

Footnotes :

差强**人意**, chaqiangrenyi – idiom, lit. barely passable

人仰马**翻**, renyangmafan – idiom, lit. men and horses thrown off their feet; fig. to suffer a crushing defeat

狭路相逢, xialuxiangfeng – idiom, lit. to meet face to face on a narrow path; fig. enemies or rivals meet face to face

虽**死犹荣**, suisiyourong – idiom, lit. although dead, also honored; fig. died a glorious death

仰人鼻息, yangrenbixi – idiom, lit. relying on others for the air one breathes; fig. to be dependent on another's whim to survive

旗鼓相当, qiguxiangdang – idiom, lit. two armies have equivalent banners and drums; fig. evenly matched, roughly comparable

筋疲力尽, jinpilijin – idiom, lit. body weary, strength exhausted; fig. extremely tired, spent

断线风**筝**, duanxianfengzheng – idiom, lit. a kite with cut string; fig. gone beyond recall

不让须**眉**, burangxumei – idiom, lit. not conceding to men (beard and eyebrows); fig. to compare favorably with men in terms of ability, bravery, *etc.*

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 33: Heaven Shaking Reversal

Volume 3, Chapter 33: Heaven Shaking Reversal

As night fell on the twenty-second day of the ninth month, the town of Pingyuan, fifteen *li* from the Hunting Palace, had become the main camp for the forces seeking to rescue the emperor. At present, all of the routes leading out from the Hunting Palace had been cut off. Sitting in the temporary command tent, the Prince of Yong despaired. He did not expect that he would escape his predicament under such circumstances. On the road, he had thoroughly gotten the full story from Qin Yong, Xiahou Yuanfeng, and others. Although there were some things that he still wasn't clear about, Li Zhi had gotten to know the majority of what had transpired.

At the time, Li Zhi truthfully did not hold out much hope when Jiang Zhe had been left behind. Who could have imagined that this desperate crisis had actually been reversed by Jiang Zhe? When he heard the news that Xiahou Yuanfeng had brought both the fake edict and Imperial Father's secret edict to issue them to Qin Yong, Li Zhi had already found this all inconceivable. What caused him even greater shock was that just as Qin Yong was hesitating with the fake and secret edicts, the supervisor of the crown prince's imperial bodyguards, Zhang Jinxiong, assigned to escort and monitor Xiahou Yuanfeng, had actually produced a keepsake from Grand General Qin. In order to mobilize Qin Yong's troops, Jiang Zhe had surprisingly used three messengers for security's sake. In addition, the people that he had employed actually included trusted subordinates of the crown prince. The more they thought of this, the more frightened Qin Yong and Xiahou Yuanfeng became. Even Li Zhi believed that Jiang Zhe's scheming was unfathomable.

In particular, when Li Zhi granted Xiahou Yuanfeng an audience alone, Xiahou Yuanfeng did not hide a single thing, explaining how he had guessed Jiang Zhe's concealment in the Cherishing Fragrance Park, how he had gone alone to capture Jiang Zhe for selfish reasons, and how Jiang Zhe had braved

death in order to capture him. Hearing his explanation, not only was Li Zhi left sighing with admiration, he also gained a favorable impression of Xiahou Yuanfeng. Although this man was somewhat treacherous and indecisive, he had profound and far-reaching insights. If he were properly employed, he would be a capable subordinate. As a result, he spent some time consoling Xiahou Yuanfeng.

Li Zhi also commended Zhang Jinxiong for his meritorious contributions. Moreover, Li Zhi clearly enunciated a promise to not look into the Kongtong Sect's previous mistake. However, contrary to expectations, Zhang Jinxiong did not remain behind. He asserted that his betrayal was because he could not stand to watch the crown prince's conduct in cooperating with the Fengyi Sect, and was unwilling to take part in the attacks against his former master. As a result, he asked personally to leave. Li Zhi was quite appreciative of the kind of person with a loyal and righteous character, thus personally wrote an order for Zhang Jinxiong, giving him permission to depart freely.

As for Qin Yong, he personally came to apologize for his offense, explaining that he was late to the rescue because of his hesitation, asking the Prince of Yong to punish him. However, Li Zhi did not blame Qin Yong. In the Prince of Yong's mind, the troops under Qin Yi had always been loyal to the dynasty. If Qin Yong were to so easily support him, and had come to the rescue without orders, although he would be extremely grateful right now, he would be worried that he would face such a situation again in the future, and Qin Yong would misjudge the situation and make a serious mistake. From this, although Qin Yong was excessively cautious, he was the most suitable candidate to garrison and protect the capital region. Consequently, Li Zhi not only spoke warm words of comfort, he even awarded Qin Yong his personal sword, causing Qin Yong to be moved to tears.

After holding an emergency military conference, Li Zhi dispatched Xiahou Yuanfeng to lead some experts to infiltrate the Hunting Palace. Afterwards, the army would advance to attack. Coordinating attacks from within and without, they would eradicate all of the rebels. Among those who followed Xiahou Yuanfeng into the palace was Xiaoshunzi. This caused Xiahou

Yuanfeng significant grief. At the time, when Xiahou Yuanfeng arrived at the Qin army camps to issue the decree, in order to prevent the information from being leaked, he had first issued the fake edict before the assembled Qin army officers before showing Qin Yong the secret edict in private. As a result, he was nearly smacked to death with one palm from Xiaoshunzi. This was nothing in and of itself. After Xiaoshunzi had interrogated him about the situation in the Cherishing Fragrance Park, hearing that he had struck Jiang Zhe with a palm, Xiaoshunzi had always kept a bone-chillingly ruthless look on his face. His gaze towards Xiahou Yuanfeng was filled to the brim with killing intent. Because of all this, how could Xiahou Yuanfeng not sweat in fear? At this moment, he could not believe that he once had the intentions of attaining Xiaoshunzi's services.

Just as night fell, Xiahou Yuanfeng led a dozen or so martial arts experts dressed in black, approaching a corner of the Hunting Palace. This location was extremely close to the Jade Qilin Palace Hall that the crown prince had taken up residence. As a result, the men stationed here were the imperial guardsmen and imperial bodyguards commanded by Xiahou Yuanfeng. As a result, when Xiahou Yuanfeng revealed himself, he and those following him were easily able to enter the Hunting Palace. After that, Xiahou Yuanfeng arranged Imperial Guard uniforms for them. Once everyone had changed, they followed Xiahou Yuanfeng and made their way towards the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall. Just as they passed by the Cherishing Fragrance Park, as Xiahou Yuanfeng expected, Xiaoshunzi insisted on going to check on Jiang Zhe. Xiahou Yuanfeng had prepared for this long ago. Because of the close proximity of the Cherishing Fragrance Park to the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall, and the possibility of alarming the Fengyi Sect, Xiahou Yuanfeng figured it was better to wait until Li Zhi's army arrived before taking action. As a result, he expressed his approval.

As a result, everyone entered the Cherishing Fragrance Park. While the others went to the side chambers to rest, Xiaoshunzi and Xiahou Yuanfeng walked into the chamber. Xiaoshunzi was naturally the first one to burst into the sleeping quarters. But when Xiahou Yuanfeng caught up, he saw Xiaoshunzi gazing furiously at him. Xiahou Yuanfeng looked at his surroundings, not seeing Jiang Zhe or his servant. He could not help but be

frightened. However, after thinking it over, he smiled and stated, “It is possible that Jiang Zhe hid somewhere else. There is no need for Lord Li to be excessively worried.”

Deeming his words reasonable, Xiaoshunzi’s expression gradually calmed. However, at this moment, he could hear someone quietly approaching these chambers. His heart jumped into his mouth. After waiting for a few moments, someone softly pushed open the door. Seeing Dong Que, Xiaoshunzi couldn’t but be overjoyed. He asked, “Where is the young master? Is he safe and sound?”

With a bit of a guilty conscience, Dong Que lowered his head, not daring to speak. Xiaoshunzi and Xiahou Yuanfeng both trembled. Xiahou Yuanfeng understood clearly that if he wasn’t able to obtain the antidote, glory, wealth, and rank would be useless to him. He hurriedly scrambled to ask, “What has happened to Jiang *daren* ?”

Helplessly, Dong Que answered, “Young master has been seized by subordinates dispatched by His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi.”

This news was like a bolt out of the blue,[1] shocking both Xiaoshunzi and Xiahou Yuanfeng. However, both of them were shrewd and they simultaneously inquired, “He hasn’t fallen into the hands of the Crown Prince or the Fengyi Sect, correct?”

Dong Que promptly responded, “No. I monitored them for an extended period of time. The young master is still at the palace hall that the Prince of Qi is residing in. The Crown Prince and his people definitely do not know his whereabouts.”

Both Xiaoshunzi and Xiahou Yuanfeng relaxed. Xiahou Yuanfeng glanced suspiciously at Dong Que, wondering why he was not accompanying Jiang Zhe. However, Xiaoshunzi knew the reason and he grimly declared, “I want to first take a trip to the Announcing Magnificence Park.”

Xiahou Yuanfeng stopped him, stating, “Their Imperial Highnesses, the Prince of Qi and the Crown Prince, are not united. Once the Prince of Yong’s army arrives, the Prince of Qi would definitely not dare to harm Jiang *daren* . If Lord Li were to go at this moment, it is possible that the Prince of Qi will

use Jiang *daren* as a hostage against Lord Li."

Xiaoshunzi also understood this point. But with Jiang Zhe in the Prince of Qi's hands, he was extremely anxious that the Prince of Qi would use Jiang Zhe as a hostage to blackmail the Prince of Yong. As a result, Xiaoshunzi did not say anything, only using his resolute gaze to signify his unwillingness to compromise.

Xiahou Yuanfeng now had a headache. At this moment, Dong Que whispered, "After Xiahou *daren* departed, the young master's condition worsened. This subordinate was powerless to help. The Prince of Qi will definitely provide treatment for the young master's illness. If Lord Li were to rush over at this moment, then with one mistake, the young master would be harmed. It would be better to wait until the Prince of Yong arrives and the situation is resolved. I do not believe that the Prince of Qi would be so foolish."

Although he gradually calmed down, Xiaoshunzi's gaze towards Xiahou Yuanfeng became increasingly frigid. How could Xiahou Yuanfeng not understand Xiaoshunzi's thoughts? Xiaoshunzi was blaming him for worsening Jiang Zhe's illness. However, Xiahou Yuanfeng could only laugh wryly. It was quite some time before Xiaoshunzi sighed to himself. The problems had been brewing for a while[2] … Jiang Zhe's health was already extremely grave, having nothing to do with Xiahou Yuanfeng's palm strike. Thinking this through, he gazed silently out the window, waiting for the opportunity to act. *Young master, I hope that you will come out of this safe and sound* …

At the crack of dawn, in accordance with the plan, Xiahou Yuanfeng and company quietly made their way towards the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall. This location had the tightest security in the entire Hunting Palace. As they approached the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall, Xiahou Yuanfeng had everyone hide, while he took the lead and walked towards the palace hall's gate. The Imperial Guard stationed there immediately raised their alertness. After exchanging hand signals, Xiahou Yuanfeng could see the snow-white clothes of the Fengyi Sect's swordswomen. Deliberately raising his voice, he shouted, "I am the Vice Supervisor of the Imperial Palace Guard, Xiahou

Yuanfeng. On the Crown Prince's order, I have come to seek an audience with His Imperial Majesty. Why aren't you swiftly going in to report?"

The imperial guardsmen did not dare to slight Xiahou Yuanfeng. They knew that this man before them was a part of the crown prince's faction. Regardless of what was going to happen, the crown prince was the future emperor. They naturally did not even consider offending him. It wasn't long before Li Hanyou walked out, a look of vexation on her face. So much time had passed and yet news of the Prince of Yong's capture or death had yet to reach the Hunting Palace. She was naturally extremely uneasy. Seeing Xiahou Yuanfeng, she impatiently asked, "Xiahou *daren* , didn't you go to issue the decree? Why have you come here so early in the morning? What business do you have?"

Xiahou Yuanfeng laughed mysteriously and replied, "You will have to ask yourselves about this. Although Miss Wen's martial arts are fairly good, she has yet to capture the Prince of Yong. However, my luck was quite good. At present, the Prince of Yong's head has already been examined by the Crown Prince. The Crown Prince has ordered me to come report this matter to His Imperial Majesty."

Li Hanyou suspiciously inquired, "If what you say is true, why isn't the Crown Prince here himself to report this to the Emperor? Instead, why have you come? Where is the head? Why don't I see it?"

Xiahou Yuanfeng glanced left and right, whispering, "Princess, you are being nonsensical about this matter. Both of us are well aware of what really is going on. If the Crown Prince were to bring the Prince of Yong's head to seek an audience with the Emperor, it would be inconvenient if His Imperial Majesty were enraged and performed an inappropriate action. It would not be good if this news were to spread. Although this lowly official's rank is petty and insignificant, I have spent years accompanying the Imperial Presence and am familiar with the Emperor's temperament. Junior Mentor *daren* has sent me to reveal what has happened. Once the Emperor's temper has passed and he has calmed down, the Crown Prince will personally come to have an audience with the Emperor. Princess must not disclose this information! At present, no outsiders know what is going on. I did not even

bring back the troops that participated in the assault and execution of the Prince of Yong. Only after His Imperial Majesty has agreed to abdicate should we announce the Prince of Yong's death."

Li Hanyou frowned and asked, "What? You saw Lu *daren* ?"

Xiahou Yuanfeng sneered. "Princess, this lowly official isn't blaming you. Regardless of what happens, we are all in the same boat. Are you planning on casting him aside before everything has been resolved? This lowly official has no desire to make things difficult for your honored sect. As a result, Lu *daren* has not been released. But if I wish to discuss a few things with Junior Mentor Lu, not even Concubine Lan has any reason to stop me."

Contempt flashed across Li Hanyou's eyes. Although she found Lu Jingzhong extremely annoying, she could only begrudge that this was a reliable method. Seeing the two imperial bodyguards behind Xiahou Yuanfeng with their heads lowered respectfully, Li Hanyou declared, "You can come in, but these two cannot."

Xiahou Yuanfeng's complexion changed. "To speak impolitely, right now the Prince of Yong is dead. We are all in the Crown Prince's boat. But who can tell when you people are going to rid of us when we've ceased to be useful? These two imperial bodyguards are my trusted personal guards with martial arts not worse than this lowly official. Without their protection, I have not the courage to enter the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall."

Li Hanyou mistook these two as the Freezing Moon branch's suicide troops, explaining why they refused to show their faces. Of course, this was the conclusion that Xiahou Yuanfeng had deliberately led her to make. As a result, Li Hanyou mocked, "You are actually quite cautious. Fine. We are only being careful and will not do anything that will betray righteousness. You can go in. But let me say this: if you try to play any tricks, I won't let you off lightly. Right now, my senior apprentice sisters Yan and Xie are both inside. It will be impossible for the three of you to cause any waves. Oh, that's right, where's Wei Ying? Is he still patrolling?"

Xiahou Yuanfeng smiled and replied, "Who cares what he's doing? He's the prestigious son of the prime minister and yet still insists upon vying over

meritorious service with us? Usually so sanctimonious; I do not respect him."

Li Hanyou frowned and replied, "Aren't you being too narrow-minded simply because Wei Ying was able to deceive you? In the future, you two will serve as ministers in the same court. It is best if you don't have a falling out."

Xiahou Yuanfeng sneered once more. Seemingly without speaking, he said, "As you command."

Seeing him smiling insincerely, his handsome face scorning, Li Hanyou only took it as Xiahou Yuanfeng's jealousy and just said, "All right. Go in. The Emperor and company are all resting in the heated room of the main hall of the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall. We are not permitted to enter the main hall. Go ask for an audience by yourself."

Xiahou Yuanfeng only relaxed after he had entered the grounds of the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall. His gaze flicked over the surroundings. The defenses here were extremely tight. At the entrance to the western side hall was beautiful woman, resting her hand on her sword's handle. She was gazing straight at him. Xiahou Yuanfeng recognized this woman. She was Yan Wushuang. Because she was not skilled a rider, she had not accompanied Wen Ziyan to pursue the Prince of Yong. Instead, she had come here to help Li Hanyou. Xiahou Yuanfeng smiled lightly, nodding his head in greeting at Yan Wushuang. She frowned slightly before returning to the side hall. Only then did Xiahou Yuanfeng walk to the entrance of the main hall. Knocking on the door, he announced, "This subject, Xiahou Yuanfeng, requests an audience with His Imperial Majesty."

Within the main hall of the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall, excluding the main audience chambers in front, were six heated rooms in the back. At present, Yong Emperor Li Yuan and company were resting inside of these warmed rooms. Only the imperial palace guards, Qin Yi, and Cheng Shu alternated the guard within the main audience chambers, taking precautions against a rebel attack. Hearing Xiahou Yuanfeng's voice, Cheng Shu, responsible for the overnight watch, frowned. If it were Qin Yi on duty, he would have demanded that Xiahou Yuanfeng return at a more reasonable hour. However, Cheng Shu's temperament was pragmatic. What would be the

point of offending Xiahou Yuanfeng right now for no reason? As such, he walked to the entrance, ordering the imperial palace guards on duty to open the doors.

Once the door opened, Cheng Shu caught sight of Xiahou Yuanfeng accompanied by two individuals with their heads lowered. Just as he was about to speak, ordering Xiahou Yuanfeng to enter alone, one of the imperial bodyguards accompanying Xiahou Yuanfeng raised his head. Cheng Shu was startled for a second before immediately understanding. He firmly stated, “If you intend to play tricks with two subordinates, I, Old Cheng, will not let you, a rebellious subject, off.”

Xiahou Yuanfeng and company walked into the main audience chambers. The doors closed behind them. Cheng Shu wished to say something, but having experienced many things, he only declared, “His Imperial Majesty is still resting. Right now, there is no point in adhering strictly to the tenets of courtesy between liege and vassal. All of you, follow me.” Finished speaking, he led the three of them behind the main audience chambers. Although the imperial palace guardsmen found this a bit strange, they knew better than to ask questions.

The heated room that the emperor was resting in was heavily guarded on the outside. Noble Consort Yan and Princess Changle rested in a separate heated room. Cheng Shu led the three visitors straight to the entrance of the emperor’s heatedroom. All of the Imperial Palace Guard kept their eyes on Xiahou Yuanfeng, on high alert. Every one of them knew that Xiahou Yuanfeng was a part of the crown prince’s faction. At this moment, the door to the heated room opened and Leng Chuan walked out. Hostility shone in his eyes. He callously stated, “His Imperial Majesty wishes to know what has happened.”

The man in the imperial bodyguard uniform to the right of Xiahou Yuanfeng raised his head. Removing the helmet from his head, he stated, “Li Shun, of the Prince of Yong’s residence, has come on orders from His Imperial Highness to pay my respects to His Imperial Majesty.”

Leng Chuan’s eyes immediately brightened. He replied, “You are Demonic Shadow Li Shun?”

The eyes of the delicate looking youth were as cold as ice. Moreover, his voice was feminine. All of this matched Li Shun's description. However, Leng Chuan still had doubts in his mind, as he gazed questioningly at Cheng Shu and the recently arrived Qin Yi. After the two had the chance to consider Li Shun, they confirmed his identity and nodded.

Leng Chuan reentered the heated room. After a few moments, he came back out and stated, "His Imperial Majesty summons Li Shun and Xiahou Yuanfeng. Grand General, Duke of Wei, please go in as well."

Li Shun and Xiahou Yuanfeng walked in. Over these last two days, Li Yuan had been filled with anxiety, aging considerably. To guard against the unexpected, he had remained clothed even while sleeping. At this moment, he sat on the imperial bed. His eyes filled with helplessness, he inquired, "How is Zhi'er's situation currently?"

Li Shun had spent many years in the Southern Chu royal palace, so naturally understood the proper etiquette of meeting the emperor. He advanced and kowtowed, responding, "This servant, Li Shun, has come on the orders of His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, to pay my respects to Your Imperial Majesty. At present, His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, has already rendezvoused with General Qin Yong. The rebel army in pursuit of His Imperial Highness has been completely annihilated. His Imperial Highness has set up camp at the town of Pingyuan. Later today, he will lead his army to besiege the Hunting Palace. But His Imperial Highness is worried about Your Imperial Majesty's safety and has specially dispatched this servant here to report."

Li Yuan was overjoyed. The dark clouds covering the sky finally began to disperse. He could not help but jump to his feet. He paced back and forth several times before he asked, "Xiahou, what's the matter with you? Why have you brought the Prince of Yong's messenger here?"

Xiahou Yuanfeng was shrewd enough to speak the truth. He answered, "Your Imperial Majesty, this subject has good relations with the Crown Prince only because he is the heir apparent. This subject has never had any intention of rebelling. As a result, when the Crown Prince dispatched this subject with the fake edict to mobilize General Qin Yong's troops, I also

brought Your Imperial Majesty's secret edict handed me by Major Jiang, Jiang *daren* , of the Prince of Yong's household. General Qin Yong was absolutely loyal, immediately dispatching troops to rescue His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong. After rendezvousing with His Imperial Highness, this subject was ordered to infiltrate the Hunting Palace to serve as the insider." Although his words weren't entirely true, no one was willing to uncover it due to his significant contributions.

Smiling, Li Yuan nodded his head. Until now, he had been distressed by this coup d'état. At this moment, now that everything was on the verge of resolution, he could not help but wonder why a major of the Prince of Yong's household would ask for the imperial seal through Princess Changle. Could it be that the previous rumors circulating in the court about Changle's feelings for that man were true? Even if he ignored that man's status as a former surrendered subject of Southern Chu, Li Yuan had also heard that the man was always in poor health. Although Jiang Zhe had contributed significantly this time, enough to even marry Changle to him, how would he be able to bring Changle happiness if he were constantly sick? *Forget about it* , thought Li Yuan, deciding to use other methods to award Jiang Zhe. *He wouldn't dare to violate etiquette and ask Us to marry Changle* .

Having made the decision in his mind, Li Yuan ordered that everyone be woken and proceed to the main audience chambers to quietly await the arrival of the Prince of Yong's troops. After discussing things with Leng Chuan, Xiahou Yuanfeng arranged for several of the experts outside to infiltrate the palace hall through a hole in the defense. Combining forces, Xiaoshunzi and Leng Chuan took control of several dozen imperial guardsmen, allowing reinforcements to come in. Although this plan was risky, with the Prince of Yong about to attack, it was too late to worry about anything else. These reinforcements were temporarily hidden in the rear of the palace hall while Xiahou Yuanfeng hurriedly went to placate the already suspicious members of the Fengyi Sect.

Noble Consort Ji's complexion was frosty. Standing before the entrance of the palace hall, she insisted on entering. Having spent years in the depths of the palace, she was long accustomed to the scheming and plotting of the

harem. Hearing Yan Wushuang speak of Xiahou Yuanfeng's arrival, although she found things to be reasonable and fair, she was suspicious of why Wen Ziyan had dispatched Xiahou Yuanfeng to take advantage. With the sense that it was best to kill first and ask questions later, than to allow any chance of reversal, she arrived at the main palace hall to investigate. Qin Yi and Cheng Shu blocked her passage, prohibiting her from entering. Although the two insisted that the emperor did not wish to see her, Ji Xia was determined to see Li Yuan and Xiahou Yuanfeng. To her, if Xiahou Yuanfeng spoke the truth, then at most, she would be offending Xiahou Yuanfeng. She couldn't care less about the disciples of the Devil Sect. If there was a plot, then she had to seize this opportunity to retrieve the situation. As a result, her words became increasingly harsh. She summoned Li Hanyou, Yan Wushuang, and Xie Xiaotong. Although the three did not necessarily agree with Ji Xia's opinion, they would not openly oppose Ji Xia's decision in the face of a common enemy.

At this moment, a bugle sounded a long call outside of the Hunting Palace. The Prince of Yong's troops had arrived. Two hours ago, taking advantage of the darkness, the army had silently[3] and noiselessly marched on the Hunting Palace. Because there weren't many individuals within the Hunting Palace deathly loyal to the Fengyi Sect, the Fengyi Sect had no alternative but to cease the patrols of the surrounding area. The Prince of Yong had made all preparations to ensure silence—everyone holding a coin in their mouths, removing the bells from horses, and muffling the hooves. As dawn approached, they surrounded the Hunting Palace. No one within had discovered their arrival. The Prince of Yong waited until the sun began to rise before he ordered the horns to be blown and the attack launched. Inside the Hunting Palace, the Imperial Guard already had serious misgivings and lacked fighting spirit. In comparison, the Prince of Yong's troops had clear-cut objectives. In no time, they had successfully fought their way into the Hunting Palace.

Footnotes :

晴天霹雳, qingtianpili – idiom, lit. thunder from a clear sky; fig. a bolt from the blue

冰冻三尺，非一日之寒, bingdongsanchi, feiyirizhihan – idiom, lit. three feet of ice does not form in a day; fig. trouble has been brewing for some time

偃旗息鼓, yanqixigu – idiom, lit. lay down the flag and still the drums; fig. stop all activities and be silent

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 34: Bitter Fighting at Dawn's Frost

Volume 3, Chapter 34: Bitter Fighting at Dawn's Frost

When the rebellion occurred, the majority of the participant disciples from the Fengyi Sect were women who Fan Huiyao had painstakingly trained over the last dozen or so years. The majority of those disciples who had risked life and limb[1] in the war alongside Fan Huiyao had either died on the battlefield or now lived a life of monasticism. Because this rebellion was Fan Huiyao's own decision, they were not participating. Li Hanyou and company, although their martial arts and intelligence were fairly decent, they had never experienced any significant setbacks. For a moment, they were left bewildered as to how to respond, and could only watch helplessly as the Hunting Palace's defenses were broken. However, Ji Xia was different. She had previously accompanied Li Yuan in fighting all over the world, immediately understanding what was going on. She did not even bother discussing the situation with Li Hanyou and company. She whistled long and loud, like the cry of the phoenix reaching the highest reaches of the Heavens. This was a signal for all of the disciples of the Fengyi Sect to assemble. Li Hanyou immediately understood Noble Consort Ji's intentions. Now that troops had arrived to rescue the emperor, the only way for the Fengyi Sect to accomplish its goals was to seize the emperor and attempt to break out. As a result, Li Hanyou shouted, "Attack! We must capture the Emperor!"

Hearing Li Hanyou's commanding shout, Qin Yi and Cheng Shu took a step back. Just as Li Hanyou was about to storm into the palace hall, a sinister palm flew straight at her. When she went to block it, her heart jumped, and she backflipped and retreated. The attacker walked out of the entrance. Although he wore the uniform of an imperial bodyguard, his appearance was delicate and handsome, his eyes as frosty as ice and snow. It was Demonic Shadow Li Shun, whom everyone had thought had escaped.

Li Hanyou felt great fear and could not help retreat several steps. She saw several additional individuals in dark clothes follow Li Shun out. All of them

were full of spirit and energy, nimble and vigorous. Li Hanyou steeled her heart, not caring about anything else. She shouted, “Two senior apprentice sisters, all junior apprentice sisters, attack together!”

Yan Wushuang and Xie Xiaotong simultaneously unsheathed their swords and attacked, followed closely by the swordswomen of the Fengyi Sect. Just as battle was about to be joined, Xiaoshunzi asked grimly, “Do you all wish to meet Wen Ziyan in the underworld?”

His words were filled with killing intent, as chilling as the coldest winters. He had also chosen the perfect moment to speak. Although Li Hanyou and company had all somewhat guessed that something must have happened to Wen Ziyan, having their fears confirmed frightened and discouraged them. Their movements could only be sluggish. Taking advantage, the men in black’s defense of the entrance was stabilized. Annoyance glimmered in Li Hanyou’s eyes. Right now, it was impossible to resolve all of this quickly.[2] Li Hanyou and the disciples of the Fengyi Sect could only raise their swords and advance, trying to fight their way inside.

At the same time, the sound of battle could be heard outside of the perimeter wall of the Dawn’s Frost Palace Hall. Desperate fighting erupted at the entrance to the palace hall. Although the fighting power of the Fengyi Sect’s swordswomen was formidable, the doorway wasn’t that wide, making it impossible for the sword formation to fully deploy. Further, opposing them was an expert of Li Shun’s level. Although they had managed to seize the advantage, they were unable to charge inside. At this moment, the door to a side palace hall was pushed open and Qin Zheng walked out, supporting Empress Dou with one arm.

Qin Zheng had heard the battle cries outside, and trembled, feeling as if she had fallen into a frozen cave. Thinking of the Prince of Qi, completely powerless to protect himself in the Announcing Magnificence Park, what would happen when the coup d’état failed? She momentarily forgot what she was supposed to do.

At this moment, a sharp whistle came from outside. Ji Xia frowned and commanded, “Qin Zheng, why aren’t you going to support them?” Only then did Qin Zheng regain her composure, leading some swordswomen in a

charge at the palace gates.

Concurrent to when the Prince of Yong launched his attack upon the Hunting Palace, the Jade Qilin Palace Hall fell into chaos. Li An was terror-stricken.[3] Grabbing onto Xiao Lan, he ordered, “Beloved concubine, quickly save Our life.”

Xiao Lan’s own mind was also in a mess. At this moment, they heard Ji Xia’s sharp whistle. At wit’s end,[4] Xiao Lan could only hold onto Li An and sprint towards the Dawn’s Frost Palace Hall.

At that time, the Prince of Yong’s troops had yet to penetrate the walls of the Hunting Palace, but prior to when they arrived at the Dawn’s Frost Palace Hall, a crack unit of horsemen under Qin Yong’s personal command had arrived and begun to battle the imperial guardsmen stationed there. Xiao Lan panicked, seeking to charge into the Dawn’s Frost Palace Hall. However, Qin Yong, knowing full well the already intense pressure inside, ordered his men to form a spearwall and use arrows to obstruct Xiao Lan’s passage. Seeing carnage before him and feeling arrows fly past him, Li An was scared out of his wits. He shouted, “I surrender! I surrender!” Right now, he couldn’t care less about his status as the crown prince and was almost about to kneel on the ground to beg for forgiveness. Accompanying Xiao Lan over were the crown prince’s imperial bodyguards. They were either craven and cowardly[5] or long dissatisfied with the crown prince. Seeing the crown prince so useless, they all lost the will to resist. Some shouted their surrender, while retreating to the side. Some abandoned everything and slipped away. It wasn’t long before the crown prince only had women from the Fengyi Sect by his side. Although Qin Zheng had exited the gates of the palace hall, she was also blocked and unable to provide support to Xiao Lan and company.

At this moment, the surroundings gradually fell silent. Under the Prince of Yong’s orders that took into account the many imprisoned court officials, the army entering the Hunting Palace only surrounded the locations that did not have put up any resistance. Right now, aside from the traitorous forces battling around the Dawn’s Frost Palace Hall, there was no other resistance.

Dragging the crown prince along, Xiao Lan fought desperately. However,

the loyalist imperial guardsmen around them increased exponentially. Although the swordswomen were formidable, they only wielded swords. In the face of the veteran Great Yong soldiers using the greater reach of the long spears to attack, the swordswomen were only able to defend themselves in the middle of the formation. At this very second, Xiao Lan had never been so regretful in her life. If she were not dragging Li An with her, she could have charged into the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall long ago.

By the time the Hunting Palace was tentatively pacified, the Prince of Yong received the reports and rushed to the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall. He caught sight of Xiao Lan and Feng Feifei standing on either sides of the crown prince, protecting him. Around them were the bodies of Great Yong's soldiers and the Fengyi Sect's swordswomen. The appearances of both Fengyi Sect disciples were dismal and it seemed as if they were on the brink of death. Seeing Li An cowering on the ground without a hint of the deportment of a member of the imperial household, Li Zhi frowned. It was fortunate that none of the soldiers had attacked Li An. It seemed that aside from being splattered with blood, Li An had no injuries on his body.

Li Zhi shouted, "Fengyi Sect rebels, listen up! If you surrender, you may yet live! If you continue to resist, don't blame this Prince for being ruthless."

Feng Feifei looked around. The turncoat imperial guardsmen were on the verge of collapse. And at this moment, her own apprentice sisters fighting bitterly were losing ground and unable to hold on. If Xiao Lan and she did not seize this opportunity to charge into the grounds of the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall, then they would never have the opportunity to do so. Steeling herself, she grabbed onto Li An and used him as a hostage, brandishing him about. Since the soldiers did not dare to attack Li An, he could be used as a shield. As expected, the soldiers held back, having no option but to yield before her. In a short while, the only two Fengyi Sect members located outside of the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall were able to charge towards the gates.

As this matter concerned the crown prince's life, Qin Yong did not dare take responsibility and make the decision. Although the crown prince had risen in revolt, his death and punishment were the sole purview of the

imperial household, and outside that of Qin Yong's. As a result, he looked to the Prince of Yong, waiting for the prince's order.

Hot rage boiled from deep within Li Zhi. Feng Feifei's actions left him fuming with fury between gritted teeth.[6] Although he absolutely loathed and despised the crown prince, regardless of what had happened, the crown prince was still his older brother. Originally desiring to shoot them full of arrows, Li Zhi ultimately changed his mind. They wouldn't be of much use even if the three of them were able to enter the grounds of the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall. How could he allow his older brother to die under these circumstances? A prince naturally had to die in a manner befitting his status. As a result, Li Zhi did not make a sound, allowing those three to charge into the grounds.

Although Xiao Lan and company were able to arrive at the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall, behind them, Qin Yong had directed his subordinates to rush in after them. Currently, with the attacks from Ji Xia, Xie Xiaotong, Li Hanyou, and the twenty Fengyi Sect swordswomen, they were able to fight their way into the palace hall, although Xiaoshunzi and other experts desperately tried to block them.

Under Qin Yi, Leng Chuan, and company's protection, Li Yuan sat on the Imperial Throne. Noble Consorts Zhangsun and Yan and Princess Changle all hid behind the throne under the protection of the imperial palace guards. As the disciples of the Fengyi Sect charged into the audience chambers, Xiaoshunzi and company no longer continued fighting zealously, swiftly retreating to the front of the throne, setting up a steadfast defensive formation. Behind Li Hanyou and company, the already smashed and dilapidated doors had been broken into fragments by that last rush. Li Hanyou moved forward, surrounding the men defending Li Yuan. Outside were the soldiers of the Prince of Yong, afraid of accidentally harming innocents. If a melee broke out, the members of the Fengyi Sect would be captured or killed. However, if something were to happen to Li Yuan, the two noble consorts, and the princess, no one could afford bearing the blame. In this brief lull, the entire audience chamber was silent. No one dared to breathe loudly. The atmosphere was utterly oppressive.

At this point, the Prince of Yong made his way through the crowd. His grim gaze flickered past the Fengyi Sect and Li An, landing upon Li Yuan. Li Zhi saluted and stated, “Imperial Father, this child was late to the rescue. Imperial Father, please forgive me.”

Gratified, Li Yuan replied, “Zhi’er, it is good that you are safe and sound. General Qin, We are greatly comforted that you have adhered by the secret edict and come to rescue Us. All right. There is no need to worry about Us. Kill all of these rebels for Us.”

Li Zhi smiled wryly. Although Li Yuan had said those words, he did not dare to commit such acts. Li Zhi promptly expressed, “Imperial Father, there is no need to worry. Right now, these rebels have already fallen into the trap. Imperial Father, please take care of your health. Once this child has captured them, this child will hand them to Imperial Father for punishment.”

Li Hanyou ruthlessly interjected, “Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, you shouldn’t be pleased with yourself! Although we have failed, both His Imperial Majesty and the Crown Prince are both still here. If Your Imperial Highness wishes to seize this opportunity to commit patricide and fratricide, then you can naturally give the order to attack. When the time comes, you can eradicate all the obstacles before you and legitimately succeed the throne. If not, then it is in your best interests to negotiate with us so that you can preserve the lives of your father and older brother.”

Although necessity demanded that Li Zhi agree to the negotiations, he was fed up with Li Hanyou’s conduct. After gazing at all of the disciples of the Fengyi Sect, his eyes ultimately landed upon Noble Consort Ji. Smiling slightly, Li Zhi stated, “This Prince wonders what views that the Noble Consort has? If the demands are too severe, I’m afraid that even if Imperial Father and this Prince agree to them, the soldiers behind me won’t. A treasonous act of rebellion like this is punishable by the nine familial exterminations. If this Prince is too permissive, it would elicit criticism from the ministers of the court and make myself look like a fool before the entire world.”

From a misty look, Noble Consort Ji’s gaze became sinister. She callously

replied, “If punished by the nine familial exterminations, then won’t both the Emperor and you also be unable to escape punishment? It’s rubbish to discuss future criticism. As long as you allow us to leave unharmed, we would naturally not harm the Emperor.”

Anger flashed in the Prince of Yong’s eyes, as he asked, “If this Prince were to allow you to leave, would you really be willing to leave like this?”

Ji Xia was startled. If they were to leave like this, if the Prince of Yong were to renege on the agreement, then wouldn’t she and the disciples of the Fengyi Sect all die? What promises? She did not believe that the Prince of Yong wouldn’t seize this opportunity to hit someone who was down. At this moment, Li Hanyou haughtily suggested, “What’s so difficult about this? If Your Imperial Highness is willing to open a path and allow Princess Changle to serve as the hostage, wouldn’t this satisfy both sides?”

Finished speaking, Li Hanyou stared at Princess Changle, her gaze murderous. Li Hanyou was extremely intelligent. The secret edict that Li Yuan had mentioned had directly led to the arrival of Qin Yong’s army and Xiahou Yuanfeng’s betrayal. But how did the secret edict end up in Xiahou Yuanfeng’s hands? Only Princess Changle had been able to send someone out of the Dawn’s Frost Palace Hall. Seeing that the glory, status, and wealth that she yearned for disappear like smoke, Li Hanyou absolutely loathed Princess Changle. In addition, although Li Hanyou also had the status of an imperial princess and personally had faith in her talents and good looks, compared to an actual imperial princess, she still felt fear and jealousy inside. As a result, she had proposed to use Princess Changle as a hostage. Although she had her own selfish motives, hearing her suggestion, all of the members of the Fengyi Sect found this to be an excellent idea. Everyone knew of Li Yuan’s doting upon Princess Changle. She was the perfect candidate to serve as a hostage.

Li Yuan and Li Zhi were both indignant. Both of them felt guilt over Princess Changle’s marriage to Southern Chu. How could they allow her to become a hostage? As a result, they spoke in unison, “Out of the question.” With these words spoken, the atmosphere in the audience chamber immediately tensed. However, oddly enough, when Li Yuan and Li Zhi’s eyes

met, the pair suddenly felt that they had never been so close before. Li Zhi, seeing the uncompromising looks on the faces of the Fengyi Sect disciples, could feel a headache coming. He could not help but think about Jiang Zhe. *I sent people to find Jiang Zhe. Why hasn't he been found yet? If Suiyun were here, there may be a way to resolve the current standoff.*

Before he had entered the Hunting Palace, Li Zhi had arranged for several of his trusted subordinates to look for Jiang Zhe. Unafraid of death, Jiang Zhe had stayed behind, planning strategies while far from the battlefield[7] to reverse the difficult state of affairs. At present, Li Zhi was grateful towards Jiang Zhe to the extreme. As a result, he had issued the order to immediately report back when Jiang Zhe was found. However, up until now, he had received no news. The Prince of Yong grew increasingly worried about Jiang Zhe's safety.

While the Prince of Yong successfully broke into the Hunting Palace, I was closely monitored by four warriors. The trusted imperial bodyguards of the Prince of Qi all worried that the Prince of Yong would cease the chaos to harm the Prince of Qi. As a result, they had long ago tried to persuade the Prince of Qi to go into hiding. However, the Prince of Qi had played down the problem and rejected their suggestion. Without any other choice, they could only keep an eye on me, potentially using me as a hostage. They all knew of the weight that I had in the heart and mind of the Prince of Yong. Once the Prince of Qi was able to see the emperor, the emperor would not take the Prince of Qi's life as he had not taken part in the rebellion.

***

After a spell, the noise outside gradually dissipated into silence. After some additional time had passed, someone knocked heavily on the door. Trembling with fear and trepidation, one of the eunuchs attending to the Announcing Magnificence Park stepped forward and opened the gate. When the gate opened, a squad of soldiers burst in, pushing the eunuch to the side. These men rapidly seized control of the entire Announcing Magnificence Park. With long strides, a youthful general marched into the main palace hall. With his hands behind his back, the Prince of Qi stood at the window, gazing out in the direction of the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall.

The youthful general gave a military salute. Although there were suspicions that the Prince of Qi had also rebelled, he was different from the crown prince, the prestige that he had in the army quite high. His bravery, ferocity, and straightforwardness garnered the admiration and respect of the troops. Although he was dissolute and lecherous, and had a bad reputation of changing women at will, he had never stolen another man's wife or concubine. Moreover, although he had many concubines in his household, he never limited them through cruel punishments or family regulations. Each and every one of his concubines and maids, as long as they wanted, were allowed to leave his household and marry someone else. Not only would the Prince of Qi not make things difficult for them, he would even provide them with generous dowries.

The reason for this custom used by the Prince of Qi was a story that captured the imagination of the common people. At the time, someone had delivered a female dancer to the Prince of Qi's household. She was extremely beautiful. However, after a few times, the Prince of Qi grew bored of her. By coincidence, the dancer's childhood sweetheart had also entered the Prince of Qi's household to serve as an imperial bodyguard. Reunited, their old affection was reignited and the two began to have an affair. This was discovered by another imperial bodyguard who had intended to force himself onto the dancer, but had been directly refused by her. As a result, he angrily reported this matter to the Prince of Qi. As expected, the Prince of Qi summoned the two childhood sweethearts to call them to account. After finding out the truth, the Prince of Qi ordered that the imperial bodyguard be dragged out and beaten. At the time, everyone assumed that the Prince of Qi would kill the lovers. However, outside everyone's expectation, after beating the imperial bodyguard, the Prince of Qi married the dancer to him. Afterwards, he recommended the imperial bodyguard become a military officer. As for the imperial bodyguard who had reported the affair, he was driven out of the Prince of Qi's household. Then, when the Prince of Qi set this custom, a retainer admonished him, arguing that this would impugn the prince's dignity. None expected the Prince of Qi to laugh and reply, "Who doesn't know that this Prince swaps women at will? Wouldn't it be too pitiful for these women to remain alone within my household? It would be

better to allow them to marry and reduce the burden upon this Prince's finances."

Although many civil officials denounced the Prince of Qi's decision, this act only served to increase love and affection of the soldiers in the army. As a result, the Prince of Qi would frequently hold banquets for the brave soldiers of his army, allowing his concubines and dancers to come attend to them. There was no lack of examples where these women married soldiers.

As a result, although this general had come under the Prince of Yong's orders to take the Prince of Qi into custody, he did not have any hostility towards the prince. He declared in a booming voice, "This general, Tian Long, has come on the orders of His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, to protect Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi. His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, has ordered that Your Imperial Highness not go out in order to prevent giving any opportunities for the rebel forces to take advantage of."

The Prince of Qi turned around. While his complexion was pale, the expression on his face was quite calm. He calmly asked, "How is the situation at the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall?"

Tian Long was startled and answered, "This general does not know."

At this moment, Tian Long's lieutenant walked over and whispered, "In a side chamber, several of the Prince of Qi's imperial bodyguards refuse to lay down their weapons and surrender."

Tian Long glanced at the Prince of Qi, as he muttered back, "What? Do I need to teach you how to handle them?"

The deputy awkwardly replied, "They have taken a man hostage, claiming that he is Major Jiang, Jiang *daren* , of the Prince of Yong's household."

Tian Long was greatly alarmed. For him to be dispatched to imprison the Prince of Qi, he naturally had to be trusted. As a result, he obviously knew the importance of Jiang Zhe. The Prince of Yong had specifically instructed everyone to ensure Jiang Zhe's safety if they were to discover his whereabouts. Wary, Tian Long glanced at the Prince of Qi and asked, "Your Imperial Highness, could it be possible to ask Your Imperial Highness to

order your subordinates to cease their resistance?”

Li Xian smiled slightly. “This Prince wishes to go to the Dawn’s Frost Palace Hall. I wonder if General is able to make the decision to permit me to do so?”

A look of awkwardness appeared on Tian Long’s face. He did not have the authority to permit the Prince of Qi to go to the Dawn’s Frost Palace Hall. However, with Jiang Zhe taken hostage by the Prince of Qi’s subordinates, what could he do? At this moment, a gentle voice spoke from outside, “Your Imperial Highness, why are you doing all this?”

Although the man was clearly out of breath, his voice was incredibly resolute. Tian Long and his deputy gazed out, seeing a scholar in azure robes walk over, helped by two of the Prince of Qi’s imperial bodyguards. The other two imperial bodyguards held sabers in their hands and served as escorts. Within the scholar’s hands was a golden pendant, that golden pendant from the emperor that had the words carved on it: “as if We are present.” Originally this golden pendant was not necessarily of any use. However, on the lower right corner were the words, “Bestowed by the Emperor upon the Prince of Yong.” This signified that this pendant was bestowed upon the Prince of Yong by the emperor himself. As a result, no one dared to attempt to obstruct it.

Tian Long immediately knew that this scholar was indeed Major Jiang Zhe of the Prince of Yong’s household. He promptly walked forward and paid his respects.

I signaled with my hand, having the two officers withdraw to the side. I spoke, addressing the Prince of Qi, “Your Imperial Highness, at present, the situation has already been decided and is irreversible. Why are you determined to go to the Dawn’s Frost Palace Hall?”

Li Xian plainly replied, “It is because that the situation has been decided that I must go take a look. You must understand that my consort is there.”

I shook my head. There were times when the Prince of Qi was truly too obstinate. After thinking it over, I ultimately said, “This lowly official is about to go to the Dawn’s Frost Palace Hall. If Your Imperial Highness does not dislike my company, then you can come with this lowly official.”

Li Xian's complexion changed and he asked, "Do you not understand the state of your health? Why are you trying to prove yourself at this point?"

I smiled faintly and answered, "Today is the moment that I have thought about day and night for some time. How can I painfully and patiently wait here? Your Imperial Highness, please lend me your palanquin."

Li Xian's expression shifted repeatedly as he replied, "Fine … This Prince agrees."

Tian Long and his deputy cried out in alarm, "Your Imperial Highness, *daren* , this?"

Lifting the golden pendant, I stated, "This lowly official will naturally bear all the responsibilities before the Prince of Yong. This has nothing to do with you two."

Only then did the two fall silent.

***

At this moment, in the wilderness off in the distance, a faint silhouette in white, like a fast and nimble meteorite, sped directly towards the Hunting Palace. As the autumn wind blew, a white silk handkerchief fell out and dropped to the ground, a dark red bloodstain upon it.

Footnotes :

出生入死, chushengrusi – idiom, lit. at the risk of one's life; fig. braving countless dangers, willing to risk life and limb

速战**速决**, suzhansujue – idiom, lit. fight quickly, end quickly; fig. to resolve something in the shortest time possible

魂飞**魄散**, hunfeiposan – idiom, lit. the soul flies away and scatters; fig. to be frightened stiff, terror-stricken

无计**可施**, wujikeshi – idiom, lit. no strategy left to try; fig. at wit's end, at the end of one's tether, powerless

贪**生怕死**, tanshengpasi – idiom, lit. greedy for life, afraid of death; fig. craven and cowardly

咬牙切齿, yaoyaqiechi –idiom, lit. bite one's lips and gnaw one's teeth; fig.

fuming with rage between gritted teeth

运筹帷幄, yunchouweiwo – idiom, lit. to devise a battle plan in a tent; fig. planning strategies while far from the battlefield

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 35: Affection as Deep as the Ocean

Volume 3, Chapter 35: Affection as Deep as the Ocean

Within the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall, as the negotiations reached a stalemate, Xiaoshunzi, standing beside the Imperial Throne to protect the Yong emperor, frowned slightly. Without any warning signs, he vaulted up. The members of the Fengyi Sect all believed that he was launching a sneak attack, practically advancing one step forward in unison. When they were about to attack, the imperial palace guards and *wulin* experts protecting the emperor's safety could only shrink their defensive perimeter, complaining at Xiaoshunzi's hotheaded impetuosity.

Just as battle was about to erupt again, Xiaoshunzi actually pounced behind the Imperial Throne, in the direction of a beautiful screen with a geographic map of the empire. Behind the screen was a door leading to the heated rooms. Qin Yi had long ago ordered men to lock that door. In addition, with the army having surrounded the palace hall long ago, no one paid any attention to what was going on behind the Imperial Throne. However, while Xiaoshunzi leapt towards the screen, a dazzling glint of steel lashed out, cutting apart the screen. An azure silhouette shot out like electricity but was intercepted by Xiaoshunzi. Barehanded, the two exchanged several blows, almost as if two falcons were fighting in midair. Before a dozen exchanges, the azure clothed man's movements turned sluggish and he was hit by one of Xiaoshunzi's palms. Everyone heard a muted groan, as the man fell down. At this moment, Noble Consort Ji's gazed flickered, her delicate foot flying out and kicking a saber lying on the ground towards the fallen man. Flipping over in midair, the man kicked off of the saber, and as light as a feather, floated to the side of the Fengyi Sect's sword formation. With a gloomy and ruthless look, the azure clothed man gazed at Xiaoshunzi, and callously stated, "Who would have thought that the painstaking efforts of me, Wei Ying, would be destroyed by you, a castrated slave."

When Wei Ying had discovered that the Prince of Yong was assaulting the Hunting Palace, he did not hesitate in the slightest and rushed to the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall. However, when he arrived, he discovered that Li Hanyou and company were already trying to fight their way inside. Wei Ying was clever, understanding that his addition would be of no use. As a result, he had made his way to the back of the palace hall. From the start, to prevent someone from attempting to infiltrate from the back, the rear of the palace hall was filled with hidden mechanisms and traps, sealing all of the entrances and exits. If it were someone else, they would absolutely have no way of getting inside. However, as the prime minister's son and a high-ranking minister, Wei Ying had served in the Ministry of Works. He had once peeked at the architectural blueprints of every single imperial palace. Moreover, he was quite experienced with architecture and construction. As a result, he had to only spend half an hour before he was able to enter the palace hall.

After he had used his treasured sword to destroy the locks on the rear door, positioned behind the screen and extremely close to Li Yuan's position, he was vexed to discover that the Fengyi Sect had yet to fight their way inside. By Li Yuan's side were Leng Chuan and several expert imperial palace guardsmen. If Wei Ying were to make his move, it would be impossible for him to succeed on the first attempt. As a result, he could only wait patiently for a bit. Just now, when the Prince of Yong's troops had arrived and all of the surviving Fengyi Sect disciples were surrounded, drawing the rapt attention and vigilance of Leng Chuan and company, Wei Ying believed that he had found the opportunity. When he was about to act and take Li Yuan hostage, he never expected that just as his killing intent was aroused, he was discovered by Xiaoshunzi. In addition, Xiaoshunzi had actually moved first, forcing him out of hiding.

Wei Ying was a student of the Fengyi Sect Master and was an expert at assassination. Formerly, he was the assassin that had attempted to assassinate Palace Attendant Zheng Xia. However, he was not a seasoned, top-level assassin. When he had started to act, he inadvertently leaked a hint of killing intent. This killing intent had been detected by the outstanding martial arts and sharp, perception of Xiaoshunzi. At this

moment, there was a malevolent expression on Wei Ying's face. If he had been able to take Li Yuan hostage, regardless of the demands that he raised, Li Zhi could only capitulate. From this, they would be able to leave unharmed. It had not occurred to him that such a great opportunity would be completely wrecked by Xiaoshunzi.

Seeing this situation, the Prince of Yong and company were filled with fright and delight. If Li Yuan had been taken hostage, as long as the demands of the Fengyi Sect weren't too excessive, they could only acquiesce. Otherwise, it would difficult for the Prince of Yong to escape blame for using someone else to do his dirty work. Right now, possessing righteousness on his side, he could absolutely not tolerate such rumors from being spread. As a result, he shot Xiaoshunzi a glance of gratitude.

However, Xiaoshunzi did not seem to see the looks of gratitude that everyone shot at him. His entire mind was preoccupied with worries about the young master. Aside from here, the Hunting Palace had been pacified for quite some time, so why had he yet to hear any news of Jiang Zhe? While he was contemplating, a racket came from outside. A general hurriedly came in and reported, "Reporting to Your Imperial Majesty and Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, and Major Jiang Zhe, Jiang *daren* of the household of the Marshal of Heavenly Strategies request an audience."

Li Zhi and Xiaoshunzi were both overjoyed. Not even caring why the Prince of Qi had also come, Li Zhi declared, "Please allow them to enter!" As he uttered these words, he suddenly remembered that Imperial Father was present. He hurriedly turned and expressed his apologies for arrogating the emperor's authority.

At this moment, Li Yuan was also extremely jubilant. Although he did not approve of a relationship between Jiang Zhe and Princess Changle, he approved of Jiang Zhe's intelligence. It was Jiang Zhe's strategy that allowed the army to mobilize and rescue the Imperial Presence. In addition, he had just been rescued by Xiaoshunzi. As a result, he was not dissatisfied with the Prince of Yong's behavior. Contrary to expectations, he gladly stated, "Rightly so … quickly have them come in!"

Quite soon, the Prince of Qi walked in with heavy footsteps. Behind him was Jiang Zhe helped along by two imperial bodyguards. Although he had only exited the palanquin before the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall and simply walked less than a hundred paces, Jiang Zhe's complexion was already as pale as paper. Seeing his current state, the Prince of Yong felt acute sorrow pierce his heart. After just a few days, Jiang Zhe was on the verge of collapse, the hair on his temples speckled white. Li Zhi promptly walked over to help support Jiang Zhe. With tears in his eyes, he said, "Suiyun, this Prince has harmed you … You … you …" He lost his voice, unable to continue.

I naturally understood why the Prince of Yong felt such sorrow. In truth, I had seen my appearance before a copper mirror. I was also completely astounded.[1] Now I finally believed the story of Wu Zixu's hair turning white overnight. However, I had fortunately only gained a few white hairs.

When Xiaoshunzi saw my present thin and pallid condition, his complexion immediately became ashen. Ignoring the emperor and the Fengyi Sect, he flew over to my side and checked my pulse. Over this last year, he had begun to learn medicine. Although he could not make prescriptions by himself, he had acquired significant skill in checking pulse and acupuncture. This was probably because of his impressive internal energy and meticulous mind. I had not the courage to continue watching his frown grow heavier. I looked around, seeing the shocked look on Princess Changle's face. She expressed lamentation and deep concern. Were it not for her dignified and chaste natural disposition, and Noble Consort Zhangsun lightly holding onto the sleeve of her garment, Princess Changle would likely have been unable to help herself and have walked down from the dais. I showed a gentle smile, giving a comforting look to Princess Changle. I stepped forward and kowtowed, "This subject, Jiang Zhe, pays my respects for Your Imperial Majesty."

At this moment, the Prince of Qi, with a somewhat impassive expression on his face, also advanced and kowtowed, after being reminded by his imperial bodyguards. He stated, "This child pays my respects to Imperial Father."

Li Yuan glanced at the Prince of Qi before his gaze fell upon Qin Zheng. He

frowned. At this moment, with a panic-stricken expression on her face, Noble Consort Yan looked at Li Yuan. Sighing, Li Yuan replied, “Xian’er … Today, before the truth is revealed, you should first wait on the side. If you did not participate in this rebellion, your second brother will surely not blame you.”

Li Zhi glanced at Li Xian, a complicated expression appearing on his face. He stated, “Sixth brother, first go to the side and rest. I will have a chat with you after I have pacified this rebellion.” So speaking, Li Zhi signaled with his hand. An intelligent imperial bodyguard promptly brought a chair over, placing it at my side. With a look asking for instructions, I glanced forward and upward at the emperor. The Yong emperor nodded his head, indicating that there was no need for me to hesitate to sit down. I only sat down after I had saluted the emperor. Wiping the sweat from my forehead, I smiled and stated, “This subject’s health is poor and has incurred Your Imperial Majesty’s ridicule. Your Imperial Highness, there is no need for you to worry. This subject was fortunate to receive help from His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, and was given timely medical treatment. There is already no hindrance on my life.”

Li Zhi was moved, his gaze on Li Xian softening. Li Xian was dumbfounded as he stared at Qin Zheng. Qin Zheng lowered her head, unwilling to return Li Xian’s scrutiny. One could not see the expression on her face, only able to observe that crystal tear droplets fell to the ground.

With a poised expression on his face, Li Zhi stated, “Imperial Father, let’s speak of these matters later in the future. We should first capture these rebels. Wei Ying, Li Hanyou, you two have rebelled against the Emperor. Your crimes are unpardonable. If you surrender now, Imperial Father may reduce the punishments because of your youthful ignorance. Otherwise, you all have family and kin. Don’t tell me that you aren’t afraid to suffer the calamity of familial exterminations?”

Hearing the Prince of Yong’s declaration, I smiled slightly. I scanned the room, catching sight of Xiahou Yuanfeng faking a faithful and loyal expression on his face, standing beside the Yong emperor. Beside the Fengyi Sect disciples was Wei Ying. Although he had a sword in his hands, Qin

Qing's expression was stupefied. I could not help but recall the feast in the palace soon after I had entered into the Prince of Yong's service and meeting these three youths who had jointly shared the title of youthful elites. However, having experienced this great storm, they had led to today's circumstances.

When Jiang Zhe entered, Wei Ying was immediately filled with distress. Compared to the arrogant and prideful women of the Fengyi Sect, he attached great importance to Jiang Zhe's ability and wisdom. As a result, he preferred offending Princess Changle in order to search the Cherishing Fragrance Park. Wei Ying did not know why, but as soon as this man walked in, an ominous premonition grew from the pit of his stomach. In order to set aside this feeling, he callously stated, "Why does Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, speak in such a condescending and pompous manner? Your Imperial Highness's desire to seize the Imperial Throne has not been only for one day. Who doesn't know that this Major Jiang is your head strategist? His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, originally had the honor of being the heir apparent. If it were not for the aggressiveness of you, the Prince of Yong, why would the Crown Prince have taken such a course of action that left him with no alternatives? In the olden days, a generational virtuous sovereign, Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty, who had the intent to depose his heir apparent, forced his Crown Prince to have no other alternative but to rebel under the support of his loyal ministers. Although, that Crown Prince ultimately died, Emperor Wu built a pavilion and a platform to remember the Crown Prince. Today, although we have suffered defeat, isn't Your Imperial Highness seeking to use this opportunity to seize imperial authority? I'm afraid that in the future you will hold the Emperor under house arrest in the Imperial Palace. If you do not kill us all today, Your Imperial Highness will likely be anxious that you won't be able to plug all of our mouths."

Hearing Wei Ying's sharp words, I saw looks of hesitation appear on the Yong emperor and everyone else's faces. Raising my voice, I countered, "Wei *daren* 's words deliberately distort the truth. Although His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, had the honor of being the heir apparent, his conduct was unvirtuous and unacceptable. The meritorious contributions

by His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, are unrivaled in this present age. Although, due to seniority, he cannot succeed the throne, His Imperial Highness has never held any resentment in his heart. Instead, he has left no stone unturned,[2] shedding his blood, sweat, and tears on behalf of Great Yong's empire. Originally, he hoped that His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, would be benevolent and virtuous, treating good ministers as brothers. His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, would have been more than happy to bend his head and serve as a subject. However, His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, only knew how to envy the virtuous and talented,[3] repeatedly seeking to harm His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong. In addition, he indulged himself in obscenity and alcohol, doing whatever he pleased.[4] A gentleman would be ashamed to associate with someone like him, while vile characters would seek to ingratiate themselves with him at every breath. Now he has rebelled against the Emperor, completely devoid of the mutual affection between liege and subject, father and son. In addition, he sought to use a fake edict, intending to harm My Imperial Highness. Were it not for the benevolence and virtue of His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, that moved the Heavens, and all of the generals and *jianghu* friends risking life and limb, His Imperial Highness would have died long ago within the walls of this palace. Now His Imperial Highness has come, adhering to His Imperial Majesty's secret edict, and has mobilized an army to rescue the Emperor. His actions follow the Mandate of Heaven and comply with the wishes of the common people. You, rebellious subjects, do not know to repent for your sins, instead seeking to sow discord between the father and son of His Imperial Majesty and His Imperial Highness. Even if you were to die ten thousand times, you would be unable to redeem your sins."

Wei Ying furiously replied, "Major Jiang, although you are a sycophant to His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, your official position is insignificant and petty. What qualifications do you have to speak within this audience chamber? Thinking back, you were originally the *zhuangyuan* and a Hanlin Academic of Southern Chu. Two generations of monarchs of Southern Chu and the Prince of De have you treated with great favor. However, you did not fully absorb the teachings of the sages. In order to

survive, you surrendered to a wicked prince, plotting for him, setting up numerous crafty schemes. The Crown Prince is by nature honest and considerate, thereby falling into your traps, leading to his current complete defeat and fall from grace. How dare a disloyal and unjust turncoat and traitorous subject like you speak? We have raised the righteous banner to purge the treacherous traitors from the side of the Emperor. Although we have failed, we are not people who can be so slandered and vilified by vile characters like you."

A look of derision appeared on my face. I waved my head, preventing the Prince of Yong from angrily interjecting. I retaliated, "Wei *daren* , at the time, I received great grace from the Southern Chu King and ultimately surrendered to Great Yong. I acknowledge that I am a turncoat. However, since ancient times, if a lord is improper, subjects will seek refuge in other states. This is exactly what is called 'a wise bird chooses its perch, a wise minister chooses his master.' In Southern Chu, I made some meager contributions and once submitted an essay admonishing the King for his conduct. Unfortunately, the King did not accept my loyal and sincere advice, dismissing me and transforming me into a commoner. After I pledged my allegiance to the Prince of Yong, Southern Chu even dispatched assassins to take my life. If we were to speak thus, it was Southern Chu who first abandoned me. His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, did not scorn Jiang Zhe's incompetence, treating me sincerely as a friend. Even if Zhe possessed a heart of stone, how could I ignore his kindness? After Zhe entered into His Imperial Highness's service, I was frequently bedridden, unable to help relieve His Imperial Highness's burdens. However, His Imperial Highness has never once turned his back on me. His Imperial Highness has the intentions to be Bo Le,[5] treating the virtuous and talented people of the world with courtesy. I am no more than an ordinary individual and yet the Prince treats me with great courtesy. As a result, I am willing to bear the title of a turncoat. Even if I die, I do not regret anything.

"However, I do not deserve the title of traitorous subject. Wei *daren* , your esteemed father is the Prime Minister, the leader of the Yong civil officials. Wei *daren* , at a young age, you passed the imperial examinations. You rose through the ranks at a speed that can be said to be rarely seen. You have not

even turned thirty and yet you already hold a position within the Imperial Secretariat. You will surely become a prime minister one day. However, *daren* has ignored the sagacity of the Emperor's grace upon you, instead colluding with traitorous rebels; inciting the Crown Prince to ignore the separation between liege and vassal and the emotions between father and son; rebelling against the Emperor. The title of traitorous subject, aside from you, Wei *daren* , who else can bear?"

When I finished speaking, cheers rang out throughout the audience chamber. Cheng Shu, the Duke of Wei, shouted, "Jiang *daren* , you truly speak to one's delight! Old Cheng is a coarse individual. I wanted to bitch this little traitor out. It was only because my words would be crass and vulgar that I dared not be rude before the Emperor. Wei Ying, traitor, should have renounced the Emperor's benevolence. You should have been hacked into mincemeat long ago! What qualifications do you have to speak within this hall?"

Wei Ying's expression shifted repeatedly, at once ashen, at once flushed. He regretted inwardly that he forgot that Jiang Zhe's words were as sharp as knives. In years past, the man had used newly composed lyrics of one song in Shu to force the King of Shu to commit suicide. During the magnificent spring banquet, he had dissipated Qin Qing's denunciation into smoke. How could he be so stupid as to seek to verbally spar with Jiang Zhe?

Wei Ying took a deep breath, seeking to change the subject and continue the negotiations. Suddenly Xie Xiaotong's tender body became unsteady. Afterwards, Qin Zheng, Li Hanyou, and all of the other Fengyi Sect members began to sway, collapsing weakly to the floor. Only Xiao Lan and Feng Feifei remained standing, although sheer panic appeared on their faces. Wei Ying grew greatly alarmed. He knew that if something were to happen to these Fengyi Sect members, then he would definitely not have the ability to seize control of the emperor. Without any further misgivings and worries about harming innocents, all of the rebels would meet a tragic end.

Within the audience chamber, other than the ruler and ministers of Great Yong, there were officers and soldiers under strict discipline, and *wulin* martial artists with incredible skills. As a result, no one cried out in fear.

However, all of them displayed looks of confusion. Some of those lacking in subtlety could not help but also reveal looks of dread, exchanging frightened looks. Tiredly, I stated, “Your Imperial Highness, everything is settled. We can make our move.”

The Prince of Yong glanced at me, astonishment in his eyes. However, he didn’t have the time to question me closely. He signaled with his hand, ordering his subordinates to advance and capture all of the rebels.

After he had stood off onto the side, Li Xian’s gaze was fixed on Qin Zheng. During the entire time, Qin Zheng refused to raise her head. The two completely forgot of the current state of affairs. Only when Qin Zheng collapsed to the floor did Li Xian let out a cry of fear. Just as he was about to take a step forward, he was pulled back by one of his trusted imperial bodyguards. The imperial bodyguard whispered, “Your Imperial Highness, you cannot allow anyone to take a hold on you.” All Li Xian could do was cease moving.

When the Prince of Yong signaled with his hand and gave the order,, a dozen or so imperial palace guards under Leng Chuan’s leadership charged towards Wei Ying, Xiao Lan, and Feng Feifei. Suddenly, with a loud bang, a hole appeared in the roof. A figure in white appeared, falling through the hole, accompanied by a whistle like the cry of the phoenix that seemed to reach the highest of the Heavens, directly pouncing at Yong Emperor Li Yuan. For the most part, everyone had been shaken by the sharp whistle, feeling their entire bodies become powerless, completely without the ability to block this interloper. Only Leng Chuan and Xiaoshunzi were able to react, simultaneously shouting angrily, leaping forward to intercept. The two figures were as swift as lightning, striking out with all of their strength. None guessed that the figure in white would simply wave the sleeve of her clothes, sending forth a surging gale, forcing Leng Chuan and Xiaoshunzi staggering back. However, both Leng Chuan and Xiaoshunzi were peak-level experts. Although that individual had been able to force them to withdraw, her speed was greatly reduced.

Within this short time frame, the imperial palace guards and the martial arts experts at the Yong emperor’s side all fully used their consummate

skills to obstruct her. However, with a cry of a dragon, a sword appeared in the figure in white's hands. Everyone heard only a dozen crunches, as all of the imperial palace guards and martial arts experts were pierced by the sword. One of them was even beheaded by the figure in white, splattering blood everyone. The nine steps leading to the Imperial Throne became a bloody killing floor. In the blink of an eye, the figure in white had arrived at the emperor's side.

Noble Consorts Zhangsun and Yan were both already frightened out of their wits and unable to move. After that figure had beheaded an imperial palace guard, the two somehow gathered their courage, simultaneously throwing themselves before Li Yuan. Noble Consort Zhangsun was closest to Li Yuan, placing herself before Li Yuan, shielding all of his vital points. Although Noble Consort Yan was a bit slower, she spread her arms open, out in front, shielding Li Yuan and Noble Consort Zhangsun. The figure was startled. Her sword pointed at Noble Consort Yan's chest, but did not pierce it. At this moment, Princess Changle and Li Xian simultaneously cried out in alarm, "Imperial Father! Mother Concubine!"

Only then did everyone react, gazing at that figure. The woman was graceful and elegant, wearing a set of snow-white clothes. Her hair was as fine and dark as ink. A snow-white handkerchief covered the lower half of her face. Although the woman's sword was pointed at Noble Consort Yan, everyone could feel that if she were to stab forward, the emperor and the two noble consorts would all lose their lives. No one dared to breathe. At this moment, a violent cough suddenly resounded within the audience chamber. Although the woman's might and prestige was as formidable as always, everyone could feel that her killing intent reduced a bit. With this, everyone could not help but relax, and following the sound found the individual who had used this method to extricate everyone from the deadlock. Seeing the person, everyone could not help but cry out in alarm.

They saw Jiang Zhe holding a snow-white handkerchief over his mouth, coughing nonstop. Instantly, dark red bloodstains could be seen seeping from the handkerchief. Jiang Zhe had been injured by the accumulated internal energy within the female assassin's whistle. While he was coughing

blood without end, contempt flashed swiftly through Xiaoshunzi's eyes, the severe chill on his face increasingly heavy and gloomy. He flew to Jiang Zhe's side. Taking out a yellow wax ball, he tore off the wax covering, exposing a snow-white pill as big as a longan fruit. Immediately, the entire audience chamber was permeated with a fragrant medicinal scent that gladdened the heart and refreshed the mind.[6] Xiaoshunzi fed the pill to Jiang Zhe. After a while, Jiang Zhe's complexion gradually calmed, no longer coughing. Intending to use the handkerchief to wipe the blood remaining at the corners of his mouth, he discovered that the handkerchief was already saturated with blood, no longer of any use.

At this moment, Princess Changle, standing on the raised dais, was about to unhurriedly walk down. However, if she were to come to my side, she would have to pass that woman in snow white. As a result, Li Yuan and Noble Consort Zhangsun simultaneously shouted with alarm, "Zhen'er, don't be rash!"

However, it was almost as if Princess Changle did not hear their words, slowly walking past that woman in snow white. In the past two days, she had been full of anxiety, finding it difficult to sleep. This caused her beautiful flowerlike face to gain a hint of haggardness. At this time, the dazed expression on her face only evoked tender feelings in others. She slowly walked to Jiang Zhe's side, kneeling down on one knee. When she was about to take out her own handkerchief and help wipe away the blood at the corners of Jiang Zhe's mouth, she discovered that in her anxiety, she had already ripped the handkerchief into shreds. She blinked lightly, a sparkling teardrop falling down onto her bluish-white dress. Her eyes suddenly brightened and she tore the sleeve of her dress. The sound of tearing silk could be heard distinctly in the audience chamber. At long last, she had torn off a piece of bluish-white silk. Afterwards, she gently helped Jiang Zhe wipe away the bloodstains on his face. When done, Princess Changle lowered her beautiful head into Jiang Zhe's lap, beginning to weep quietly. For a brief moment, the entire audience chamber was deathly quiet. The only sound was the desperately restrained sounds of Princess Changle sobbing.

I took the pill that Sir Sang had given Xiaoshunzi with clear-cut and

detailed instructions. This pill was called the “Nine Revolutions Heart Protection Pill.” Although I knew that my life had been saved once again, Princess Changle’s actions left me completely dumbfounded. Until now, my feelings towards her were those of adoration and pity. However, at this moment, I truly sensed Princess Changle’s infatuation with me. I could not help but feel warmth in my heart. Not caring about the proper etiquette between liege and vassal, the separation between a man and a woman, I extended a hand and gently caressed her beautiful hair. I had never before been like this. I knew that this woman occupied an important position in my heart.

Everyone in the audience chamber all took deep breaths of shock. After Princess Changle had rejected the husband selected for her by the Yong emperor, people guessed that she already had someone in her heart. The Fengyi Sect and the crown prince had once spread rumors to that effect. There were those who had heard rumors about the love between Jiang Zhe and Princess Changle. However, everyone considered these rumors to be false, as Jiang Zhe lived in seclusion and rarely left the Prince of Yong’s residence, while Princess Changle was known for her scrupulous adherence to the dictates of chastity. However, the present scene before their eyes caused everyone, for the first time, to believe the veracity of that rumor. But what was strange was that although everyone believed that the relationship between the two was a breach of proper etiquette, everyone’s minds and hearts were filled with sympathy and tenderness.

At this moment, the woman in white withdrew her sword, gradually turning around. Above the masked portion of her face, her bright eyes, like the stars in the sky, slowly looked around her surroundings. Even though she looked at nobody in particular, everyone in the audience chamber felt as if she was staring at them. The piercingly icy gaze was like a heavy hammer slamming into their heart. All could not help but retreat several steps.

Li Zhi sucked in a breath and stated, “This Prince is greatly honored to have the Fengyi Sect Master’s presence here. I wonder if the Fengyi Sect Master has any instructions?”

Footnotes :

大吃一惊, dachiyijing – idiom, lit. to be greatly surprised; fig. astounded

殚精竭虑, danjingjielü, idiom, lit. to exhaust one's thoughts and ingenuity; fig. to rack one's brains, to leave no stone unturned

妒贤忌能, duxianjineng – idiom, lit. jealous of the virtuous and the talented; fig. envious of those more capable

为所欲为, weisuoyuwei – idiom, lit. to do as one pleases; fig. to act willfully

伯乐, Bo Le, was a horse tamer alive during the Spring and Autumn Period, who was a famous judge of horses. He once discovered that a horse used to draw a heavy wagon was actually a swift horse. He is used as an example to refer to lords capable of recognizing the special talents of people and offer them the opportunity to showcase their skills.

沁人心脾, qinrenxinpi – idiom, lit. to penetrate deeply into the heart; fig. to gladden the heart, to refresh the mind

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 36: Retreating to Advance

Volume 3, Chapter 36: Retreating to Advance

The gaze of the Fengyi Sect Master fell upon Jiang Zhe, an indescribable emotion flashing across her eyes. In a clear and cold voice, she said, “Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, since we have reached this point, regardless of my Fengyi Sect’s original intentions, to Great Yong, we are already rebels and enemies. Even if Your Imperial Highness wishes to execute and exterminate my Fengyi Sect, there is no one to obstruct it. This seat has come solely to remind Your Imperial Highness of one thing. Although Your Imperial Highness holds the advantage at present, with this seat present right now, Your Imperial Highness will have to worry about your own safety.”

“The friendship between the Emperor and this seat was formed in times of tribulation. As a result, this seat can refrain from harming him. But there are still the two Noble Consorts, Princess Changle, you, the Prince of Yong, the Prince of Qi, Li Xian, and the loyal ministers and brave generals. If this seat desires it, none of you will be able to escape from the Dawn’s Frost Palace Hall. Although this seat’s disciples will also lose their lives here in the Hunting Palace, my Fengyi Sect still has some hidden strength, and will not completely collapse from this setback.[1] To speak the truth, this was originally this seat’s selfishness. My junior apprentice sisters and maids were all veterans of a hundred battles. This seat gave them a new lease on life, as I was unwilling to once again be involved and take risks. In addition, this seat has also underestimated Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, believing that Wei Ying, Hanyou, and company would successfully and smoothly seize control of the Hunting Palace. Those I have not involved should be capable of responding to the Devil Sect’s provocations.

“Your Imperial Highness, you should be clear that regardless of who wins, Northern Han and the Devil Sect won’t let this opportunity slip by, otherwise Your Imperial Highness and the Prince of Qi would not have

issued secret orders to tighten the security on the northern frontier, taking precautions against a sneak attack from Northern Han. If Your Imperial Highness is unwilling to give my Fengyi Sect a way out, then this seat can only begin the slaughter. Of course, this seat will definitely not allow Your Imperial Highness to survive. Afterwards, this seat will mobilize my sect's remnants and cause chaos within Great Yong's borders. When the time comes, with the situation unstable, Northern Han will seize the opportunity to invade, and Great Yong will be embattled by internal and external threats. Even if Your Imperial Highness were to survive, you would likely be filled with regret, hating your survival."

Although her voice was plain, clear, and aloof, it caused everyone who heard it to be tremble with fear. By this point, Li Yuan had already pulled Noble Consort Zhangsun to her feet. In an even voice, he spoke, "Sect Master Fan, you must not let your emotions affect your decisions. Sect Master and Great Yong share the same interests. If the empire falls into peril, Sect Master will also suffer unexpected calamities. Although the disciples of your honored sect have made grave mistakes today, everything can be discussed. Sect Master, please calm down."

Li Yuan speaking in such a manner caused an uproar in the entire audience chamber. Regardless of how great the Fengyi Sect Master's martial arts, she was still a rebel. As a sovereign monarch, how could Li Yuan be so weak? Li Zhi frowned, glancing at Imperial Father. He stated, "Imperial Father's words are what this Prince thinks. The Sect Master's character is noble and benevolent,[2] and it is possible that this rebellion was not a result of Sect Master's instigation. As long as Sect Master makes the painful decision and hands these rebels over to be punished by this Prince, then if Sect Master is willing, Great Yong's Imperial Clan is willing to construct a palace for the Sect Master to allow Sect Master to cultivate in peace."

Although Li Zhi agreed with Li Yuan's decision, everyone could hear that Li Zhi wanted the Fengyi Sect Master to personally execute all those who had participated in the rebellion and afterwards voluntarily placed under house arrest. When the time came, after the traitorous elements of the Fengyi Sect had been purged, they could only be a subservient sect of the imperial clan.

Although the Fengyi Sect Master had participated in the rebellion, as long as she was controlled, based upon her status as a grandmaster, she could still awe and intimidate Northern Han's Devil Sect. Li Zhi had no choice but to make this offer. The one responsible for monitoring the Fengyi Sect Master, Great Master True Compassion, had disappeared without a trace, while the Fengyi Sect Master had appeared at the Hunting Palace. Recalling Fan Huiyao's status as the head of the three grandmasters of the age, then it is likely that Great Master True Compassion had likely encountered some mishap. If this were true, then if Fan Huiyao were to continue to betray Great Yong, then Great Yong would have lost someone able to contend against the Sovereign of the Devil Sect of Northern Han. As a result, although Li Zhi had an implacable hatred for the Fengyi Sect, he had no choice but to make this compromise.

Arrogance flashed in Fan Huiyao's eyes. Just as she was about to speak, she heard the sound of something shattering. She looked around, only seeing Jiang Zhe's clear and stony expression. Princess Changle had risen to her feet, standing at his side. Her beautiful brows were furrowed, as she gazed with worry at Jiang Zhe. At Jiang Zhe's feet was a sparking and transparent jade pendant, shattered into pieces.[3] It was evident that Jiang Zhe had removed this jade pendant and intentionally dropped it onto the floor, allowing it to shatter. Li Zhi grew alarmed. Over these last two years, whenever he came across bamboo folding fans, ink stones, and other elegant objects, he always purchased them and sent them as presents to Jiang Zhe. This jade pendant was a present from a year ago. If considering quality, although precious, it was also fairly ordinary. Its rarity came from the delicate and refined way it was carved. A image of the Feast at Hongmen[4] was carved on its back. Although, the image was extremely simple, its depiction was very vivid, almost as if physically and spiritually capturing the events of that day. Jiang Zhe was extremely fond of the jade pendant and always wore it on his body. He had to be filled with wrath to shatter it now.

Before Li Zhi could react, Jiang Zhe had already smiled and spoken, "Sect Master, today you are treading on dangerous ground. Zhe truly feels that Sect Master's actions aren't worth it. It is said that a 'gilded individual does not stay in a dangerous area.' What is the point for Sect Master to help these

rebels? Great Master True Compassion is a grandmaster. Although, he is somewhat inferior to Sect Master, it will be impossible for Sect Master to get off lightly. I am somewhat knowledgeable about medicine. Although the medicine that Sect Master uses has given you a reprieve, if you wish to preserve your life, it is best if you don't act blindly without thinking. Otherwise, even if Zhe's meager life is offered with both hands, it will be impossible for Sect Master to leave the Hunting Palace alive. Xiaoshunzi. Currently, within this audience chamber, the Emperor sits on the Imperial Throne, while His Imperial Highnesses, the Princes of Yong and Qi, are both important figures for the stability of Great Yong's empire. If I order you to disregard my safety, are you certain you will be able to save one of them?

Xiaoshunzi callously replied, "Young master, do not worry. Although this servant is incapable, I will definitely not permit the Fengyi Sect Master to do as she pleases."

The smile on my face increasingly cheerful, I continued, "Sect Master, the lands under the Heavens belong to the sovereign, the ministers who govern it are the sovereign's ministers. Regardless of anything else, the Fengyi Sect Master is still within Great Yong's borders and is a citizen of Great Yong. Today, as long as one of three individuals—the Emperor and the two Imperial Highnesses—is to survive, then it will be impossible for your Fengyi Sect and any of your allies to survive. When the time comes, not only will Sect Master's great reputation be lost here, the losses suffered by the Great Yong court will also be severe. Whatever the case, Sect Master has performed a great service in the founding of Great Yong. If Great Yong falls into peril from the Fengyi Sect Master rebellion, endangering the country's existence, your name will go down in history in infamy, scorned by future generations. When that happens, what face does Sect Master have to face the common people of the world?"

Fan Huiyao's face remained as calm as ever, almost as if she did not react in the slightest to Jiang Zhe's words. However, Li Zhi's eyes brightened. If the Fengyi Sect Master was already heavily injured, then this was the perfect opportunity to exterminate her. Li Zhi believed that Jiang Zhe had shattered his jade to remind him that he should not hesitate, pushing him to make up

his mind. Emotions flickered in his eyes, as he secretly made several gestures with his hands. The soldiers and guards within the audience chamber swiftly formed three battle formations, separately protecting Li Yuan, Li Zhi, and Li Xian. Although everyone still had misgivings about enraging the Fengyi Sect Master, and had no thoughts about acting blindly without instructions, everyone had made up their minds to ensure the safety of these three individuals when the Fengyi Sect Master launched her attack. Even the imperial bodyguards and soldiers protecting the Prince of Qi had this mindset, willing to sacrifice their lives to ensure Li Xian's survival. Everyone knew that outside of the Prince of Yong the only one capable of ascending to the Imperial Throne was the Prince of Qi.

Fan Huiyao sighed inwardly. Her gaze towards Jiang Zhe gained a bit of killing intent. At this moment, Xiaoshunzi and Leng Chuan simultaneously took a step closer to her. If Fan Huiyao were to attack, then these two would serve as the main force in obstructing her. Right now, I had already achieved my goal of restraining the Fengyi Sect Master. If pushed too far, she would likely be pushed to take risks out of desperation. If that happened, the results would likely be miserable. Thus, I said, "Sect Master, at present, although we loyalists can exterminate your Fengyi Sect, we still remember Sect Master's great contributions to Great Yong. His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, still hopes to reach an agreement with Sect Master. At present, the majority of your honored sect's disciples have collapsed from a bewildering poison. They shall be the first to die. If Sect Master is willing to compromise, then it is possible to turn hostility into friendship.[5] I can even make the decision to let these disciples who have participated in the rebellion off."

Fan Huiyao laughed icily and replied, "As expected, Major Jiang is a great schemer. I wonder if Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, has the same intentions?"

Li Zhi shouted, "Major Jiang's words are this Prince's decision." Even though he said this, he was filled with misgivings. Jiang Zhe's words were a bit ambiguous, almost as if he did not wish for the Fengyi Sect Master to hand over her rebellious disciples. Wasn't this being too generous?

However, he was a firm believer in Jiang Zhe's planning. As a result, he did not make any effort to stop Jiang Zhe's machinations.

Fan Huiyao sighed lightly. She clearly understood Jiang Zhe's intentions. Jiang Zhe did not care about her disciples, only desiring to hold her here. If she were to leave behind these trusted disciples, how would she continue to serve as the Fengyi Sect's master? She would definitely find herself isolated and alone. In addition, Jiang Zhe pointed out the seriousness of her injuries, so the Prince of Yong would definitely sacrifice anything to ensure her death. When the time came, the losses suffered by the Fengyi Sect would be disastrous, while she would very likely be unable to leave here alive. But if this were to happen, Jiang Zhe probably felt distress at the heavy cost needed to kill her, thus pointing out her inability to kill all three of the most important individuals within the audience chamber, then pointing out the seriousness of her injuries, before finally hinting that with an expert like Xiaoshunzi present, there would be no way for her to leave the Hunting Palace alive. After making these three points, he had then compromised, agreeing to let off the remaining Fengyi Sect disciples, having her commit suicide to beg the world for forgiveness.

Fan Huiyao considered many things in her mind. If she was not injured, she could naturally come and go as she pleased. If that were the case, then Jiang Zhe's objective would become a joke. Unfortunately, Great Master True Compassion's Buddhist cultivation was unparalleled in this world. She had only defeated him after suffering heavy injuries. Although the old monk had been forced to make a promise to return to the Shaolin Temple to recuperate and would not obstruct her in the short term, by hurrying to the Hunting Palace to salvage the desperate situation, her internal injuries had worsened considerably. If she had not taken that life-saving pill, she likely would have been powerless to take any action. However, even with the help of medicine, if she were to fight arduously, then there would be only one result for her—her cultivation wasted, her arteries broken. With the presence of an expert like Xiaoshunzi, it was impossible for her to kill the Yong emperor and his sons. In the end, not only would her life be lost, it would also be impossible for her disciples to escape alive.

She forced a slight smile onto her face. Fan Huiyao shook her head. She was such a majestic heroine of the age and yet had fallen into such dire straits because of a feeble scholar without the strength to even truss a chicken. She had originally believed that she could rely upon her majestic prestige as a grandmaster to compel the Prince of Yong to yield. Who could have thought that Jiang Zhe had noticed the seriousness of her injuries? That's right … how could she forget Jiang Zhe's master of medicine? The pill that Xiaoshunzi had fed him, the Nine Revolutions Heart Protection Pill, was the best evidence. Moreover, if she hadn't taken the same pill prepared twenty years ago by that man, it would likely have been impossible for her to even remain standing.

Although no one could see the expression on the Fengyi Sect Master's face because of the mask on her face, everyone heard her silence, realizing that Jiang Zhe's words weren't false. Some of the clever ones understood Jiang Zhe's intentions. But was forcing the Fengyi Sect Master to commit suicide even possible? Everyone automatically discarded this notion. As a result, they still tried to guess Jiang Zhe's true intentions.

After a while, Fan Huiyao sighed softly and stated, "It is possible to compromise. As long as Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, is willing to allow my remaining disciples to depart and not issue the order to pursue for seven days, then this seat is willing to accept this condition."

I glanced at Li Zhi, seeing the puzzlement on his face. And yet, he still lightly nodded his head. As for Li Yuan, he never had any intentions of enraging the Fengyi Sect Master. Naturally, he would not speak any dissenting. Emotions flashed across my eyes and I stated, "His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, does not have any objections to this condition. However, neither the Crown Prince nor Wei Ying are disciples of your honored sect. They cannot be included."

Fan Huiyao uncaringly replied, "Li An is from the imperial clan. This seat will not bother with him. However, Wei Ying is this seat's honorary disciple. He must depart as well."

I was already satisfied that I was able to ensure that Li An stayed behind. Thus, I said, "Since this is the case, there is nothing that we can say.

However, this location is not fit to rest in. The Sect Master must monitor the Emperor and the Imperial Highnesses for seven days. Surely, we cannot spend it here? If Sect Master is willing, we can prepare a quiet and peaceful location for the Sect Master to rest in. What does the Sect Master think?"

Fan Huiyao's heart suddenly skipped a beat and she answered, "There is no harm in doing so. However, this seat requires that hostages stay by my side, otherwise if you break this agreement, wouldn't this seat have no one to kill?"

I had prepared for this long ago. Calmly, I responded, "The Emperor is an honored and prestigious existence, while the Prince of Yong must control the situation. The two Noble Consorts and Her Imperial Highness, the Princess, have all endured a terrible fright, how can we allow them to continue to feel apprehensive? The various generals must constrain their troops. As for the ministers of court, even if they are willing, I'm afraid that Sect Master will remain suspicious. If the Sect Master is willing, both His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, and I can serve as hostages. If His Imperial Majesty and His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, take any actions that violate our agreement, Sect Master can take our two lives as compensation."

With a slight smile, Fan Huiyao acquiesced, "Major Jiang is skilled at picking people. That's fine. This seat agrees to have you two serve as hostages. However, I must state this clearly … if His Imperial Majesty and His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, desire to leave the Hunting Palace within this seven-day period, don't blame this seat for refusing to adhere by this agreement."

Li Zhi glanced at Li Yuan before speaking, "Since Sect Master has spoken thusly, this Prince and Imperial Father will not leave the Hunting Palace in the next seven days to show our sincerity."

At this moment, everyone felt that Jiang Zhe truly possessed ability and wisdom surpassing others. Although they did not understand what kind of agreement he had made with the Fengyi Sect Master, they understood that the Fengyi Sect Master had, at least, been temporarily placated. Seven days would be sufficient for the appropriate arrangements to be made. When the

time came, no matter how the Fengyi Sect Master tried to cause trouble, the losses suffered would be greatly reduced. Moreover, being able to negotiate an appropriate resolution was the best case scenario. After all, at present, everyone was worried that the Fengyi Sect Master would begin a slaughter. As for those rebels, they could be taken care of in the future.

Moreover, the two hostages picked by Jiang Zhe were extremely clever. He, himself, was willing to be a hostage, displaying the loyalty and fealty in his heart. As for the Prince of Qi, it was an opportunity for him to atone for his crimes. It could be assumed that he would not reject the opportunity. In addition, the Prince of Yong would definitely not have the heart to sacrifice Jiang Zhe, while Li Yuan would not sacrifice the Prince of Qi. With this, these hostages would not only allow the Fengyi Sect Master to be at ease, it would also not cause discontent among those selected to serve as hostages. As a result, even if they ultimately could not punish the rebels, being able to completely purge the Fengyi Sect's forces within the imperial court ensured that the gains outweighed the losses.

Just as everyone had let out a breath and relaxed, Li Hanyou suddenly shouted, "Master, Master! It was Li Zhen, Jiang Zhe, and Xiahou Yuanfeng who spoiled our affairs! Master cannot let them off!"

Fan Huiyao glanced at Li Hanyou, disappointment appearing in her eyes. She replied, "Hanyou, stop speaking. Major Jiang, presumably, my disciples were poisoned at your hands? I wonder how you were able to poison them and if you have the antidote?"

Prepared for this long ago, I calmly answered, "This one has been worried about this long ago. If His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, were to mobilize troops to come rescue the Emperor, what would happen if your honored sect attempted to seize His Imperial Majesty and use him as a hostage? We would surely refrain from attacking, in fear of harming innocents. What then? In order to smoothly rescue His Imperial Majesty, this one asked Princess Changle to dispatch trusted subordinates to switch out the incense burned in the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall to a Leisurely Fragrance from the southern frontier starting yesterday. The scent of this incense gladdens the heart and refreshes the mind. If one were to smell it,

one would feel vigorous, with a clear mind. In truth, this was all down to luck. The majority of the Fengyi Sect disciples come from rich and powerful families, and would not stop incense from being burned. However, if the Leisurely Fragrance were to be continuously breathed in for a day or more, and then the scent of the Crow's Head Straw was breathed in, also specially produced in the southern frontier, it would cause one's limbs to grow weak. The reason why this one insisted upon coming to the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall, even when ill, was to bring the refined ointment manufactured from powdered Crow's Head Straw. I then had Xiaoshunzi use his internal energy to send out the scent. As everyone's smell was confused by the medicinal fragrance on my body, no one noticed the scent of the Crow's Head Straw as a result. Moreover, the Princess long ago mixed the antidote into the drinks consumed by His Imperial Majesty and all of the *daren* . That is why only your honored sect's disciples were poisoned."

Fan Huiyao smiled faintly and replied, "Major Jiang is deserving of being the disciple of the Medical Sage, skilled at mixing poisons. This seat admires you greatly." Afterwards, she caught sight of pride flash across Jiang Zhe's eyes, a feeling of gratification welling up from within. It seemed like Jiang Zhe was only human, inevitably feeling pride from being praised. This would be of benefit to her future acts. Consequently, she grew increasingly amiable as she said, "Since that is the case, I would like to ask Major Jiang to deliver the antidote to allow my disciples to leave at the earliest opportunity."

I glanced at the Prince of Yong, using my eyes to ask for instructions. Li Zhi nodded and stated, "Suiyun, hand over the antidote to the Sect Master. However, Sect Master, please have the disciples of your honored sect hand over their weapons, otherwise this Prince does not dare to be unconcerned."

Disdain flickered across Fan Huiyao's eyes, as she replied, "This is only natural. If Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, is worried, you can briefly send the Emperor away."

Overjoyed, Li Zhi agreed, "Since Sect Master is so magnanimous, this Prince will accept your kindness. Changle, quickly go with the two Noble Consorts and accompany Imperial Father to rest in a side hall."

Princess Changle hesitated momentarily, glancing at Jiang Zhe. She said, “Changle obeys.” Finished speaking, she walked towards the raised dais. She intended to go and support Li Yuan.

None guessed that when she was halfway there, a chilling glint of steel would shoot out and a beautiful voice shout, “Li Zhen! Accept death!” The originally collapsed on the floor Li Hanyou suddenly jumped up, pointing her sword and lunging for Princess Changle’s chest. This was completely unexpected. Who could have thought that the poisoned Li Hanyou would be able to do such a thing? Initially, everyone’s attention had been on the Fengyi Sect Master. Who was paying attention to the poisoned Fengyi Sect disciples? Moreover, no one could have expected that right after the Fengyi Sect Master had compromised and reached an agreement, Li Hanyou would act. At this moment, Leng Chuan and Xiaoshunzi were a dozen or more meters away. Although the two simultaneously cried out in alarm and charged forward, there wasn’t enough time for them to prevent Li Hanyou from stabbing Changle. Of the other experts guarding the Yong emperor, many were dead or badly injured. Even those unharmed had paid no attention to Li Hanyou. As a result, no one was actually able to save Changle in time.

On the Fengyi Sect’s side, Wei Ying, Xiao Lan, and Feng Feifei had retreated to guard the poisoned disciples upon the arrival of the Fengyi Sect Master. They were even more powerless to stop Li Hanyou. In addition, Princess Changle was the primary culprit in dashing their dreams. The thought of rescuing Princess Changle did not cross their mind. The only one who had the power to save Princess Changle was the Fengyi Sect Master. However, when she was about to act, Fan Huiyao felt the *qi* and blood in her chest roil. In order to not expose any flaws, she could only helplessly maintain a calm expression on her face, watching on with faked indifference. At this moment, she was calculating how to prevent Princess Changle’s death from affecting the agreement that the two sides had reached.

Footnotes :

一蹶不振, yijuebuzhen – idiom, lit. one stumble, unable to rise; fig. a setback leading to a total collapse, ruined at a stroke

光风霁月, guangfengjiyue – idiom, lit. light breeze and clear moon; fig. noble and benevolent character

四分五裂, sifenwulie – idiom, lit. torn apart into four to five pieces; fig. shattered into pieces

鸿门宴, the Feast at Hongmen was an event that took place at the fall of the Qin Dynasty and the beginning of the Chu-Han Contention. Xiang Yu invited Liu Bang to a feast. At the time, Liu Bang had just conquered the Qin heartland, effectively destroying the Qin Dynasty, while Xiang Yu had been embroiled in a bloody battle against a massive Qin army at Julu. The feast was held with the purpose of assassinating Liu Bang. One of Xiang Yu's cousins, Xiang Zhuang, put on a sword dance. Knowing what would happen and disagreeing with the plot, Xiang Yu's uncle, Xiang Bo, intervened. Afterwards, Liu Bang made an excuse and was able to flee. As a result, this event became used figuratively to describe any event that was ostensibly held for joyous reasons, but had treacherous intentions.

化干戈为玉帛, huagangeweiyubo – idiom, lit. to exchange weapons of war for gifts of jade and silk; fig. to turn hostility into friendship

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 37: Using Blood to Atone for Transgressions

Volume 3, Chapter 37: Using Blood to Atone for Transgressions

Everyone could only watch on as Princess Changle was about to perish, when a figure suddenly, surprisingly, and miraculously appeared, putting itself in front of Princess Changle, defending her. In a split second, the sharp sword pierced his chest, blood splattering everywhere. In a heartbreaking voice, that man let out a miserable shriek, crying out the words, “Li Hanyou!”

Originally, when Li Hanyou pierced that man’s chest, she was extremely overjoyed. However, after clearly seeing the man’s appearance, she could not help but be shocked. Hearing that man’s shout filled with bitter resentment, Li Hanyou frenetically shook her head. She released the sword in her hand because it felt like scalding iron, and retreated several steps. But under that man’s blood-red eyes, she felt her legs weaken and she collapsed to the ground. At this moment, the man drew his own sword, brandishing and slashing at Li Hanyou. At any other time, this man’s martial arts were far worse than Li Hanyou’s, and Li Hanyou could easily avoid this attack. However, at this very moment, Li Hanyou was completely flustered. Whatever the reason, she could not personally kill this man. As a result, while Li Hanyou’s mind was in a complete daze, the sharp sword shot past her face, leaving behind a deep, fierce wound that cut to the bone. Only then did Li Hanyou return to her senses, rapidly retreating several steps, avoiding the fate of being beheaded. However, she let out a miserable shriek from the sharp pain on her face and deep concern about her appearance being destroyed. Hiding her face in her hands, she collapsed to the floor.

This change caused everyone, including the Fengyi Sect Master, to be astonished. Suddenly, a man cried out, “Qing’er!” It was the Grand General Who Suppresses Distant Lands, Qin Yi. He felt as if something had exploded

in his head. Amidst the chaos, he could only see a sword in his beloved son's chest. With large strides, he walked over, seeking to hold Qin Qing.

However, someone else's movements were faster. Princess Changle cried out in sorrow, "Big brother Qin! You can't die!" She was already holding Qin Qing with her arms. However, she wasn't strong enough. Although she could, with difficulty, hold Qin Qing up, she was on the verge of falling over. Fortunately, Qin Yi arrived at this moment, pulling Qin Qing into his arms. The two supported Qin Qing, allowing him to slowly collapse to the foot of the dais.

The one who had stopped Li Hanyou's blow was Qin Qing. Qin Qing was different from everyone else. The entire time, his eyes had not left Li Hanyou. At one moment, filled with loathing. At the next, the loving affection that they had shared. As a result, only he had paid any attention to Li Hanyou's abnormal activity. For some time now, he had longed for death. Moreover, he knew that Li Hanyou's swordsmanship was superior to his. If he were to use a weapon to block her attack, he would likely fail. As a result, he had steeled his heart and used his body to shield Princess Changle. Based upon his zealotry, he had surpassed the limitations upon the human body, successfully using his flesh to block that killing blow.

When the sharp sword penetrated his chest, Qin Qing could finally let loose the pent-up rage and hatred in his heart. As a result, he ignored the disparity between their martial arts skills. When he slashed with his sword, he did not have any excessive expectations that he would succeed. However, he had still managed to destroy Li Hanyou's appearance.

Li Hanyou originally hailed from a poor family. As a result, she was not fond of the scent of incense. Although, in order to maintain the proper deportment of a princess of the imperial clan, she had never expressed her dislike, she would always do her best to stay as far away from incense as possible. Although the scent of the Leisurely Fragrance was lovely, for some reason, Li Hanyou did not like its scent. However, if she were to prohibit incense, she worried that she would be looked down upon. As a result, she would painstakingly seize opportunities to patrol or do things on the outside. Therefore, although she was also poisoned, the toxicity level was

quite low. After she had taken a general antidote, she was surprisingly able to recover some of her martial arts. By then, however, the Fengyi Sect Master had arrived and begun to negotiate with Li Zhi. Li Hanyou was worried that the Fengyi Sect Master would abandon her and her apprentice sisters. In order to maintain her ability to resist, she had waited to act.

However, the more she listened, the more Li Hanyou became annoyed. Princess Changle had first transmitted the emperor's secret edict before poisoning the Fengyi Sect disciples, causing all of her efforts to attain the glory, splendor, wealth, and rank that Li Hanyou desired to be wasted. If she could not kill Princess Changle, it would be difficult for her hatred to diminish. However, when she spoke to remind the Fengyi Sect Master, her words fell upon deaf ears.[1] She had always been a proud and arrogant individual. Momentarily, hot anger muddled her mind, surprisingly seizing the opportunity to try to kill Princess Changle. Originally, this sword of hers could only succeed. To her surprise, her sword had been stopped by Qin Qing.

Regardless of how heartless Li Hanyou was, Qin Qing was her husband. Even if she did not have any true feelings for Qin Qing, their relationship was still there. She had no desire to assume responsibility for murdering her husband. In reality, she had initially intended to wait until the rebellion had been successful to use her power and influence to force Qin Qing to take her back. After all, Qin Qing was a perfectly suitable candidate as a consort. Even if Qin Qing refused to accept such favors and she desired to kill him, she wouldn't personally do so. Naturally, there would be those willing to do so.

Under the heavy guilt and shock from killing her own husband, combined with the chaotic state of her mind, Li Hanyou actually forgot to evade, allowing her face to be marred by a deep wound.

These unforeseen changes caused the tense atmosphere intensify. Everyone gripped their weapons tightly, preparing for the explosive beginning of a melee.

By now, Fan Huiyao's *qi* and blood flow had stabilized. She callously stated, "Li Zhi, do you desire for this seat to begin slaughtering?"

Li Zhi's body trembled. Speaking one word, one sentence at a time, he ordered through gritted teeth, fuming with rage, "No one is allowed to move indiscriminately!" Under Li Zhi's command, the bloody melee that was about to erupt was forcibly suppressed. However, the atmosphere in the audience chamber was stifling, causing no one to dare breathe heavily.

In a daze, I gazed at Qin Qing. Opening my right hand, I discovered that my right hand was dripping with blood. Just now, when Princess Changle was being attacked, I could only watch on helplessly, completely forgetting everything else. After I came to my senses, I discovered that the fingernails of my right hand had pierced the skin of my right palm. Sparing no effort, I rose to my feet, urgently requesting, "Xiaoshunzi, help me go over."

With an ashen complexion, Xiaoshunzi came over, helping me walk to Qin Qing's side. As of now, Qin Qing was unconscious. Kneeling on the floor, I checked Qin Qing's pulse. After quite a while, I raised my head, catching sight of Princess Changle's tear-filled eyes and the look of hope in Qin Yi's eyes. Helplessly, I shook my head and said, "General Qin has been pierced in the heart and lungs. There is no way to reverse the situation. If Grand General is willing, this lowly official can use acupuncture to allow General Qin to regain consciousness for a short period of time."

Feeling as if his life was departing, Qin Yi was left speechless for a moment before he replied, "*Daren* , please use acupuncture."

I sighed, accepting the meteorite hairpin from Xiaoshunzi, using it to poke Qin Qing several times. After a short while, Qin Qing coughed several times, opening his eyes. Trembling, Qin Yi's hand gently caressed Qin Qing's face. Tears flooded down his aged face, as he said, "Qing'er, this is all father's fault. In the past, I was always busy and away in battle, and was unable to provide a proper education for you, allowing you to be deceived and toyed with by others. And now, you've …" Qin Yi could not continue.

There was no more resentment in Qin Qing's eyes, only peacefulness and calm. He serenely replied, "Father, this is all because this child was fond of a beautiful woman, causing both His Imperial Father and Father to fall into such a desperate situation. Right now, this child understands the mistakes that I have made and will die to atone for my sins. Father, please do not feel

sorrow for this child." His words were incredibly coherent, while his face grew flushed. Everyone knew that these were the last moments of lucidity before death.[2] Qin Yi found it difficult to endure the sorrow and grief that he was feeling, but he did not know what to say.

Qin Qing's gaze fell upon Princess Changle. He smiled and said, "Your Imperial Highness, Qin Qing was originally childhood sweethearts with Your Imperial Highness. However, Qin Qing was blunt and stupid, unable to understand the painstaking efforts and sacrifices on the part of Your Imperial Highness for the country and the people. Contrary to what is expected, I actually spoke words of harsh criticism. No wonder Princess became disappointed with Qin Qing."

In a gentle voice, Princess Changle replied, "Big brother Qin, there is no need to speak of matters of the past. You are still Our Big Brother Qin. Although Changle once blamed you, you ignored the bitterness of our past and saved my life. Changle does not know how to thank you properly. Big brother Qin, if you have any outstanding affairs that need to be settled, please feel free to tell Changle."

Qin Qing's eyes dimmed somewhat. He remarked, "Your Imperial Highness, Qin Qing was incompetent and neglected my duties, causing such a disaster to fall upon my family. I beg the Princess to remember my honored father's past loyalties and ask His Imperial Majesty and His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, to blame the Qin family because of Qin Qing."

Holding her face, weeping, Princess Changle declared, "Big brother Qin, do not worry. We will definitely plea for leniency on behalf of the Qin family before Imperial Father and older brother."

At this moment, Li Yuan spoke up, "Qin Qing, you save Our beloved daughter. In addition, if it weren't for the Qin family's contributions to the rescue of Our Imperial Presence, we would not have been able to so swiftly pacify this rebellion. We will only reward the Qin family. How can We blame them? There is no need for you to worry."

Qin Qing's gaze turned to Li Zhi. In a serious demeanor, Li Zhi stated,

“General Qin, this Prince vows here to never charge the Qin family with any crime without cause. General Qin Yong saved this Prince’s life, while the elderly general has been known for his wholehearted loyalty. You have also saved my sister. This Prince’s heart is completely filled with gratitude, and will definitely not repay kindness with ingratitude.”

Only with these promises did Qin Qing finally relax. Reaching out his hand, he grabbed onto Jiang Zhe’s hand. In a weak voice, he said, “Brother Jiang, I, Qin Qing, have always looked down upon you. However, today, I was completely won over. Her Imperial Highness, the Princess, has endured a pitiful fate. You must not turn your back on her. Do not hesitate to advance because of your different statures and supposed proper etiquette.” As he spoke, his voice fell away. Outside of me, it was unlikely that there was that many people who heard what he had said.

I grieved. Although I had long known of Li Hanyou’s real identity, I had never thought of reminding Qin Qing. I had watched idly as Qin Qing had fallen deeper and deeper in love with her. Utterly remorseful, I murmured, “General Qin, do not worry. My feelings for the Princess are sincere. I will definitely not forsake her. As long as Jiang Zhe is alive, I will ensure that the Qin family does not encounter disaster.”

Hearing my whispered promise, a satisfied smile appeared on Qin Qing’s face. Taking another look at his father, he stated, “Father, this child is going to take his leave.” As he finished speaking, Qin Qing’s eyes closed, his breathing weakened. In the blink of an eye, he had departed for the underworld.

Qin Yi shouted, “Qing’er!” The grief-stricken shout combined with Li Hanyou’s mourning cries traveled a long distance. With raging hot anger in his eyes, Li Zhi callously stated, “Sect Master, Li Hanyou chose this moment to murder. It would be quite unreasonable for her to be let off. Sect Master, please hand over Li Hanyou to this Prince for punishment.”

After remaining silent for a moment, Fan Huiyao replied, “The one she killed was Qin Qing. Since Princess Changle is in good health, there is no need for you to make things difficult for her. In the future, how you pursue her is your business.”

Li Zhi was somewhat hesitant. If Li Hanyou were let off so easily, it would be a terrible let down to the Qin family. Although Qin Qing had first made a mistake, it was the Qin family that had rescued the emperor. At this moment, holding his son's corpse in his arms, Qin Yi abruptly stated in a heavy voice, "Your Imperial Highness, there is no need to worry about this elderly subject. His Imperial Majesty's safety is more urgent. Allow Li Hanyou to leave. In the future, there will be ample time[3] to exact revenge." His voice was full of grief and sorrow.

Still hesitating, Li Zhi glanced at Jiang Zhe. Contempt and scorn flashed across my eyes, as I gravely stated, "Your Imperial Highness, please do not betray the Grand General's kindly intentions." Li Zhi heaved a sigh and spoke no more.

Fan Huiyao shook one of her fingers and pointed. Li Hanyou immediately collapsed, losing consciousness. Xiao Lan came over and took the antidote from Xiaoshunzi, handing it to the Fengyi Sect members. It wasn't long before all of them could move again. However, to guard against all eventualities, all of their weapons had been taken away. Fan Huiyao stonily ordered, "You will first go to the rendezvous point that this seat arranged earlier and wait. This seat has already left behind a handwritten command there. You all only need to follow that command. If this seat is unable to continue to exercise command over the Fengyi Sect, then Ling Yu will take the position of Sect Master. Wei Ying will hold the position of a Guest Retainer. Ji Xia will take the post of Enforcement Elder. Junior apprentice sister Ji, inform Ling Yu that the three of you must work together towards a common purpose and must not contest control of sect."

All of the members of the Fengyi Sect solemnly and respectfully saluted, obeying, "We solemnly comply with Sect Master's orders." Afterwards, Ji Xia led them away.

Wei Ying and Feng Feifei followed right behind Ji Xia. Two of the Fengyi Sect's swordswomen picked Li Hanyou up and followed them out. Just as Xiao Lan was about to leave, Li An, who had always remained paralyzed on the ground, suddenly and frantically reached out and grabbed onto Xiao Lan. He said, "Beloved concubine, bring Us along!"

Xiao Lan hesitated for a moment, gazing up at the Fengyi Sect Master. The Fengyi Sect Master unfeelingly shook her head. Lowering her head, Xiao Lan looked at Li An. The current Li An had completely lost the prestige and bearing of a member of the imperial clan. Loathing grew from Xiao Lan's heart. She forcefully kicked Li An away before leaving in a relaxed fashion. Li An was in so much pain that snot and tears flowed. Li Zhi frowned. Waving his hand, he had several imperial bodyguards walk over and drag Li An to the side, to prevent him from remaining a disgrace.

At this moment, Qin Zheng walked towards the exit with her head down. She too had to leave. As a rebel, if she didn't go, the only road before her was death. However, she was deeply apprehensive in her heart. Without the Prince of Qi's handwritten command, it would be impossible for the Prince of Qi's army to attack the Prince of Yong's army. As a result, she had cooperated with her apprentice sisters and forced the Prince of Qi to personally write that missive. In order to be absolutely safe, the one who went to deliver the command was her father, Qin Wuqi. However, it was now clear that the Prince of Qi was not sincere in his allegiances, otherwise Jiang Zhe would not have been able to hide at the palace hall that the Prince of Qi was staying at. That handwritten command definitely had problems. Her father had likely already been imprisoned by the Prince of Qi's subordinates. If she were to rush to the Prince of Qi's army, even though there was no way for her to command them to retrieve the situation, there were high hopes that she would be able to rescue his father. The affection between husband and wife was already as thin as paper. It was impossible for her to rescue her beloved son from within the capital. The only hope she had was to rescue her father. Right now, Qin Zheng had no desire to lose the few relatives she had alive.

After taking a few steps, Qin Zheng subconsciously turned around and looked. Behind rows of weapons, the Prince of Qi stood with his hands behind his back. The prince's expression was placid, staring fixedly at Qin Zheng. His eyes were filled with gratitude and elation. Qin Zheng felt a twinge of love, understanding that Li Xian was happy that she was able to escape. Recalling her own conduct that caused the Prince of Qi to not know what to do in the future, remembering her beloved son in the Prince of Qi's

residence in Chang'an, she slowed her steps. Seeing this, the Prince of Qi suddenly turned his head away, no longer looking at Qin Zheng. However, Qin Zheng could see his entire body shaking. It was clear that he did not want her to worry about his safety and stay behind.

Qin Zheng's mind was completely blank, only remembering the books on womanly conduct that she had read as a child, the exhortations of listening to one's husband after being married. She had always greatly scorned those exhortations. However, at this moment, she finally realized the real meaning behind those words. If a married couple could not be of one mind, then there could only be pain, suffering, and disputes. Thinking of the current distress being experienced by the empress and Noble Consort Ji; thinking of Noble Consorts Zhangsun and Yan's willingness to sacrifice their lives to shield Li Yuan; thinking of Qin Qing, dead by Li Hanyou's hands; Qin Zheng ultimately stopped. Her gaze stupidly fell upon Li Xian again. Although this man had brought her much misery, if it weren't for her continued refusal to cut off her relationship with her sect, how could the results be like this? Even after she had brought him such suffering, this man still refused to delineate a separation between the two of them. Having such a husband, how could she let him go? At this moment, Qin Zheng deeply regretted her failure to single-mindedly attend to her husband.

Just then, Xie Xiaotong turned her head and called out, "Senior apprentice sister, quickly!"

Fan Huiyao's brows furrowed and she asked, "Zheng'er, what are you hesitating for?"

Coming to a decision, Qin Zheng turned around and kowtowed. She said, "Master, please forgive this disciple for being unable to listen and obey to your commands."

In a cool voice, Fan Huiyao replied, "Zheng'er, you have always been confused. Master has never blamed you. Right now, don't tell me that you still have excessive expectations in your heart? Hoping that His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, can save your life?"

Qin Zheng ignored the Fengyi Sect Master. She shouted, "Qin Zheng is a

consort of a prince of Great Yong. I do not know what it means to be loyal to my country and instead have rebelled. As a daughter, I was unable to admonish my father to be loyal and righteous, causing my father to perform inappropriate tasks on his daughter's behalf. As a wife, I failed to scrupulously abide by the dictates of womanhood, failing to play the traditional roles of a wife and rebelling against natural human relationships. As a mother, I have failed to serve as an example, unable to raise my beloved son with benevolence, to the point that my child is now implicated because of me. Imperial Father and second brother, His Imperial Highness has always been loyal to the dynasty. Even using intimidation and coercion through any methods available on the part of the Crown Prince and this guilty wife, we were unable to mobilize a single soldier subordinate to His Imperial Highness. Imperial Father, second brother, and all of the generals, please recognize this. Qin Zheng has performed such disloyal, unfilial, heartless, and unjust acts, and does not have the face to remain alive on this earth. Imperial Father, please forgive His Imperial Highness."

Hearing these words, Li Xian cried out in alarm, "Zheng'er, you mustn't do anything foolish!" Just as he was about to leap forward to stop her, he was prevented from doing so from the multitude of soldiers between them. In addition, Li Xian's internal energy had not yet recovered. There was only enough time for him to take a few steps forward before a golden hairpin appeared in Qin Zheng's hands.

The sharp hairpin was aimed at her throat. Qin Zheng smiled a splendid and sweet smile. This hairpin was a gift from Li Xian after they had married. Then, in an instant, the golden hairpin pierced her throat, blood gushing forth. With this, Qin Zheng died.

Li Xian could only rush over and pull Qin Zheng's beautiful body into his embrace. Flustered, he attempted to use his hands to try and stem the flow of blood. But with the way that the blood was gushing forth, how could he stem it? In a voice filled with sorrow, he cried out, "Zheng'er … Zheng'er … You cannot die! It is all because I failed you. I should not have allowed them to dictate your life." However, at this point, Qin Zheng was no longer breathing.

Li Xian's gaze fell upon the Fengyi Sect Master, his eyes radiating boundless remorse and wrath. To his side, someone spoke some words to him, but he did not hear a single syllable. Picking up his wife, he did not look at anyone, staggering as he made his way towards the exit. When all those who thought to stop him saw Li Xian's bloodstained clothes and his eyes brimming with despair, grief, and indignation, they silently retreated. Li Zhi sighed softly. Gesturing with his hand, several of his trusted subordinates followed Li Xian out.

When Li Xian's figure had disappeared, Li Zhi candidly stated, "Fengyi Sect Master, are you satisfied? Without you sowing discord, how could the relationships between father and sons, between brothers, become like this? Right now, your honored sect's disciples have all departed. Sect Master, please temporarily take up residence at the Autumn's Return Abode. In the next seven days, this Prince will definitely not dispatch anyone to pursue and kill your disciples. However, Sect Master must also scrupulously abide by your promises and is not permitted to take a step out of the Autumn's Return Abode."

"Even without my sect's participation," retorted Fan Huiyao frankly, "Don't tell me that you, the Prince of Yong, would be willing to renounce the Imperial Throne? Right now, the Throne is yours for the taking. The Crown Prince plotted treason and rebelled, forever losing his qualifications to ascend to the Throne. The Prince of Qi is also suspicious. From this day forward, you can kill or imprison them as you will. As for your Imperial Father, I wonder if you are going to force him to abdicate?"

"There is no need for Sect Master to waste your time thinking about these matters," riposted Li Zhi, "These matters are the affairs of my imperial household. If Sect Master is still worried, at most, this Prince can come and be Sect Master's hostage."

Fan Huiyao took a look around, seeing the resentful gazes on the faces of everyone in the audience chamber. She was filled with disappointment and frustration. Slowly, she replied, "This seat has already made a promise. It is sufficient to have Major Jiang and His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, serve as my hostages. However, let me say this clearly. It will be impossible

for Your Imperial Highness to dispatch men to pursue and kill my disciples without my knowledge. In the next seven days, if someone departs from the Hunting Palace, this seat will absolutely not let matters lie."

Li Zhi did not respond. His gaze fell upon Jiang Zhe. He saw the doggedness and resolution in Jiang Zhe's eyes. Those eyes were filled with hatred and death. I nodded my head resolutely. Li Zhi's heart leapt. Could it be that Jiang Zhe already had a way of completely destroying the Fengyi Sect? As a result, Li Zhi calmly stated, "This Prince agrees to this condition. Sect Master, after you …"

Footnotes :

置若罔闻, zhiruowangwen – idiom, lit. to turn a deaf ear; fig. to pretend not to hear

回光返照, huiguangfanzhao – idiom, lit. final radiance of the setting sun; fig. flash of lucidity or activity before death

来日方长, lairifangchang – idiom, lit. the future is long; fig. there will be ample time for that later, we'll cross that bridge when we get there

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 38: This Regret, Interminable

Volume 3, Chapter 38: This Regret, Interminable

I wrinkled my brows as I set down a black stone while picking up a bowl of medicine, its fragrance assailing my sense of smell. I drank the medicine in one gulp. Setting the bowl down, I smiled at the Fengyi Sect Master and stated, “If Sect Master doesn’t mind, this one is somewhat learned in the art of healing and is willing to diagnose and treat Sect Master.”

Fan Huiyao’s pair of clear, limpid eyes above her veil displayed a shred of disdain. She impassively declined, “This seat dares not trouble you. It is a mere seven days. This seat will be able to persevere.” As she spoke, she sat down a white stone.

I smiled helplessly. It could be assumed that the Fengyi Sect Master did not trust me, worried that I would poison her medicine. Under normal circumstances, when the Fengyi Sect Master was uninjured, trifling poison would naturally not harm her. However, with the current state of her conditions, it was difficult to say. The Fengyi Sect Master was seriously cautious and careful.

Taking a look at the *weiqi* board, the formation of my pieces was broken and in disorder. What an embarrassment! If I didn’t have ulterior motives, what was the point for me to involve the Fengyi Sect Master and play *weiqi* ? However, the Fengyi Sect Master probably also didn’t want us worrying that she would just depart, thus agreeing to my request. As a result, we began to play *weiqi* in the reception hall. Otherwise, regardless of whether she recuperated or cultivated, it would all be better than accompanying me, someone who had caused her great ambitions to fail.

Glancing again at the board, I tossed the black stone aside and admitted defeat. Picking up a brush at the side, I considered for a moment before writing a prescription. Handing it to Dong Que, I said, “I’ve added two ingredients to the prescription. Deliver it in four hours. In addition, go take a

look and see if Xiaoshunzi has come out of secluded cultivation. If he has come out of seclusion, have him come over."

Xiaoshunzi would be a better opponent for the Fengyi Sect Master in *weiqi* than me. Ever since the Prince of Qi had shut himself gloomily in his room on a daily basis, who could help? Otherwise, would there be a need for me to accompany the Fengyi Sect Master while ill?

Accepting the modified prescription, Dong Que respectfully withdrew. The Fengyi Sect Master gazed out past the beaded curtains, having no interest in collecting the stones. Within the courtyard, the leaves of the parasol tree had yellowed. With the cold western wind, this autumn was truly bleak and desolate. After a while, the Fengyi Sect Master furrowed her long, shapely eyebrows. She could hear someone walk gently over. That person's light and slow pace carried a peculiar cadence, almost as if the person was in harmony with the surrounding environment, noiselessly walking through the dead leaves and leaving no wake passing through water. The person's martial arts had already reached the Natural State. Fan Huiyao sighed lightly. When she had reached such a state, she was thirty-five years old.

Shortly after, Xiaoshunzi pushed aside the curtains and walked in. Having not seen him in three days, I noticed that his aura had transformed again. In the past, he was like a sheathed sword or a covered lamp. Although veiled and obscure during normal times, when crucial moments arrived, such as when he stood before the Fengyi Sect Master, he would be unable to cover his overwhelming vigor and sharpness. But right now, his aura was as refined and elegant as a piece of jade, gaining mellowness and gentleness. Even before the Fengyi Sect Master, he remained calm and elegant. Although I did not understand the mysterious profoundness behind the improvement of his cultivation, I could guess that Xiaoshunzi had already reached a higher state under the pressure and painstaking cultivation of these last several days. Pouring a cup of wine for myself, I picked it up, offering it to him. I stated, "Xiaoshunzi, congratulations on gaining a higher level of cultivation."

Xiaoshunzi came over and accepted the cup, replying, "Many thanks to the young master. This servant's improvement is all due to Sect Master Fan." Finished speaking, he unhurriedly saluted the Fengyi Sect Master.

A look of regret flashed across Fan Huiyao's eyes as she stated, "Little brother Li's rapid improvements to his martial arts leaves this seat filled with admiration. Pitifully, Brother Li is willing to serve as a servant even with such ability. Truly a pity. Isn't Jiang *daren* treating little brother Li too poorly?"

Both Xiaoshunzi and I smiled faintly. We exchanged looks. How could an outsider understand our relationship? How could our relationship be simply described as one between a master and servant? Further, Xiaoshunzi willingly served as a servant to better completely reject others' efforts at recruitment. In addition, others could not treat him as a simple servant, while his status as a servant enabled him to not have any qualms while acting, allowing him to ignore status and morality. This was the most important reason why we were master and servant.

***

Opening his eyes, Li Xian could feel a headache rush to his skull from the hangover. He had drunk himself asleep these past few days, waking up the next day with a splitting headache. After he rose from bed, he saw on the table beside the bed a bowl of sobering medicine. He drank it in one gulp; his brows could not help but furrow from its bitter taste. These last several days, while he had served as the Fengyi Sect Master's hostage, he didn't need to do anything, merely staying within the Autumn's Return Abode. As a result, he ended up using alcohol to numb himself. Although some of this was the result of the psychological shock from the death of Qin Zheng, Li Xian understood that this wasn't the real reason. In any event, Li Xian had long been prepared for Qin Zheng's death. Once the coup d'état failed, the imperial clan would absolutely not tolerate a treasonous, rebel consort. Although Qin Zheng's death was a result of the choices she had made, even if she had been able to escape this time, she would be living the life of a renegade. What caused Li Xian such suffering was the current challenging situation that he found himself in. Although the Prince of Yong had yet to state how he would be punished afterwards, Li Xian understood that the best case scenario was to lose his military command, allowing him to become an idle imperial clansman. If he were unable to return to the battlefield, Li Xian did not know how he would be able to spend the rest of

his life.

After bathing and changing, a transformed beyond recognition Li Xian walked out of his room. Since this was his destiny, he needed to ensure that he did not become a joke in other people's eyes. Arriving in the courtyard, Li Xian could hear the sound of stones being placed upon a chessboard. His heart leaping, he walked towards the reception hall. Parting the beaded curtains, he walked in. With one glance, he caught sight of Jiang Zhe playing *weiqi* with the Fengyi Sect Master by the western window. However, although the expression on Jiang Zhe's face was leisurely, the expression on Xiaoshunzi's face was solemn and grave. In addition, seeing the stone in Xiaoshunzi's hands, he immediately realized that the one actually playing against the Fengyi Sect Master was this eunuch. After Li Xian had walked in, neither the Fengyi Sect Master nor Xiaoshunzi raised their heads to take a look. It was only Jiang Zhe who turned his head to look and smile slightly. Afterwards, Jiang Zhe rose to his feet, letting Xiaoshunzi take his seat, walking over.

Saluting Li Xian, I asked, "Your Imperial Highness, is your state of mind better?"

"Is there a need for you to ask such a question when you know the answer?" answered Li Xian rhetorically with a sigh. "Oh, that's right … these last few days, I have ignored what has been going on outside. Has Imperial Father issued any edicts?"

Seeing Li Xian's wan and sallow features, I replied, "From what this subject knows, His Imperial Majesty has already issued an edict deposing His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, from the position as heir apparent. The Crown Prince's treasonous rebellion will be adjudicated by the Imperial Secretariat, Ministry of Justice, and Imperial Censorate. According to this subject's speculations, he will either be imprisoned for the rest of his life or ordered to commit suicide. The Crown Prince's subordinate Eastern Palace officials will all be handed over to the Ministry of Justice to be charged. At best, they will be dismissed from their positions, never to be employed by the state again. Concubine Xiao's name has been expunged from the Imperial Clan Records. The children she bore have all been demoted to commoners.

The Crown Princess has been demoted to the Duchess of Han, while the Crown Prince's heir has been demoted to become the Prince of Anguo of the second rank and sent to his fiefdom. Without an imperial edict, he is not permitted to leave his fief. As for the children bore by the other concubines, they will all be handed to the Duchess of Han to raise. Although their names will remain in the Imperial Clan Records, they have all been stripped of their titles and rewards.

"As for Your Imperial Highness's punishment, it will have to wait until His Imperial Majesty returns to the capital to be determined. However, although the Princess of Qi has committed suicide, the criminal charges remain. His Imperial Majesty has already expunged her name from the Imperial Clan Records. Your Imperial Highness's heir bore by the Princess of Qi will not be implicated. However, he will not be permitted to inherit Your Imperial Highness's principality."

Li Xian sighed and said, "Second brother is benevolent and magnanimous, and was lenient. Please tell him that I am willing to relinquish my military authority."

"Your Imperial Highness, there is no harm in having a good discussion with His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong," I comforted. "It is possible that Your Imperial Highness may acquire an unexpected gain."

Li Xian ruefully replied, "Suiyun, there is no need to console me. I will not be reluctant and hold onto my military authority. Presumably, as long as I am cautious in my conduct, second brother will not excessively make things difficult for me. Oh, that's right. How was Lu Jingzhong punished? Second brother probably detests him bitterly."

I smiled faintly and responded, "His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, has already dispatched Xiahou Yuanfeng to order Lu Jingzhong to commit suicide. He should die today. Things have been too hectic these past few days. His Imperial Highness had his hands full."

At this moment, I heard the Fengyi Sect Master state, "To the victor go the spoils. Li Xian, there is no use for you to ask all these questions. If you wish to live a few more years, you had best pledge your loyalty to the Prince of

Yong.”

Li Xian did not reply, hints of scorn appearing on his face. It would be impossible for a proud and arrogant prince to compromise, kneeling on the floor, begging for forgiveness.

***

In a side hall in the Jade Qilin Palace Hall, Lu Jingzhong stood before the window, calmly gazing out. Having recognized that his natural endowments were poor, he had thus never spent much time practicing martial arts. As a result, after he had been placed under house arrest by the Fengyi Sect, although he was resentful, he did not resist. In any case, if the Fengyi Sect desired to exercise control over the court, it would be impossible without him. Aside from him, no one could organize and command the crown prince’s faction. Therefore, he ignored the complacent and rash actions taken by Li Hanyou and company. In any case, a coup d’état demanded military force. There was no need for him to be involved. However, there were some things that could not be performed by these egotistical and overconfident women. For example, in order to force the Prince of Qi to mobilize his troops, the Fengyi Sect had no choice but to release him from his house arrest. Although Lu Jingzhong was still prohibited from taking a step out of the Jade Qilin Palace Hall, he knew that when the time came to negotiate with the Yong emperor, they would need his help. These matters could not be handled by Li Hanyou and company. Even Wei Ying, who possessed surpassing talent, was his inferior when it came to the subtleties of negotiating court politics.

However, the Prince of Yong had successfully reversed the desperate crisis. Hearing the sounds of battle in the Hunting Palace, Lu Jingzhong’s heart sank, becoming as cold as ice. He understood well. No matter how capable an adviser and strategist, they were useless when they were to personally face weapons. The crown prince’s defeat signified his own defeat. When a nest was overturned, how could the eggs remain intact?[1] These last few days, while he had remained under house arrest in the Jade Qilin Palace Hall, he had contemplated his chances for survival. Unfortunately, although he wasn’t willing to die together with the crown prince, Lu Jingzhong had no

intention of pledging allegiance to the Prince of Yong. The Prince of Yong had many capable individuals by his side—Shi Yu, with talent to become prime minister; the three distinguished heroes were skilled civil officials; in the military, he had Zhangsun Ji, Jing Chi, and other generals; and a master of strategy in Jiang Zhe. How would he be able to find shelter in the Prince of Yong's service? In addition, he had been the crown prince's prime adviser, repeatedly pushing the Prince of Yong into dangerous and hazardous positions. The Prince of Yong would absolutely not attempt to recruit him. Lu Jingzhong had likely remained under house arrest without being punished either because the Prince of Yong was too busy to worry about him, or was unwilling to allow him to die so easily.

At this moment, the sound of footsteps could be heard tramping from outside. They were orderly and vigorous, presumably from an elite unit of troops. After the soldiers reached the door, they separated and stood on either side the entrance. Then one of them pushed the door to the room open and walked in. Lu Jingzhong turned to look, catching sight of Xiahou Yuanfeng in a set of azure robes. In Xiahou Yuanfeng's hands was a tray. On top of the tray was a small, green jade bottle. After Xiahou Yuanfeng entered the room, the soldiers outside closed the door behind him. Xiahou Yuanfeng set the tray with the jade bottle down on the table at the center of the room. In a callous voice, he stated, "Lu *daren* , this lowly official has been sent to see *daren* off."

Lu Jingzhong trembled inside. An indescribable exhaustion seeped through into his mind. Walking to the table, he picked up the jade bottle. Playing with it in his hand, he remarked, "Xiahou Yuanfeng, it is common for the disciples of my Freezing Moon branch to slaughter one another. However, I do not understand why you betrayed the Crown Prince. You must know that if you hadn't transmitted that secret edict ordering Qin Yong to rescue the Emperor, the Prince of Yong would definitely have been killed. When the time comes, your position will be far higher than your current one. Since we are martial uncle and nephew, please let me understand."

After remaining silent for some time, Xiahou Yuanfeng replied, "Doesn't Martial Uncle already know? I was poisoned by Major Jiang and was forced

to surrender."

"Do not conceal anything from me," mentioned Lu Jingzhong with a smile. "I understand your character. You would rather use torture to acquire the antidote than reject what is near to seek what is far."

Startled, Xiahou Yuanfeng smiled. "Martial Uncle truly understands Yuanfeng. Since that is the case, then little nephew won't conceal anything from Martial Uncle. First, Major Jiang was seriously ill at the time. If I had used torture on him, he would likely have died before I could get any information out of him. Moreover, that man may seem weak, but he possesses a will of steel. If it was a trifling matter, I could maybe force him. But with a matter of such importance, even if I threatened him with death, it would be useless."

The expression on Lu Jingzhong's face did not change. He knew that this wasn't the real objective behind Xiahou Yuanfeng's surrender. As expected, Xiahou Yuanfeng continued, "There is another reason … this nephew has never considered myself as a member of the Freezing Moon branch. The Freezing Moon branch's objective is to support a virtuous ruler in times of chaos and reunify the world. Even though of the same sect, its members slaughter one another in order to acquire the position of Sovereign for the sole purpose of being able to take a peek at the *Hidden Talisman Classic* . However, I, Xiahou Yuanfeng, am not so ambitious. In my eyes, the *Hidden Talisman Classic* is completely worthless. Others will be responsible for fighting to unify the Middle Kingdom. I only desire power and authority, being able to enjoy the pleasures of life. I have no desire of becoming the Sovereign of the Freezing Moon branch. As a result, pledging my allegiance to a virtuous ruler is a shortcut for me. His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, is muddleheaded and incompetent. If he were to become Emperor, not only would Great Yong's future be in doubt, even those women from the Fengyi Sect would be better able to control the Crown Prince than us. It would be impossible for me, Xiahou Yuanfeng, to become a sycophant even if I wanted to.

"His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, is different. Although His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, is sagacious and experienced, he is a

lot more difficult to wait upon, preventing me from serving him halfheartedly, impossible to escape the Prince of Yong's eyes if I do not display my true skills and work to the best of my abilities. But based upon my abilities, what do I have to be afraid of? Although His Imperial Highness has a galaxy of talents in his service, most of them are gentlemen, individuals of noble character. There are few vile characters. Regardless of a virtuous ruler or a sage, they all require a vile character such as me. There are some things that a virtuous ruler and his worthy ministers cannot handle on their own that I can take care of. As long as I am loyal to the Prince of Yong, I will surely achieve meteoric success. Compared to the illusory reward, the *Hidden Talisman Classic* , doesn't Martial Uncle feel that this nephew's choice is more realistic? It is only that I needed to pick the proper moment to pledge my allegiance. This time, I contributed significantly to rescuing both the Prince of Yong and the Imperial Presence. In the future, I will surely be placed in an important position by the Prince of Yong. What other opportunity would have been more suitable?"

In the beginning, Lu Jingzhong had an indignant expression on his face. Then, it was gradually replaced by despair, before soon turning into serenity. Forcing a smile, he could be heard to mutter, "So that is the case … It was I who failed to see through your intentions. Fine … fine … this is your choice. Does your father know?"

Xiahou Yuanfeng casually answered, "Nobody understands a son better than his father.[2] What's more, father was never involved in this rebellion. As a result, there is no need to worry for martial uncle to worry about him."

Lu Jingzhong opened the cork of the jade bottle. Suddenly thinking of something, he suggested, "Since worthy nephew has already decided to follow the Prince of Yong, I must remind you of something. By nature, Jiang Zhe is deceitful. His schemes are profound and far-reaching. If that man makes up his mind to harm you, you will definitely lose. You should seize this opportunity, before the Prince of Yong has ascended the throne and while Jiang Zhe is still seriously ill, to kill him. Otherwise, you will always be worth less than and be below Jiang Zhe. In addition, uncle has long suspected that the Prince of Yong has a force operating in secret. That secret

force is most likely in Jiang Zhe's hands. Demonic Shadow Li Shun is an outstanding elite. He is most likely the leader of that secret force, as it is extremely difficult to explain his martial arts and abilities otherwise, and yet his willingingness to serve as another's servant."

Xiahou Yuanfeng's expression gradually grew ruthless, as he replied, "Martial uncle is truly vicious. You seek to harm me even at death's door. Although Yuanfeng is a fool, I do understand that Jiang Zhe can only be a friend and cannot be made an enemy. What's more, although the man's schemes are profound, his personality dislikes demanding hard work. Otherwise, he would not have been so uninvolved with the affairs of the Prince of Yong's household while he served as its Major. In addition, as soon as Shi Yu returned to Chang'an, he was able to immediately take control over the affairs of the Prince of Yong's household. If Jiang Zhe were someone interested in authority and power, how would his conduct be so? Furthermore, if that man were truly reluctant to part with power and authority, during the time he spent in Southern Chu, he could have been a high-ranking subordinate of the Prince of De. Based upon his abilities, he should not have distanced himself from the court. Aside from this, if he clings to power and authority, the Prince of Yong will be unable to tolerate him sooner rather than later. For what reason do I need to make things difficult for him?"

Lu Jinzhong showed a slight, wry smile. "You refuse to listen to sincere advice. In the future, it will be too late for regrets. Fine … fine ..." His words were filled with regret and a barely discernible hint of loathing. With a composed expression, Lu Jingzhong drank the poison in the jade bottle in one gulp.

Gazing at Lu Jingzhong's corpse, Xiahou Yuanfeng bent over and closed his eyes, distantly asking, "Martial uncle, what was the point of trying to sow discord before dying to the extent that you died unable to close your eyes?"

***

Seven days passed by quickly. On the morning of the seventh day, Fan Huiyao circulated her internal energy through her body. Sensing that her internal energy had recovered by seventy percent, she could not help but

feel overjoyed. That day, she had agreed to stay behind with the purpose of recuperating from her injuries and then using her martial arts to charge out of the Hunting Palace. At present, although she did not have the appropriate medication to convalesce, having recovered seventy percent of her internal energy was sufficient for her needs. Pushing open the door of her room, Fan Huiyao took a deep breath of the fresh air of fall. Before she checked her surroundings, she resolved to kill Jiang Zhe as her first target. Then, she would kill the Prince of Qi. Afterwards, if she were able, she would go see if she could kill the Prince of Yong. As for Princess Changle, who had ruined her plans, she did not have any intentions to murder her. A woman doing such things only filled Fan Huiyao with admiration and respect. As a result, Fan Huiyao was unwilling to harm her. Although it was said that Crown Prince Li An was still alive, it would be too exhausting to bring him along. If she could rush back to Chang'an in a timely manner, she could take control of the imperial grandson that Xiao Lan had bore. When the time came, it would not be impossible for her to attempt a comeback[3] and seize control of Great Yong.

However, when she checked her surroundings, Fan Huiyao's heart sank. Neither Jiang Zhe nor the Prince of Qi were within the Autumn's Return Abode. Frowning, Fan Huiyao focused, discovering that in a radius of several *li* , there were only two individuals present. Fan Huiyao could identity these two individuals from their measured steps. She cruelly stated, "Great Master True Compassion, Demonic Shadow Li Shun, there is no need to wait any further. This seat is already here waiting. It seems like Jiang Zhe is truly intelligent, understanding that this seat was using delaying tactics. But don't tell me that just the two of you can keep this seat here."

The door to the courtyard opened and an elderly monk in gray robes walked in, his hands placed together in prayer. Between his brows was a red dot glistening beautifully. At his side was Li Shun, dressed in azure robes. Li Shun had a slight smile on his face. Fan Huiyao laughed pitilessly, her hand grasping the handle of her sword. She said, "Relying upon you, True Compassion, this seat's defeated opponent. Have you already recovered from the injuries suffered a few days ago? Demonic Shadow, although you have reached the Natural State, you would be able to take a

hundred moves from this seat if fighting fairly. But if in a duel determining life and death, based upon this seat's swordsmanship and experience, you will definitely die."

Xiaoshunzi laughed humorlessly. "Sect Master, before we begin, I must pass along my young master's message."

Fan Huiyao's heart was stirred as she taunted, "This seat is willing to listen to his clever scheming."

Ignoring Fan Huiyao's mocking voice, Xiaoshunzi stated, "My young master has said that, although Sect Master had prevailed earlier, one will suffer grievous injuries in order to win. Great Master True Compassion and Sect Master are both listed among the three grandmasters of this era. Since that is the case, Sect Master must also have suffered terrible injuries. If Great Master True Compassion had died or suffered injuries to the point that he could not come, then Sect Master would surely have fought to the death seven days ago. The Emperor, three Princes, a Princess, and several ranking generals and officials were all within that audience chamber. If the losses suffered were too great, it likely would be difficult for Great Yong to survive the coming wars. This was not a result that the young master was willing to accept. As a result, young master used Sect Master's unwillingness for mutual destruction to compromise and come to an agreement with Sect Master. Young master was able to predict that Sect Master would adhere to the seven days as agreed to stall for time. However, Sect Master has forgotten something. Regardless of Great Master True Compassion's life or death, he will definitely not permit Sect Master to continue to bring calamity upon the world. As expected, five days ago, the Shaolin Temple's Eighteen Arhats all arrived at the Hunting Palace. As for Great Master True Compassion, he arrived two days ago. It is only that young master had long ago predicted this and had His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, dispatch men to welcome them far away from the Hunting Palace. As a result, they only arrived at the Autumn's Return Abode today."

Contempt flickered across Fan Huiyao's eyes. She mocked, "Although the numbers are many, a pack of wolves is no match for a fierce tiger. They are useless even if they are many."

Xiaoshunzi smiled faintly and replied, “My young master understands this point, stating that a thousand elite soldiers can defeat a mob of ten thousand. As a result, he had an ulterior motive for making this agreement. May I ask Sect Master: is the medicine Sect Master took the Nine Revolutions Heart Protection Pill?”

Fan Huiyao proudly replied, “That’s correct. It was personally concocted by the Medical Sage, himself. Without this pill, this seat would likely have been unable to rush for several hundred *li* to arrive here at the Hunting Palace. If your young master had also not taken this medicine, he likely would have died within the Dawn’s Frost Palace Hall.”

A murderous intention flashed in Xiaoshunzi’s eyes, as he explained, “That was the Nine Revolutions Heart Protection Pill. However, Sect Master seems to have forgotten something. Sir Sang should surely have informed you that this pill can only be taken at a moment of life and death. In addition, one must rest properly to recover for several days after taking the pill.”

Fan Huiyao was startled, anxiety growing within her. At the time, Sang Chen had indeed spoken these words. However, she had never thought that she would need to take this medicine. Beyond that, she trusted in the profound and mystical qualities of her internal energy. As long as she was able to survive, she could self-treat her internal injuries. As a result, she had not taken Sang Chen’s warning to heart.

Smiling derisively, Xiaoshunzi continued, “As expected, Sect Master did not take Sir Sang’s warnings seriously. That day, when Sir Sang entrusted this medicine to me, he warned me that the Nine Revolutions Heart Protection Pill is concocted using the treasures of our world and all kinds of rare and precious medicinal ingredients. It can arouse the human body’s hidden potential, preserving one’s life. If someone with heavy internal injuries, with their heart on the brink of failure took this pill at that moment of death, the pill would completely arouse the blood in one’s body. However, all things that have benefits also have drawbacks. With the arousal of one’s potential, which can result in an unexpected recovery,[4] it, however, consumes its user’s life force. Therefore, after one’s life has been preserved, one must take all kinds of supplements to make up for the deficiencies. Sir Sang left

this medicine behind because of the heavy injuries to my young master's heart and the inefficacy of other methods. It was prepared for any contingency, and using this pill to arouse young master's potential, allowed him to remain alive to this day. Although this method is extremely dangerous young master would have no need to worry about dying at any moment if it were successful, though he would be unable to completely recover his health. A few days earlier, didn't Sect Master see my young master consume medicine as food on a daily basis? This was to seize this golden opportunity to treat the side effects of the pill. At the time, young master once suggested helping treat Sect Master as well. Unfortunately, Sect Master, as expected, refused young master's offer."

Her voice somewhat husky, Fan Huiyao returned, "How would this seat dare to consume Major Jiang's medicine? The poisoning techniques of a personal disciple of the Medical Sage are incomparable in this world. This seat does not dare to have a taste of his abilities."

"Your fear was within my young master's calculations," responded Xiaoshunzi proudly. "That day, young master explained how he poisoned your sect's disciples for the sole purpose of arousing Sect Master's wariness. As a result, Sect Master would not casually consume medication. Otherwise, regardless of whether Sect Master adhered to Sir Sang's warnings, Sect Master would rather believe in the warning than ignore it. Sect Master would surely invite capable doctors to help treat your internal injuries. My young master negotiated this seven-day agreement to ensure that Sect Master did not have any opportunity to take any medication and heal your injuries. Of course, if Sect Master truly dared to take the medicine that my young master prepared, my young master stated that he could only take the risks and poison Sect Master."

Sweat flowing freely from Fan Huiyao's forehead. She had never anticipated that Jiang Zhe's scheming would actually reach such a state. Her delaying tactics had actually gratuitously given him the advantage.

Xiaoshunzi continued, "My young master took the risks and stayed behind in the Autumn's Return Abode for seven days. Every day, he invited Sect Master to play *weiqi* and sip tea. In order to confuse my young master and

lead him to believe that Sect Master would adhere to agreement and commit suicide, Sect Master would inevitably not reject my young master's invitations. As a result, Sect Master was too busy to take note of your own changes. Moreover, with the recovery of Sect Master's internal energy, Sect Master would simultaneously redouble the consumption of your life force, as Sect Master would remain under the misconception that everything is within your hands and would not pay any attention to the exhaustion of your vitality."

Subconsciously, Fan Huiyao glanced at her two hands. Her pair of beautiful hands had indeed lost its luster. She had believed that this was all because of her injuries and did not expect that it was an indicator of her impending death.

At this moment, Xiaoshunzi struck another psychological blow as he added, "Young master stated that Sect Master was always conceited, always on guard against others' plots, not expecting that time would actually be young master's greatest advantage. Right now, Great Master True Compassion's internal energy has recovered to fifty percent. In his case, there is absolutely no future of hidden harm upon his cultivation and life. This one is also willing to use all my strength. As for Sect Master, your internal energy is in actuality your remaining life. As such, young master believes that the two of us will be able to ensure Sect Master is unable to escape from here. Originally, if Great Master True Compassion had not come, young master could only mobilize the remaining experts to contend with Sect Master. Now that Great Master True Compassion and the senior monks from the Shaolin Temple have come, they have ensured that young master's force is even more abundant. However, young master also stated that as he does not know martial arts, he will not remain in the Autumn's Return Abode to await death. Right now, all the important personages within the Hunting Palace have already gone into hiding. No matter how formidable Sect Master is, you will be unable to find them straightaway. Young master said that as Sect Master travels afar to the underworld, he will not personally see you off."

Fan Huiyao suddenly laughed heartily. It was a good while before she was

able to cease her laughter and state, “Good, good … This seat has spent my entire life fighting throughout the world. At the end, falling into the hands of a weak and feeble scholar. Good … Let this seat see if I can take a few more lives with me as I die!”

Great Master True Compassion and Xiaoshunzi simultaneously took a step forward. The atmosphere between the three seemed to congeal. A gust of autumn wind blew past, and yellow leaves, as far as the eye could see, fluttered through the world, whirling around the three. However, the leaves did not touch the three’s bodies, pushed away by the *qi* emitted.

At this moment, atop a distant tower with a view of the Autumn’s Return Abode, I stood beside the Prince of Yong, looking out the window, gazing in the direction of the Autumn’s Return Abode. Then, a deafening sound came from the Autumn’s Return Abode. At the beginning, it was the thunderous sound of *qi* colliding. Afterwards, it was the sound of sword *qi* ripping apart the vast sky. Next, it was the sound of buildings crumbling, flying sand, and rolling pebbles. Ultimately, the sound was increasingly piercing. Although we were far away, both of us wore suffering on our faces. When those sounds reached our ears, it was like rolling thunder, practically puncturing our eardrums. Fortunately, I had made preparations beforehand, cotton stuffed into my ears. Li Zhi also followed my example.

After a while, eighteen gray figures entered the ruined Autumn’s Return Abode. Within a hundred paces, smoke and dust roiled through the air. We could see how the fight was going. However, as we were standing aloft, we could still see the dazzling, silver rainbow of the sword. Eventually, from within the smoke and dust, a lengthy laugh could be heard. The laugh was originally sweet-sounding and moving. However, at present, it was filled with wrath and reluctance. Soon after, with a bang, a dazzling and violent blaze burned from within the smoke and dust. When this raging inferno erupted, its speed was as swift as lightning. The area it covered was over a *zhang* [5] in diameter. The flame was cylindrical. At its center, the flame was azure colored. On the outside, when the white colored flame reached the exterior, it became a dazzling crimson color.

I could finally relax. The laugh came from a woman, filled with the sorrow

of a heroine meeting her end and the resentment of her lofty aspirations turning to dust. It could be assumed that my plan was already successful. My mind relaxing, I collapsed into a chair, feeling my limbs grow weak. Successfully forcing the Fengyi Sect Master to commit suicide was probably the biggest risk that I had taken in my life.

Footnotes :

覆巢之下，焉有完卵, fuchaozhixia, yanyouwanluan – idiom, lit. when the nest is overturned, how can the eggs remain intact; during the Three Kingdoms period, a minister named Kong Rong was executed. When news spread to his sons, they used this to remark that it would be impossible for them to escape, and sure enough, they were quickly arrested and executed.

知子莫若父, zhizimoruofu – idiom, lit. nobody understands a son better than his father; fig. a man’s father knows him best

重整旗鼓, chongzhengqigu – idiom, lit. to reorganize flags and drums; fig. to regroup after a setback, to attempt a comeback

起死回生, qisihuisheng – idiom, lit. to rise from the dead; fig. an unexpected recovery

Roughly 2.4 meters

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 39: Unceasing Repercussions

Volume 3, Chapter 39: Unceasing Repercussions

With difficulty, I rose to my feet. Returning to the window, I gazed once again at the Autumn's Return Abode. After a while, over a dozen figures walked out slowly from within the smoke and dust. I squinted, studying carefully. From the foremost gray-clothed monk's pace and disposition, I could immediately tell that he was Great Master True Compassion. The monks behind him all had majestic and vigorous gaits. Although there were only twelve of them left, there was not the slightest hint of dejection. After a long while had passed, I still had yet to see Xiaoshunzi. I tensed up. My two hands resting upon the window sill tightened, my knuckles whitening. After a while, the roiling dust and smoke was finally dispersed by the autumn wind. Only then did I see an azure-robed figure standing with his hands behind his back within the ruins. The azure robes were speckled with blood. From a distance, the blood was as beautiful as peach blossoms, scattered all over the place on the cloth.[1] Before him, a conflagration burned merrily, gradually spreading to the ruined buildings and the surrounding vegetation. By now, imperial guardsmen arrived to put out the fire. Suddenly, the azure-robed man's figure suddenly disappeared without a trace. Quickly rubbing my eyes, I saw that his figure had reappeared somewhere else. Instantly, before I had even blinked a few times, he appeared at the foot of the tower that the Prince of Yong and I were in. At this moment, Great Master True Compassion and the Shaolin monks were still some *li* away.

At this moment, Li Zhi was practically dancing a little jig[2] as he walked over. Animatedly, he stated, "Suiyun, it was truly due to you that we were able to not only force the Fengyi Sect Master to kill herself, but you also prevented us from suffering irreversible damage. This Prince is truly left speechless … truly speechless."

Finally able to relax, I turned my head. Smiling, I replied, "This was all due to the contributions of Great Master True Compassion and the senior monks

of the Shaolin Temple that we were able to ensure the Fengyi Sect Master's death. This subject only used delaying tactics to stall for a few days. Moreover, without Your Imperial Highness's trust in this subject, allowing Zhe to act on my own initiative that day within the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall, this subject's stratagem would not have succeeded. Now, with the death of the Fengyi Sect Master, it will be impossible for the Fengyi Sect to overthrow the dynasty. This subject congratulates Your Imperial Highness for eliminating Great Yong's greatest hidden danger. Your Imperial Highness, please personally go to greet Great Master True Compassion to express your gratitude. In the future, Your Imperial Highness will require the Shaolin Temple's support to stabilize your position in *jianghu* . Moreover, dealing with Northern Han's Devil Sect will require a peak expert like Great Master True Compassion to take command."

Eager to take action and rubbing his hands together,[2] Li Zhi spoke, entirely joyous, "Suiyun, do not worry. This Prince will go immediately to greet the Great Master. However, Suiyun, are you not going to see the Great Master?"

"This subject is about to collapse," I replied, smiling wryly. "If Your Imperial Highness empathizes with my condition, it is best that this subject be allowed to rest."

Li Zhi gazed at me with worry. Seeing that my expression was only somewhat tired, he stated in relief, "Suiyun, you have to rest properly. Going forward, this Prince still has to capture all of those supporting the Fengyi Sect in one go before reforming the laws and discipline of the court. These are all complicated tasks. This Prince will have to rely upon Suiyun's help!"

I smiled slightly, but did not respond. There were many things that needed to be handled in the coming days. It was not a simple task to reform the laws and discipline of the court, especially as the emperor was still alive. In addition, although the Fengyi Sect had lost its central pillar in Fan Huiyao, their painstakingly nurtured strength had intertwined with the Yong court. This strength was not easy to deal with. However, I did not need to worry about these matters. Presumably, Shi Yu had already made preparations. Moreover, there would always be more individuals willing to gild the lily rather than provide help in the hour of need.

Watching the Prince of Yong's departing animated figure, I released a soft sigh, tears falling down my face. Since entering the Prince of Yong's service, I had often lingered on the precipice between life and death, exhausting all of my abilities, and shedding blood, sweat, and tears. All of it was for today ... Right now, the Prince of Yong's succession was ensured. Having lost his position as heir apparent, the crown prince's grave sin of treason would lead to a lifetime of imprisonment or a forced suicide. The Fengyi Sect, serving as accomplices, had already lost their former splendor. Against the remaining scattered remnants, I had been making preparations since long ago to deal with them. It could be said I had avenged my grievous hatred. If that was the case, to someone with my temperament, what use did I have for glory, splendor, wealth, and rank? My vengeance wrought, it was time for me to withdraw. Tenderness bubbled from within, as I thought about Princess Changle and Roulan.

At this moment, someone pushed open the door to the room. I did not turn around to look. No one else would enter in such a manner aside from Xiaoshunzi. As expected, Xiaoshunzi's feminine voice came over hoarsely, "Young master, I fortunately did not fail my mission. The Fengyi Sect Master lit her body's Samadhi fire, immolating herself."

"How are your injuries?" I asked softly. "Although the Fengyi Sect Master has died, there are still some matters that I require you to handle."

Xiaoshunzi smiled and replied, "Young master, do not worry. These injuries are nothing. Great Master True Compassion practically handled, by himself, the majority of the Fengyi Sect Master's attacks. Therefore, I only needed to harmonize my *qi* . Moreover, I have reaped a substantial harvest dueling with the Fengyi Sect Master. It was worth it to sustain such injuries. Is the matter that young master wants me to handle the pursuit and execution of the surviving members of the Fengyi Sect?"

Turning around, I solemnly stated, "That day at the Dawn's Frost Palace Hall, although I gave them the antidote, I also played a trick. Within a month, those poisoned will emit a unique odor that only a wild bird from the southern frontier can smell. I once ordered several men to train several of these birds. As a result, I want you to mobilize the Secret Camp, using those

birds to grasp the movements of the surviving members of the Fengyi Sect. For now, do not disturb them. At present, in order to hide their whereabouts, they are definitely using hidden bases that cannot easily be found. I want detailed information on those hidden bases. However, there is one matter that must be done. I want Li Hanyou. This is a matter that I had promised Dong Que."

"Young master, when all is said and done, it is inappropriate to allow Dong Que to stay by young master's side," expressed Xiaoshunzi, glancing at me with concern. "What arrangements have young master made for him?"

Sighing, I responded, "The hatred in Dong Que's heart is deeper than mine. The murder of his parents is absolutely irreconcilable. The Crown Princess's maid was pregnant when she was murdered. Were it not for the intelligence from the spies planted next to the Crown Prince by the Prince of Yong, I would definitely not have realized that the maid had been murdered. Alas, I underestimated Li Hanyou's insanity, not predicting that she would unexpectedly be so ruthless and cruel to a maid. Didn't you once see Dong Que offer sacrifices to his wife and child in the middle of the night? With that kind of bitter and deep-seated hatred, don't say that Dong Que is unwilling to let matters be even I cannot let Li Hanyou off. Were it not for my failure to think this through satisfactorily, Xiu Chun would likely not have died and Dong Que would not have been left all alone. As a result, I want you to bring Li Hanyou to Dong Que, allowing him to punish that woman however he likes."

Thinking it over, Xiaoshunzi observed, "It's only that to capture Li Hanyou alive, it will inevitably disturb the remnants of the Fengyi Sect. It is likely that young master's plans will be wrecked."

"Those plans are merely those that I made on His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong's behalf," I explained, smiling slightly. "Their success will not affect the general situation. However, it would be a pity if those useful chess pieces were to be destroyed for no reason. We cannot go handle this matter directly. However, what we cannot do, the Embroidered Union can. Furthermore, if we are to have the Fengyi Sect to follow my arrangements, we will have to provide them with some honey. Besides, in the eyes of those

women, there is only self-interest. If handled appropriately, not only will we not need to use force, we can acquire a method of controlling the Fengyi Sect."

Seeing Xiaoshunzi somewhat comprehend my intentions, I whispered a few things to him. As he listened, he nodded his head, sometimes even supplementing his own views and ideas.

After our discussion had reached its conclusion, we returned to our temporary residence. Upon arriving at the small courtyard, I caught sight of Dong Que staring listlessly off into the distance. I laughed and stated, "Dong Que, you must be anxious to pursue Li Hanyou, no?"

Originally, I had believed that Dong Que would be absentminded and blurt out a response. Who could have expected that he would immediately return to his senses? Respectfully, he replied, "That day, young master promised Dong Que that you would take help me take vengeance. Young master would definitely not fail to live up to your promise. Dong Que will have to rely upon young master to attain my vengeance."

I gave Dong Que a look of praise. "I have already made arrangements for this matter. Within ten days, you will definitely see Li Hanyou. Moreover, I will deliver a complete and intact Li Hanyou to you, allowing you to handle her as you will. However, when this matter is handled, you must depart from Chang'an. Do you perchance have any plans? If you desire to become an official, I will make the necessary arrangements for you. Even so, it is best that you temporarily leave the capital. If you return in five or six years, then there will be no further problems. If you do not wish to become an official, I will provide you with substantial funds, sufficient for you to spend the rest of your life in wealth. What are your plans, if you don't mind me asking?"

Thinking it over, Dong Que answered, "This lowly one was originally a loafer. Even if my family is avenged, I have no place to call home. If young master does not discard me, this lowly one desires to remain by and serve at young master's side. Although young master has the services of Lord Li and young master's affairs can only be handled by Lord Li, there will always be matters that will be too trifling for Lord Li to handle. This lowly one understands that I do not have the ability to handle important matters, but

can handle those trifling and unimportant matters. I wonder if young master is willing to accept me?"

My heart was stirred. Of those who served at my side, Xiaoshunzi held the foremost position, rarely able to leave my side. As a result, he did not have any set duties. Chen Zhen was the one, in practice, responsible for supervising the Secret Camp. Han Wuji was in charge of the businesses of the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets. Although the eight elite operatives were all excellent and talented individuals, each had essentially taken charge of a section of responsibilities. Moreover, I had no intention of burying their talents. In the future, no matter where I took up residence, I would require a supervisor who could handle trifling matters. This Dong Que was a suitable candidate. Besides, although I knew that this man had kept some secrets to himself, if we were really speaking of secrets, those carried by Xiaoshunzi and I were definitely greater than his. With this, it seemed like it would be worth it to take Dong Que fully into my service. Although approving mentally, I smiled and stated, "You must understand that if you become the supervisor handling my external affairs, you will have to meet with many knowledgeable and intelligent individuals. Are you not afraid that your identity will be exposed?"

Dong Que actually smiled and riposted, "Didn't young master say that after five to six years, it wouldn't be a problem?"

Startled, I could not help but laugh. "Okay…. Since you are willing to serve, that means that we are bound by fate. In the future, I will treat you as a trusted subordinate, so that our acquaintance was not in vain."

Dong Que saluted again. Before, although his etiquette was complete and entirely present, it was the etiquette of a subject. Now, the salute that he had performed was one of a servant to his master. I advanced and helped him to his feet. Although I did not understand his reasons for remaining at my side, as long as it was no harm to me, I had no intention of allowing such a capable subordinate to depart.

Suddenly, Xiaoshunzi's brows twitched. He whispered, "Great Master True Compassion has come."

I had some misgivings in my heart. Right now, by rights, Great Master True Compassion should be going to rest. Later tonight, the Prince of Yong was going to host a banquet for the experts from the various sects. Why would Great Master True Compassion suddenly and unexpectedly come at this moment? After a while, an imperial bodyguard came in to report, "*Daren* , Great Master True Compassion requests a meeting."

I gestured towards Xiaoshunzi and Dong Que. Both of them understood. While Xiaoshunzi supported me to welcome the senior monk, Dong Que hid in the inner room. Although Great Master True Compassion had never met Dong Que before, based upon his formidable senses, it would be easy for him to notice Dong Que's disguise. Although things had been settled, there were still some things that were best kept secret.

Great Master True Compassion had already changed his clothes. Although his injuries weren't light and his complexion was pale, his expression remained as calm and plain as always. In a fast pace, I walked forward. Saluting, I said, "Originally, I should have gone to personally thank Great Master's invaluable assistance. However, Zhe's health has always been poor and was unable to do so, causing Great Master to come personally. Great Master, please do not blame me."

Great Master True Compassion raised his gaze and looked at me. At present, Jiang Zhe was close to thirty years of age. But because of his pale complexion, his lack of facial hair, and his delicate attractive appearance, the hair on his temples were already powdered white. His frequent illness heavily taxed his mind and body. However, this combination of delicateness and fragility caused him to appear even more elegant, distinguished, and accomplished, making his bearing seem even more natural and graceful. His eyes carried a profound, serene chill. His gaze was tranquil and calm. Compared to their last meeting, Jiang Zhe seemed to be a bit more vigorous and spirited. No matter how one looked, one could only feel that this young man was no more than a lofty and unsullied scholarly character. Based upon his appearances, who could know that he was a vicious and meticulous strategist?

Great Master True Compassion sighed inwardly. The Fengyi Sect Master's

martial arts were slightly better than his. For experts of their level, it was possible to be defeated; however it wasn't easy to kill. Even if were to collaborate with Jing Wuji, even if they were able to defeat the Fengyi Sect Master, she could still easily escape and flee. However, this weak and feeble scholar, with meticulous care, had used cruel chained strategies to force the Fengyi Sect Master to fall into a situation where she could only die. Ultimately, that once-in-a-generation heroine and peerless woman perished within the imperial clan's Hunting Palace. This was enough to cause Great Master True Compassion to tremble with fear. Just now, he had heard reports from his disciple and learned the details of what had happened. This youth, at this most critical juncture, had put his life on the line to save the desperate crisis, pacifying the rebellion and rescuing the Imperial Presence. Carefully observing this man's conduct, the man's strategies were sinister and ever-changing, able to penetrate every nook and cranny, birthing deep fear in all.

The more he understood Jiang Zhe, the more worried Great Master True Compassion became. In the past, the Fengyi Sect Master was also a magnificent and outstanding character. If not for an ill-considered mistake, how would she have caused such problems for the world? This man's intelligence and knowledge was greater than the Fengyi Sect Master's. At present, now that the Prince of Yong was clearly the next sovereign of Great Yong, this Jiang Zhe, as the Prince of Yong's trusted subordinate, would certainly wield great authority in the future. If he were to make a mistake as well, it would inevitably cause the common people to be plunged into misery and suffering, causing the rivers to flow with blood.

It was because of these fears that Great Master True Compassion had come to personally pay a visit to Jiang Zhe. After both parties had made their proper greetings, they took their seats. Reciting one of the many names of the Buddha, Great Master True Compassion stated, "Benefactor Jiang's resourcefulness is boundless. The Fengyi Sect Master was forced to die from self-immolation. Although this old cassock was able to contribute my humble efforts, without Benefactor Jiang's planning, the Fengyi Sect Master would likely have been able to flee and come back to haunt us. Alas, Benefactor's stratagems are excessively vicious. At present, Benefactor is

His Imperial Highness's trusted and major subordinate. By your side you are accompanied by an expert like little brother Li. With a single mistake, you can cause countless innocents to suffer. Henceforth, I ask that Benefactor is able to observe the will of the Heavens and give the common people the chance to live in peace. Would Benefactor please not blame this old cassock for his wordy exhortations?"

Initially, I couldn't help but feel that this senior monk was unavoidably being a busybody. However, seeing the grave and solemn eyes of Great Master True Compassion, I thus solemnly replied, "This youngster understands the cyclical nature of Heavenly Law and the inevitability of retribution. These are engraved in this youngster's heart. In the future, if there are any errors and insufficiencies in my conduct, I ask Great Master to remind me."

Great Master True Compassion's heart skipped a beat. *Don't tell me that this man is trying to ensure that I not simply focus upon him, but upon the empire at large? If I were to worry about his conduct at all times and were to admonish him, wouldn't that mean that I would owe this man a favor?* However, after carefully considering matters, Great Master True Compassion could see that Jiang Zhe's expression was completely sincere. He could not help but think, *Fine … If this man is truly a wicked and evil character, his true character will be revealed sooner rather than later. Moreover, His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, is an enlightened ruler. What reason do I have to be consumed by groundless fears?*[4] After thinking this through, Great Master True Compassion did not say anything extra, only uttering a few idle words before rising and departing. As he was about to depart, Great Master True Compassion glanced keenly and intensely in the direction of the inner room. He could faintly sense that there was someone inside. However, that man's breathing was even and subtle, clearly possessing deep internal energy that was quite unique. Due to this hidden man, Great Master True Compassion's mind could not help but carry private worries.

After Great Master True Compassion departed, with an ashen face, Xiaoshunzi stated, "This old monk surprisingly dares to reprimand young

master, truly ridiculous. Does young master desire to teach him a lesson?"

I smiled indifferently and replied, "The wise man knows he knows nothing, but the fool thinks he knows all. The Great Master has a merciful heart and mind. This is his advantage. Moreover, this matter is a reminder to us. In this world, there is nothing that can remain hidden for all eternity. These years, in order to attain vengeance, I have committed numerous cruel and ruthless tasks. Although I have no regrets, there will inevitably be those who bear an irreconcilable hatred towards me. It is only that this time with the Fengyi Sect Master, I do not know how many people will be implicated. By provoking the world's resentment and causing everyone fear, it seems that I already have fallen into a dangerous situation. With this, the matter that we discussed must be quickly taken care of. All right, I need to think about that the arrangements. There is no need for you to get involved. Go take care of the matter involving Li Hanyou. If this matter is not settled, I will be unable to rest easy."

Xiaoshunzi silently listened to my words, his expression gradually relaxing. "Young master speaks the truth. Although the old monk was rude, the heart cultivation methods that he gifted to young master are quite useful. These last few days, after practicing them, young master's health has indeed improved. Considering this matter alone, I will not make things difficult for him."

On the fourth day of the tenth month, the Imperial Presence returned to the capital. Sitting inside a carriage accompanying the army, I was leisurely and relaxed. After the Yong emperor returned to the capital, an enormous storm would break out. This was completely unavoidable. Even if Li Yuan desired to be half-hearted, His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, would definitely not agree. Although the ones who rescued the Imperial Presence were the Qin family, it would be reasonable to say that the situation rested in Li Yuan's control. However, there were some changes to the inevitable and right situation because of some subtle reasons. First, although Qin Qing had died by Li Hanyou's hands, if it weren't for Li Yuan's decision to betroth them, it would not have led to today's results. Although Qin Yong had rescued the Imperial Presence, everyone knew that the people who had

transmitted the emperor's secret edict were the Prince of Yong's subordinates. With this, the Prince of Yong not only contributed to the pacification of the rebellion, he was also an entirely worthy[5] candidate as heir apparent. Combined with his usual prestige, he had already completely surpassed Li Yuan's power and prestige. Beyond all this, the Prince of Yong had taken the most risks. As a result, the handling of the aftermath could absolutely not bypass his involvement. However, the Prince of Yong had long made preparations for matters within the capital, relieving me of worry.

Before rescuing the Imperial Presence at the Hunting Palace, the Prince of Yong had dispatched trusted imperial bodyguards to deliver a letter to Shi Yu in the capital. Upon receiving the letter, Shi Yu made careful and meticulous arrangements, constantly monitoring all of the important ministers of the court. Although neither Wei Guan nor Zheng Xia, responsible for the governance and defense of the capital, were ordinary individuals, how were the many years of the Prince of Yong's management typical? Moreover, in these last several years, the Prince of Yong had cast a wide net, secretly controlling a majority of the low level officials. Although he was unable to control the court, it was quite easy for him to undertake such a surveillance operation. Besides, Shi Yu had managed the Prince of Yong's affairs in Chang'an for many years. As a result, Shi Yu was able to completely sever the communications between the Hunting Palace and Chang'an. While the Hunting Palace was embroiled in a life and death struggle, Chang'an remained undisturbed. After the disciples of the Fengyi Sect had escaped, it wasn't that they weren't interested in sending a message to Chang'an, they simply did not dare to throw away their lives by going to Chang'an. As a result, the messengers that they dispatched were only normal disciples. All of them were either captured or killed by Shi Yu.

After the Fengyi Sect Master was killed, the Prince of Yong had dispatched men back to Chang'an to report the situation to Shi Yu. With this news, Shi Yu raised his vigilance, not daring to lower his guard. Moreover, the Fengyi Sect had many accomplices within the court. In addition, the entire court was filled with Wei Guan's students and old friends. If something unforeseen were to happen before the emperor and the Prince of Yong returned to the

capital, the foundations of Great Yong would likely be shaken. Consequently, Shi Yu decisively sought out Zheng Xia. Zheng Xia had always been upright and plainspoken. Although Wei Guan's qualifications and position were above Zheng Xia's, Zheng Xia was the one who was the Yong emperor's mainstay. When Zheng Xia saw the emperor's secret edict and the Prince of Yong's handwritten message, he carefully asked several questions before believing Shi Yu's words. Zheng Xia's conduct was extremely decisive, immediately cooperating with Shi Yu to place Wei Guan under house arrest before easily seizing control of the situation in Chang'an. With Zheng Xia appearing, the civil officials in the court all trembled as they followed orders. As for the military officials, though they belonged to different factions, understood that Zheng Xia and Shi Yu represented the orders of the emperor and the Prince of Yong, and did not dare to disobey. As for the Prince of Qi's subordinates, one, they always been at a disadvantage, while two, they had not received any orders from the Prince of Qi. As a result, they tacitly accepted everything that occurred. Everyone was waiting for the enormous changes that would occur when the Yong emperor returned to the capital.

A storm was brewing….

Footnotes :

星罗棋布, xingluoqibu – idiom, lit. scattered about like stars in the sky or chess pieces on a board; fig. spread all over the place

手舞足蹈, shouwuzudao – idiom, lit. hands dancing and feet leaping; fig. dancing and gesticulating in joy, dance a jig

摩拳擦掌, moquancazhang – idiom, lit. to rub one's fists and wipe one's palms; fig. to roll up one's sleeves for battle, eager to get into action or start on a task

杞人忧天, qirenyoutian – idiom, lit. the man of Qi fears the sky falling; fig. groundless fears, the sky is falling!

当之无愧, dangzhiwukui – idiom, lit. fully deserving, without any reservations; fig. entirely worthy

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 40: Sincere Mercy, Vanished Enmity

Volume 3, Chapter 40: Sincere Mercy, Vanished Enmity

On the ninth day of the tenth month of the twenty-fifth year of Great Yong's Wuwei era, the Emperor charged the Crown Prince with treason, issuing an edict ordering his suicide. The deceased Crown Prince was buried with rites befitting that of a prince, but was not permitted to be buried in the dynastic tombs. He was posthumously granted the title of Li, meaning tyrannical.

—*Great Yong Dynastic Records* , *Biography of the Prince of Li*

On the fifth day of the tenth month, while the Yong emperor was journeying back, Chang'an had already been pacified. After discussions between Zheng Xia and Shi Yu, both decided to conceal what had happened. As a result, although the popular sentiment in Chang'an was one of great anxiety, no one knew of the tumultuous events that had occurred at the Hunting Palace. On the sixth day of the tenth month, Zheng Xia led a number of imperial bodyguards and rushed to have an audience with the emperor. As Zheng Xia was meeting in secret with the Yong emperor, I was already long prepared. Although I could not know what they were discussing, I knew that Zheng Xia would not be muddleheaded.

Only when Zheng Xia entered the Yong emperor's tent and noticed that the Yong emperor was safe and sound did he relax. After Zheng Xia had finished kowtowing, Li Yuan promptly explained everything that had happened. Li Yuan trusted Zheng Xia implicitly, telling Zheng Xia all of the details that he knew. Hearing everything that had occurred, Zheng Xia was left flabbergasted. However, he had always been adept with his resolution and decisiveness. After calming down, he asked, "Your Imperial Majesty, what are your intentions?"

"We are also extremely vexed," expounded Li Yuan in distress,. "Both the Crown Prince and the Prince of Yong are Our sons. We naturally do not

desire for brother to kill brother. However, this time, the Prince of Yong nearly lost his life, while We were also nearly murdered as well. It won't do if we do not investigate this and harshly punish the perpetrators. However, for the Crown Prince to be like this, We are also at fault. Moreover, the Empress once tried to hang herself. Although she was saved by her maids, she is already at death's door. Having been married for many years, We cannot steel Our heart.

"In addition, there's also the Prince of Qi. This child also has greatly valued camaraderie. This is his virtue and also his shortcoming. Right now, he is indeed implicated in this affair. Regardless of what happens, he has to be punished. The only question is the severity. His temperament is so stubborn. We are worried that the Prince of Yong would place him under house arrest or demote him to a commoner out of anger. Wouldn't this leave Us in a difficult situation?

"And then there's Prime Minister Wei. Hearing your reports that he has not raised a ruckus, it seems like he truly had no idea about the rebellion. However, it would be too outrageous if the crime of treason is not punished with the familial exterminations. Lord Zheng, please help Us think. How should all of this be handled?"

With a solemn expression on his face, Zheng Xia replied, "Your Imperial Majesty, at present, in this subject's view, it is unimportant how these matters are handled. The most important matter is the father and son relationship between Your Imperial Majesty and His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong."

Li Yuan's mind shook with shock. After all was said and done, he had been emperor for many years now. He had also thought about their relationship, although at the back of his mind. However, he was still caught unprepared for Zheng Xia's blunt words. He could not help but glower at Zheng Xia.

Without a hint of fear, Zheng Xia continued, "Your Imperial Majesty's kindness to this subject is as heavy as a mountain. Were it not for Your Imperial Majesty and the empire, this subject would never utter such words filled with impropriety. If Your Imperial Majesty is willing to listen to this subject's words, even if this subject shall be executed, this subject will

endure such hardship gladly."[1]

After hesitating, Li Yuan allowed, "Lord Zheng, speak … We know full well your loyalty and devotion."

"Your Imperial Majesty, at present, it is already impossible to prevent the Prince of Yong from succeeding the throne," observed Zheng Xia, shivering. "The Crown Prince plotted treason and rebelled. By rights, he shall be deposed. The Prince of Yong's accomplishments are unrivaled in the founding of our Great Yong, and he is also the oldest of the remaining princes. This time, regardless of what Your Imperial Majesty intends, the position of heir apparent is already the Prince of Yong's. Before, in order to safeguard the Crown Prince, Your Imperial Majesty had suppressed the Prince of Yong. It would be difficult for the Prince of Yong to not harbor resentment. Currently, even if the Prince of Yong seizes the opportunity to take the throne, there will be no one who will oppose it resolutely. To the subjects, loyalty and devotion to His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, is the same as loyalty and devotion to Your Imperial Majesty. But if this were to happen, Your Imperial Majesty would be placed in an extremely awkward situation. If Your Imperial Majesty were to personally punish the Crown Prince and company, it would inevitably lead to the Prince of Yong's dissatisfaction. If the Prince of Yong nurses a grudge, even if Your Imperial Majesty were able to preserve the Crown Prince and the Prince of Qi for now, once Your Imperial Majesty passes, who knows what the Prince of Yong will do that day? If this matter is handed to the Prince of Yong to take care of and Your Imperial Majesty expresses your opinion, then the Prince of Yong would definitely care about Your Imperial Majesty's thoughts. When the time comes, Your Imperial Majesty will definitely attain your desires and eliminate the estrangement between Your Imperial Majesty and the Prince of Yong."

Li Yuan lowered his head and considered for a long time. Rising, he saluted Zheng Xia. Greatly alarmed, Zheng Xia promptly stepped away, stating, "Your Imperial Majesty, what are you doing? This subject cannot bear to receive such courtesy."

Gratified, Li Yuan replied, "Lord Zheng's wise words may be bitter, but

they are spoken on my Li family's behalf. If in the future, the father and son relationship between Us and the Prince of Yong is normalized, the lives of the Crown Prince and the Prince of Yong can be preserved. Then it will all be a result of lord's contributions."

Zheng Xia promptly and repeatedly expressed his apologies for the offenses. Li Yuan smiled and continued, "We and Lord Zheng have been liege and vassal for many years now. There is no need to be so clichéd and overly courteous. What's more, although We were mistaken in some people, We were not mistaken about you, Lord Zheng. We know that Lord speaks forthrightly in remonstration considering Our needs. However, there are some matters where We need you to help Us make a decision. Tell me, what We should do going forward?"

Zheng Xia inquired, "Your Imperial Majesty, are you determined to preserve the Crown Prince's life?"

Somewhat hesitant, Li Yuan responded, "Although the Crown Prince is a degenerate, he is, after all, Our son. We truly cannot bear to put him to death."

Zheng Xia continued to ask, "Then what about His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi?"

Li Yuan resolutely answered, "Although Xian'er was too excessively attached to camaraderie and is unsuitable to succeed to the Imperial Throne, We truly treasure this son. We cannot permit Zhi'er to harm him."

"If that is the case," replied Zheng Xia solemnly, "Then Your Imperial Majesty must not shield the Crown Prince, otherwise it will be detrimental to the Prince of Qi."

With astonishment, Li Yuan asked, "How so?"

"Your Imperial Majesty, considering his political and military achievements, the Prince of Qi cannot compare to the Prince of Yong," answered Zheng Xia. "Considering age, he is younger than the Prince of Yong. As a result, without the Crown Prince present, then the Prince of Qi will have the opportunity to become a general and a subject. However, if the Crown Prince remains alive, then whatever happens, when all is said and

done, the Crown Prince is the eldest son and bore by Your Imperial Majesty's wife. Together, the Crown Prince and the Prince of Qi will have the possibility of rebellion. As a result, if Your Imperial Majesty were to shield the Crown Prince, even if His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, were to agree reluctantly, he would always be suspicious of the Prince of Qi. When the time comes, if someone were to sow discord, the Prince of Qi will die at the Prince of Yong's hands sooner or later. At that moment, Your Imperial Majesty's desire to preserve both sons will ensure that neither will be preserved. However, if Your Imperial Majesty were to abandon the Crown Prince, then it would be impossible for His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, to jeopardize the Prince of Yong's succession. With that, the relationship between liege and vassal will be peaceful."

After remaining silent for some time, Li Yuan said, "Lord Zheng speaks the truth. Since that is the case, then We can only ignore the fate of that unfilial son."

"This is only from personal considerations," continued Zheng Xia. "From a legal standpoint, the Crown Prince rebelled in an attempt to force Your Imperial Majesty to abdicate, and enticed Her Imperial Majesty, the Empress, to forsake virtuous conduct. These unfilial behaviors and conducts are a failure to one's father and one's liege. He also pursued and attempted to kill his younger brother. This is failing his duty as an older brother. How can he be forgiven for such sins? Your Imperial Majesty intends for the dynasty to persevere through the ages. If later generations are not warned of the consequences of such behavior, everyone will mimic the Crown Prince. Wouldn't this ensure that the Imperial Clan be forever embroiled in internecine strife?"

Hearing this, Li Yuan was deeply frightened. He acknowledged, "Zheng Xia's words are truly the logic of the world. Good, We are resolved to force the Crown Prince to commit suicide. By rights, the Empress should also commit suicide as well. However, remembering the years as a married couple, she will be demoted to become a commoner, allowing her to live and die as she will. As for the Prince of Qi, We will hand him to the Prince of Yong to punish."

Zheng Xia solemnly stated, “Your Imperial Majesty is wise! These punishments will not only warn future generations, they will also ensure that the Prince of Yong will accept it wholeheartedly. Moreover, the Prince of Qi will not be excessively punished by the Prince of Yong.”

His mind clear and sober, Li Yuan added, “The punishment for the Crown Prince’s family has already been handled. Let all of this become custom…. There is another matter. After We have returned to the capital, I wish to enfeoff Lady Zhangsun as Empress. What does Lord Zheng think?”

At first, Zheng Xia was startled by this sudden decision before he quickly came to his senses. “Your Imperial Majesty is wise! This is all that it should be.” The liege and vassal exchanged looks and smiled, having reached a tacit mutual understanding.

Zheng Xia understood that anointing Noble Consort Zhangsun as empress was a truly wise decision. Right now, it was very clear that Li Yuan still needed to sit upon the Imperial Throne for a period of time. It would be problematic without someone supervising the harem. Moreover, in the future, when the Prince of Yong ascended to the throne, he also needed an empress dowager to display filial piety towards. Now that Lady Dou had already been deposed, with the death of the Prince of Yong’s birth mother long ago, and Noble Consort Ji as a rebel, then only Noble Consorts Zhangsun and Yan had the qualifications and the seniority to become empress. However, with the Prince of Qi also involved in the rebellion, Noble Consort Yan naturally also lost the qualifications to become the empress. As for Noble Consort Zhangsun, her status was respectable and prestigious. In addition, Princess Changle had also contributed greatly to pacifying the rebellion. As Princess Changle’s birth mother, then it would be logical for Noble Consort Zhangsun to become the new empress. Moreover, the cleverest part of this choice was that Noble Consort Zhangsun did not have any living sons and would not affect the Prince of Yong’s position as heir apparent. As a result, she could properly serve as a maternal model for the entire nation. Li Yuan considering all of this represented that he was already paving the road for the Prince of Yong to ascend to the throne. Moreover, this also represented that Li Yuan no longer had any fear of his

second son. As a subject, Zheng Xia was naturally joyous. Moreover, this kind of matter could not be laid bare, only be hinted at. That was why liege and vassal exchanged looks and smiled.

After a while, the Yong emperor spoke, somewhat hesitatingly, “Zheng Xia, how do you view the deep love that Princess Changle feels towards Jiang Zhe?”

Zheng Xia cautiously inquired, “What are the intentions of Your Imperial Majesty and His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong?”

With dissatisfaction, Li Yuan responded, “Zhi’er once privately came to see Us, seeking to have Us betroth Princess Changle to Jiang Zhe. However, having seen Jiang Zhe’s extensive scheming mind and poor health, he is not a good match for Changle. As a result, We have already declined. However, Jiang Zhe contributed so greatly. If We are to continue to reject it, it will likely disappoint him.”

After thinking it over, Zheng Xia advised, “It doesn’t matter how this subject views this matter. On the one hand, Jiang Zhe was once a subject of Southern Chu, while the Princess was once the Queen of Southern Chu. It is in keeping with proper etiquette for Your Imperial Majesty to decline to betroth them. On the other hand, however, Jiang Zhe is at present a subject of Great Yong and has contributed mightily to the pacification of this rebellion, while the Princess is Your Imperial Majesty’s beloved daughter, holding a high and respected status. It would be understandable for a meritorious subject to marry a princess. All this will be dependent on Your Imperial Majesty’s intentions.”

“If Jiang Zhe’s health was better, it would be nothing for Us to wed them,” mulled Li Yuan after thinking it over. “However, at present, We cannot but be worried. Let’s set this matter aside for now.”

Seeing that it was getting late and Li Yuan was becoming a bit tired, Zheng Xia stated, “Your Imperial Majesty, since everything has already been discussed appropriately, then Your Imperial Majesty should rest.”

“We have already made up Our mind,” said Li Yuan, smiling. “In the future, all major affairs of government will be handled by the Prince of Yong. We

want to spend a few years in comfort. Lord, do not leave just yet. Draft an edict for Us before you go to rest."

On the seventh day of the tenth month, Li Yuan returned to the capital, issuing three edicts in succession. First, he ordered the crown prince to commit suicide, granting him the posthumous title of Li, meaning "tyrannical," while the empress was demoted to become a commoner. Second, the Prince of Yong was anointed as the crown prince with supervisory duties over the affairs of state. Third and last, Li Yuan enfeoffed Noble Consort Zhangsun as the empress, picking a day to hold the ceremony. In addition, for her contributions, Princess Changle was bestowed ten thousand households as her income and granted the title of Princess of Ning. A residence was specially built for her.

The Yong emperor's swift and decisive actions shocked many people. The court either believed that the Prince of Yong had seized the opportunity to blackmail the emperor or that Li Yuan had been frightened and had lost interest in the affairs of state. No one knew that this was all a result of the words of Palace Attendant Zheng Xia.

After the Prince of Yong took control of the government, he began what was known in the histories as the "Prince of Li's Treasonous Incident." A large-scale purge began. Numerous high-ranking officials and distinguished personages found guilty of involvement in the former crown prince's rebellion were all imprisoned. Aside from these individuals, the total number of people implicated was innumerable. For a short while, the entire court was filled with dread and worry. Only a few individuals figured out that the Prince of Yong's purge was well controlled.

The majority of the court ministers implicated came from powerful local aristocratic families. Although these families had made significant contributions to the founding of Great Yong, they now lorded over their territories, seizing land and even going so far as to build a private army. Faintly, one could discern that they were setting up independent regimes. This time, the Prince of Yong was seizing the opportunity afforded by the former crown prince's rebellion to employ the soldiers under his command to practically completely destroy these families. They employed both subtle

and overt methods, frequently annihilating or imprisoning members of those aristocratic families. After all, these families could not avoid having some ties with the Fengyi Sect and Wei Guan. As for the members of the ancillary branches of the families and the commoners who attached themselves to the families, the Prince of Yong did not lightly charge and punish them.

Having undergone the war between the Embroidered Union and the Fengyi Sect, many of these aristocratic families had already been massacred. Now that the Prince of Yong was borrowing the nominal purpose of investigating the former crown prince's treason, it left these families trembling like cicadas in the cold of winter. None of them dared to stick their heads out, allowing the Prince of Yong to break them in turn. Within a month, the Great Yong court had a completely new look. Very quickly, the Prince of Yong's administration of Great Yong was able to return to normal operation with the officials brought back from Youzhou by Shi Yu and those lower ranking officials willing to work. With blood, the dust upon Great Yong's court was washed away.

Within all of this, there was a type of court officials who were the first to be purged. These officials' daughters or wives all had relations with the Fengyi Sect. The lightest punishment was demotion. A bit more severe was dismissal. There were those who were sent to the execution grounds. Many of the Fengyi Sect's disciples were originally young ladies from important families. Most of them entered the Fengyi Sect in order to improve their status and position. As a result, the majority of them completely cut off their ties with the Fengyi Sect. If these women were able to receive their fathers' and brothers' protection, then they would be able to spend the rest of their lives in peace. Although there were some wives and daughters who were abandoned, on the whole, the majority of them were able to make fresh starts. But if the women hailed from impoverished households, and able to marry into distinguished or aristocratic families because of the Fengyi Sect, their fates were quite miserable. They were either divorced by their husbands or completely neglected. However, with the appearance of the butcher's knife, their miserable and resentful cries were completely covered by the bloody purge.

In reality, the Prince of Yong wasn't so ruthless and merciless. There were some officials who were part of the crown prince's faction or students of Wei Guan. As long as there was no clear evidence of their complicity or participation in the rebellion, and possessing of ability and talent, then they would not be purged. Under the purges guided by the Prince of Yong, the sole force that escaped the purges was the military. The Prince of Yong had issued the order that the officers and soldiers of Great Yong had made heroic contributions[2] on the state's behalf. As such, the Prince of Yong prohibited the purge from affecting the military. Even if he discovered that some of the generals had intimate relations with the Fengyi Sect, as long as they wrote a detailed repentance letter, they would be absolved. As a result, the Prince of Yong's purge did not endanger Great Yong's foundation, and instead actually increased the strength of its military, as many younger individuals of aristocratic families and members of *jianghu* all joined the military in order to avoid being implicated. After the crisis had passed, Great Yong's military was actually strengthened significantly.

On the ninth day of the tenth month, Zheng Xia took a bottle of poisoned wine, white damask cloth, and a dagger to the Brocade Peace Palace Hall where the crown prince was placed under house arrest. This was the second time that the crown prince had been imprisoned here. Last time, although Li An was also apprehensive, with Wei Ying's secret help, as well as the Fengyi Sect, Lu Jingzhong, and company's help, he knew what was going to happen. However, this time, Li An did not have any support to lean upon. Locked within the palace hall, he could neither eat nor drink. He was already at his final breath.

Just as Zheng Xia was about to enter the palace hall, he suddenly caught sight of a group of individuals walking over. Based on the embroidered character on the lantern they carried, they were from the Prince of Yong's household. As they neared, Zheng Xia saw that Jiang Zhe was at their head. Standing behind him in attendance was Li Shun. Surrounding him was a ring of imperial bodyguards. The security was extremely tight.

Stepping forward, Jiang Zhe saluted Zheng Xia and stated, "On His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong's orders, this lowly official has come to see off

the Crown Prince. Palace Attendant *daren* , please allow it."

Zheng Xia frowned. "This is in contravention of proper rites. Do you have the Emperor's edict?"

A hint of murderous intent flared in Jiang Zhe's eyes. He whispered, "Palace Attendant *daren* , there is no harm for this lowly official to tell the truth. His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, does not know that I have come. I have used His Imperial Highness's golden pendant to swindle my way past the Imperial Guard and Imperial Palace Guard to arrive here. This time, I must see the Crown Prince. If Palace Attendant *daren* does not allow it, then Jiang Zhe can only force my way in."

Hearing Jiang Zhe's words, Zheng Xia was greatly startled. He carefully studied Jiang Zhe, seeing the willingness to die rather than yield in Jiang Zhe's eyes. Although Zheng Xia scrupulously abided by proper etiquette, he was not a completely obstinate man. Could it be that this man had assisted the Prince of Yong to force the crown prince because he had an irreconcilable hatred towards the crown prince? This man's scheming was sagacious and vicious. *If I am determined to refuse his request and he is to harbor resentment, it would inevitably give birth to future disaster. It would be fine if he seeks to harm me … but in the event that this man seeks to sow discord between the Emperor and the Prince of Yong, then it would be my sin.* Thinking of this, Zheng Xia stated, "Since you've come on the orders of His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, this official can allow your presence. Major Jiang, come in with this official."

Revealing a hint of joy on his face, Jiang Zhe gestured, having the imperial bodyguards remain outside. Accompanied only by Xiaoshunzi, Jiang Zhe followed Zheng Xia inside. Originally, Zheng Xia had two eunuchs that knew martial arts by his side to safeguard against the crown prince's refusal to commit suicide. Now seeing that the situation had reached such a state, in order to prevent these eunuchs from seeing something they weren't meant to see, Zheng Xia had them wait outside as well.

The three of them walked into the Brocade Peace Palace Hall. Within, they saw Li An curled up and shivering on the bed. Zheng Xia could not help but sigh lightly, while Jiang Zhe's face was stony.

After Zheng Xia read the edict, Xiaoshunzi brought over the tray that he had taken from the eunuchs and walked over, placing the bottle of poisoned wine, white damask cloth, and dagger on the table. Li An only let out a miserable shriek as he retreated. As expected, he was unwilling to commit suicide.

Walking close to him, I whispered, “Your Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, does Your Imperial Highness remember Liu Piaoxiang of Southern Chu?”

Li An’s eyes were filled with confusion. It was only some time before he replied, “We remember. We once had the fortune of copulating with her. Didn’t Liang Wan send her back long ago? Jiang *daren* , please plea for leniency on Our behalf to second brother. As long as Our life is spared, We are willing to spend the rest of Our life in imprisonment or leave home and become a monk.”

I felt blood and *qi* seethe in my chest. Who could have expected that Liang Wan had still managed to lie to me that day? So the true murderer who had killed Piaoxiang was actually her. As for this Li An, although he had brought about her death, he was not the murderer. However, the more I pondered, the more resentment I felt. If it weren’t for his lust, if it weren’t for Liang Wan’s desire to ensure that his identity remained secret, how could Piaoxiang have been murdered? Reaching this conclusion, I turned to glance at Xiaoshunzi. I stated, “His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, is unwilling to be on his way. Help him.”

Xiaoshunzi glanced at Zheng Xia. In passing, he picked up the bottle of poisoned wine, walking forward and grasping onto Li An. With ease, he forced Li An to drink all of the poison. Very quickly, Li An stopped breathing, his complexion the color purple, with expressions of defiance and remorse on his face. No one would know what he regretted.

I only felt empty inside. Having avenged Piaoxiang, I surprisingly was at a loss of what to do next. Just then, Zheng Xia spoke significantly, “Jiang *daren* , the past is the past,[3] while the future can still be shaped.[4] Do you understand?”

I glanced at Zheng Xia. Stepping forward, I saluted him, stating, “Zheng *daren* , do not worry. Although Zhe has some selfish motives, I have never sought to incite His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, to ignore the relationship between brothers. It is only that the Crown Prince was guilty of monstrous crimes,[5] thus Zhe had to personally see my enemy off.”

Although Zheng Xia only heard just the few words of what I said, he could tell what was true and what wasn’t. However, he also knew that was done today could not be undone. There was no point for him to meddle; it was enough to warn this youth to not cause harm upon the situation for the sake of personal vengeance.

Just as the three were about to depart, commotion came clamoring from outside. Arriving outside, they discovered the Prince of Yong hurriedly rushing over. After seeing Zheng Xia and Jiang Zhe, Li Zhi’s facial expression relaxed and he stated, “Zheng *daren* , this Prince dispatched Jiang *daren* to see off the Crown Prince to exhaust the last of our brotherly affection. Zheng *daren* , please do not take offense.”

Zheng Xia could not help but find all of this a bit ridiculous. However, he knew better than to expose all of this, only replying, “This is normal. Why would this subject take offense? His Imperial Majesty is still waiting for this subject’s report. Your Imperial Highness, please …”

Once Zheng Xia had departed, the Prince of Yong walked over and grimly glared at Jiang Zhe. Li Zhi said, “Suiyun, you’re truly extremely daring, having the impertinence to fake my command. There will be a reckoning after we’ve gone back.”

Then he whispered, “Suiyun, for you to have some a load on your mind, why didn’t you tell this Prince? You are truly … alas …”

Feeling warmth infuse my body, I turned my head away, hiding the tears spilling from my eyes. In a low whisper, I returned, “This subject dared not allow my selfishness to harm Your Imperial Highness’s interests. Your Imperial Highness’s love and protection moves this subject to tears. In the future, I do not dare to hide anything from Your Imperial Highness.”

Li Zhi sighed. “Let’s go…. If it weren’t for Xiahou Yuanfeng seeing you enter

the palace this late at night, this Prince would not yet have learned of your rash actions. Fortunately, Zheng *daren* did not blame you."

After saluting again to express my apology, I followed His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, out of the palace grounds. The entire journey, I felt great gratitude. I would never be able to completely repay His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, for his great grace.

Footnotes :

甘之如饴, ganzhiruyi – idiom, lit. as sweet as syrup; fig. to endure hardship gladly

汗马**功**劳, hanmagonglao – idiom, lit. to ride a laboring horse to great deeds; fig. heroic contributions

往事已矣, wangshiyiyi – idiom, lit. the past is dead; fig. that was then, the past is in the past

来者可追, laizhekezhui – idiom, lit. what is to come can still be overtaken; fig. the future can still be shaped

恶贯满**盈**, eguanmaning – idiom, lit. strung through and filled with evil; fig. guilty of monstrous crimes, filled with extreme evil

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 41: Vanished Like a Spring Dream

Volume 3, Chapter 41: Vanished Like a Spring Dream[1]

While the Prince of Yong was busy with his purge, and the entire court lived in anxiety, there was a secret force that did not cease its activity. On the evening of the twelfth day of the tenth month, at a secluded farm in the countryside, a group of black figures made their way towards the farmhouse. After surrounding the farmhouse, a black-clothed, masked man whispered several instructions in a low voice. A gloomy and cold middle-aged man led two youths and walked towards the door of the farmhouse. He shouted, “Guests have come from afar to pay a visit. Why hasn’t the owner come out to welcome us?”

The door to the farmhouse was softly pushed open. A man and a woman walked out. From that man’s appearance, one could determine that he was astonishingly actually that man who had escaped from the Hunting Palace and disappeared without a trace, Wei Ying. Although he had changed into the rags of a peasant, it was impossible for him to conceal his magnificent and elegant bearing. As for the woman, she was dressed like a village girl. However, her appearance was beautiful and elegant. Her bearing resembled a moon goddess floating elegantly. With a depressed and chilling expression on his face, Wei Ying asked, “Who are you people? Why have you have come here?”

The middle-aged man mildly answered, “You are truly difficult to find. We have been following you for several days. Only now have we finally been able to track you and surround you here.”

Wei Ying frowned. Over these last several days, they had long ago discovered that they were being followed and spying on them. However, Wei Ying and the survivors from the Fengyi Sect did not dare to publicly cause trouble. As a result, they had done their best to avoid the surveillance of these mysterious men. But they did not expect that those pursuing had actually come calling. Who were these people? If they were the Prince of

Yong's subordinates, an army would likely have appeared to arrest them vestiges. As he considered all this, Wei Ying asked, "Your distinguished self must surely know that you are only able to follow us because we dare not cause an uproar. However, this location is remote and desolate. If you dare to attack us, your gains will not make up for your losses. Quickly reveal your intentions."

The middle-aged man's brows arched, as he replied, "Although your distinguished self and company all have excellent martial arts, you may not necessarily be able to defeat bows and crossbows. As for our identity, we aren't any honorable and glorious sect. We are members of the Embroidered Union. This one is surnamed Huo, currently holding the position of Protector within the Embroidered Union. These two at my side are my Union Head's trusted disciples. You probably heard of this one. He is called Huo Li."

When the middle-aged man spoke of ranged weapons, Wei Ying and the woman both heard the soft sound of the loading mechanisms of crossbows. Judging from the sounds, there were over thirty crossbows surrounding the front of the farmhouse. Although there was no sound of crossbows from the rear of the farmhouse, they could hear the faint sounds of breathing. It seemed that these men, as expected, had come prepared. Even if these remnants were capable of victory, they would surely cause a ruckus and disturb the neighbors, the gains not making up for the losses.

The woman's shapely eyebrows furrowed. She looked carefully, seeing that although the middle-aged man's appearance was ordinary, his bearing and mannerisms were all unusual. As for the two youths by his side, they were both exceptional. The youth named Huo Li was especially outstanding, carrying a calm and unflustered bearing, his appearance handsome. As for the other youth, his appearance was also refined and elegant, his bearing carrying a faintly discernible hint of heroism. They had naturally heard of this Huo Li. Using his own strength, he had thrown Luoyang into chaos. If the other youth had the same status as him, it seemed like the Embroidered Union truly possessed a galaxy of talent. However, this woman had heard her master speak of the secret ties between the Embroidered Union and the

Prince of Yong's household. As a result, she said, "I have long heard that your honored union has reached an alliance with the Prince of Yong. Have you lot come under orders to capture us?"

"Our Embroidered Union does not dare suggest that we have not had any dealings with the Prince of Yong, however our relationship is not one of an alliance," replied the middle-aged man callously. "At the time, we cooperated with the Crown Prince in a smuggling operation. Unfortunately, Li An burned the bridge after crossing the river, and even sought to make things difficult for our Union Head Huo. That was why we divulged information to the Prince of Yong. Although we were unable to depose Li An from his position as heir apparent, we were able to cause problems for him. On this world, we are the only ones allowed to be of disservice to others; no one is permitted to perform a disservice towards us. However, regardless of what has happened, we are not the Prince of Yong's subordinates. Our Embroidered Union can cooperate with anyone. However there is one principle that we cannot and will not forget. Our Embroidered Union was founded to resist Great Yong. We will do anything that can cause Great Yong problems. As a result, since your honored sect has failed and suffered a devastating defeat, becoming Great Yong's great enemy, my Union Head has dispatched this one with some presents for your honored sect."

So speaking, the middle-aged man gestured with his hand. A young man in black suddenly appeared from within the darkness. The expression on his face was icy, as he walked over carrying an embroidered case in his hands and delivering the embroidered case to the middle-aged man. Taking the case, the middle-aged man opened it. When Wei Ying and the woman took a look, they were both greatly alarmed. Within the case was a thick wad of banknotes. In addition, these banknotes were from the most reputable and richest money house in Southern Chu, located in the capital of Jianye.

The middle-aged man indifferently stated, "There are banknotes worth two hundred thousand taels of silver here. My Union Head has stated that since you have lost to the Prince of Yong, you are bound to try to make things difficult for Great Yong. However, it would be impossible for you to do so within Great Yong's borders. No matter how strong you are, it will be

impossible for you to go up against the military. As a result, the only option available to you is to go far away. Northern Han is the Devil Sect's territory; it will be impossible for you to go there. It may be assumed that you will not leave civilization. If that is the case, then the only option available for you to make a comeback is Southern Chu. However, with your devastating defeat, you likely lack the funds to move your operations to Southern Chu. We know that although your honored sect has a lot of profits your expenses are also very large. At present, the majority of your honored sect's businesses are in Great Yong. It will likely be impossible for you to continue to manage them. As a result, my Union Head specially dispatched this protector with these banknotes, hoping that you will be able to attempt a comeback in Southern Chu. Union Head stated that as long as one is an enemy of Great Yong, they will be our friends. Fairy Ling, are you willing to form an alliance with us?"

That woman was Ling Yu, anointed by Fan Huiyao as the next sect master of the Fengyi Sect. Gazing at the banknotes, she replied, "Although you have spoken honeyed words, there is something that this fairy does not understand. You're willing to provide us with banknotes worth two hundred thousand taels of silver because we have a shared enemy?"

The middle-aged man smiled and answered, "Our Union Head has never made a loss. If you are willing to agree to one condition, we will not only provide you with banknotes worth two hundred thousand taels of silver, we will also hand over a portion of our assets in Southern Chu to you."

Wei Ying and Ling Yu both immediately raised their eyebrows, eyes wide. Although two hundred thousand taels of silver was a significant amount, it would run out one day. However, if they were able to get their hands on the Embroidered Union's assets in Southern Chu, they would be able to maintain the Fengyi Sect's expenses. Although they were excited, they were also wary of what this condition might be. Wei Ying walked forward and voiced, "There is no harm for your distinguished self to speak your condition. If we find it reasonable, it may be possible for us to agree."

"To speak the truth, the Fengyi Sect has suffered a complete defeat and fallen from grace," responded the middle-aged man with a smile. "Your

public assets will undoubtedly be confiscated by the Great Yong court. However, you have some secret assets. Right now, it would be inconvenient for you to continue managing them. It would be best to hand them over to our Union. We will perform a bilateral exchange that benefits both sides."

Seeing that Wei Ying and Ling Yu were interested, the middle-aged man took out another embroidered case. He opened it, revealing several agreements and deed documents. He continued, "These are the deeds to fourteen assets that we have in Southern Chu with a total value of four hundred thousand taels of silver. If you are willing to take comparable value assets to exchange, then our alliance will be formed. Our Embroidered Union is in a difficult position in Southern Chu. Because of our Union Head's youthful impetuosity, we were too excessive in the chaos that we wreaked upon Southern Chu. However, to topple Great Yong, we have no alternative but to continue operating in Southern Chu. But, if you are to take over, as long as you are able to strengthen Southern Chu, when the time comes, not only will you be able to take vengeance for the pain and suffering wrought upon us by Great Yong, we will also fulfill our long-cherished wish."

Ling Yu and Wei Ying exchanged a look. Wei Ying walked forward and accepted the second embroidered case, examining the documents within. After looking through them, he turned and nodded at Ling Yu. With a look of joy, Ling Yu stated, "Our sect does have some secret assets in Great Yong. Although they are not worth four hundred thousand taels of silver, they are still worth some three hundred thousand taels. However, with this, you will make a big loss. I do not believe that you wish to be taken advantage of. If there are any other conditions, there is no harm in revealing them. As long as they aren't too excessive, they can be discussed."

The middle-aged man's eyes brightened as he replied, "In reality, we have no alternatives. At present, although our assets in Southern Chu are fairly good, anything that relates to the Embroidered Union in Southern Chu will immediately give rise to disaster. As a result, although we have ample assets in Southern Chu, they are useless to us. In comparison, because the Great Yong court does not view our Embroidered Union with implacable hatred, we have great prospects for future development.[2] This exchange wouldn't

be too great of a loss to us. However, if Fairy and Wei *daren* are willing, we do have a small request. This is a private request from a guest elder of our Union. He wants your honored sect to …" Reaching this point, the middle-aged man lowered his voice to a whisper, audible only to the nearby Wei Ying.

Wei Ying frowned. Turning around, he returned to Ling Yu's side and whispered a sentence. Subconsciously, Ling Yu was about to reject this categorically. However, Wei Ying spoke several more words. Ling Yu hesitated for a moment before turning and returning into the farmhouse. Wei Ying smiled slightly, asking the middle-aged man, "This request seems a bit odd. She is only one person … is she really worth three hundred thousand taels of silver?"

"Young master Wei, to speak the truth, this is all the personal grievances between the guest elder and her," replied the middle-aged man in a low voice. "This guest elder has just made a gargantuan, meritorious contribution. This was his only demand. Our Union Head has also agreed. In reality, our losses won't be too heavy. All that money is ill-gotten wealth. What our Union desires most is to form an alliance with your honored sect. In the future, we will act together against Great Yong with you in Southern Chu and us in Great Yong. For this objective, what is a little bit of money? As for this individual that we are requesting, she is no more than an additional request. To speak bluntly, she was a member of the imperial clan and had a respectable status before, and would naturally be of extreme importance to your sect. But now she is no more than a useless individual with her face ruined. Considering martial arts, your sect has many individuals with martial arts superior to hers. Considering intelligence and ability, you have no use for her. Once you've arrived in Southern Chu, the only benefit she can offer as a member of the Yong imperial clan will really be of detriment to your sect's survival. She is already completely without value for you. As for our Union, we can use her life to acquire the loyalty of a guest elder. This is an excellent transaction. However, to tell the truth, let alone three hundred thousand taels, she isn't worth a single tael. However, if this money can be exchanged for cooperation with your honored sect, let alone three hundred thousand taels, it would be worth it if we add another three hundred

thousand taels."

Wei Ying sighed. "For your honored union to have a talent like you, no wonder the Fengyi Sect was never able to deal with you. These last few days, we have received little news of what has been happening. How is the current situation? Do you have any news that you can share?"

The middle-aged man thought for a moment before saying, "Young master Wei is worried about your esteemed father, correct? Young master, do not worry. I have heard that the Prince of Yong has been lenient towards your esteemed father, only temporarily placing him under house arrest. However, your esteemed father is currently extremely downhearted. On several occasions, he tried to commit suicide, but failed. At present, he is bedridden."

Wei Ying sighed again, as he stated, "This is entirely my fault … I wonder if your honored union is willing to help me, so that my esteemed father no longer needs to suffer?"

A chill appeared in the middle-aged man's eyes. He could understand Wei Ying's intentions from his words. Under these circumstances, it would be impossible to rescue Wei Guan. Everyone knew of Wei Guan, as he was the prime minister. In addition, Wei Guan did not know any martial arts. As a result, it would be impossible for him to escape pursuit. Wei Ying's request was to have the Embroidered Union kill his own father.

Seeing the great changes on the face of the middle-aged man, Wei Ying hurriedly explained in a low voice, "This isn't because I am ruthless. My father has always been loyal and devoted to Great Yong. It is said that nobody understands one's son better than his father. Without the concealment of family love, my father would be able to completely see through me. This is extremely unfavorable to me. Moreover, my father has always been loyal. If he dies from suicide, the court may consider my father's previous contributions and will certainly not implicate our clansmen. This is also Wei Ying's laborious intent. Would your distinguished self please help me accomplish this?"

After hesitating, the middle-aged man replied, "This one will have to

report this matter to the Union Head. If feasible, the Union Head will take action. If not, there will be no way for us to communicate with your honored sect, at least temporarily. As long as your esteemed father is not dead, young master should know of the results of this matter."

Satisfied, Wei Ying nodded his head and replied, "There is another matter. Although there have been rumors of the Fengyi Sect Master's death at the Hunting Palace, we do not know the veracity of those rumors. Does your honored union have any news?"

"Our Union Head personally investigated this matter," answered the middle-aged man. "There is at least seventy percent chance of the Fengyi Sect Master's death being true, as the Eighteen Arhats paid a trip to the Hunting Palace and only twelve returned to the Shaolin Temple. When Great Master True Compassion returned to the Shaolin Temple, he immediately went into seclusion to recuperate from his injuries. I'm afraid that the Fengyi Sect Master's death is likely true. However, Great Yong has been unwilling to announce this publicly."

"That is only natural," replied Wei Ying. "The Devil Sect Sovereign in Northern Han once made a solemn pledge with the Sect Master. If the Sect Master were to die, Jing Wuji would no longer be constrained by that pledge. As a result, it is only natural that the court dare not breathe a word of this to anyone.[3] If your honored union were to spread this news, Northern Han's Devil Sect will be sure to grow restless.[4] When the time comes, wouldn't this be of benefit to you?"

"This matter is of great importance," responded the middle-aged man, frowning. "This one cannot make the decisions. However, if this were the case, if the Devil Sect were to invade, they would inevitably affect our power and influence. As a result, our Union Head will likely not agree."

Wei Ying smiled. "The news cannot be kept hidden forever. This matter will be spread sooner rather than later. If your honored union plans properly, you can seize the opportunity presented for your benefit."

Although it seemed as if he was excited by the prospect, the middle-aged man did not say a word. Wei Ying understood that it was best to leave it at

that and did not continue to try to persuade him.

It wasn't long before a middle-aged woman in azure dress walked out of the farmhouse. Although from her appearance, one could tell that she wasn't young anymore, her appearance was as lovely and sumptuous as ever. Behind her were two swordswomen who carried a stretcher with an unconscious woman upon it. The thick white bandage wrapped around the unconscious woman's face prevented one from being able to see her facial features.

A hint of joy appeared on the middle-aged man's face. Turning, he made a gesture with his hand. Another man in black walked out from within the darkness. His appearance was completely veiled. Arriving next to the stretcher, he ripped off the woman's clothes without a hint of pity. After carefully examining the red birthmark at the woman's waist, he rose from his haunches and nodded his head. From this man's secretive movements and profound internal energy, everyone knew that he was not an ordinary individual. Satisfied, the middle-aged man waved his hand. The two youths by his side took hold of the stretcher and disappeared into the darkness.

The middle-aged man handed the two embroidered cases to Wei Ying. "Since our alliance is formed, please kindly accept these items. It is also best if we arrange a method for us to communicate. After your sect's position in Southern Chu has been established and stabilized, we will be able to exchange information. There will definitely be the day when Great Yong will be besieged by threats internally and externally, and fall."

Murderous intent flashed across the middle-aged woman in azure dress's face. She replied, "That day won't be long in the future. This time, with Great Yong's internal unrest, Northern Han will definitely seize the opportunity to profit from its misfortunes. After we have taken control over the Southern Chu court, we will attack from two sides and will definitely make it difficult for Great Yong's liege and vassals to rest and eat in peace."

Overjoyed, the middle-aged man replied, "If that is the case, our Embroidered Union will definitely seize the opportunity to incite a popular uprising. As long as we coordinate inside and out, Great Yong will definitely be destroyed!"

After discussing a method to communicate in the future, the middle-aged man departed satisfied. The members of the Fengyi Sect could just barely see a wave of men in black mutually shielding one another as they withdrew in the darkness and the crossbows in their hands. As a result, all of them drew in a sharp breath. If a battle had broken out, then they would have suffered disastrous casualties. As expected, the Embroidered Union, able to appear and disappear unpredictably in Great Yong, was an unusual organization.

At this moment, the wan and haggard looking Xiao Lan walked out of the farmhouse. Arriving beside the azure-dressed middle-aged woman, she spoke, “Martial Aunt, although I was not able to discern his appearance, from his bearing and mannerism, he seems like a certain individual. But that individual died long ago, thus I cannot be certain.”

The middle-aged woman, who was Noble Consort Ji, uttered, “It doesn’t matter. Speak your thoughts. I believe in your perception.”

Xiao Lan solemnly stated, “That man is exceedingly similar to the imperial bodyguard that served by the Crown Prince’s side, Xia Jinyi. However, Xia Jinyi died long ago during the scandal involving Concubine Chun.”

After thinking it over, Ji Xia clapped her hands and replied, “Maybe he is that man. Who could have thought that the Embroidered Union would be so vicious? No wonder they want Li Hanyou. I once heard of Li Hanyou’s real identity from the Sect Master. If that man is really Xia Jinyi, then everything fits. It seems like the Embroidered Union is sincere in their wish to cooperate with us. All right. Go make preparations. We will leave immediately. Only when we have departed from Great Yong will we be safe.”

Everyone voiced their agreement in unison. None of them were clear about Li Hanyou’s true identity, but since Ji Xia had spoken thusly, then it was very likely the case. As a result, they did not ask any questions. As long as the Embroidered Union was sincere in their desire to cooperate, then their whereabouts would not be immediately discovered by the Yong authorities. This was the most important thought occupying all of their minds.

***

When she was splashed awake by a bowl of cold water, Li Hanyou immediately and subconsciously sought to draw her sword. However, it was not at her waist. Opening her eyes, Li Hanyou could feel that she was lying on the ice-cold floor. In front of her was a black-clothed man standing with his back to her with his hands clasped behind his back. At his side were two youths, watching Li Hanyou. One of them had an empty bowl in his hands, clearly emptied to splash her awake.

Doing her best to try to remember what had happened, Li Hanyou could only remember that before she had passed out, she had drunk the medicine that Ji Xia had delivered her before falling unconscious. A hot rage ignited, as she coldly questioned, “Have they sold me out?”

The man in black replied frostily, “That’s right. We used banknotes worth two hundred thousand taels of silver and four hundred thousand taels worth of assets to trade with your honored sect. In exchange, your honored sect gave us three hundred thousand taels worth of assets and you.”

Li Hanyou’s heart froze. Over these days, her mind was already near collapse. Having to flee day and night, her grievous wound and the psychological shock of losing power and influence left her in excruciating suffering. Now that she had been abandoned by the Fengyi Sect, she became even more disheartened. Although the resentment from being sold out and betrayed still burned within her mind, she did not have the courage to continue to live. In a dispirited voice, she said, “Good … Good … Kill me. In any case, Li Hanyou does not have any path to survive.”

The man in black turned around. Smiling, he declared, “No. I won’t kill you. That would be too merciful and kind to you.”

Li Hanyou could hear an ear-piercing cry of fear sound at her ears. She subconsciously thought to cover her ears, but she soon discovered that the one screaming was her. Trembling, she pointed at the man in black, shouting, “Xia Jinyi, you’re still alive! How are you not dead?”

Dong Que smiled faintly. Before Li Hanyou had woken, he had intentionally removed his disguise and changed to his previous attire. As a result, it wasn’t strange that Li Hanyou was able to recognize him instantly. Opening

his mouth, he said, “That’s right, I should have died long ago, but I was not resigned to die. Therefore, I have come back from the underworld. Qiao Cuiyun, the day you caused the deaths of my parents, murdered Xiu Chun and our unborn child, did you think that you would fall into today’s straits?”

Li Hanyou slowly shrank backwards, her heart filled with panic. She could pretend that she was an imperial clanswoman, but in front of this man, that fake identity was completely worthless. She subconsciously objected, “I am not Qiao Cuiyun. I am Li Hanyou, the beloved daughter of the Prince of Jingjiang. I …”

Before she could continue, Dong Que broke out into laughter. The laughter was filled with mockery and hostility. It was only after some time that he spoke, “You do not have to worry, I won’t kill you. That would be letting you off too lightly. A pheasant dares to pretend to be a phoenix. Such a delightful thing cannot happen in this world. Qiao Cuiyun, you are truly too foolish. Do you know how I am going to punish you?”

Li Hanyou’s heart sank as she trembled. She wouldn’t be so afraid if this man was going to kill her. But upon hearing him state that he wouldn’t kill her, Li Hanyou could feel fear well up from within. She naturally understood what was most painful to a woman. Suddenly, she raised her palm, seeking to slam it against her head and commit suicide. However, as soon as her hand was raised, it powerlessly fell back to her side. Only now did she alarmingly discover that her internal energy had completely disappeared without a trace. Afterwards, she could hear the sounds of Dong Que laughing.

Speaking slowly and relishing each word, Dong Que stated, “Qiao Cunyun, do not worry. I am well aware of what you want to do. However, now that your beautiful face has been ruined, even if I wished to sell you into a brothel, it would be impossible to find someone willing to buy you. However, do you know that within the depths of the remote mountains, there are frequently families with men of thirty and forty who are not yet married because women refuse to marry into their households? Although your appearance has been ruined, your body is still more than enough for them to be satisfied. I have already found a household for you. It is

composed of a pair of brothers, both of whom are nearly forty years old. Alas, they have not yet married. As a result, they have been more than willing to use their savings to buy a woman to be their wife. They will be perfectly satisfied as long as the woman is able to bear and raise children. I have already dispatched a messenger to inform them that I have a woman in my hands. Because she failed to scrupulously abide by the tenets of womanhood, she was divorced and had her face ruined by her husband. However, her figure is extremely arousing. Moreover, she is healthy, capable of bearing plenty of children without any problems. I was willing to sell you to them for a low price and they have already voiced their agreement."

A look of dread appeared on Li Hanyou's face as Dong Que continued, "However, in order to ensure that they are not harmed, I cannot allow you to marry them perfectly intact. As such, I have already crippled your martial arts. With this, you will have no way of resisting them. Moreover, after your internal energy has dissipated, it will allow you to successfully become pregnant. However, you have learned too much, making it easy for you to kill a hunter household. As a result, I have used acupuncture to destroy the tendons of your hand and legs. In addition, I have informed them that you once sought to kill your husband and ensure that they are on their guard against you. With these precautions, although you can still walk with some difficulty and pick up some light items, you won't have the opportunity to harm them.

"In addition, since you have learned so many things and to prevent you from teaching your children, causing future trouble, I will seal your mute acupoint. Unable to speak and in a location where there is no one literate, how can you teach them? In any case, to that pair of brothers, they only want a woman. They won't care that your face has been ruined and become ugly. Moreover, to speak the truth, your body is more than enough for them to pleasure themselves for some time."

Li Hanyou began to collapse, almost as if she was catching sight of the inferno of hell. Crying out miserably, she recoiled, wanting to stay away from Dong Que. However, Dong Que ignored her, instead adding on, "I am not worried that you will be driven insane. A woman's fortitude and

patience is extremely strong. Besides, that pair of brothers won't mistreat you. To them, you are an asset that deserves to be treasured. Although they are strong and vigorous, causing their demands to be excessive, based upon your well-trained body, you should definitely be able to endure. All right, they are already anxiously waiting. I need to act now. There is no need for you to be afraid."

Dong Que walked over. Holding down Li Hanyou's pampered body, he gazed into her eyes and said, "As you are enduring the suffering of living in the remote mountains, there is no harm for you to think of your former glory, splendor, wealth, and rank even though it can be considered as no more than a dream to you. After waking from the dream, you are no longer an imperial clanswoman, no longer Her Imperial Highness, a Princess. You won't even be a heroine from a famous sect in *jianghu* . Alas, a dream ultimately is no more than a dream. A short-lived illusion leaves no traces behind and you are still only Qiao Cuiyun. The only difference is that you no longer have parents-in-law and a husband who will love and protect you."

Li Hanyou, no, Qiao Cuiyun gritted her teeth. When she was about to bite her tongue and commit suicide, Dong Que seized control over her acupoints. He whispered, "You want to bite your tongue and commit suicide, I won't allow you to die so easily. Originally, I wanted to pull all of your teeth out, but the results would be too ugly. Therefore, I specially came up with an acupuncture technique to ensure that the flesh of your cheeks are unable to exert any force. With this, even if you try to bite your tongue to commit suicide, you won't be able to do so successfully. At most, you will bleed some. I don't believe that you have the courage to try this repeatedly. Moreover, of your two new husbands, one of them will always be by your side. Don't think that you will successfully commit suicide. Furthermore, if you are determined to die, your new husbands will surely come up with ways to ensure that their precious investment is not lost. There is no way for me to know what they will think of. Will they bind your jaw open or something else?"

Li Hanyou could no longer endure Dong Que's taunting. Her head falling to the side, she fainted. This time, Dong Que did not forcibly wake her back up,

because he understood that if he were to continue, Li Hanyou likely would truly become insane. As long as she fainted, once she woke back up again, she wouldn't become crazy. After all, this was a human's self-protective mechanism. Gazing at the unconscious Li Hanyou, a hot flame blazed in his eyes. He stated, "Qiao Cuiyun, when next you wake, you will probably already be within the remote mountains. The martial arts that you have trained in and your staunch willpower will ensure that you will not easily become insane, allowing you to experience your deserved retribution with a clear head. Is there any other punishment more suitable than this?"

The two youths standing on the side exchanged glances, fear in their eyes. Both of them knew of the deep hatred between Dong Que and Li Hanyou. But Dong Que's revenge method was still able to create fear in their hearts. However, they would not stop him from acting. Li Hanyou once attempted to assassinate their young master. They had been made aware of this fact long ago. Thinking of the young master's near-death experience, they would not be tenderhearted regardless of what punishments Li Hanyou experienced.

When Dong Que walked out of the secret chamber, seeing Chen Zhen waiting for him, he advanced and saluted, stating, "Many thanks to Supervisor Chen for your help. Dong Que cannot thank you enough."

Chen Zhen smiled lightly, handing him a piece of paper made from cotton. "On it are the secret branches of the Fengyi Sect that we discovered while following them. This is the intelligence that the young master requires. I'll have to trouble you to bring it to him. In addition, please inform the young master that everything has already been prepared. We can act immediately once the young master gives the order."

Taking the piece of paper, Dong Que replied, "When I return, I will immediately report this to the young master. Supervisor Chen, do not worry. Please inform Supervisor Han that those secret assets belonging to the Fengyi Sect need to be quickly expropriated, so as to prevent the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets from suffering excessive losses."

Smiling, Chen Zhen acknowledged, "Brother Han went long ago to take care of them. He has an anxious and hot-headed temperament."

The two exchanged glances and smiled before mutually saluting and departing.

Footnotes :

春梦无痕, chunmengwuhen – idiom, lit. vanished like a spring dream; fig. a short-lived illusion leaves no traces

大有可为, dayoukewei – idiom, lit. with great prospects for the future

讳**莫如深**, huimorushen – idiom, lit. important matter that must be kept a secret; fig. don't breathe a word of this to anyone

蠢蠢欲动, chunchunyudong – idiom, lit. to begin to stir; fig. to grow restless, to become threatening

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 42: Cool Breeze and Bright Moon

Volume 3, Chapter 42: Cool Breeze and Bright Moon[1]

Accepting the paper made of cotton sent by Dong Que, I read its contents, taking some notes on another piece of paper. Dong Que had explained everything that had happened. Although Dong Que's retaliation methods were quite spiteful and cruel, in comparison, my methods were probably far more ruthless and vicious. As a result, I did not seek to blame or rebuke Dong Que. Ignoring the deep enmity between him and Li Hanyou, I always believed that one should take responsibility for one's actions. Furthermore, I believed that rather than waiting for the Heavens' retribution, it was better for me to do it. Otherwise why would I try to cause trouble for an empire's crown prince?

After I had collated the information about the secret branches of the Fengyi Sect that could be handed over to the Prince of Yong, I dispatched someone to invite His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong. During the short gap before the Prince of Yong arrived, I asked Xiaoshunzi, "Tell me, how should Wei *daren* 's situation be handled?"

After thinking it over, Xiaoshunzi answered, "With Wei Ying's vicious and merciless methods, there is no point in leaving Wei *daren* alive. In addition, the father and son relationship between the two is quite deep. I fear that Wei *daren* can't be used to deal with his son. It is best to kill him, so that the Embroidered Union can gain the trust of the Fengyi Sect. What does young master think?"

"Although Wei Guan did not participate in the coup d'état," I replied, after some thought, "As the head of the civil officials and failing to manage his household strictly, he should be punished. Moreover, it is impossible that he did not know what Wei Ying was doing; it is only that he could not anticipate that Wei Ying would actually participate in a rebellion. He would look favorably upon the Crown Prince's succession. Wei Ying is truly intelligent. If Wei Guan remains alive, then he would naturally be forced to place

righteousness over his family and seek to exterminate Wei Ying. But if Wei Guan were to die, then many of his students and friends would remember their past relationships and potentially be lenient towards Wei Ying. However, Wei Ying is being too clever. Human relationships are superficial when the individual departs.[2] That leniency will not be much of an impediment, at most being of use when the Fengyi Sect retreats from Great Yong. In addition, with the Prince of Yong's cutting edge present, who would dare to act out of personal consideration towards a treasonous rebel like Wei Ying?

"How about this? Allow Wei Guan to commit suicide. There is no need to be meddlesome. Simply have the imperial bodyguards monitoring him relax a bit and have them speak a few words of slanderous gossip. What do we have to fear that Wei Guan wouldn't succeed in his suicide?"

At this moment, Xiaoshunzi gave me a meaningful glance. I immediately understood that His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, had arrived and did not continue. I rose to my feet to welcome him. Accompanied by Shi Yu and Xiahou Yuanfeng, the Prince of Yong walked over. From the look on the face of His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, I could tell that his mood was very good. Stepping forward and saluting, I stated, "It is this subject's capital offense to trouble Your Imperial Highness to come." As I begged forgiveness, I gazed at Xiahou Yuanfeng. When did the Prince of Yong trust him so implicitly?

Seeing the hesitation in Jiang Zhe's gaze, the Prince of Yong was also somewhat annoyed, regretting his decision to bring along Xiahou Yuanfeng. However, this man had been quite competent and diligent these last few days. With his help, the purge of the crown prince's faction within the palace and the court had proceeded quite smoothly. Moreover, this man's consideration for his thoughts was extremely rare. Two days ago, when Jiang Zhe entered the palace on private business, were it not for Xiahou Yuanfeng delivering the news, it would have been too late for the Prince of Yong to smooth things over. As a result, lately, he had gradually included Xiahou Yuanfeng amongst his trusted subordinates. Because of this, Shi Yu and company were all dissatisfied. Could it be that Jiang Zhe was dissatisfied

as well? Somewhat awkwardly, the Prince of Yong laughed and replied, “Suiyun, how has your recovery been these last few days? This Prince has some important matters to discuss with you.”

After inviting the Prince of Yong and company to take their seats, I handed the information that I had organized on the secret branches of the Fengyi Sect over to the Prince of Yong. I said, “Your Imperial Highness, this is a list of the secret branches of the Fengyi Sect that this subject was able to find. Your Imperial Highness, please choose the proper moment to thoroughly control these secret branches. However, it is best if we do not act right way, so as to prevent the Fengyi Sect from becoming suspicions of this subordinate’s operatives.”

The Prince of Yong took the list. After looking at it for some time, he sighed with admiration. “Suiyun, your operatives seem to be more formidable than those of Imperial Father’s and this Prince’s. This Prince only knows about thirty to forty percent of these secret branches, and they were only just discovered these last few days.”

I was able to hear the implications in the Prince of Yong’s words. He wished to fold my personal operatives into his own operations. However, now wasn’t the right time to hand over either the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets or the Embroidered Union to the Prince of Yong. After all, if it were discovered that the Prince of Yong had relations with either of those organizations, then the two organizations would become useless. In order to dispel the Prince of Yong’s intentions and to change the subject, I sat back down. Gently fanning the folding fan in my hands, I replied, “Sunzi’s *Art of War* states that there are five types of spies—local spies, internal spies, double agents, expendable spies, and surviving spies. Originally, Your Imperial Highness was extremely adept at using of spies.

“I have heard Sir Dong speak that whenever Your Imperial Highness’s army is marching, wherever you reach, you would assemble locals, personally questioning them about the area. It could be said that Your Imperial Highness is adept at using local spies. Years ago, Great Yong planted Liang Wan as a spy in Southern Chu. She could be said to be a expendable spy. Through Liang Wan, Great Yong was able to bribe and deter the

Southern Chu officialdom. They can be considered as internal spies. When Your Imperial Highness was establishing your personal household guard, you established a scout unit within. These specialists tasked with reconnaissance and military intelligence can be considered as surviving spies. As for double agents, didn't Your Imperial Highness use the discord ploy while campaigning in Shu, forcing the Prince of De to urgently attack Luocheng?"

Somewhat embarrassed, Li Zhi replied, "How can this Prince's ability to use spies match with Suiyun's?" Glancing at Xiahou Yuanfeng, Li Zhi knew that there were some things that were best kept from this new convert and thus did not speak any further. In reality, Li Zhi could only prostrate himself with admiration at Jiang Zhe's usage of spies. Without Jiang Zhe's arrangements, how could the crown prince have lost the emperor's grace? Without Jiang Zhe's arrangements, how could Xiahou Yuanfeng be converted to his cause to reverse the desperate situation? Since ancient times, famous generals were only known for their ability to command their own subordinates, while Jiang Zhe was skilled at using the enemy's strength for his own purposes against themselves. Naturally, Li Zhi would not be able to learn how to use spies in such a godly manner.

"The flaw in Your Imperial Highness's use of spies is that you only use it against your enemies," I continued, smiling. "As a result, although Your Imperial Highness very clearly understood what was going on by the former Crown Prince's side, you knew little of what was going on at the sides of those neutral individuals like Wei *daren* and Grand General Qin. The incident at the Hunting Palace was a direct result of this oversight. To say nothing else, Your Imperial Highness must know that this subject has some private matters that I have kept hidden. However, Your Imperial Highness has never been suspicious. Although this is because of Your Imperial Highness's refusal to be suspicious of those that you employ, now Your Imperial Highness has become Great Yong's heir apparent and soon-to-be monarch. All of the world's talents will all come to pledge their allegiance. Don't tell me that Your Imperial Highness will not have misgivings about all of them and not employ those suspicious? Therefore, this subject recommends that Your Imperial Highness create another department,

establishing an information network within the court tasked with supervising and monitoring the court and the common people. Only then will Your Imperial Highness's sovereign power be guaranteed, and the empire and Chang'an be stabilized."

"If this department were established, it would cause the great alarm in the entire court," replied Shi Yu, frowning. "In addition, with this, the individual responsible for this department of inspection would inevitably have too much authority. Quite the problem." As he spoke, he gazed at me with suspicion, clearly suspecting that I wanted to take control of this department.

I smiled placidly. "This will depend on Your Imperial Highness's arrangements. As long as Your Imperial Highness separates the supervisory and punishment role in two, this department will be unable to overturn and overthrow the Heavens. As for whether it will cause alarm and panic, that will be based upon its behavior and conduct. And that will be dependent on Your Imperial Highness yourself. As long as Your Imperial Highness does not only rely upon the reports from the department of inspection to charge individuals with crimes, then how could the court be thrown into an uproar? As long as the activities do not affect the empire or aren't treasonous in nature, Your Imperial Highness does not have to take those reports seriously. But with important matters, Your Imperial Highness can plan ahead and be prepared."[3]

Li Zhi listened to my words conscientiously, taking them to heart. A splendid and breathtaking look flashed across his eyes. When I had finished speaking, he opened his mouth and acknowledged, "This Prince has long desired to create a department of inspection within the palace. Suiyun, are you willing to take charge of it?"

"Your Imperial Highness, although Zhe is skilled at using spies," I advised, smiling faintly, "It is best that a meticulous and attentive individual be assigned to this task. This subject has always been sloppy. How can I assume such a heavy responsibility? Moreover, this subject has only just recovered from my illness and should spend my time carefully nursing my health. I'm afraid that this subject won't be able to handle this kind of demanding

work.”

Shock flashed across Shi Yu and Xiahou Yuanfeng’s eyes. They both anticipated that Jiang Zhe desired to personally take this supervisory authority. To their surprise, Jiang Zhe had actually declined the appointment. Filled with guilt and shame, Shi Yu thought, *I should have remembered that Jiang Zhe has always been a lofty and unsullied character, disinterested in struggling for power and profit* .

In comparison, Xiahou Yuanfeng’s eyes were radiating a passionate light. This department of inspection seemed to be specifically tailored for him. He was confident that he had the qualifications to take charge of this position that operated in the dark. Moreover, although this position’s official rank was low, the power and authority afforded it would be enormous. If someone else were to take this position, it would inevitably cause the Prince of Yong to worry and fear. This was probably why Jiang Zhe had resolutely declined the position. However, as a former member of the Crown Prince’s faction, all of the Prince of Yong’s subordinates in high positions within the army and government fundamentally were on guard against him. If he were to assume such a role, the Prince of Yong would naturally be reassured, as he only had the Prince of Yong as his patron. In order to safeguard the Prince of Yong’s governance, he would undoubtedly leave no stone unturned, not daring to be lax nor daring to have any thoughts about betrayal.

At this moment, Li Zhi also thought of this point, and could not help but glance at Xiahou Yuanfeng. Reacting quickly, Xiahou Yuanfeng immediately displayed a look of wholehearted loyalty. Li Zhi nodded his head lightly, not saying any words.

I took in the entire interaction, feeling happy. In reality, even if I had not made this suggestion, the Prince of Yong would have thought of establishing a mechanism to supervise the court. For me to take the initiative and make the suggestion, and yet refuse to take charge, the Prince of Yong would certainly trust me even more. The Prince of Yong would also inevitably think of Xiahou Yuanfeng as the perfect candidate to take charge, as his future was entirely dependent upon the Prince of Yong. As far as I was

concerned, I also believed that Xiahou Yuanfeng was a good candidate. Although he was fickle and changeable, possessing an insidious mind, he was also adaptable to changing circumstances. He understood how formidable I was. Unless the Prince of Yong wished to kill me, he would absolutely not cause trouble for me.

After some time, the Prince of Yong came to his senses and said, “Suiyun, in a few days the ceremony anointing this Prince as heir apparent will be held. You have contributed the most and must come attend the ceremony.”

I naturally agreed cheerfully before asking, “Your Imperial Highness, after you have become the heir apparent, Your Imperial Highness will formally take charge of the governance of the empire. Have you made the proper arrangements?”

The Prince of Yong answered, “This Prince has already reported some of my arrangements to Imperial Father. Because he is suspected of treason, Director Wei Guan of the Imperial Secretariat can no longer serve as Prime Minister. Imperial Father desires to name Palace Attendant Zheng Xia as the new Director of the Imperial Secretariat. This Prince has already agreed. Imperial Father has also agreed to have Ziyou serve as Right Vice Director of the Department of State Affairs.”

Clapping my hands, I replied, “As expect, Your Imperial Highness is enlightened. Although Sir Ziyou has the talent to be Prime Minister, his qualifications aren’t enough for him to enter the Department of State Affairs right now. In addition, with the court in turmoil, Palace Attendant Zheng has a prestigious reputation as a man of virtue. With him in control the Imperial Secretariat, everything will be controlled. The Right Vice Director of the Department of State Affairs is one of the ranking ministers of the court. The current Director is a weak and ineffectual man, allowing Ziyou to have a free hand. The Department of State Affairs administers the Six Ministries. Your Imperial Highness can use this opportunity to reform the Six Ministries. After a few years, Sir Ziyou can enter the Imperial Secretariat. However, with this, who will take the position of Palace Attendant? This position requires a firm and daring individual willing to remonstrate the Emperor.”

Smiling, Li Zhi replied, “As expected, Suiyun understands the profound

intentions behind this decision. Allowing Palace Attendant Zheng to take charge of the Imperial Secretariat will precisely meet everyone's expectations. As for the new Palace Attendant, this Prince already has a candidate in mind. I have already decided to appoint the Duke of Wei, Cheng Shu, to the position."

I was startled, as I asked, "The Duke of Wei?" Within my mind emerged Duke Cheng Shu's indolent and lackadaisical appearance.

Laughing, Shi Yu spoke up, "That's right. Although the Duke of Wei usually appears to be frivolous,[4] his character is actually loyal and straightforward. He shall be the Palace Attendant because, although he will transfer from a military official to become a civil minister, first, His Imperial Highness does not wish for him to return to the battlefield and second, allow His Imperial Majesty to not worry."

After thinking it over, I realized that the Duke of Wei was truly the best candidate for the position. At the time, when the Fengyi Sect's power was overpowering, that old geezer was one of the few individuals who dared to take a stand on matters of principle. Moreover, he had a close relationship with the emperor and would be an excellent middleman to prevent conflict between Zheng Xia and Shi Yu.

His excitement roused, the Prince of Yong continued, "In addition, the Grand General has already decided to resign. This Prince has already nominated General Qin Yong to command the Imperial Guard. Thus, Imperial Father and this Prince can both rest easily."

I smiled slightly. It seemed like Zheng Xia, Qin Yi, and Cheng Shu, these pure, unadulterated ministers were genuine evergreen trees.

At this moment, Li Zhi suddenly glanced at me. Somewhat uneasy, he said, "However, there is one matter of which this Prince has let you down. This Prince had once asked Imperial Father to betroth Changle and you. However, Imperial Father was concerned with your poor health and was unwilling to issue such an edict. You can be reassured that in a year or two, as your health improves, this Prince will definitely ask Imperial Father again. In addition, there is no need for you to worry. Imperial Father has

already conferred the title of Princess of Ning upon Princess Changle and has begun construction of her official residence. Imperial Father won't force Changle to marry anyone else. The two of you are still young. You will surely be able to enjoy marital bliss in a year or two."

I snickered inwardly. I had long known that the Prince of Yong had been seeking to raise this subject to console me and prevent me from being discouraged. As a result, I adopted a facial expression that seemed to be filled with disappointment and frustration. In the subsequent discussions, it seemed like my attention was elsewhere, somewhat disorderly in my speech. Ultimately, the Prince of Yong could only bid his farewell and depart. After the Prince of Yong had left, I immediately summoned Xiaoshunzi, telling him that the plan had begun.

***

In order to rapidly stabilize the situation, the ceremony to anoint the new crown prince was held on the twenty-fifth day of the tenth month. On that day, due to falling ill and becoming bedridden, Major Jiang Zhe of the Prince of Yong was unable to participate. As a result, when an ordinary-looking carriage departed through the city gate, no one suspected that I was within the carriage. I had changed into an ordinary-looking set of azure robes. While playing with the folding fan in my hands, I wondered if there were any flaws in my plans. I had long ago made the decision to depart while the Prince of Yong was being enfeoffed as the new crown prince. First, there was no point for me to remain by the Prince of Yong's side with my vengeance wrought. His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, had plenty of individuals capable of administering the state and commanding its armies. Aside from this, I was also giving thought to His Imperial Highness. By showing my abilities within the Hunting Palace, I had not only caused Great Master True Compassion and others to be afraid, individuals like Zheng Xia and Qin Yi would inevitably tremble inside. If I were to remain at the Prince of Yong's side, they would always be worried that His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, would use my sinister and insidious stratagems. Rather than have them suspect the Prince of Yong's straightforward and upright intentions, I had best depart. With the Prince of Yong's status, there was no need for him to be tainted by retaining the services of a strategist who relied

upon sinister and cunning schemes. As a result, I had decided to depart long ago. Beyond all this, one of the reasons that I chose to depart was the refusal on the part of the Yong emperor to betroth Changle to me.

Therefore, I had seized this opportunity while the entire Prince of Yong's household was busy with the ceremony. First, I had Xiaoshunzi pick up Roulan. Then, taking advantage of the lax security, under Chen Zhen and Han Wuji's support, I departed from Chang'an. For the entire journey, I had prepared layer upon layer of red herrings, allowing me to disappear without a hitch into the sea of people.

Gently caressing the face of the sleeping Roulan, I heaved a sigh. The only regret that I had was the princess. We were star-crossed lovers. Now as the Princess of Ning, Princess Changle's status was even more honored and respectable. How could I have her wander the world with me? Besides, it was possible that I would never return to Great Yong.

Departing from the Illustrious Virtue Gate, I could not help but recall being taken prisoner by the Prince of Yong and being brought under escort to Chang'an. I helplessly upturned the corner of my lips. Although only two years had passed, the impression left on my heart by Chang'an was intense and profound. It could be assumed that regardless of where I went, I would always remember the sights and sounds of Chang'an.

After going for some distance, Xiaoshunzi's voice suddenly floated into the carriage, "Young master, an honored individual has come to see you off."

I was startled. Outside of my subordinates, no one knew of my departure from Chang'an. How could there be someone seeing me off? Lifting aside the curtains to the carriage, my gaze immediately froze. Within the pavilion on the side of the road up ahead, a woman in plain, unadorned dress stood. Her beautiful, thick hair stood tall. Around her was wrapped a heavy, emerald-green cloak. At her side was a refined woman over thirty years old. There was also a delicate and fair teenager. I uttered a cry of surprise. The three were Princess Changle, Head Maid Zhou, and Xiaoliuzi. What was going on? With Xiaoshunzi's help, I stepped out of the carriage. Entering the pavilion, I urgently asked, "Your Imperial Highness, how have you come to see me off?"

Grudgingly, Princess Changle replied, “Were it not for Xiaoshunzi’s report, were you going to depart henceforth in spite of Our deep love?”

Embarrassed, I responded, “Your Imperial Highness, from henceforth, Zhe is only a commoner. The Princess’s status is still respected and honored. Regardless of everything else, the title of Princess Ning will ensure that Your Imperial Highness will spend the rest of your life with glory and honor. I …”

Princess Changle outstretched her delicate hands, covering my mouth. In a beautiful, sonorous voice, she replied, “We do not care about any of that. We only know that We do not owe anything more to Great Yong. Imperial Father and Mother are both healthy. In addition, older brother will scrupulously perform his filial duties. If you do not scorn me, I am willing to accompany you and depart. From henceforth, let us pass our days in an ordinary manner, becoming a simple, common, loving couple.”

I was no longer able to restrain the ecstasy inside. It wasn’t that I didn’t think of eloping with Changle and going far away. However, the title the emperor had conferred caused me to shrink back. The title of Princess of Ning was not randomly given. All daughters of the imperial clan could obtain the title of princess. However, those titles typically contained two characters. An example was the original title of Princess Changle (长乐), which meant “everlasting happiness.” Princess Changle was only given the title of the Princess of Ning, a title with only a singular character, because of her enormous contributions to pacifying the former crown prince’s rebellion. Since ancient times, there were very few princesses who were able to obtain such a title with only a singular character. Therefore, I had given up. Who could have expected that Princess Changle would be willing to renounce this rare distinction to accompany me?

Taking a step forward, I wrapped my hands around Princess Changle’s hands. I said, “Your Imperial Highness, Zhe is indebted to your grace and cannot thank you enough. Although Zhe is only a commoner, I will ensure that Princess will receive happiness.”

A captivating crimson blush crept onto Princess Changle’s beautiful countenance. She whispered, “If I didn’t believe in you, why would I have been willing to come? However, you should stop calling me Imperial

Highness and Princess. My name is Li Zhen. From now on, call me Zhen'er."

Feeling the swelling tides of tender and loving feelings well up from my heart, I whispered, "Zhen'er, I will definitely not turn my back upon you."

Thinking of her years of bitter longing finally coming to an end today, Princess Changle's eyes instinctively reddened. She threw herself into my embrace. Hugging her pampered body tightly to me, I shot a glance of gratitude towards Xiaoshunzi. Without him acting on his own initiative, I likely would truly be alone until my dying days. Xiaoshunzi smiled slightly, not speaking a word.

I helped Princess Changle into the carriage. Head Maid Zhou and Xiaoliuzi boarded the carriage behind. Both of them were loyal and devoted to Princess Changle. In addition, in order to prevent them from being punished for losing the princess, they were going to accompany us.

The carriage set off once again. Holding onto Princess Changle's delicate hands, I only felt joy in my heart. *After all is said and done, the Heavens finally showed concern for me, allowing me to obtain such a caring and intimate lover after losing Piaoxiang* . I couldn't care less how the emperor and the Prince of Yong would react to this news. In any case, I had no intentions of returning to that fighting and scheming court.

When the Prince of Yong returned to his residence after formally being instated as the crown prince, he quickly received news that Jiang Zhe had disappeared. He hurriedly rushed to the Cold Courtyard only to discover that all of the imperial bodyguards had had their acupoints sealed. All of the gifts that the Prince of Yong had bestowed upon Jiang Zhe had been sealed and left behind, none of them missing. All of the documents and letters were catalogued and listed, indicating where some were collected, which ones were already burned and destroyed. Upon the desk was a letter from Jiang Zhe. Removing it from its envelope, Li Zhi discovered a four-line poem.

Returned and stored are the gold and girdles,Spread has this news to all the mortals.All the world covets the Cold Courtyard's guest,Just a simple student from Jiangnan.[5]

Heaving a sigh, L i Zhi sat down in the chair, stating, "Don't tell Us that We

were still unable to completely win you over?"

At this moment, Xiahou Yuanfeng spoke up, "Your Imperial Highness, there may be some news that will brighten Your Imperial Highness's mood."

Li Zhi's brows arched, expressing his doubts. With a smile on his face, Xiahou Yuanfeng continued, "Just now, when this subject received news that Jiang *daren* had departed, I had people investigate. It seems that Princess Changle also left the palace today. In addition, the Princess only brought along Head Maid Zhou, a little eunuch, and some guards. However, those guards responsible for her protection have already returned to the palace, begging for forgiveness, because they also had their acupoints sealed by someone. It was only with great difficulty that they were able to disengage themselves and return to report the situation. Her Imperial Highness has disappeared."

Li Zhi's eyes brightened. He asked, "Are you telling me that Changle eloped with Jiang Zhe?"

Xiahou Yuanfeng respectfully responded, "This subject does not dare to jump to unfounded conclusions. However, Your Imperial Highness, if there is no news of the Princess, then she should have departed with Jiang *daren* ."

Laughing heartily, Li Zhi replied, "Good, good! Changle finally has the courage and drive. As long as Suiyun becomes Our brother-in-law, We won't have to worry. Sooner or later, he will return."

Frowning, he continued, "However, Imperial Father is probably going to be angry. I should enter the palace as soon as possible to mollify his rage."

Just then, Shi Yu hurriedly walked in. He said, "Your Imperial Highness, a report from the northern frontier! Long Tingfei has mobilized an army and has marched out of the Mingshui Pass,[6] invading Zhenzhou. It is a military emergency!"

Li Zhi's blade-like brows jumped and he replied, "They have come as expected. Immediately issue an edict. This Prince will personally go meet the enemy head on."

Shi Yu categorically refused, stating, "Your Imperial Highness, this won't do. Before, as an Imperial Prince who commanded the army, you naturally

could lead the army into battle. Things are different now that you are the heir apparent who has responsibility for governance of the empire. At present, the internal situation has not yet been fully pacified. Your Imperial Highness must remain in the capital to control the overall situation, otherwise Your Imperial Highness will be risk the big picture for small things.[7] Moreover, with the change of Your Imperial Highness's status, you cannot put yourself in danger like before."

Li Zhi's brows tensed up. He had not yet adapted to his new status. For a time, he was caught in the dilemma. Aside from him, who else could lead troops into battle? Great Yong had plenty of generals, but it would be extremely difficult to find a commander-in-chief capable of stopping Long Tingfei. Glancing at the letter left behind by Jiang Zhe on the desk, Li Zhi forced a smile and stated, "Suiyun, how could you leave Us at this moment?"

Suddenly, Xiahou Yuanfeng observed, "Your Imperial Highness, there seem to be words on the back of the letter."

Li Zhi was startled before stepping over and picking up the letter. Sure enough, there were words written on the back. They said:

Northern Han will certainly seize this opportunity to send troops and violate Great Yong's borders. The only one who can serve as the commander-in-chief is the Prince of Qi, Li Xian. If Your Imperial Highness treats him with sincerity, His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, will bend his head and obey.

After reading its contents, Li Zhi was left dumbfounded, holding the letter for some time, a multitude of expressions flashing across his face. He did not speak for a long while. At this time, an imperial bodyguard rushed over to report. "Your Imperial Highness, all of the *daren* have gathered in the main hall, awaiting Your Imperial Highness's arrival to discuss official business."

Returning to his senses, Li Zhi smiled slightly, stating, "We will go immediately. Send Our orders. From henceforth, this Cold Courtyard is to be sealed. No one is permitted to enter without permission. All of the courtyard's servants are to remain. They are to carefully maintain this courtyard without negligence." Finished speaking, Li Zhi flicked his sleeve

and walked out. There were still many important matters for him to attend to.

It was already late autumn. The bright moon hung high in the sky, while a cool breeze blew through the courtyard. Walking through the Cold Courtyard, Li Zhi was filled with a sense of grandeur. *Northern Han, Southern Chu, just you wait. My Great Yong's elite horsemen will very quickly come to conquer you!*

Footnotes :

清风明月, qingfengmingyue – idiom, lit. cool breeze and bright moon; fig. peaceful and clear night, alludes to living a solitary and quiet life

人走茶凉, renzouchaliang – idiom, lit. no sooner has the person gone that the tea cools down; fig. once a person departs, his relationships become useless, superficiality of human relationships

未雨绸缪, weiyuchoumou – idiom, lit. before it rains, bind around with silk; fig. to plan ahead, to prepare for a rainy day

玩世不恭, wanshibugong – idiom, lit. to despise worldly conventions; fig. frivolous, without respect

This is based off of an untitled poem written by the Song Dynasty minister, Zhao Bian, upon his retirement from office.

明水关, mingshuiguan – lit. Clearwater Pass

因小失大, yinxiaoshida – idiom, lit. risk big things for the sake of small ones; fig. pennywise, pound-foolish

Volume 4: Beacons of War Blaze Once More

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 1: Splendid, Flaming Female Clothing

Volume 4, Chapter 1: Splendid, Flaming Female Clothing

In the twenty-seventh year of Great Yong's Wuwei era, on the Northern Han frontier, through the whistling of the autumn breeze, on the road between the Yanmen Pass and Daizhou,[1] a horse with a rider in red galloped quickly along, kicking up smoke and dust. One was barely able to discern that it was a sorrel horse with a hair coat the color of blood and with a mane like raging flames. Although the rider's appearance was completely covered by a great cloak and hood, one could faintly discern that the rider was dressed completely in red. The rider's cloak was of the same color. Across the rider's back was an ebony sandalwood bow. By the saddle was a pouch filled with white-feathered arrows. At the rider's waist was a saber with a handle gilded with gold and encrusted with jade. The saber, itself, was covered by the great cloak, hiding the scabbard style. However, from the handle, one could tell that this was a precious saber that was impossible to acquire.

Just as the rider in red was allowing her horse to gallop wildly, five horsemen suddenly charged out from both sides in front. All five of them were barbarian tribesmen. They galloped towards the rider in red. Just as the two sides were about to collide, the rider in red rapidly notched and shot three arrows in one go. Like meteorites, the white-feathered arrows shot out. Two of the barbarians were caught unprepared by this development, not expecting that the rider in red would shoot arrows at such a close distance. They flipped over and fell off their horses. However, firing three arrows at once was unavoidably a bit too much for the rider in red. As a result, the third arrow that was fired was weak and lacking, brushed away by its target using a saber. The remaining three horsemen shouted out simultaneously and ferociously attacked. Not having enough time to fire more arrows, the rider in red could only unsheathe the precious saber and meet their attack. All four were skilled at fighting on horseback. Although

the rider in red's saber was sharp, the rider's horsemanship brilliant, all three barbarians were also brave and fierce fighters. Gradually, the rider in red began to lose ground. Suddenly, the rider in red let out a tender shout, yelling, "Eat my poison powder!"

The rider in red threw something out with her left hand, sending a wave of pink smoke towards two of the barbarian horsemen. The two urgently split up and tried to avoid the pink smoke, revealing a gap. The rider in red seized the opportunity. Spurring her horse, the rider escaped the encirclement, charging back the way that she had come. The barbarian horsemen turned their horses and gave chase. Just as they were about to surround the rider in red again, the rider suddenly pulled the reins of her mount. The sorrel horse reared onto its hind legs and turned around. Its head reared, the horse naturally and flowing, without the slightest reduction in speed, sped towards Daizhou. The barbarian horsemen did not expect that the rider in red would have such formidable riding abilities. Their reaction could not but be sluggish. When they had turned around to give chase again, they had fallen far behind.

Vexed, the rider in red turned around to glance at her pursuers. The barbarian horsemen still pursued her without letting up. The rider in red gritted her teeth. It wasn't that she was worried about her safety. Twenty *li* ahead were the walls of Daizhou. These barbarian horsemen, somehow blundering in, would definitely not dare to chase her all the way to Daizhou. However, if others were to learn that she had been ambushed while traveling alone, then it would be impossible for her to remain so carefree and leisurely in the months to come.

At this moment, her eyes brightened, as she noticed a gray-clothed horseman up ahead going in the same direction as her. The horse that he was mounted upon was a fine steed that was the cream of the crop. The horseman also had a bow and arrows with him. In this prefecture, all of its denizens, regardless of gender, were skilled in horse archery. No matter how incompetent this oncoming horseman was, he should still be able to help out. With the two working together, they could probably kill those barbarians. Thinking of this, the rider in red shouted out, "Old chap! Quickly

shoot arrows!”

Stunned, the gray-clothed horseman turned his head, a cold and murderous intent quickly flashing across his eyes. The horseman turned around, his palomino, spotted-white horse passing by the rider in red. The rider in red could hear the twanging sound of a bowstring. From the sound of the bowstring, the rider in red could tell that the bow’s draw weight wasn’t great. Usually, in Daizhou, such a bow would only be used by woman. However, when she heard the sound of the arrows whistling through the air, the rider in red could not help but be stunned. The man had shot five arrows in one go. The rider in red turned her horse around and caught sight of the five arrows splitting into two groups, three in front and two behind. One of the arrows pierced the throat of one of the barbarians. Just as the two other arrows of the first batch were fended off by the barbarians, the second group of arrows arrived. Although the two barbarians tried to dodge, they were only able to avoid death, instead grievously wounded. The two barbarians exchanged glances before turning their horses around and fleeing, bringing with them their dead compatriot and the master-less horse as they fled.

The rider in red exhaled a breath in relief. Nudging her horse over, she clasped her hands together and said, “Many thanks to brother for saving my life. Lin Tong is here to express my thanks.”

When the gray-clothed horseman turned his head around, his eyes brightened, seeing the rider in red’s hair was tied up into three buns. Her hair was further wrapped in a red handkerchief and held in place by a gold hairpin. The rider was no more than sixteen or seventeen years of age. Her skin was as pale as snow. She had a pair of curvaceous eyebrows and pitch-black eyes that were sparkling and limpid. The corners of her pink and lovely cherry lips were slightly raised, making her seem mischievous and pampered.

The rider in red also stared blankly at the gray-clothed horseman. The horseman was just over twenty years old. His appearance was delicate and handsome, almost as if he were a weak and feeble scholar. However, his brows carried a penetrating aura that seemed to be able to see through

worldly affairs and yet also a frivolous, carefree feeling. Other than the brutes and stalwarts who the rider in red usually saw, the handsome men that she interacted with usually carried a martial aura about them. She had never seen such a delicate, handsome man. As a result, the rider in red could not help but blush. She asked, “Who are you? I can see that you are not someone from Northern Han. You aren’t a spy, right?”

The gray-clothed horseman calmed down. Smiling, he replied, “Young miss, this isn’t the proper way to repay a debt of gratitude. How can you consider your rescuer to be a spy?”

The red-clothed young woman’s face flushed, as she claimed, “It’s one thing that you rescued my life. It will be another if you are a spy. If you don’t answer the question, I will have to deliver you to the authorities.”

With deliberate exaggeration, the gray-clothed horseman declared, “*Aiyah* , the Princess of Red Clouds is truly outstanding. It seems that I saved the wrong person.”

The red-clothed young woman was instantly startled. She was the second daughter of General Lin Yuanting who was assigned to garrison Daizhou and Yanmen Pass. Lin Yuanting was the family head of an influential, aristocratic family from Daizhou and an important minister in the Northern Han court. His wife was the Princess of Anqing.[2] As senior princess, she had given birth to four sons and two daughters. All four sons were generals famous for their bravery. The oldest daughter, Lin Bi, had been fostered by the King of Northern Han, Liu You, as an adopted daughter and was conferred the title of Princess of Jiaping.[3] She was twenty-three years old this year.

Not only was Lin Bi was beautiful and intelligent, she was also skilled at martial arts and military strategy. She had once repeatedly repulsed the invasions of the barbarians, accruing impressive and outstanding military service. Marrying Lin Bi was the objective of the warriors of Northern Yong. As for Lin Bi, she vowed to only wed a like-minded inimitable hero, otherwise she would never marry. However, how many men deserved a woman like this? It was only two years ago, when the General Who Dominates Distant Lands, Long Tingfei’s wife passed away, that Lin Bi finally found a suitable home to call home. At the time, Long Tingfei was twenty-

nine years old, handsome and formidable, possessing a high and important position, and had performed brilliantly in the military. Even though he was employed by the King of Northern Han, he was feared by Liu You. A marriage alliance was naturally the best method to ensure the loyalty of an important official. Endowed with both beauty and talents,[4] and an adopted member of the royal family, Lin Bi was naturally the perfect candidate. Moreover, Long Tingfei was one of the few heroes who were a match for Lin Bi. As a result, this marriage very quickly became a subject that garnered the general public's approval. However, because Long Tingfei's wife had just passed away and he was busy battling Great Yong, the two had decided to temporarily postpone their wedding.

Coming from such illustrious origins, although the Lin Tong had been pampered and spoiled since childhood, she wasn't a completely ignorant young miss. Everyone in Daizhou knew of the Princess of Red Clouds, and recognized her sorrel horse and her red clothes. However, this gray-clothed man was clearly not a native of these parts and yet with one look had identified her. Lin Tong could not help but grow suspicious. Her suspicions aroused, the severity and stubbornness of her tone increased, "Who are you really? If you don't speak the truth, don't blame my saber for being ruthless." As she spoke, she gripped the handle of her saber.

The youth was alarmed, promptly clasping his hands and stating, "Princess, please do not be angry. This commoner is surnamed Wang, and has the given name of Ji. I am not a spy."

The tension on Lin Tong's face eased a bit, as she sized up the young man. She asked, "From your appearance, you do not seem to be from Northern Han. Quickly explain your origins and ancestry to this Princess."

Smiling wryly, the youth answered, "Princess, this commoner is from Southern Chu. Afterwards, I wandered the lands destitute. Last year, this commoner wandered to the northern lands. As I am a skilled veterinarian, adept at treating horses and livestock, I have frequently wandered about these lands. A few days ago, I heard that Daizhou was going to hold a market in the autumn, thus am journeying to Daizhou to see the bustling of the market. Unexpectedly, I ran into the Princess. I was able to identify Princess

from your precious horse, famous throughout this region for its color. Princess, please understand that this commoner is speaking the truth."

With astonishment, Lin Tong gazed at the youth for some time before speaking, "Wang Ji, you aren't the 'Divine Doctor Bo Le' renowned amongst the barbarians? I have heard that you are not only adept at treating livestock, you are skilled at identifying great horses."

The youth smiled again. "I deserve not the Princess's praise. This commoner does possess a minor reputation in the barbarian lands. Surprisingly, the Princess has also heard of me."

Lin Tong replied, "Of course. My Daizhou is close to the barbarian lands. Every day of every hour, we must keep an eye on the activity in the barbarian lands. It is a pity that the barbarian lands are vast but sparsely populated with vast distances between the various tribes. As a result, the information we receive is rough and incomplete. I originally thought that the man hailed as 'Divine Doctor Bo Le' would definitely be an elderly man of virtue and prestige. Who could have thought that he is actually so young? Wang Ji, this Princess wants to ask you … You originally hail from Southern Chu; did you learn your veterinarian skills and horse identification there? How did you come to wander into the barbarian lands?"

The youth smiled wryly again. He suggested, "Princess, we shouldn't speak like this, right? It isn't right for us to block the path."

With a start, Lin Tong realized that there were other passersby on the road. She replied, "This Princess intends to go to Daizhou and visit the market. How about you follow me along and slowly explain your background to me? Be sure to be obedient and not escape, otherwise this Princess will have Daddy mobilize the army and hunt you down."

The youth smiled and agreed, "This commoner does not dare. Princess, after you."

The two spurred their horses towards Daizhou with excitement. For no real reason, the two did not allow their horses to gallop, simply trotting along. As they traveled, they talked.

Lin Tong said, "Wang Ji, you haven't told me how you learned your skills."

Although it was the same question as before, the suspicion in her eyes had mostly dissipated and gained a bit of curiosity.

The young man seemed to lose himself in thought. It was only when Lin Tong asked him again that he returned to his senses and respond with a smile, “To speak of this commoner’s master, he is an extraordinary talent that is rarely seen in this world. The things that he has learned and studied are marvelous and wondrous. This commoner was originally a servant boy at his side. However, I was able to learn some of his teachings superficially. A few years ago, his elderly self dismissed many of his servants. This commoner was one of them. Although, this commoner received not a few monies, I could not live off of those savings. After thinking it over, since this commoner does not have any other abilities, I could only rely upon my skills as a veterinarian to earn a living. However, in Southern Chu and Great Yong, a veterinarian can barely make a living. This commoner was not reconciled to becoming a lowly individual. After much thought, I cannot be an ordinary individual living on this earth. Therefore, I came to these barbarian lands. Here, livestock is many. Moreover, there are all kinds of difficult cases.[5] If I were to become famous there, my name would naturally resound throughout the world. In the future, I would need not have any worries about my livelihood. On the whole, this commoner’s luck was rather decent. After practicing medicine for several years, I did not make any mistakes. Although the barbarians are brave and strong, addicted to slaughter, they are deeply respectful towards veterinarians. As a result, this commoner was able to live a relatively carefree life there. As for being compared with Bo Le, it was only because this commoner was able to identify several rarely seen fine steeds. The news got increasingly distorted.[6] When it reached Princess’s ear, it inevitably became somewhat exaggerated.”

Thinking it over, Lin Tong spoke, “It seems that although you are young, you have been to many places. This Princess has some things to ask you.”

Wang Ji bowed while remaining mounted. He replied, “Princess, ask away. If this commoner knows the answer, I will definitely not hide it or refuse.”

Lin Tong asked, “Since you know of this Princess, then have you heard of my elder sister, Princess Jiaping, Lin Bi?”

Wang Ji nodded and responded, “This commoner has naturally heard that the Princess of Jiaping is a heroine amongst women and has repeatedly commanded troops to repulse the invasions of the barbarian tribes. Who within the entire Northern Han does not know of her illustrious name? I have heard that the Princess has already been engaged to General Long. They are truly an exceptional couple. Who would not envy them in this world?”

Lin Tong proudly exclaimed, “That’s right! My elder brother-in-law is a great hero. In this entire world, he is the only one worthy of being matched with my older sister. However, I have heard that others state the name of Princess Changle side by side with my elder sister. Don’t tell me that within this world, there is a woman capable of being compared with my elder sister? I don’t believe it. But, no one has spoken to me of Princess Changle’s affairs. Don’t tell me that you don’t know of her either.”

Seeing Lin Tong’s large, almond eyes, Wang Ji helplessly chuckled. Only when he saw Lin Tong’s expression become increasingly annoyed was he able to stifle his laughter. He replied, “You can’t blame them for speaking of her to you. This Princess Changle has experienced a bumpy road. In addition, she is from Great Yong. That is why no one has spoken of it to you.”

With excitement, Lin Tong blurted out, “So you know! Quickly tell me!”

After collecting his thoughts, Wang Ji explained, “This Princess Changle’s actual title is the Princess Changle of Ning. She is the eldest daughter of Li Yuan, Yong’s Emperor *Emeritus* . Her birth mother was the original Noble Consort who was advanced to the position of Empress three years ago. At present, she is the Empress Dowager. The Princess has a virtuous, chaste, and calm temperament. At the age of sixteen, she was married to Southern Chu’s Crown Prince, becoming his wife. After the Crown Prince succeeded, Princess Changle became the Queen. Simply for her status, she is incomparably respectable and honored.”

With misgivings, Lin Tong asked, “She is compared to my sister because of this reason?”

Shaking his head, Wang Ji grinned. “That is naturally not the case. Although

the Princess was of a respectable status, unfortunately Great Yong and Southern Chu were enemies. Although no one in Southern Chu dared to mistreat her, the Princess likely did not feel a hint of joy while in Southern Chu, spending years living in seclusion in the depths of the palace. Later, in the twenty-second year of Southern Chu's Xiande era, the King of Southern Chu changed the era name to Zhihua, though that has since been abandoned. In the twenty-third year of Xiande, the nineteenth year of your honored state's Rongsheng[7] era, that year, Prince Li Zhi of Yong led an army and captured the Southern Chu capital, bringing Princess Changle back to Great Yong."

Delight appearing on her face, Lin Tong replied, "This is for the best, since the Princess was not happy in Southern Chu. Although I dislike people from Great Yong, this action taken by the Yong Emperor was right and proper."

Wang Ji smiled once more. "Not long after the Princess returned to Great Yong, the King of Southern Chu was allowed to return to Southern Chu, dying on the journey back. As a result, the then Yong Emperor wanted to select another husband for the Princess. At the time, the then Yong Emperor had chosen three candidates. One was the son of Qin Yi, the General Who Suppresses Distant Lands, Qin Qing. One was the son of Prime Minister Wei Guan, Wei Ying. The last candidate was the Vice Supervisor of the Imperial Palace Guard, Xiahou Yuanfeng. Of these three, one was a general, one was a civil official, and Xiahou Yuanfeng was skilled with both brush and sword, having the reputation as the handsomest man in Great Yong. It is reasonable to say that regardless of how high the Princess's eyes, she should have taken a fancy to one of them."

Animatedly, Lin Tong asked, "Then who did the Princess choose?"

Wang Ji answered, shaking his head, "The Princess did not take a liking to any of them."

With astonishment, Lin Tong inquired, "She did not fancy any of them? Could it be that she would only fancy someone of my brother-in-law's caliber?"

"How many individuals can be like General Long in this world?" asked

Wang Ji rhetorically with a grin. “This commoner does not know whether the Princess was looking for a towering figure like General Long. However, the then Yong Emperor spoke, agreeing to marry the Princess to whomever she preferred, regardless of that individual’s identity.”

With curiosity, Lin Tong asked, “Then who did Princess Changle ultimately choose?”

“How could an emperor’s son-in-law be casually selected?” retorted Wang Ji, heaving a sigh. “Regardless of the dynasty, an imperial princess is a greatly honored existence. However, it would be extremely difficult for them to gain happiness. They would either be used as a tool to ensure the loyalty of a subject who has performed meritorious service or become a sacrificial victim in a marriage alliance. Princess Changle was sacrificed when she was sent to form a marriage alliance with Southern Chu. Although she had the good fortune of returning home, the candidates selected for her by the former Yong Emperor were all descendants from prestigious families. Although it was said that the Princess would be given the right to choose her husband, it is likely that if Princess Changle truly had someone in mind, he would either be executed by the Yong Emperor or would be stabbed in the back by the three candidates. Moreover, while marrying a princess would provide matchless glory and honor to a true, towering hero, it is likely a path for them to eventually be buried under kindness and tenderness. As a result, ultimately, Princess Changle did not say a single word, gritting her teeth and refusing to remarry. At the end, the former Yong Emperor issued an edict, betrothing Princess Changle to Wei Ying. However, Princess Changle would rather become a nun than marry again. Finally, the former Yong Emperor could only allow her to remain as a widow and not remarry. At the time, there were rumors that Princess Changle was grateful to the deep affection from her dead husband, the King of Southern Chu, and desired to be faithful to his memory.”

This time, Lin Tong did not speak, though disapproval showed in her eyes. Wang Ji understood that, with Northern Han existing on the northern frontier and the ease at which strong young men died, in order to maintain the population, it was not encouraged for widows to remain faithful to their

deceased husbands. Wang Ji did not lay this bare, continuing, “Afterwards, people guessed that the Princess’s vision was like a torch, able to see through an individual’s loyalty or treachery, as well as future prospects. As a result, she was unwilling to be married to any of those candidates.”

Lin Tong could not help but ask, “How so?”

“Princess has probably forgotten what happened in the twenty-first year of Rongsheng,” replied Wang Ji with a smile. “In the twenty-fifth year of Wuwei, Great Yong once experienced internal strife. At the time, Crown Prince Li An committed treason and rebelled. Then he was forced to commit suicide.”

Lin Tong nodded her head. “I remember. That year, elder sister became engaged to brother-in-law. However, brother-in-law was busy attacking Great Yong, causing the wedding to be delayed even until today.”

“That son of the Prime Minister, Wei Ying, participated in the rebellion,” added Wang Ji, “Afterwards, he escaped with the remnants of the Fengyi Sect, his current whereabouts unknown. He implicated his father, causing Wei Guan to commit suicide out of guilt. If it weren’t for the former Yong Emperor keeping in mind Wei Guan’s contributions, the Wei family likely would have suffered the nine familial exterminations. As for that Qin Qing, General Qin, he married the wrong person. His wife, the Princess of Jingjiang, Li Hanyou, was a treasonous rebel. She even tried to assassinate Princess Changle, though unsuccessful. This General Qin was ultimately killed by his wife. In addition, it is said that the near success of the Fengyi Sect’s coup d’état is because that General Qin was tricked by his wife.”

Wang Ji paused. Picking up the waterskin hanging from the pommel of his saddle, he took a draw. Lin Tong seized this opportunity to ask, “Then what about that Xiahou Yuanfeng’s character?”

After collecting his thoughts, Wang Ji responded, “How should I put it? This man has already become highly favored by the new Emperor. Although he is still the Vice Supervisor of the Imperial Palace Guard, it is rumored that the Prince of Yong has established a new department within the palace called the Bright Inspection Department. Xiahou Yuanfeng has been

assigned control of this new department. This commoner does not know what responsibilities the Bright Inspection Department has, but I have heard that the majority of Great Yong's civil and military officials would scowl when hearing that department's name. It may be assumed that regardless of what he actually does, Xiahou Yuanfeng is not a good candidate to be the Princess's husband."

Hearing this, Lin Tong expressed, "So that is the case … Princess Changle is truly intelligent. However, how can she be compared with my older sister just based upon this? I cannot accept it!"

Just as Wang Ji was about to respond, his expression suddenly changed. He stated, "Princess, behind, there are …"

Lin Tong was alarmed, intuitively looking back. A dozen or so meters away, she caught sight of a horsewoman dressed in an emerald-green attire with a yellow, embroidered phoenix cloak smiling at her. The horsewoman was probably over twenty years of age. Her appearance was extremely similar to that of Lin Tong's. The differences were that her long eyebrows extended to her temples. Her eyes were like that of a phoenix's and had a natural magnificent and graceful bearing that was far above that of Lin Tong's. Some fifty to sixty meters behind the horsewoman were eight other riders, four men and four women. All of them did not move an inch as they stood sat in their saddles. Seeing that Lin Tong had discovered her, the leading female horsewoman laughingly asked, "Tong'er, did you sneak out again?"

Lin Tong cried out in fear and shouted, "Elder sister …" before jumping off of her horse, throwing herself into the embrace of the horsewoman. The horsewoman reached out with her hands, coincidentally grasping onto Lin Tong's delicate hands. Borrowing her older sister's strength, Lin Tong jumped and landed in the same saddle as Lin Bi, gracefully seating herself in Lin Bi's embrace.

A brilliant and splendid grin on her face, Lin Tong said, "Elder sister, Tong'er only wishes to go see the crowds."

The horsewoman in emerald-green smiled slightly, a look of doting flashing across her phoenix eyes. Afterwards, her eyes fell upon Wang Ji.

Frightened, Wang Ji promptly jumped off of his horse. Prostrating on the ground, he saluted, “This commoner, Wang Ji, pays my respects to Your Royal Highness, the Princess.”

The horsewoman in emerald-green, the Princess of Jiaping, Lin Bi, stretched her hands out and gestured for Wang Ji to get up. In an amiable tone, she asked, “The rites are excused. Presumably, it is Tong’er who is seeking to learn about Princess Changle from you? We have heard your elegant and refined words, as if you were personally familiar with this matter.[8] It may be assumed that you are also who knows the inside story, correct?”

Pulling on her older sister’s arm, Lin Tong said, “Elder sister, he is the man whose stories abound amid the barbarians, Divine Doctor Bo Le. It was I who tangled him up with questions. Earlier, he even saved my life. Elder sister cannot blame him wrongly.”

Hearing Lin Tong’s words, Lin Bi’s eyes softened considerably, though still filled with some hesitation. Bowing slightly on her horse, she said, “So it is Divine Doctor Wang! I have heard that Divine Doctor Wang is skilled at treating horses. We have long heard of your famous name. As for those two barbarians who slipped through the net, We have already captured them. They were spies who originally planned on taking advantage of the bustling activity of the market to kill high-ranking military officers. Many thanks to Sir Wang for saving my younger sister.”

Wang Ji respectfully replied, “This commoner deserves not Your Royal Highness’s thanks. It was only the slightest of efforts and not worth mentioning. If there is nothing else, please permit this commoner to depart.”

Hearing this, Lin Tong somewhat anxiously pulled on her older sister’s sleeves. Without batting an eye, Lin Bi stated, “Sir Wang, just now, I heard you speak of the affairs of Princess Changle. We are also very interested. There is no harm for you to continue, allowing Us to also listen.”

Wang Ji smiled wryly. What identity did Lin Bi have? It was likely that she was well aware of Princess Changle’s story. However, since she had asked in such a manner, what could he do other than agree? Without any other

options at the moment, he leapt back onto his horse. The retinue continued unhurriedly towards Daizhou.

Note :

In China, there are multiple ways of saluting. In *jianghu* and common usage, a typical salute involves making a fist with the right hand, while either using the left hand to wrap around the right fist or the right fist is held against the open left palm . Females switch this around. It's also switched around to denote the start of an argument or fight. In polite society, salutes were made holding the two palms forward together, the fingers overlapping somewhat .

Footnotes :

代州, Daizhou – modern-day Dai County in Shaanxi Province

安庆公主, anqing gongzhu – Princess of Anqing, lit. Princess of Peaceful Celebration

嘉平公主, jiaping gongzhu – Princess of Jiaping, lit. Princess of Auspicious Peace

才貌双全, caimaoshuangquan – idiom, lit. endowed with both beauty and talents; fig. be both beautiful and accomplished

疑难杂症, yinanzazheng – idiom, lit. dubious or hard-to-treat cases; fig. difficult and rare cases

以讹传讹, yi'echuan'e – idiom, to pile errors on top of errors; fig. increasingly distort the truth

荣盛, rongsheng – lit. magnificent glory

如数家珍, rushujiazhen – idiom, lit. as if enumerating one's family valuables; fig. to be very familiar with a matter

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 2: Gossiping About Inside Stories

Volume 4, Chapter 2: Gossiping About Inside Stories

Lin Yuanting's family has garrisoned Daizhou for generations. In the thirteenth year of Eastern Jin's Zhenyuan[1] era, Yuanting was appointed the Imperial Inspector of Daizhou, remaining loyal to the Jin Dynasty. At the time, the Administrator of Taiyuan, Sheng, set up an independent regime in Shaanxi. The founded kingdom adopted the name, Han. Liu Sheng dispatched a letter, inviting Yuanting to surrender. As a loyal and devoted subject, Lin Yuanting refused to yield. In anger, Liu Sheng led an army and attack Daizhou, but he was unable to defeat the valiant and fierce Daizhou garrison. In the fourteenth year of Zhenyuan, the Yong Emperor Gaozu deposed the Jin Dynasty, establishing the Yong Dynasty. When Yuanting learned of Jin's fall, he offered sacrifices towards the distant Chang'an. He mourned inconsolably. Without alternatives, Yuanting submitted to the First Ruler of Northern Han, Liu Sheng. Touched by Yuanting's loyalty and righteous, and afraid of his valor and military skills, Sheng married his beloved daughter to him. After pledging his allegiance to the First Ruler of Northern Han, Yuanting conscientiously adhered to his duties, repelling the barbarian invasions and raids. Dozens of years were spent in this fashion, as the army and civilians of Daizhou bore the duties of defending against the barbarians.

Princess of Jiaping, Bi, was Yuanting's eldest daughter. She was taken as the adopted daughter of the Later Ruler of Northern Han, Liu You. She used superb stratagems, far surpassing her brothers. She was highly treasured by Yuanting. The army and civilians in Daizhou all knew her as the "Princess General."—*Yong Dynastic Records* , *Biography of the Princess of Jiaping*

Seeing Wang Ji furrow his brows slightly, restlessly sitting on his horse, Lin Tong shouted, "Hey! Don't get lost in thought! I'm asking you! You haven't finished speaking about Princess Changle! What happened afterwards?"

Wang Ji's body shook. Clasping his hands, he replied, "Reporting to the

Princess, to speak of Princess Changle, we will have to go back to the time of internal turmoil in Great Yong. At that time, the former Crown Prince colluded with the Fengyi Sect and surrounded the Hunting Palace. The Prince of Yong was able to escape the encirclement, but was unable to rendezvous with the army. At this critical juncture, Princess Changle stepped forward bravely and persuaded the rebels to temporarily postpone their attack on the then Emperor. Just as both sides were locked in a stalemate, the Princess acquired the Emperor's secret edict and Grand General Qin's token before thinking of a way to send these items out. Ultimately, an army was mobilized to rescue the Emperor, saving everyone and crushing the rebels. As a result, the then Emperor bestowed the title of Princess of Ning upon her."

Skeptical, Lin Tong said, "How can this be true? Surely, the rebel army would have completely surrounded the Hunting Palace, not allowing anything to leave it. Princess Changle isn't my elder sister, able to fight her way out of the encirclement alone. How was she able to send transmit the secret edict? You must be lying!"

By now, Wang Ji had fully calmed down. Regaining his previous calm bearing, he smiled and explained, "Your Royal Highness's fame has spread throughout the world. This lowly one admires her abilities greatly. That Princess Changle is a weak woman without the strength to even truss a chicken. How could she have slaughtered her way out of the encirclement? With this, we will have to mention another individual. That man is surnamed Jiang and named Zhe, styled Suiyun, and was a trusted strategist under the Prince of Yong. By himself, the man made all of the arrangements, not only sending out the secret edict to mobilize the army and also forced out the foremost of the three grandmasters of the era, the Fengyi Sect Master, Fan Huiyao."

Lin Tong's eyes brightened. She exclaimed, "Oh! That's right! I've heard people speak that the Fengyi Sect Master has already died. As a result, the State Mentor has disseminated the order permitting the disciples of his sect to freely come and go from Great Yong. The State Mentor is a formidable and terrifying individual. If the Fengyi Sect Master isn't as powerful as the State

Mentor, still, as the previously foremost of the three grandmasters of the era, did she really die? Is that Jiang Zhe's martial arts that great to force the Fengyi Sect Master to commit suicide? How is he related to Princess Changle?"

Her successive questions left Wang Ji smiling wryly. He asked, "Princess, what question should this commoner answer first?"

Lin Tong laughed mockingly, retorting, "Can't you just explain everything?"

"Princess, Jiang Zhe is and was only a weak and feeble scholar," related Wang Ji, "This lowly one has heard that his health has always been poor, frequently teetering on the boundary between life and death. However, the man's stratagems, courage, and insight are matchless in this world."

"This I do not believe," sneered Lin Tong, "How much courage and insight can a weak and feeble scholar have? This Princess has met many intellectuals and scholars. Once they are faced with weapons, they are either scared half to death or kneeling on the ground to surrender. Further, no matter how formidable that man is, can he be more formidable than my brother-in-law?"

Wang Ji gave an awkward look to Lin Bi. Smiling slightly, Lin Bi declared, "There is no need for you to avoid taboo subjects. This Princess also wishes to hear how an outsider views the situation."

Clasping his hand together to express his apologies, Wang Ji replied, "Princess, there is no way to compare the two. A scholar has a scholar's strength of character. A martial man has a martial man's courage and valor. General Long is the commander-in-chief of Northern Han's armies and is considered as one of the top two generals of the present age. His stratagems, courage, and insight are naturally outstanding. However, if he is put in another's shoes, General Long likely cannot achieve the things that Jiang *daren* did."

Glaring at Wang Ji, Lin Tong asserted, "If that is the case, then I will listen earnestly to your words. I will punish you if you exaggerate the facts!"

"Jiang *daren* was formerly a subject of my homeland, Southern Chu," began

Wang Ji, smiling faintly. “In the sixteenth year of Xiande, at the age of twenty, he became famous by passing the imperial examinations as the *zhuangyuan* . Considering the literary abilities of the world, none can compare to that of Southern Chu. By coming in first in the examinations, that Jiang *daren* can be said to stand at the pinnacle of the literary world. Moreover, in the present, there is no one who can match his unique talents.”

Curling up her mouth in a sneer, Lin Tong replied, “You’re bullying me for disliking studying! Elder sister, tell me, is he speaking the truth?”

Lin Bi’s eyes gazed off into the distance, as she answered, “He speaks the truth. Considering literary ability, Jiang *zhuangyuan* is truly second to none.”[2] Turning to Wang Ji, she said, “Please continue.”

In a soft voice, Wang Ji remarked, “If you were to ask me how his good is his poetry, this commoner is not educated and cannot explain clearly. However, this commoner is especially fond of a poem that he composed at a young age.”

So speaking, he cleared his throat and recitingly sang:

“The row of the oars brings the spring wind, the boat like a leaf on the waters,One single simple fishing rod in hand, one hook dangling from the line.An island covered with flowers, a bowl filled with merry wine,How happy and free I am, floating upon the endless waves.”[3]

Wang Ji sang passionately, his voice extremely clear and melodious. Everyone could feel as if they were transported to the endless, rippling waves of Southern Chu’s rivers and lakes.

Finished singing, Wang Ji continued, “That Jiang *daren* served as a Hanlin Academic for several years. After he gained the appreciation of Southern Chu’s Prince of De, he accompanied the army in the joint invasion of the Kingdom of Shu. This commoner does not know what stratagems Jiang *daren* presented, but there is one deed that is well-known to the masses. After Shu fell, Prince Li Zhi of Yong intended to bring its King back to Great Yong. With this decision, although on the surface, Great Yong and Southern Chu were dividing Shu evenly between them, Great Yong’s control over the King of Shu would give them a significant advantage. At the time, Great Yong

was like the sun at high noon.[4] Although Southern Chu had tens of thousands of troops, it was impossible for them to reverse the situation. It was Jiang *daren* , who sang a song during the banquet and forced the King of Shu to commit suicide. From that point on, the entire court praised Jiang Zhe as the most gifted scholar of Southern Chu."

In disbelief, Lin Tong blurted out, "I don't believe it! How can a poem hound a king to death? Elder sister, is he speaking the truth?"

Reaching out a hand to gently ruffle her younger sister's beautiful hair, Lin Bi clarified, "Everyone has a sense of shame. That King of Shu, facing the ruination of his country and the deprivations of his people, was to be imprisoned for the rest of his life. With such public ridicule, no wonder he chose to commit suicide."

Not really understanding, Lin Tong nodded her head. "If elder sister says it's true, then it must be true. However, that Jiang Zhe is truly malicious."

"Maybe so," remarked Wang Ji, smiling. "After returning from Shu, Jiang *daren* fell gravely ill. For two years, he did not attend court, staying in his home to recuperate. I do not believe that Jiang *daren* would have been pleased with himself over what he had done."

Lin Tong asked, "Oh! I remember! In the nineteenth year of Rongsheng, the Prince of Yong captured Jianye. For Jiang Zhe to become the Prince of Yong's trusted subordinate, he must have surrendered to the Prince of Yong at that point. He composed a poem to mock the King of Shu for surrendering and yet he himself was willing to bend his knee and surrender. It seems that his moral character is lacking! Is this what you mean by a scholar's strength of character?"

The expression on Wang Ji's face darkened, as he disclosed, "For the Princess to speak thusly, this commoner has no way of refuting. However, in this commoner's eyes, I do not blame Jiang *daren* . In the twenty-second year of Xiande, the King, unable to clearly see the situation, desired to advance himself to become Emperor. Jiang *daren* submitted a memorial directly criticizing this action. The King was so infuriated that he desired to execute Jiang *daren* . But recognizing Jiang *daren* 's reputation and his meritorious

contributions, the King only dismissed Jiang *daren* from office and made him a commoner. When the Prince of Yong invaded Southern Chu, he personally went to invite Jiang *daren* . However, Jiang *daren* refused to surrender and was ultimately forcibly taken back to Great Yong by the Prince of Yong. This commoner has heard that the Prince of Yong valued Jiang *daren* highly, exhausting all efforts to have him surrender. This commoner believes that Jiang *daren* 's decision to ultimately pledge his allegiance to Great Yong was because of the Prince of Yong's sincerity."

Unwilling to let Wang Ji off so easily, Lin Tong retorted, "Although it could be said that it was a subject seeking a worthy master, I do not feel that it is worthy of being considered as the strength of character of a scholar."

Shaking his head with a simper, Wang Ji stated, "Princess speaks the truth." Although he spoke those words, it was clear from the look on his face that he was only half-heartedly agreeing.

Just as Lin Tong was about to continue to interrogate him, Lin Bi spoke up, "Tong'er, do you not want to continue to listen?"

Only then did Lin Tong shut her mouth. The individual she esteemed most was her elder sister and brother-in-law. As a result, she was extremely unhappy that Wang Ji viewed that Jiang Zhe as being superior to her brother-in-law.

Wang Ji continued, "This commoner does not know what ideas and strategies Jiang *daren* put forward to the Prince of Yong. However, His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, greatly respected and treasured Jiang *daren* , treating him as a teacher, a friend, and a brother. Not long after arriving in Great Yong, Jiang *daren* was nearly assassinated by a former personal bodyguard of the Prince of De. Reportedly, on his deathbed, the Prince of De issued a secret order that Jiang *daren* must be killed if he were to pledge his allegiance to another state. Jiang *daren* was severely injured, saved from the brink of death. Were it not for the Prince of Yong exhausting all kinds of precious and rare medicines, Jiang *daren* likely would not have survived until the Medical Sage, Sir Sang, arrived. His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Yong, was greatly infuriated because of this incident. From that point on, it is said that Jiang *daren* 's guard was tighter than that of the

Prince of Yong's."

Startled, Lin Tong inquired, "Why was your Prince of De so ruthless? Although Jiang Zhe was disloyal to Southern Chu, his actions were pardonable. Moreover, the Prince of De was already dying. Why was he worrying about these things?"

Sighing, Wang Ji responded, "At the time, many people shared your thoughts. Regardless of Jiang *daren* 's actions, he had made significant contributions to Southern Chu. Although, he changed his loyalties to Great Yong, it was Southern Chu who first dismissed him from office. That personal bodyguard was unavoidably too obstinate.

"Moreover, Jiang *daren* is only a scholar. It is a bit ridiculous for the Prince of De to remember him on his deathbed. However, afterwards, during his escape back to Southern Chu, the assassin was killed at the banks of the Yangtze River by a servant of Jiang *daren* 's. The servant's name is Li Shun and he was originally a court eunuch in the Southern Chu Royal Palace. No one knows why he willingly became Jiang *daren* 's servant. At the start, no one paid him much attention. However, that Li Shun surprisingly had the ability to kill that assassin. Only then did everyone realize that he was a rarely seen expert. For such an expert to willingly serve as a servant to Jiang *daren* , that meant that Jiang *daren* definitely had some ability. Even then, though, few people paid any attention to Jiang *daren* , especially after he was nearly assassinated.

"Because of his poor health, Jiang *daren* spent half the year bedridden. Princess must understand that if a person's health is poor, no matter how capable he is, he is only able to employ twenty to thirty percent of his abilities."

Lin Tong was entranced listening to Wang Ji weave the story. She could not help but ask, "If that Jiang *daren* 's health was so poor, how was he able to advise the Prince of Yong? How was he able to hound the Fengyi Sect Master to death?"

Sighing again, Wang Ji answered, "This commoner does not know how Jiang *daren* was able to advise the Prince of Yong. I have only heard that,

after Jiang *daren* helped the Prince of Yong subdue the former Crown Prince's rebellion, he was already an emaciated wreck. Reportedly, his temples were already white and he would frequently vomit blood without end. Some had stated that Jiang *daren* would not live long."

Hearing these words, Lin Bi sighed softly. She stated, "With every breath in one's body, unto one's dying day[5] … it is a pity that the man is not in my Northern Han. Please continue."

"At the time of the former Crown Prince's coup d'état, Jiang Zhe was also within the Hunting Palace," added Wang Ji. "In addition, he was seriously ill. And yet, he was the one who saw through the Crown Prince's conspiracy, preventing the Prince of Yong from dying tragically at the hands of vile characters. As he was preparing to escape the encirclement, the Prince of Yong vowed to bring him along if he was to bring anyone at all. However, Jiang *daren* took the initiative to stay behind. The one who hid Jiang *daren* was Princess Changle."

After some thought, Lin Tong asked with curiosity, "Why would Princess Changle take him in? Could it be that they had a private love affair?"

After some hesitation, Wang Ji responded, "This commoner cannot confirm the veracity, but Princess Changle was formerly the Queen of Southern Chu, while Jiang *daren* was an official in the Southern Chu court. For years, Princess Changle resided in seclusion in the depths of the palace, while Jiang *daren* rarely attended court. Logically speaking, it would have been impossible for the two to carry on a love affair. Later on, there were some who stated that, after arriving in Southern Chu, Princess Changle was fondest of poems and essays. Jiang *daren* 's poems can be said to be unrivaled under the Heavens. As a result, it is possible that from Princess Changle's love of Jiang *daren* 's poetry, she grew to admire him. However, with the separation between their different social statuses, Princess Changle never spoke of her desire to wed Jiang *daren* to the then Yong Emperor.

"During the coup d'état, Jiang *daren* went to her to seek her help. Princess Changle would naturally save him by whatever means possible. Afterwards, Jiang *daren* devised a plan, having Princess Changle acquire the secret edict from the then Yong Emperor. That task completed, Jiang *daren* had the

secret edict delivered, leading to the mobilization of the army to rescue the Emperor."

With curiosity, Lin Tong inquired, "For Jiang *daren* to seek help from Princess Changle, could it be that he knew of the Princess's affection?"

Smiling, Wang Ji spoke, "This commoner is not clear about that. In reality, with the situation he faced, Jiang *daren* could only seek help from Princess Changle. Before, Princess Changle had been neutral in the succession struggle. If it was simply the Crown Prince and the Prince of Yong struggling, she may have continued to remain uninvolved, but as soon as the situation involved the Emperor, she could only take action. With the deep love between father and daughter, she would naturally not watch idly as the Crown Prince threatened her father."

"If that is the case, then how was Jiang *daren* not discovered through a search?" questioned Lin Tong, "How did he manage to send the secret edict out?"

With a look of veneration on his face, Wang Ji expounded, "Jiang *daren* 's hiding spot was likely quite secretive. In addition, the rebels did not take the weak and feeble scholar into account. As for the individual who went to issue the edict, this was the probably the most unexpected aspect of all of this. Xiahou Yuanfeng was initially a member of the Crown Prince's faction and had taken part in the coup d'état. Reportedly, he was extremely close with the Crown Prince's Junior Mentor, Lu Jingzhong. As a result, no one could have expected that he would use to the opportunity of issuing the Crown Prince's fake edict to bring the secret edict out of the Hunting Palace. Everyone knew that Xiahou Yuanfeng was originally not part of the Prince of Yong's faction. No one could understand how he was persuaded by Jiang *daren* . With him renouncing the dark and seeking the light, Xiahou Yuanfeng was able to make an enormous contribution to pacifying the rebellion. At present, he is heavily favored by the Yong Emperor. But it was Jiang *daren* 's abilities that are truly deserving of admiration. He had actually done the impossible."

Nodding her head, Lin Tong expressed, "So that is what happened … Now, quickly speak of how Jiang Zhe was able to hound the Fengyi Sect Master to

death. I don't believe that he has such ability."

Wang Ji's expression roused, he replied, "To speak of this matter, it is truly enough to cause everyone to be won over by Jiang *daren* 's abilities. Jiang *daren* is no more than a weak and feeble scholar. The Fengyi Sect Master would likely have been able to kill him with just a pinky. On that day, with the Fengyi Sect's treasonous plot failed, all of the rebels had been surrounded. Just as they were about to taken out in one scoop, the Fengyi Sect Master appeared out of the blue.[6] With a single person and a single sword, she stood in the middle of the audience chamber. Aside from the then Yong Emperor and the Princes, there were important ministers, ranking generals, and experts from *jianghu* . However, in the presence of the foremost of the three grandmasters, a mere woman, all bent their heads without exception. No one dared to face her directly and look her in the eyes. However, it was Jiang *daren* , a weak and feeble scholar, vomiting blood and on the verge of death, who actually stood up and spoke intense words that resounded powerfully within the audience chamber, preferring to die in glory than live in dishonor. The Fengyi Sect Master had no choice but to agree to remain behind as a hostage in exchange for the lives of her disciples. Who can compare with this kind of boldness?"

Lin Tong wished to say something, but she suddenly remembered the formal visit that she had paid to the State Mentor of Northern Han. That day, before his presence, she had not even dared to breath. With this experience, it could be assumed that for Jiang Zhe to scold the Fengyi Sect Master's misbehavior without fear of death, he truly had upright and unyielding strength of character. As a result, Lin Tong did not speak.

"There are few who know of what happened next," continued Wang Ji. "However, seven days later, the Fengyi Sect Master was surrounded and killed by Great Master True Compassion of the Shaolin Temple leading his sect's experts and Demonic Shadow Li Shun. And so, a once-in-a-generation grandmaster died filled with regret and hate."

Lin Tong asked, puzzled, "If that is the case then why is it said that Jiang Zhe hounded the Fengyi Sect Master to death?"

"This information comes from the Shaolin Temple," answered Wang Ji,

“Reportedly, the Fengyi Sect Master was already injured. Taking a divine pill given her by the Medical Sage, Sir Sang, she was temporarily able to protect her heart arteries. As a disciple of the Medical Sage, Jiang *daren* was a master of medicine. As such, Jiang *daren* used some methods to force the Fengyi Sect Master to exhaust her life force over that seven-day period. As a result, the Fengyi Sect Master was ultimately forced to fight with her life on the line. Great Master True Compassion is another grandmaster, while Demonic Shadow Li Shun was a peak-level expert. Combined with the Eighteen Arhats from the Shaolin Temple, how could the Fengyi Sect Master survive? In addition, it is said that it was Demonic Shadow Li Shun, taking advantage of the two grandmasters dueling, who mounted a sneak attack and grievously wounded the Fengyi Sect Master, forcing her to self-immolate herself and die. If the mark of death was not upon the Fengyi Sect Master, she likely would have been able to escape.”

Shocked, it was some time before Lin Tong could bring herself to say, “If that is the case, then this Jiang *daren* is truly formidable. However, that Great Master True Compassion’s actions were unbefitting of his status as a grandmaster. Working together and attacking from two sides … and even relying upon a sneak attack. How was this information spread? Wouldn’t it be too embarrassing?”

“At the time, when this commoner heard this story, I only took it as a joke,” replied Wang Ji, shaking his head. “I cannot hope to understand Great Master True Compassion’s intentions.”

Turning to gaze at her sister, Lin Tong blurted, acting like a spoiled child, “Elder sister, you must know! Quickly tell me!”

Unable to handle her younger sister’s nagging, Lin Bi could only smile and say, “What’s strange about this? That Jiang *daren* ’s thought processes are simply unfathomable. Great Master True Compassion had this matter spread, naturally causing everyone to become wary of Jiang *daren* . When the time comes, people would naturally be on guard when facing Jiang *daren* . It may be assumed that Great Master True Compassion was somewhat afraid that he would be next.”

Half-understanding, Lin Tong nodded her head and inquired, “Oh … then

Wang Ji, what happened to Jiang Zhe and Princess Changle?"

Wang Ji responded, "When the Fengyi Sect Master appeared, although the audience chamber was filled with heroic figures, almost everyone without exception bowed their heads, intimidated. Only two individuals, throughout this affair, showed no fear of death, gaining everyone's admiration. One was Jiang Zhe, Jiang *daren* . As a weak and feeble scholar, he directly scolded the Fengyi Sect Master for her misdeeds, causing the gathered heroes to blush with shame. The other person was Princess Changle. At the time, Jiang *daren* had been injured by the Fengyi Sect Master's profound internal energy, vomiting blood without end. Disregarding and fearless of the Fengyi Sect Master's sword pointing at her, Princess Changle personally went to check Jiang *daren* 's injuries. As she revealed her innermost feelings, she completely disregarded life and death, leaving all who witnessed it to sigh in admiration."

Li Tong cried out in surprise, as she asked, "Could it be that Princess Changle was married to Jiang Zhe? If that is the case, then no wonder everyone compares her with my elder sister, while that Jiang Zhe is comparable to my brother-in-law."

Smiling slightly, Wang Ji knew that for this little princess to speak in such a fashion, she had admitted that Jiang Zhe was truly formidable. Not baring his thoughts, he mentioned, "Although the Prince of Yong once asked the then Emperor to betroth the two and the entire court was moved by their deep love, ignoring the improprieties from their different statuses, the Yong Emperor refused."

In surprise, Lin Tong asked, "Why? Jiang Zhe performed such a great meritorious service and the two of them were willing. Why did the Yong Emperor refuse?"

Smiling, Wang Ji answered, "The justification given was that Jiang *daren* 's health was too poor, and the Yong Emperor was worried that Jiang *daren* would not be able to live long. Princess Changle had already lived a rough life. If her husband were to die again, wouldn't it be one disaster after another? With this reason given, even the Prince of Yong did not dare to argue otherwise."

“So that’s why,” uttered Lin Tong, nodding her head. “That’s reasonable. Did Jiang *daren* ’s health improve? Did the Yong Emperor betroth the two?”

“If that was the case, then it wouldn’t be considered as a legendary saga,” conveyed Wang Ji, continuing to smile. “Having made such a great contribution to Great Yong, Jiang *daren* was on the cusp of a meteoric rise in his career. However, at the same time the Prince of Yong was being anointed as the heir apparent, Jiang *daren* quietly left Chang’an, bringing along Demonic Shadow Li Shun. Reportedly, Jiang *daren* came and went completely honestly, sealing up and leaving behind all of the rewards bestowed upon him by the Prince of Yong, taking nothing with him. In such a manner, he departed into seclusion within *jianghu* . For someone of his talents and feats, he actually cared not the slightest for riches and honor, power and influence. Even those people who felt that there were blemishes on his reputation and integrity can only cease their criticism and sigh with admiration.”

A look of tremendous respect flashed across Lin Tong’s eyes, as she stated, “If that is the case, then that Jiang *daren* ’s character is truly unparalleled in this world. Wait a minute … weren’t you originally going to tell me why Princess Changle was capable of being compared to my elder sister? How did you stray from the topic?”

Wang Ji complained internally. *If I truly digressed, isn’t it because of your questions?* However, a smile remained on his face, as he answered, “Princess is unaware that although Jiang Zhe departed in such an easy and relaxed manner, he managed to take a person with him.”

Her eyes widening, Lin Tong asked, “Could it be … could it be that Princess Changle actually eloped with him?”

Wang Ji clapped his hands together. “Indeed! Princess Changle’s temperament is outwardly flexible and inwardly unyielding. Originally, when the Yong Emperor was forcing her to remarry, she would rather die than to obey. Now that the Yong Emperor was prohibiting her from marrying Jiang *daren* and with Jiang *daren* departing in such a manner, how could the Princess feel at ease watching him depart? Those two had exhausted their youths and heart’s blood for the sake of Great Yong.

Without any qualms, the two of them departed for the ends of the earth, wandering the lands free and unfettered, forming a loving couple, 'rather living the life of a pair of mandarin ducks than the life of immortals.'[7]

"Princess Changle had originally been advanced to the title of Princess of Ning, obtaining incomparable glory and honor. In addition, her mother was advanced to become Empress. As a result, she was not lacking in riches and honor. However, she ended up discarding everything, accompanying her lover to reside in seclusion in *jianghu* . This kind of amazing woman should barely be able to be comparable to Her Imperial Highness, the Princess of Jiaping." As he spoke these last lines, he gazed towards Lin Bi, caution filling his eyes.

Shaking her head, Lin Bi declared, "Princess Changle of Ning was able to accommodate both loyalty and filial piety, possessing outstanding conduct and appearance that values emotion while maintaining her character, disregarding power and influence, riches and honor. How can We compare to her? Tong'er, you were young before, as such Daddy and Mommy were worried that you wouldn't understand the true essence behind Princess Changle's story. In fact, it would have been detrimental to you. Today, since you have heard Sir Wang tell you of her story, I can tell that you have come to realize some of the principles. As such, I made no attempt to prevent you from listening."

Finished speaking, Lin Bi's gaze fell upon Wang Ji. With a subtle meaning behind her words, she said, "Sir Wang, you are still young and yet have such extensive knowledge. Truly hard to come by …"

Everyone's eyes fell upon Wang Ji, gaining a bit of suspicion and wariness.

Footnotes :

贞渊, zhenyuan – lit. profound chastity

首屈一指, shouquyizhi – idiom, lit. to count as number one; fig. second to none, outstanding

This is a poem by the last ruler of the Southern Tang state, Li Yu, set to the tune of the *ci* , "Fisherman."

如日中天, rurizhongtian – idiom, lit. like the sun at high noon; fig. to be

very influential

鞠躬尽瘁，死而后已, jugongjincui, si’erhouyi – idiom, lit. to bend to a task and spare no effort unto one’s dying day; fig. with every breath in one’s body, unto one’s dying day

从天而降, congtian’erjiang – idiom, lit. to drop from the sky; fig. to appear unexpectedly, out of the blue

This is a line from a poem by the Tang Dynasty poet, Lu Zhaolin, entitled “Chang’an: Ancient Theme.”

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 3: Dragon Flying in the Heavens

Volume 4, Chapter 3: Dragon Flying in the Heavens

Long Tingfei, hailing from an aristocratic family in Northern Han, was a splendid and extraordinary talent, uniquely capable in both strategy and valor, considered to be without rival in the world. The Later Ruler entrusted him with military command, never suspicious or jealous. Tingfei returned this trust with loyalty and dedication.—*Northern Han Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Long Tingfei*

Maintaining a calm expression on his face, Wang Ji declared, “This commoner has wandered the four lands. Although it cannot be said that this commoner’s knowledge and experience are extensive, I have learned all kinds of information in my travels. Although the Great Yong court has claimed that the Princess lives in seclusion in the depths of the palace because of the fright she endured during the Hunting Palace coup d’état, all kinds of rumors have abounded among the common people. Each and every one of those rumors have been vivid and seemingly realistic, filled with comprehensive details. When the coup occurred, this subject was in Great Yong and also heard many different rumors. As a result, my understanding is a comparatively a bit more detailed. This commoner is not a spy. Princess, please understand.”

Lin Bi’s gaze swept past him, as she replied, “Sir Wang is being overly anxious. Sir is proficient at identifying and treating horses, and has such extensive knowledge and experience. You are truly a talent that my Northern Han greatly desires! If Sir is willing to consent, We will honor Sir as an honored guest.”

After hesitating momentarily, Wang Ji declined, “For the Princess to regard me so highly, this commoner should by rights obey. It is only that this commoner is on my way to Penglai on the Eastern Sea. I’m afraid that I won’t be able to comply.”

Lin Bi was a bit startled, as she asked, “Why are you going to the Eastern Sea?”

“Recently, this commoner met an old friend who reported that my former honored master is in good health,” answered Wang Ji respectfully and cautiously. “And he has recently had a boy. As a result, this commoner is of mind to go congratulate my former master.”

With curiosity, Lin Tong asked, “Isn’t your former master an elderly individual? How could he have a son?”

Wang Ji was startled before he smiled and responded, “Presumably Princess has misunderstood. This commoner’s former master is still in the prime of his life. Previously, aside from a young miss, he had no other children. Only recently has he added a son. Next month is the young master’s first birthday. Hearing of this news, this commoner is intent on proceeding to join the celebrations.”

Lin Bi’s expression stirred. Although Wang Ji was young, his words and bearing were both far from normal. His former master must undoubtedly not be an ordinary individual either. Moreover, wasn’t she on her way to the Eastern Sea as well? If she were to have the opportunity to meet Wang Ji’s former master, it may be possible for Northern Han to gain another pillar of the state. Thinking of this, she smiled and stated, “What a coincidence! We have also the need to travel to the Eastern Sea. Is Sir Wang willing to journey together with Us?”

Surprised, Wang Ji returned, “Princess is an important subject of Northern Han. Why would you go to the Eastern Sea? Although the Eastern Sea is within the sphere of influence of the Marquis of the Eastern Sea, although the Marquis of the Eastern Sea stands alone,[1] who doesn’t know that in recent years, the Marquis of the Eastern Sea has already begun to reconcile with Great Yong? As a result, the Marquis has frequent dealings with Great Yong. If the Princess were to go to the Eastern Sea, it would likely be quite dangerous.”

Smiling, Lin Bi replied, “There is no harm. Sir presumably does not know that the beloved son of the Marquis of the Eastern Sea is getting married.

The invitations have been sent throughout the world. We are on our way to offer Northern Han's congratulations on the express orders of our King. Moreover, the rare treasures exhibition is also a grand occasion. We wish to see the rare treasures of exotic and foreign lands."

Hearing this, Lin Tong beamed from ear to ear. Anxiously, she stated, "Elder sister, I also want to go take a look at the rare treasures exhibit."

Lin Bi smiled softly, stretching out her hand to pat her younger sister in placation, preventing her from interrupting.

Wang Ji clapped his hands. "Oh! This commoner has also heard of the rare treasures exhibition. In the last two years, rich merchant Hai Wuya of the Eastern Sea has built massive ships that travel the seas to Korea, Japan, and the various lands of the Southern Seas, using the porcelain and silk manufactured in the Central Plains and Jiangnan to exchange for gold, silver, precious stones, and all kinds of regional specialties. Reportedly, the profits are over a hundred, no a thousandfold. Presumably this exhibition is being hosted by Hai Wuya, correct?"

"That's correct. Hai Wuya has taken advantage of the wedding of the beloved son of the Marquis of the Eastern Sea to host the exhibition," affirmed Lin Bi with a smile. "In addition, at present, there is no one in this world who doesn't want to cooperate with Hai Wuya and take a piece of the profits from the ocean trade monopoly? This exhibition is naturally the perfect opportunity for those individuals."

With misgivings, Wang Ji asked, "But who doesn't know that behind this Hai Wuya is definitely the Marquis of the Eastern Sea? It won't be an easy task to want a share of those profits. Further, every state has rich, huge merchants who are already working in cooperation with Hai Wuya, resulting in today's balanced situation. If the Princess desires to monopolize the profits, it is likely that neither Great Yong nor Southern Chu will be willing to allow that to happen."

Lin Bi gazed deeply at Wang Ji and replied, "As expected, Sir Wang clearly understands the affairs of the world. Hai Wuya has been in business in the Eastern Sea for five years now. During the first two years, he was no more

than minor businessman operating a sea shipping operation. The most recent two to three years, he has undertaken three convoys out into the open ocean. The ships that he used include dozens of massive ships that he personally designed with high cargo capacity, fast speed, and armed with newly designed weaponry. There were nearly a hundred merchant ships from other businesses accompanying Hai Wuya's ships and also escorted by the Marquis of Eastern Sea's warships. If Hai Wuya wasn't so capable, all of this would have been impossible. Just think, all of the major merchants from Great Yong, Southern Chu, and my Northern Han cooperated with him, allowing all three to derive benefits, ensuring that none of the three can make things difficult for him. We greatly admire this kind of scheming, courage, and insight. However, when there's a gain, there's a loss. For Hai Wuya to curry favor on all sides, although effective to this day, in recent years, the flames of war have increasingly wreaked havoc. Great Yong and Northern Han cannot coexist. As a result, Hai Wuya must reassess the situation. Rather than remaining neutral, would it not be better for him to choose a single master?"

The more Wang Ji listened, the more worried he became. Her telling him this kind of classified information made it highly impossible for him to disengage himself. From the corners of his eyes, he could see that the mixed gender bodyguards all had their hands on the handles of their sabers. Wang Ji could only feign ignorance, smiling and answering, "Princess speaks the truth. However, allow this commoner to speak disrespectfully. Hai Wuya can cease cooperating with any of the three countries, but he cannot cast aside the Marquis of the Eastern Sea. Without the Marquis's escort, it would be impossible for long distance seafaring merchant ships to arrive at their destination and return safe and sound. In addition, if one were to consider production capability, Great Yong and Southern Chu occupies the most populous and affluent parts of the Middle Kingdom. With the fall of Shu, Sichuan's resources and production were divided by the two countries. If Hai Wuya were to cooperate with only one country, it would not be surprising if he chose either Great Yong or Southern Chu. However, Northern Han is at a significant disadvantage. If the three countries are balanced, Northern Han would be able to get a share of the profits,[2] but if

Northern Han desires to monopolize the oceangoing trade, it is likely that your gains will not make up for your losses."

Disdain flashed across Lin Bi's eyes. She replied, "Sir speaks the truth. We also share the same thoughts. My Northern Han has been a disadvantage in the oceangoing trade. Sir has also misunderstood Our intentions. The one trying to monopolize those profits won't be my Northern Han, but Southern Chu. In the near future, Southern Chu will dispatch an envoy seeking to cooperate with Northern Han to threaten the Marquis of the Eastern Sea to reach an agreement, allowing the three parties to control the oceangoing trade, excluding Great Yong. The Northern Han court has dispatched Us to the Eastern Sea with the intentions of seizing this opportunity. If the Marquis of the Eastern Sea agrees, when the time comes, we can completely sever the profits that Great Yong makes from the oceangoing trade. This will only benefit us without doing us harm. If this is impossible, we will do our utmost to seize as big a share of the profits as we can."

Listening to her words, Wang Ji continuously nodded his head. He stated, "This commoner is from Southern Chu. Although I have been away from my homeland for years, I am aware that my homeland attaches enormous importance to commerce. Such intentions are inevitable and reasonable. I wonder who is responsible for these negotiations from my homeland?"

Lin Bi smiled faintly and answered, "We have heard that the envoy dispatched by Southern Chu to celebrate the wedding of the only son of the Marquis of Eastern Sea is the son of Lu Xin, the Duke Who Suppresses Distant Lands, Grand General Lu Can. Great Yong's envoy is the Prince of Qing, Li Kang, and the Vice Minister of Rites, Gou Lian. Since both sides are striving their utmost, my Northern Han cannot randomly send someone. We can only go and take this difficult job reluctantly. Sir Wang, since you are also going to the Eastern Sea, what harm is there for you to journey together with Us? Maybe there are things that We will be forced to rely upon your help."

Wang Ji respectfully consented, "This commoner was able to ride on several coattails to success. How dare I refuse?"

Lin Tong hastily exclaimed, "Elder sister, I want to go as well!"

Lin Bi glanced down, seeing the hopes and desires in her younger sister's eyes, excitedly bouncing up and down in the saddle, determined to go alone if she was refused. With a pampering and indulgent smile, Lin Bi allowed, "Fine. As long as you are obedient, I will bring you along."

Overjoyed, Lin Tong clasped her hands together into a prayer and swore to the Heavens that she wouldn't act willfully and cause trouble.

Lin Bi smiled shallowly without speaking. *Inconveniences would naturally be unavoidable, however this trip isn't a matter of life and death. On the surface, Southern Chu seems to be on the level, but when it comes to sharing profits, I have no intentions of relying upon them. This Wang Ji is a talent and isn't like other Southern Chu citizens who love leisure and hate labor. If this person has no problems, no effort must be spared to ensure that he remains and serves Northern Han.*

Wang Ji had different thoughts. Was it better to remain in Northern Han as an undercover agent or return to his master's side? It was difficult for him to decide. After thinking it over, he decided it was best to ask his former master's opinion. Recalling the letter that he had read yesterday and the implied jubilation[3] between the lines,[4] it could be assumed that his former master was in an excellent mood. This wasn't surprising. Accompanied by his beloved, completely unfettered,[5] and recently becoming a father of a son, presumably his former master had no intention of leaving his life of seclusion. However, over these last several years, Great Yong and Northern Han had been locked in a stalemate. It was difficult to tell how long his former master would be able to enjoy a life of leisure.

***

After staying a few days in Daizhou, Wang Ji followed Lin Bi and Lin Tong, beginning the journey to the Eastern Sea. Although they could cross over Mount Wutai and take a ship from Shandong, Lin Bi instead took a vast detour, first going to Jinyang.[6]

Jinyang was where Long Tingfei was stationed and was an important strategic city for Northern Han, easily defended and difficult to attack. It was further protected by the Shiling[7] and Chitang[8] Passes, keeping the Yong armies out. Over these last few years, when the time came for the fall

harvest, Long Tingfei would marshal an army and attack Zezhou.[9] and Zhenzhou, harassing the Great Yong borders as they were focused on the fall harvest. After learning the lesson from the Northern Han invasion in the twenty-fifth year of Wuwei, the Prince of Qi, Li Xian, adopted a scorched earth policy,[10] dispatching an army to strictly garrison the defenses and implementing the *baojia* system.[11] On the borders, the Prince of Qi set up a string of fire beacons, monitoring the movements of the Northern Han army. If the Northern Han army were to invade, they would immediately turn out the entire force to meet the enemy. Who would have known that Long Tingfei would dramatically change the tune? Relying upon the Northern Han's ability to stage long distance raids, able to come and go as the wind, he used guerrilla tactics to harass Great Yong's northern frontier. Great Yong's military clearly had more troops than Northern Han, but was completely stifled by Long Tingfei's tactics. Ultimately, the Prince of Qi decided to stick to the defenses and not sally forth, moving all of the border residents behind the defensive line, leaving behind a hundred *li* of open space. With this, based upon Great Yong's massive military and the scattered forts and strongholds, the Prince of Qi was finally able to ensure a stalemate.

Some thirty *li* from Jinyang, Wang Ji could see dust and smoke being kicked up in the distance. After careful observation, he could see the concentrated dust did not dissipate, knowing an elite unit of horsemen was approaching. However, being within Northern Han's borders and with Great Yong's cavalry strictly staying within its borders, he could tell that these horsemen were friendly. Presumably, they were dispatched from Jinyang to welcome and escort the Princess of Jiaping.

It wasn't long before everyone could see that the horsemen were dressed in crimson armor. At their head was a man wearing a battle gown the color of flames. As he wore the mask part of his helmet, it was impossible to see his features. However, from his vigorous body and his unstoppable,[12] imposing manner, one could not help but be entranced. A look of happiness appeared in Lin Bi's eyes, and she spurred her horse forward. Her personal guards who usually never left her side oddly halted and did not follow. Just as Lin Bi's lone horse galloped forward, the leader of that elite unit of horsemen, the red-armored general, also came rushing out. When the two

were less than ten meters apart, the two simultaneously leapt off the horses, holding out their hands and catching each other in midair. The two landed on the ground gently. Then the fiery red man embraced the woman in emerald green. That kind of strong, deep love and the intense joy after reuniting from a long separation infected everyone. All stayed silent, calmly watching the two.

After a while, the two figures separated. Holding hands, they walked over towards Wang Ji and company. Wang Ji and company all dismounted from their horses, standing at attention. When the couple approached, everyone could see the jubilation on Lin Bi's face, making her exceptionally beautiful beyond description. The red-armored general had removed his face mask, revealing a perfect and unblemished face. Combined with his tall, slim, and elegant build, his imposing height of six feet, his pair of eyes as dark as the night sky with a hint of bluish green, and his refined and formidable natural elegance, it caused everyone, including Wang Ji, to willingly kneel to pay their respects. In unison, they hailed, "Subordinates pays our respects to the Grand General."

Of course, Lin Tong did not kneel, instead gaily rushing forward and hugging the red-armored general's right arm. Excitedly, she called out, "Brother-in-law! Tong'er has missed you every day! When are you going to marry my elder sister?"

Although Wang Ji had long ago guessed that this red-armored general was Northern Han's Heaven-propping jade pillar, Long Tingfei, he could still not help but feel a burst of excitement. Meeting such a heroic individual was truly his great fortune. Recalling the heroes that he had met in his youth, he surprisingly discovered that none of them could match Long Tingfei. Even Prince Li Zhi of Yong and Prince Li Xian of Qi, although carrying the lofty auras of members of the imperial clan, were inferior when compared to Long Tingfei. Possibly the only one capable of comparing with this man was his former master who had bestowed him with everything. Recalling that scholarly, feeble, and delicate youth, Wang Ji could not help feel his heart heat up with passion. His unique characteristics, no matter who he was in company with, would cause everyone to subconsciously turn their gazes

upon him.

Hearing Lin Tong's questions, Long Tingfei's face could not but become somewhat embarrassed. He had been engaged with Lin Bi for two years now and yet they had still not wed. The fact of the matter was that there were plenty of reasons. To begin with, his first wife had died not long ago. Long Tingfei was unwilling to remarry so quickly. Second, in the last few years, Long Tingfei had been busy campaigning against Great Yong, exhausting himself. Naturally, his mind was not on marriage. The most important reason was that although Lin Bi was a woman, she was a master of strategy and tactics, outshining all of her brothers. In the last several years, because of Lin Yuanting's poor health, Daizhou's defenses and governance had all fallen into Lin Bi's hands. In order to prevent the northern barbarians from seizing the opportunity to conquer Northern Han, it was impossible for Lin Bi to take off her battle gown and become another's wife. As a result, the wedding had been delayed until now. However, these reasons could not be spoken aloud. As he was thinking of how to respond, Long Tingfei's eyes fell upon Wang Ji. Smiling, he walked over and greeted, "This must be 'Divine Doctor Bo Le,' Sir Wang, correct? I have heard Sister Bi say that Sir has arrived within my Northern Han's army. I am exceedingly pleased at your arrival! I have heard that Sir Wang is skilled at identifying and treating horses. Presumably, your skill at raising horses must be outstanding as well. If able to receive Sir's help, my army's horses will surely increase in quality!"

Wang Ji once again kowtowed, replying, "This commoner does not deserve such praise. The nickname of 'Divine Doctor Bo Le' is no more than a false reputation. Although this commoner hails from Southern Chu, I am in love with the lifestyle of Mobei.[13] If General does not scorn me, once Ji has paid a visit to my family, this commoner will return to serve General, doing my utmost until my dying day."

Long Tingfei smiled slightly. Using both hands, he helped Wang Ji to his feet, stating, "It would be our King's fortune if Sir Wang is willing to serve my Northern Han. Having wandered for many years, presumably you are accustomed to traveling. This time, accompanying the Princess to the Eastern Sea, I hope that you will do your utmost."

Saluting, Wang Ji acknowledged, “This one obeys and will definitely not fail this trust.”

Long Tingfei smiled softly again, gratification and joy filling his expression. Wang Ji could not help but feel his heart warm. Were it not for the plans that he had made earlier, he would likely serve this general to the death without any regrets.

The group continued onwards to Jinyang. As Lin Bi was a royal princess and Long Tingfei’s fiancée—and even though Long Tingfei did not want to make public her whereabouts, only holding a banquet with his trusted generals—his residence could not help but bustle with activity. At the liveliest moment of the banquet, Long Tingfei and Lin Bi disappeared without a trace. Everyone assumed that the two had gone off to chat privately after some time apart, only going so far as to share knowing looks and winks.

As everyone thought, Long Tingfei and Lin Bi were having a private discussion in an elegant study. However, the subject of their conversation was different from everyone’s expectations. They did not discuss their relationship. Instead, they were discussing military secrets.

Upon returning to his residence, Long Tingfei had changed into a set of robes sky blue in color. With a radiant smile, he gazed upon Lin Bi, stating, “Sister Bi, there is no need for you to worry excessively. You need only serve as a spectator. If Southern Chu, as expected, has the ability to persuade the Marquis of the Eastern Sea to exclude Great Yong, then we will naturally be able to get a part of the profits. Moreover, we can seize the opportunity to invade Great Yong. If Southern Chu fails, there is no need for you to intervene, so that you don’t get caught in the crossfire.[14] However, I do hope that you will seize the opportunity to form an alliance with the Marquis of the Eastern Sea. If we can attain the Marquis’s cooperation, Great Yong will become completely surrounded.”

Lin Bi’s long, shapely eyebrows furrowed slightly, as she replied, “Tingfei, you are clear about this … Great Yong has the most formidable military. Although you currently hold the advantage, as long as you are unable to inflict a crushing defeat upon the Prince of Qi, it will be impossible for you to

threaten Great Yong. Do you have any plans? This stalemate is not to our benefit. Although the people of our Northern Han are brave and strong, compared to Great Yong's power and Southern Chu's affluence, we do not have the ability to unify the world."

Long Tingfei rose to his feet. Walking to the wall and pointing at the map, he said, "Sister Bi, look. At present, the Prince of Qi is enduring silently and not sallying forth. Although our armies are without equal, we have not been able to damage Great Yong's strength in the slightest. Although our armies are brave and fierce, exhausting their abilities, we only have two hundred thousand troops. Although there are another hundred thousand troops in the area around Daizhou, they have to remain there to defend against the barbarian tribes and cannot be moved lightly. As a result, we cannot continue like this. At present, the reason why Great Yong has been able to hold us to a stalemate is because of the Prince of Qi's seasoned and experienced command. It may be assumed that after overcoming so many obstacles, Li Xian has already greatly improved. If we can eliminate Li Xian, when the time comes, I have full confidence that I will have no other opponent within Great Yong. As long as we are able to acquire Zezhou and Zhenzhou, Great Yong will be powerless to check our country."

Frowning, Lin Bi replied, "It would be best if that were the case. If we are able to eliminate Li Xian, unless Li Zhi, as Emperor, personally leads troops into battle, Great Yong has no one capable of blocking your armies. However, if Li Zhi were to take the field himself, Southern Chu can seize the opportunity to attack as well. When the time comes, Great Yong will face a war on two fronts, causing them to fall into dire straits. However, Li Xian is still an imperial clansman and is trusted by Li Zhi. It will be difficult to eliminate him."

"Having made contributions to shake a monarch's position, how many rulers are unsuspicious of their generals leading armies?" observed Long Tingfei, smiling. "No matter how skilled Li Zhi is, it will be inevitable that he becomes suspicious. Further, there's still a sore point between Li Xian and Li Zhi that remains. That year when Li An colluded with the Fengyi Sect to stage a coup d'état, although Li Xian did not personally participate, the

suspicions upon him were heavy. His consort committed suicide because of her participation. From the intelligence that we have attained, Li Xian was originally under house arrest. Due to my sudden invasion and without any alternatives, Li Zhi could only pardon Li Xian. Li Xian's temperament is quite strange, making several mistakes since. First, he refused Li Zhi's efforts to find him another wife. Last year, Li Zhi desired to find another consort for Li Xian, but was declined by Li Xian. Second, the son bore by the former Princess of Qi has lost his ability to inherit Li Xian's principality. If Li Xian is intelligent, he should show no interest in this son of his. However, he actually brought his son to the army encampments. With this, the Prince of Yong would inevitably become resentful. Speaking of this Li Xian, he is truly obstinate. Surely, he must understand the limits of decorum and yet is unwilling to bow his head and give in. Seeing him reveal these flaws, there is no need for me to be polite. Since last year, I have disseminated rumors claiming that Li Xian's steadfast defense is because he intends to use the army to establish his independence. If the target were someone else, with Li Zhi's magnanimity and insight, it would not be important. However, if the target is the one once suspected of treasonous activity and with Li Xian's lack of discretion, what do you think Li Zhi will do? In the last several months, Li Zhi has issued several edicts to Li Xian to soothe him."

Thinking it over, Lin Bi stated, "If it were another general, these soothing edicts would cause him to become filled with gratitude. However, with Li Xian, he will feel that the Yong Emperor has become suspicious of him."

"That is the indeed the case," replied Long Tingfei. "In response, Li Xian has submitted several memorials explaining the military situation in order to explain his true intentions. However, it is impossible to argue these kinds of things. Right now, even the city of Chang'an abounds with rumors. Presumably, Li Zhi is in a difficult position. If he does not recall Li Xian, it is likely that as the rumors continue to spread, Li Xian will be filled with dread. Even if he originally had no intentions of rebelling, such thoughts will be born."

"In reality, if Li Zhi is able to dispatch someone as a sufficiently suitable army supervisor," responded Lin Bi, "Everything will be calmed down."

Smiling, Long Tingfei explained, “How could it be so easy? This army supervisor must possess the ability to suppress the Prince of Qi and also cannot arouse the ire of the Prince of Qi’s subordinate commanders. Furthermore, he must also be Li Zhi’s trusted subordinate. At present, Great Yong does not have such a candidate. As long as this situation continues, regardless of whether to protect the Prince of Qi or to safeguard against the Prince of Qi from rebelling, Li Zhi will have no option but to recall him. When the time comes, without a capable commander-in-chief in command of Great Yong’s armies, there will inevitably be generals who cannot maintain the defenses and seek to attack. I can seize advantage of the opportunity and annihilate the Yong army.”

“I hope that you will succeed in one strike,” sighed Lin Bi. “Our Northern Han cannot sustain this kind of stalemate.”

Full of confidence, Long Tingfei declared, “Sister Bi do not worry. After I have captured Zezhou and Zhenzhou, our wedding cannot and should not be further delayed.”

Lin Bi’s beautiful face flushed scarlet, unable to utter a single word. Long Tingfei walked in front of her, grasping her delicate hands, stating, “I know that you cannot let go of the situation in Daizhou. It won’t be a problem. I’ve already thought things through. I, Long Tingfei, am not a short-sighted individual. As long as I am able to lead Northern Han to prosperity, what harm is there for us to be apart frequently?”

Lin Bi was touched. It was a while before she spoke, “Once you have annihilated the Yong army, let’s go report this to His Royal Majesty and my father.”

Overjoyed, Long Tingfei pulled this beloved, beautiful woman of his into his embrace. Under the wavering candlelight was the shadow of this couple. How could this feeling, this scenery, not leave one enraptured?

Footnotes :

独树一帜, dushuyizhi – idiom, lit. to fly one’s banner on a solitary tree; fig. to act as a loner, to stand alone

一杯羹, yibeigeng – lit. a cup of soup; fig. to get part of the profits, one’s

share of the action

喜气洋洋, xiqiyangyang – idiom, lit. bursting with joy; fig. jubilant

字里行间, zilihangjian – idiom, lit. between the words and the lines; fig. implied meaning, reading between the lines

无拘无束, wujuwushu – idiom, lit. free and unconstrained; fig. unfettered, without care or worries

晋阳, Jinyang – modern-day Taiyuan (太原), Shaanxi

石岭关, shiling guan – lit. Stone Ridge Pass

赤塘关, chitang guan – lit. Scarlet Dyke Pass

泽州, zezhou – modern-day Jincheng (晋城), Shaanxi

坚壁清野, jianbiqingye – idiom, lit. to fortify the defenses and raze the fields; fig. to leave nothing for the invader, scorched earth policy

保甲制度, baojia zhidu – the baojia system was created by the reformer Wang Anshi during the Song Dynasty to serve as a community-based system of law enforcement and civil control

如火如荼, ruhuorutu – idiom, lit. like wildfire; fig. unstoppable

漠北, Mobei – lit. north of the Gobi Desert, refers to what is now Outer Mongolia

池鱼之殃, chiyuzhiyang – idiom, lit. a fish caught in a pond suffering a calamity; fig. caught in the crossfire

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 4: Arriving at Binzhou

Volume 4, Chapter 4: Arriving at Binzhou

Jiang Yong's father was Jiang Wuya, garrisoning Xuzhou. During the Eastern Jin Dynasty, Jiang Wuya was appointed the Marquis of Yongning,[1] taking the older sister of the Gaozu Emperor, Senior Princess Ninghua, as wife. When Great Yong was founded, while Jiang Wuya and Gaozu were battling for supremacy, Jiang Wuya was seriously injured by an assassin, dying on the battlefield. Yong, seeing the strength of the enemy, under orders from his mother, took his father's former subordinates and fled to the Eastern Sea to become a pirate. Inheriting his father's noble rank as the Marquis of Yongning, he seized control over the Eastern Sea, using his might to shake the coastal regions. Everyone called him the Marquis of the Eastern Sea. Gaozu attempted to have him surrender, but he refused.—*Yong Dynastic Records* , *Biography of the Marquis of the Eastern Sea*

After departing from the Jinyang, Lin Bi and company traveled day and night towards southern Shandong, bringing a hundred or so personal bodyguards. The areas that they traveled through were the no man's land between Great Yong and Northern Han. As a result, Lin Bi and company changed into commoners' attire, disguising themselves as traveling merchants. The entire journey concluded without mishap. With ten days, they arrived at Binzhou. While Binzhou was situated on the border between Great Yong and Northern Han, it was in reality within the territory controlled by the Marquis of the Eastern Sea. When the marquis was formerly raiding the coastal regions, he used Binzhou to supply his ships. In order to ensure the safety of their merchant ships on the high seas, the merchants of Binzhou would secretly share information with the marquis, especially after Li Zhi had taken over the Yong government. The enmity and hostility between Great Yong and the Eastern Sea was gradually dispelled. The marquis no longer maliciously plundered and raided Great Yong's merchant ships, while Great Yong ceased its severe suppression of Jiang

Yong's forces. As a result, the Eastern Sea's power and influence grew significantly in Binzhou, especially after the long-distance oceangoing trade began. As a result, Binzhou became one of the largest and most important ports in the world. Through Binzhou, Northern Han and Great Yong sent an unending stream[2] of their products out on long journeys on the merchant ships in exchange for exotic countries' gold, silver, grains, and other products. As a result, both Northern Han and Great Yong desired to control Binzhou. However, before they were absolutely certain to succeed, no one dared to act blindly without thinking.

Trade between Southern Chu and Eastern Sea was conducted at Hangzhou. This time, Southern Chu—desiring to force the Eastern Sea to exclude Great Yong's trade, only trading with Northern Han in the north and Southern Chu in the south—had not come with kind intentions. If Great Yong intended to destroy everything, then it would be impossible for Binzhou to continue to serve as a port. When the time came, it would only be Southern Chu who could monopolize the profits. As a result, Lin Bi was not committed to Southern Chu's proposal. Of course, if Southern Chu were really to succeed, Lin Bi would definitely exhaust her mind to ensure that Northern Han controlled Binzhou. Although difficult, it was not impossible.

Passing through the gates into Binzhou, everyone was able to experience the welcoming, bustling aura of the city. Going back and forth were merchants with regional accents from throughout the world. Were it not for the rustling of the autumn wind, one would suspect that they had arrived at a flourishing city in Jiangnan. Nominally, Northern Han was an enemy country in Binzhou. As a result, there was naturally no official posthouse for Northern Han. However, someone had already made reservations for a courtyard at Binzhou's most famous and largest inn.

The inn's name was the Halcyon Inn. This name was extremely ordinary. However, at present, all of the Halcyon Inns in the world were owned by one master. Two years ago, the first Halcyon Inn opened business in Southern Chu's Jianye. Afterwards, branches were opened in all of the major cities in the world. This Halcyon Inn did not rely upon luxury to attract customers. In fact, its furnishings and decorations were known for their

simplicity and elegance. Although the inn's service was considerate and attentive, there were nothing special about it. Although one could enjoy famous dishes from all of the major cuisines of the world, compared to the dishes from renowned chefs, they were quite lacking. It would be reasonable to say that the Halcyon Inns did not have anything special that made them stand out. However, after the Halcyon Inn had opened numerous branch inns, merchants who frequently traveled the world were astonished to discover that each and every Halcyon Inn was the same. The inn's operation, the structure and layout of the rooms, the flavor of the food and drink, were almost practically the same. To these merchants who spent years on end away from home, the comforting similarities of the Halcyon Inns made them quickly consider the Halcyon Inn as their home away from home. Within each and every Halcyon Inn, they were able to enjoy a familiar feeling. In addition, the Halcyon Inn had another benefit. Once a customer had stayed at one of the Halcyon Inns, within a few months, all of the Halcyon Inns would know of the guest's needs and wants, arranging each stay—the rooms, the food, the service—to one's exact specifications, making a guest feel completely at home.

Of course, it was inevitable that there were those who were worried that the Halcyon Inn would have problems. However, each and every inn, aside from one or two managers, had a majority of local workers. After undergoing training, these servants would act according to the small pamphlets filled with regulations brought by the managers. If there were any violations, a servant would be immediately dismissed. As a result, each and every Halcyon Inn was essentially the same, while some had some small distinguishing characteristics in the details. This kind of operation was extremely easy for the local authorities to dispatch spies to enter and investigate. However, it was very difficult for these spies to discover anything. As a result, until now, no one knew who the Halcyon Inn's behind-the-scenes proprietor was.

The reason that Lin Bi selected the Halcyon Inn was not because of her fondness for this aspect, but rather because the Halcyon Inn had another benefit. Each room was separated from the others using flowers and trees, rock gardens, and winding corridors, offering the guests privacy and

security. If one rented one of the courtyards, then it would be even safer. The guest rooms within the courtyards, seemingly arranged irregularly, actually controlled all of the crucial points. As long as appropriate individuals were placed at each of the guest rooms, then they would naturally form a defensive circle, most suitable for the bodyguards of high-ranking officials and dignitaries to use. After staying at the Halcyon Inn once, many guests fond of luxury would grow fond of the Halcyon Inn. Moreover, although the Halcyon Inn was not particularly luxurious, its decorations and furnishings were refined and elegant, not degrading their social status.

After settling down, Lin Bi dispatched someone with her calling card to the residence of the Binzhou Prefectural Magistrate, Huang Wei. Huang Wei was nominally an official of Great Yong. However, in reality, he was a family retainer of the Marquis of the Eastern Sea, Jiang Yong. This was a fact that everyone was well aware of. Although Jiang Yong's influence had already extended all the way to Binzhou, Jiang Yong himself was not present in Binzhou. In order to attend the wedding banquet, one must first deliver one's invitation. Afterwards, the Marquis of the Eastern Sea would dispatch a ship to welcome the guest and carry him or her out to sea.

Lin Bi wanted to meet with the Southern Chu envoy before attending the wedding banquet. However, the Southern Chu envoy had boarded a ship from Hangzhou and directly headed to the wedding banquet, making it impossible for them to meet before the wedding banquet. As a result, Lin Bi could only let things happen.

When the Northern Han contingent had settled down, Wang Ji was lying in bed, finding it difficult to sleep. The entire journey, Lin Bi had kept a tight watch upon him. As a result, he did not have a way of communicating with his compatriots. Now that they had checked into the Halcyon Inn, if he remembered correctly, this would be the only way for him to communicate with his compatriots. If unable to contact them, obtaining his former master's directives, then how would he be able to pay his respects to his former master? In three days, it would be the twenty-eighth day of the ninth month, the wedding day of the Marquis of Eastern Sea's beloved son. And on the second day of the tenth month, it would be the first birthday for his

former master's son. What could he do? Wang Ji hesitated.

Just as Wang Ji was tossing and turning restlessly in bed, someone knocked on his door and stated, "This lowly one is here to deliver tea. Would the guest please open the door?"

Raising his voice, Wang Ji allowed, "The door is open. Come in!"

The door was pushed open, and an inn waiter dressed in azure and wearing a small cap walked in. As he closed the door behind him, he said, "Honored guest, our humble inn has prepared famous tea from various regions. I do not know if the honored guest has a particular preference, so as a result, I have brought some Longjing tea. If honored guest does not like it, I can replace it at any time."

Although the waiter said those words, his conduct was extremely strange. After setting down the teapot, he swiftly shed his clothes and took off his cap. Wang Ji was first startled before he noticed that the waiter had placed a jade pendant on the table. A look of joy appearing on his face, he began to undress as well. Wang Ji said, "Longjing is great. Oh, that's right. This one wishes to take a short nap. Be sure to not disturb me."

As he spoke, Wang Ji changed into the waiter's clothes and put on the cap. The two's figures were similar. Once their facial features were slightly hidden, they closely resembled one another. The waiter lay down in bed, covering his head with the blanket and pretending to fall asleep, while Wang Ji took the tray and walked out. He remembered his surroundings perfectly. Not saying a single word, he walked straight out of the courtyard. As he stepped through the doorway, he saw another waiter waiting for him. Wang Ji did not say a word, following behind this second waiter. After making several twists and turns, they arrived at an extremely well-hidden guest room.

Within the room was a man standing with his hands behind his back. Hearing a sound, he turned around. The two exchanged looks, barely discernible tears appearing in their eyes. Both of them took a step forward and clasped arms. The man lightly exclaimed, "Chiji! I haven't seen you for three years!"

Wang Ji, no, Chiji, replied, “Lü’er, having not seen you for three years, you’ve become increasingly steady. Is the young master well? Are all the brothers well?”

Lü’er opened his mouth to speak, but he did not know where to begin since there were a lot of things to say. Pulling Chiji down into a chair, Lü’er arranged his train of thought before responding, “The young master’s health has become quite good, frequently taking the mistress out onto the sea in a boat, enjoying their romantic surroundings,[3] arousing everyone’s envy. Right now, the little master is nearly a year old, while the young miss, Roulan, is vivacious and adorable. Accompanied and attended to by Lord Li, Supervisor Dong, and Head Maid Zhou, they are filled with boundless joy.”

Hearing all of this, delight lit up on Chiji’s face. He replied, “That’s great! Before the young master went into seclusion, he dispatched me to wander the barbarian lands. These last several years, I have wandered the world. I felt like I was no more than floating duckweed, moving swiftly along without any dependents. Now, I can finally return to the young master’s side. By chance, I even get to celebrate the little master’s first birthday. Truly making me elated!”

“Everyone agrees with you,” said Lü’e with a smile. “These last few years, I have been tasked with managing the Halcyon Inn, causing me to wander the lands. I only returned to Binzhou a few days ago. Seeing the young master’s face again caused me to immediately relax. When you were selected by the young master to be sent to the barbarian lands to investigate military intelligence and popular sentiment, all of us were originally concerned about you, afraid that you would be harmed by the barbarian’s cruelty. Who could have thought that you have not only returned safe and sound, but have also returned with the nickname, ‘Divine Doctor Bo Le?’ I have heard that the barbarians have esteemed you as one of their deities. I had expected that you would be too happy to think of home.[4] Who could have expected that you would still miss the young master? If the young master were to learn of this, he would definitely be moved and possibly not drive you off again.”

Picking up the teacup on the table, Chiji drank it in one gulp. He tranquilly recounted, “The barbarians are nomadic, often idling away their time. In late

autumn when the horses are fat, the barbarians plunder the Central Plains, killing and pillaging, performing all manner of evil deeds. We would naturally view them as vicious, ruthless, and barbaric. In reality, in the two years I spent in the barbarian lands, I found that the average herdsman was extremely kindhearted and guileless. After I arrived on the prairies, I met with danger several times, losing my rations and my horse. Each time, I was saved by the herdsmen. Although the barbarians are rough and uncultured, they are also unsophisticated by nature. Their emotions are written all over their faces. I was happier being with them. Unfortunately, there are not only herdsmen on the prairie; there is also nobility, composed of each tribe's leader and their families. It is these people who are filled with wild ambitions. In order to fight for women, gold, and silk, they not only raid the Central Plains, they also fight against one another. In those tribes, those herdsmen are no better than slaves. They perform arduous labor on a daily basis. In times of war, they need to go into battle. If they win, they naturally get a share of the spoils. However, if they lose, their wives, children, and property are snatched away by their enemies. As a result, all of them are brave and good at fighting, because victory and defeat are closely linked with life and death, honor and disgrace. In all honesty, even if they win, the spoils of war are mostly acquired by the nobility. They are only given some leftovers."

Baffled, Lü'er asked, "Since those herdsmen have to endure such a pitiful existence and they are brave in battle, why do they not resist?"

Smiling wryly, Chiji answered, "It is easier said than done to resist. Life on the prairie is arduous. It is extremely difficult for a single person to live by himself. As a result, these herdsmen are unable to separate from their tribes. In addition, by occupying the best habitats, the nobility is able to obtain the best horses and weapons. As a result, they are able to easily bribe the loyalty of the boldest and most ferocious warriors of the tribe. How are the most oppressed herdsmen capable of resisting? Moreover, regardless of location or time, as long as they are able to survive, how many individuals are willing to risk their lives?"

Hesitating, Lü'e voiced, "I have once heard that the barbarians commit all

kinds of crimes. But from your personal experience, I feel a bit sympathetic towards them. I'm afraid, however, if the young master were to hear your words, he would be infuriated."

"What kind of person is the young master?" asked Chiji rhetorically before calming continuing, "He will not blame me. In addition, I also wish to tell the young master that although those barbarians have deep-lying enmity towards the Central Plains I can see that they are divided between good and evil. When the Middle Kingdom is engulfed in war, the methods employed are just as cruel and merciless. Therefore, I desire to ask the young master why we cannot coexist in peace and instead must slaughter one another."

Lü'e claimed, "The young master will surely be able to allay your misgivings."

Nodding his head, Chiji cast aside the vexing misgivings in his heart. He asked, "Now that you are the owner of the Halcyon Inn and are very wealthy, naturally it is worthy of celebration! However, I have heard that Daoli is even better off."

"That's right," replied Lü'e with a smile. "Daoli sailed out into the open ocean twice, each trip traveling tens of thousands of *li* . The exotic treasures and regional specialties that he brought back left all who saw them dazzled. Truthfully, the best off is actually Hualiu. After that fellow's real identity was revealed, General Qin and the Elderly Madam did not blame him. With his identity revealed, there was no way for him to leave the capital. Ultimately, he became an imperial bodyguard for the Prince of Yong. I have heard that he is now Xiahou Yuanfeng's deputy in the Bright Inspection Department. If one were to consider his rank, he is the highest. It is a pity that Baiyi, Yulun, Shanzi, and Quhuang are all busy handling the Embroidered Union and the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets. They were not even permitted to come back this time by the young master."

Smiling Chiji declared, "What are you worried about? Once Great Yong unifies the world, we can spend the rest of our lives in leisure."

A look of longing flashed across Lü'e's eyes as he smiled. "Yeah, I truly can't wait for the day when the world is unified. When the time comes, there will

be no need for us to fight and kill. Oh, that's right, Chiji, why did you come with people from Northern Han? When the young master saw the report, he found it truly laughable."

"I had no idea that I would run into persons from the Lin family," answered Chiji, smiling wryly. "However, my luck this time was good, not only did I get the opportunity to meet General Long Tingfei, but I also met the Princess of Jiaping, Lin Bi, who has a similar reputation as Her Imperial Highness, Princess Changle. Alas, while they can truly be said to be a heroic couple, it is a pity that they are subjects of Northern Han. Oh, that's right. Does the young master have any instructions? Long Tingfei and Lin Bi both want me to join the Northern Han army. If the young master has issued the order, I am willing to become an undercover agent in Northern Han."

Lü'e shook his head. "The young master has said that both Long Tingfei and Lin Bi are unique geniuses of this age. Not only are they both resolute and firm, they are also incomparably intelligent. Unless a long time passes, it will be impossible for you to gain their trust. As a result, it would be useless if you serve as an undercover agent by their side. The young master has instructed that after you have accompanied them to the little Marquis's wedding banquet to leave using a pretext. Facing these kinds of people, the young master naturally has his own methods. That's right. The young master also wants me to tell you that you can't miss the little master's *zhuazhou* ."[5]

A cheerful look flashed across Chiji's face. He replied, "Please report to the young master that I, Chiji, will respectfully adhere by young master's orders. I will definitely arrive before the second day of the tenth month."

Lü'e nodded his head. "I have already made all of the arrangements. In a while, your substitute will have the waiter deliver oil for the lamp. You will take this opportunity to change places."

Chiji nodded his head. The weight on his mind lifted, he smiled and said, "I have brought some precious gifts for the little master. I will definitely arrive on the second day of the tenth month."

"Good. I have also prepared some gifts," replied Lü'e with a smile. "I'm

afraid that they won't be as novel as Daoli's gifts. He has just returned from a trip overseas."

Chiji responded, "I had no choice in the matter. However, my gift won't be excessively inferior. This was a gift of thanks given by the strongest tribal chief for treating his horse."

The two continued to converse for a short period of time before a servant came to report that the time was up. Picking up an oil lamp, Chiji returned to his guest room. Although Lin Bi had assigned men to keep the night watch, she had not prohibited the waiters from coming and going. Chiji was able to successfully return to his room without a hitch. The waiter substituting for him changed back into his clothes and noiselessly departed. Chiji lay down on the bed. It wasn't long before he fell asleep.

The next day, Lin Bi allowed everyone to go out and explore the city, only prohibiting them from provoking unnecessary quarrels. Wang Ji was pulled out of the inn by Lin Tong. Although he did not know Lin Tong's intentions, he understood well Lin Bi's intentions. At present, Lin Bi would absolutely not prevent him to leave the Northern Han contingent's sight. As expected, the personal bodyguard responsible for Lin Tong's safety was also given the day off by Lin Bi. Taking over his responsibilities were two of Lin Bi's trusted bodyguards. From what Wang Ji could observe, the martial arts of this man and woman duo was remarkable. Wang Ji knew that he did not have the abilities to defeat the two of them. It would be impossible for him to find the chance to escape. Lin Bi's behavior was truly cautious. However, having already made contact with his compatriots, Wang Ji freely accompanied Lin Tong in sightseeing the city of Binzhou.

Binzhou was originally a small coastal town. However, now it was a neatly laid out large city. A swarm of merchants were gathered within the city and all kinds of shops could be found everywhere. Each of the shops was packed with glittering jewels that delighted the eyes, a feast for all browsing. Lin Tong excitedly wandered the city, frequently attracted by all kinds of novel items. At her side, the two bodyguards kept their eyes upon their surroundings with their acute vision.

After walking for several hours, his hands filled with boxes and packages,

Wang Ji gazed at the still highly spirited Lin Tong with chagrin. He didn't know why, but this little princess handed all of her purchases to him. The two bodyguards only laughed at him, taking him to be a joke. Wang Ji naturally knew that they would not spontaneously help him, so as not to hinder their movements. However, when did he become the little princess's servant?

While Wang Ji felt aggrieved, Lin Tong had caught sight of a weapons shop. Although she was female, she had grown since childhood in the flames of war. She was especially fond of weapons and warhorses. As a result, she animatedly entered the shop. This shop was quite expansive. Its four walls were stacked and stocked with all kinds of weapons, including sabers, spears, swords, and halberds. All of them were high-grade weapons. At the center, upon a long table, were exquisitely manufactured daggers and knives. Included among them were several strange and peculiar designs. With one look, one could tell that they were not manufactured in the Central Plains.

With curiosity, Lin Tong walked over and examined the weapons, picking up a scimitar to take a closer look. This was a saber that was curved, including its scabbard. It was sheathed in a green-colored scabbard made from shark skin. The saber's hilt was made from a pure white ivory. The grip of the saber was pitch black and had delicate silk embroidery. The blade of the saber was in the shape of a crescent. Lin Tong pulled the scimitar from its scabbard. Seeing that the blade was as brilliant as the sun reflecting off of snow, Lin Tong's eyes lit up with attachment. At this moment, the middle-aged shopkeeper walked over. Waving his hand, he dismissed the shop assistant attending to Lin Tong. Gently laughing, the shopkeeper said, "Young lady, this is a scimitar that was acquired from Persia. It is capable of slicing any metal and chopping jade, most suitable for young ladies that train in martial arts to defend themselves. If young lady is fond of it, this lowly one is willing to sell it to you at a discount."

Holding the scimitar, Lin Tong walked over to a pile of wood to test the blade. Chopping down, the solid and aged wood was easily cut apart. Lin Tong was euphoric, asking, "How much for this blade?"

The shopkeeper promptly answered, “This scimitar was used by the Persian royal family. This lowly one does not deserve to raise the price on my own initiative. Three thousand taels of silver will be enough.”

“What!?!” Lin Tong was greatly startled. Although she had figured that this scimitar would not be cheap, three thousand taels was a bit too expensive, right? Although she hailed from a prestigious house and had the title of princess, the Lin family had spent generations garrisoning Daizhou. In order to train the army, money was spent like running water. In addition, the Lin family was known for its honesty and incorruptibility. As a result, Lin Tong did not have that much money on her. Sighing, Lin Tong set the scimitar back where it came from. If she were to really spend three thousand taels of silver on a weapon that she could not take into battle, her father would likely punish her. In low spirits,[6] she walked towards the exit. Lin Tong could not help but turn her head back several times to look, gazing upon that exquisite scimitar.

At this moment, a little girl, bouncing up and down in a vivacious manner, stepped in. She walked very quickly. Coincidentally, Lin Tong’s head was turned. As a result, the two bumped into one another. That little girl was young and light. With a cry of “*aiyah* ,” she fell backwards. Having trained in martial arts, Lin Tong was able to react immediately, reaching out to embrace the little girl. Glancing down, she saw that this little girl was about five or six years of age, her appearance beautiful, lovable, and charming. She had beautiful skin and clear and luminous almond eyes that were clever and astute. She radiated an extremely spirited and elegant aura. Lin Tong could not help but smile and ask, “Little sister, did you get hurt?”

Shaking her head, the little girl replied, “Big sister, do not worry. Lanlan did not get hurt.”

Lin Tong released her hold on the little girl. The little girl rushed over to the table, picking up the scimitar that Lin Tong was so fond of. Animatedly, she said, “Shopkeeper uncle, I brought money. Please sell it to me.”

Lin Tong’s gaze could not but stare at this little girl. This little girl surprisingly wanted to purchase this precious scimitar. What was going on?

The shopkeeper was in a somewhat awkward position. This little girl had come earlier wanting to purchase said scimitar. Naturally, he did not believe that this little girl would have that much money. As a result, although she had asked him to not sell the scimitar, he did not comply by the agreement. Blushing a bit with shame, he glanced at Lin Tong before amiably stating, “Little miss, this requires three thousand taels of silver.”

Immensely proud of herself, the little girl replied, “I brought the money. However, it’s being carried by someone else. Uncle Hai, Uncle Hai! Hurry up!”

In the wake of the little girl’s melodious and sweet-sounding voice, a deep and resounding voice boomed, “Coming, coming! Little imp, you ran too fast. Uncle Hai can’t catch up.”

Just as the voice was resounding in everyone’s ear, a man in azure robes walked in from outside. This man was over thirty years old. His appearance was refined and handsome. The only blemish was that his skin was bronzed, the skin of his face rough. With one look, everyone could tell that he was frequently under the sun. Although the man’s clothing was plain and simple, his bearing was calm and unflustered. The look on his face carried a faint majestic presence.

When the shopkeeper saw him, he was startled, recognizing this man. Smiling widely, he walked forward and said, “So it is Lord Hai who has come. Don’t speak of paying for it. This lowly one’s business is all because of your fortune. If the young miss likes it, she can simply just take it.” As he spoke, the shopkeeper was left to wonder when Lord Hai gained such a niece that he doted upon by his side.

The man smiled lightly and replied, “We’re both businessmen. How can I take advantage of you? This girl is the daughter of my best friend, always naughty and stirring up trouble. This time, she has taken a fancy to this scimitar. The money that she is spending is her own pocket money. This is the little girl’s own affairs. There is no need for you to worry about me. Charge her whatever it costs.”

The little girl pouted. “Uncle Hai is always ignoring others’ feelings and

doesn't help Lanlan bargain."

The man smiled faintly. "Who let you be so obstinate? What precious items does Uncle Hai not have? You are free to take anything you like. Instead, you have taken a fancy to this scimitar."

Lin Tong could not help but become curious from the lofty tone of the man's words. Pretending to look at the other weapons, she stayed behind to watch the lively scene.

The little girl angrily said, "How would that do? This is what Daddy promised me, allowing Lanlan to personally purchase a gift for little brother. If selected and chosen from Uncle Hai's collection, it wouldn't be Lanlan's gift."

The man broke out in laughter, replying, "Your daddy has never bothered about these things and yet you are so obstinate. Fine … Uncle Hai won't be bothered with you." So speaking, he took out a stack of banknotes and handed it over to the shopkeeper, stating, "This time, you've spent two years' worth of allowance and red envelopes. In the future, don't come to me to borrow money."

Immensely proud of herself again, the little girl replied, "There is no need for Uncle Hai to worry about this. Mother dotes on me dearly and will definitely give Lanlan pocket money."

At this moment, the shopkeeper had already placed the scimitar in an embroidered case, respectfully handing it to the man, going so far as to return some of the banknotes. He said, "Lord Hai, even if this lowly one had a heaven-reaching gall, I dare not seek profit from you. Would Lord Hai please accept this kindly?"

The man smiled and replied, "This isn't that major. You have brought merchandise back from distant lands. How can you sell at a discount? This niece of mine is fond of these exquisite objects. In the future, she will unavoidably continue to trouble you. It is enough as long as the price is fair." So speaking, he returned the banknotes back to the shopkeeper.

After thinking it over, the shopkeeper stated, "In that case, this lowly one will obey. Lord Hai, this lowly one has an exquisite object to gift the young

miss to play with." As he spoke, he had a shop assistant go into the back of the store to bring out a strange object made out of steel. When the object was pulled apart, it turned out to be an exquisitely manufactured foldable crossbow. The steel body of the crossbow was closely connected to the arms with a hinge, while an exceedingly sturdy string made from an unknown material was firmly attached to the crossbow's arm and body. When the crossbow was unfolded, it was only slightly bigger than the size of a palm, perfect to hide in the sleeve and use for self-protection. The shopkeeper said, "This was accidentally obtained by this lowly one. Because there is only this single one and its power is weak, therefore it was not put out to sell. Let it be a gift to the young miss to play with."

A look of excitement flickered across the little girl's eyes. Rushing forward, she snatched over the little crossbow, looking at it over and over for some time. Only then did she speak, "Truly exquisite. Uncle Hai, Lanlan likes it very much." Her glittering eyes were filled with entreaty.

The man smiled slightly. "Since it is his kind intentions, you can keep it." Finished speaking, he took the little girl's hand and walked out. The shopkeeper followed them out, seeing them off, beaming. It was clear that he was extremely happy that Lord Hai had accepted his gift.

Lin Tong could only guess that the departed man must be an important figure in Binzhou for the shopkeeper to be so deferential. As she thought, her eyes could not help but follow that man out, revealing hints of her curiosity. The man had long discovered that someone was watching him. However, because of his extraordinary status, it was not unusual for him to be the object of others' attention. As a result, he did not pay it any attention. However, as he walked out, he still took a look in passing. Strangely, when he saw Lin Tong, an odd grin appeared on his face, a hint of contempt flashing across his eyes.

Once the man and the little girl had departed, Lin Tong asked the shopkeeper, "Who was that person for you to flatter him so?"

The shopkeeper smiled and answered, "Young lady is an outsider or perhaps doesn't recognize him. He is the proprietor of the biggest shipping company in Binzhou. By himself, he controls the oceangoing trade. He is Hai

Wuya, Lord Hai.”

Lin Tong cried out in surprise. Rushing out of the shop, she discovered that Hai Wuya had already disappeared.

Once she had gone, the shopkeeper yelled to his shop assistant, “The one we have dealings with, young master Hai, is truly an astute individual. It is extremely difficult to take advantage of him. In comparison, Lord Hai has a generous and magnanimous character, only a bit cautious, not fond of social niceties. He is the most difficult individual to curry favor with. Surprisingly, we were fortunate enough to make such a profit. Quickly, send a letter to the owner. In two days, have the owner bring gifts and pay a visit to Lord Hai …”

Lin Tong stamped her foot and muttered, “Truly a pity. It would have been best if elder sister were here.” Finished speaking, Lin Tong was no longer in the mood to window-shop. Gloomily, she walked back towards the inn. Wang Ji smirked, a look of joy and longing showing in his eyes.

Footnotes :

永宁, yongning – lit. perpetual peace

源源不断, yuanyuanbuduan – idiom, lit. a steady flow; fig. an unending stream

花前月下, huaqianyuexia – idiom, lit. amidst the flowers under the moonlight; fig. romantic surroundings

乐不思蜀, lebusishu – idiom, lit. enjoying oneself to forget Shu; this is an idiom that speaks of Liu Shan, the ruler of Shu-Han, enjoying himself while he was a prisoner, completely forgetting his former kingdom; fig. indulge in pleasure and forgetting about one’s home and duty

抓周, zhuazhou – known as the grabbing test, it is the custom of placing a variety of objects before an infant on its first birthday to see which he or she picks up; this is used to help determine a child’s future inclinations and career

无精打采, wujingdacai – idiom, lit. dispirited and downcast; fig. listless, in low spirits

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 5: Having Common Interests

Volume 4, Chapter 5: Having Common Interests[1]

Hai Zhongying, with the pseudonym Wuya, was born in Jingchu,[2] hailing from a family that produced generations of scholars. But because he was the child of a concubine and had an outspoken personality, he was not liked by his father's wife. After his parents passed, Zhongying took some financial resources and traveled to Fujian, organizing a fleet of merchant ships and becoming rich and powerful. Zhongying's generosity and righteousness caused everyone to be filled with respect.

In the twenty-third year of Wuwei, Zhongying led a convoy to the Southern Sea,[3] running into pirates. His cargo was lost and Zhongying barely escaped with his life. At the time, the merchandise owners and the families of the sailors were either harassing him or advising him to change his name and hide from his creditors. Zhongying replied that he treated others with integrity. If he were to run away, then it would be impossible for his descendants to hold their heads up high. Even if he had to lose his family fortune, he would repay the debt. Afterwards, Zhongying made a comeback in the Eastern Sea. When negotiating with merchants and intermediaries, the negotiations would frequently be completed at once, each and every time adhering to the tenets of integrity.—*Yong Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Merchants*

Listening to Lin Tong's story, Lin Bi comforted her, "Tong'er, there is no need for you to feel regret. Hai Wuya is a character whose words carry enormous weight in Binzhou. It would be good if we had the chance to have a meeting with him. However, that man clearly has an intimate relationship with the Marquis of the Eastern Sea. It would be useless to only convince him. If the Marquis does not nod his head as well, no one will be able to make the decision that we need. Further, we have also made inquiries and discovered that it would be more useful to convince Hai Li than to convince Hai Wuya. To this day, Hai Wuya is a bachelor. More than two years ago, his

nephew, Hai Li came from the Southern Chu to seek shelter with him. Right now, Hai Li has become his uncle's most valued and important assistant. We have already dispatched men to investigate. Many years ago, the Hai family was destroyed by a flood. That nephew of his was left destitute in Southern Chu. During the time that he drifting about homeless, there was practically nothing that he didn't do. It was only more than two years ago that Hai Li learned of the existence of his father's younger brother and came to seek help from his uncle. Hai Wuya's temperament is magnanimous, completely ignoring the disputes that he had with his brother, taking in this nephew. Although Hai Li is young, his mind is meticulous and is extremely shrewd. Of Hai Wuya's business, he can make seventy percent of the decisions. I don't think that we will be able to completely exclude Great Yong. However, if we are able to persuade Hai Li to be preferential to us, we will reap enormous benefits."

Lin Tong was confused. If the only relative that Hai Wuya had was this nephew, then who was the little girl? To be doted on so much by Hai Wuya, her identity must surely not be ordinary.

However, Lin Tong also knew that it would be impossible to get an answer to her question. She thus asked, "Elder sister, there is another matter. Why do I feel like you're on your guard against Wang Ji? This is very different from your usual behavior."

Lin Bi sighed softly and replied, "Foolish child, do you really believe that Tingfei and I simply wished to recruit his services?"

Lin Tong was startled. "What, you guys?"

"Tingfei and I both are suspicious of Wang Ji's master's identity," explained Lin Bi with a smile. "Wang Ji is not only an outstanding horse archer, he also has literary talent. On top of all this, he is able to identify and treat horses. Even rarer is his bearing and mannerisms. To Tingfei and my status, he is neither servile nor overbearing. This entire journey, I have noticed that he is extremely familiar with the geography of the lands that we have passed. This kind of individual, no matter where he is, is impossible to be neglected and ignored. You know that he has spent years in Southern Chu and Great Yong. If so, why has he not enlisted in the army and not recruited?"

Lin Tong refuted, “He’s a veterinarian. Or maybe it’s because he does not wish to enlist or become someone’s subordinate?”

Lin Bi continued, “This entire journey, we have hastened along as if we are an army force marching. But he not only was not exhausted, he would frequently tell some jokes and talk about his experiences to amuse you. In addition, I can sense that he is not unfamiliar with military matters. It is clear that if he has never enlisted, then he must have been received similar training. Little sister, this man’s identity cannot be simple.”

Lin Tong’s face flushed before it paled. She rose, intending to go out, but was pulled back by Lin Bi. Lin Bi questioned, “What are you going to do?”

In a rage, Lin Tong answered, “I want to go ask him why he is acting like a spy. Why is he deceiving me … and elder sister?”

“I can tell that he is not deliberately deceiving you,” stated Lin Bi, shaking her head. “This entire journey, he made no effort to get close to you, neither did he made inquiries about military matters. I believe that your meeting was wholly unexpected. He does not have the deliberate intentions of being a spy. I am only saying that there are surely some question marks about his background. Seeing how he esteems his former master, little sister, what kind of individual can have a servant like this? Have you thought about this?”

Lin Tong’s heart palpitated with fear for some time, recalling each and every word that Wang Ji had uttered. Afterwards, her mind suddenly remembered the vigor and spirit within Wang Ji’s eyes whenever he talked about Jiang Zhe. She could not help but mumble, “Elder sister, you don’t think … don’t think … that his master is that person?”

Lin Bi smiled slightly. “Originally, I would never make this kind of baseless conjecture. However, with the fact that his master is also in the Eastern Sea, this has only aroused my suspicions. At the time, when Jiang Zhe went into seclusion, there was no one in this world who did not desire to find his whereabouts. If this kind of individual is not properly controlled, no one can rest easily. After carefully thinking things over, Jiang Zhe is no normal person. He was the Prince of Yong’s trusted strategist and also has Princess

Changle of Ning by his side. In addition, Princess Changle was originally the Queen of Southern Chu. Then, thinking of Jiang Zhe's conduct and behavior, it is impossible for him to go to Southern Chu. As for the Kingdom of Shu, it has been divided by Great Yong and Southern Chu, but he can't go there either because he forced its former King to commit suicide. If he were intelligent, it would be best if he never went to Shu in this lifetime. Beyond that, the present situation in Shu is unstable. Adopting the goal of reestablishing Shu, the Embroidered Union comes and goes as they please. If he were to remain in Great Yong, it would be impossible for him to escape the authorities' attention and notice. If he came to Northern Han, he likely fears that we would take him captive. In this enormous world, there is only one location that he can hide himself—the territory of the Marquis of the Eastern Sea.

"At present, although the relationship between the Marquis of the Eastern Sea and Great Yong has warmed, the Marquis has not yet sworn fealty to Great Yong. Jiang Yong has a stubborn temper. It would be unlikely for him to surrender and pledge allegiance before Li Yuan has died. Moreover, from the intelligence that we have obtained, Jiang Yong's son, Jiang Haitao was once bitten by a poisonous snake and was only saved by Jiang Zhe. Tell me, wouldn't that make the Eastern Sea the best place for Jiang Zhe to hide and live in seclusion? The Marquis of the Eastern Sea would definitely treat him as an honored guest, while Great Yong would not have to worry that he will become employed by another country. It is only that the Eastern Sea is vast and boundless, while our Northern Han is not adept at naval warfare. Furthermore, although Jiang Zhe is formidable, Tingfei and I do not fear him. As a result, we naturally have set this matter aside.

"However, after running into Wang Ji, I have guessed that his master is likely Jiang Zhe. Tong'er, tell me. What would happen if Jiang Zhe were to die in the Eastern Sea?"

Although Lin Tong was young and rarely participated in military decisions, she had grown up in a military household. As a result, she only needed to think for a moment before crying out in alarm, "It is likely that Great Yong's Emperor will be utterly enraged . The Eastern Sea and Great Yong will

become enemies, since Jiang Zhe died in Eastern Sea."

In a calm and unruffled tone, Lin Bi replied, "This by itself is easy to guess. The Yong Emperor, Li Zhi, is surpassingly wise. Sooner or later, he will realize Eastern Sea's innocence. Although he will be angry, it will not be enough to affect the ultimate result. The Eastern Sea's surrender to Great Yong will happen sooner rather than later. However, Li Zhi will use all the means at his disposal to pursue and assassinate Jiang Zhe's murderers. Our Northern Han and Southern Chu will be the biggest targets. When the time comes, if we were to proclaim responsibility, then Li Zhi will order the Prince Li Xian of Qi to immediately attack Northern Han. Although Li Xian has many troops and generals, there is a rift between him and the Emperor, and his soldiers and generals are filled with doubt. Our Northern Han will definitely be able to achieve a decisive victory, allowing our counterattack to penetrate through Great Yong's frontier. From this superior position, we will be able to ensure that Great Yong will be unable to confront us for many years to come. As for Southern Chu, they can seize this opportunity to attack as well. Tong'er, when the time comes, we will no longer have to live in fear and worry about our country being destroyed."

Seeing her older sister's glowing expression, the grief and joy in Lin Tong's heart increased. She naturally knew of the anxieties of her father, her elder sister, and her brother-in-law. If her elder sister's desire were to succeed, it would naturally be for the best. However, Lin Tong didn't know why, but she could not help but recall the stories that Wang Ji had told of Jiang Zhe. Surprisingly, she could not bear for such a man to die at the hands of assassins.

As if she understood her younger sister's thoughts, Lin Bi reached out and grasped Lin Tong's hands, stating, "Tong'er, you have already reached the marriageable age. Elder sister wants you to understand that it isn't that elder sister is fond of these kinds of actions. In war, who wouldn't exhaust all of the methods available? In these matters, even a tiny bit of mercy cannot be tolerated. Our four brothers are fierce and brave generals, but none of them are capable of serving as a commander-in-chief. Although you are still young and mischievous, I know that your intelligence and

cleverness are not any less than elder sister's. Tong'er, you must make all efforts. In a few years, once you can assume a heavy responsibility, elder sister can be at ease accompanying your brother-in-law in battle."

Lin Tong was stunned for some time. Suddenly, with tears falling, she embraced Lin Bi wept. "Elder sister, it's entirely Our fault, otherwise, there's no way that you wouldn't be married to brother-in-law. Elder sister, Tong'er will discipline myself going forward. In the future, when Tong'er becomes a Grand General, I will lead a magnificent army and protect Daizhou, ensuring that you and brother-in-law will not have any fears about trouble in your rear."[4]

Feeling sour, Lin Bi also wrapped her arms around Lin Tong. She whispered, "Tong'er, all of this is destiny. Our Lin family has never had a disloyal and unjust member. That year when Mom and Dad were in love, after Maternal Grandfather rose in rebellion and established Northern Han, Daddy would rather never see Mother again then betray the Jin Emperor. From the various uncles, I have heard that when the First Ruler's army surrounded Daizhou, the city had already run out of supplies. At this moment, the First Ruler dispatched a messenger informing Daddy that the Jin Emperor had been deposed. Hearing this news, Daddy was heartbroken. Although for the sake of Daizhou's troops and civilians, he had no alternative but to surrender to the First Ruler, Daddy still refused to be an official of Northern Han, using the pretext of convalescing from illness to remain at home. Afterwards, when the barbarians invaded and Daizhou fell into a desperate situation, the First Ruler personally came to ask for Daddy's help. For the common people and these lands, Daddy could only ultimately don his armor and go into battle. Afterwards, Daddy became a subject of Northern Han. These last several years, Maternal Grandfather and Uncle have trusted and relied upon our Lin family, never having a hint of suspicion or jealousy. Tong'er, our Lin family cannot watch our home and country be invaded and conquered! As a child of the Lin family, there is nothing that we cannot sacrifice for Northern Han and for the Lin family. Elder sister knows that you are quite fond of Wang Ji. However, you must remember that he is not from Northern Han, while you are a child of the Lin family."

Lin Tong's face became as pale as paper. She did not refute her sister's words. She had truly begun to fall in love with that cultured and refined, yet also courageous and resolute youth. She had originally believed that since Wang Ji had already promised her brother-in-law that he would stay in Northern Han, then it may be possible to keep him by her side. However, right now, Lin Tong finally understood that her first love, like the gorgeous and beautiful spring blossoms, had already died under the desolate autumn wind. Afterwards, she heard Lin Bi add, "This time, I have brought along two batches of people with me, overt and covert. If Jiang Zhe's whereabouts are discovered, they will assassinate him. As a result, our watch over Wang Ji cannot relax, even for a moment. You must be careful and ensure that he does not pass along any information. We will definitely be able to find Jiang Zhe by following him."

When Wang Ji pushed open the door and walked out of his room, seeking to eat in the inn's dining hall, he coincidentally saw Lin Tong walk out from Lin Bi's room. Just as he was about to call out to Lin Tong, he discovered that he couldn't utter a single sound. That charming and adorable little princess's entire body was glowing with an incomparably gorgeous radiance, almost as if she were another Lin Bi. Lin Tong's gaze also fell upon Wang Ji and smiled slightly. Even though that smiling expression was splendid, Wang Ji could feel his heart palpitate with fear. Lin Tong walked over. Beaming, she said, "Hello! Are you going to eat? I'm also going to eat. It's definitely a lot livelier there."

Wang Ji wanted to reply, but only felt that his mouth was too dry, and was incapable of speech. The little princess seemed both familiar yet unfamiliar.

***

On the twenty-seventh day of the ninth month, under the guidance of the Marquis of the Eastern Sea's subordinates, Lin Bi and company boarded a large ship, specially prepared by the Hai Family Shipping Company to carry all of the guests invited to the wedding banquet to the island occupied by the Marquis. There weren't that many guests aboard the ship. Only those of sufficient status were permitted aboard. Responsibility of entertaining the guests fell upon a trusted subordinate commander of the Marquis, Luo

Heng. Grinning from ear to ear, he stood on the deck of the ship, chatting with the guests, completely showing no signs of his nickname as the "Maritime Butcher."

When Lin Tong first boarded the ship, she was filled with excitement. However, once the ship began to move, she felt dizzy and sick. Although hating to part with the ocean scenery, she was forced by Lin Bi to go into a cabin and rest. Lin Bi remained at the bow of the ship, enjoying the gentle sea breeze, while paying attention to the other guests aboard the ship out of the corners of her eyes. There were many guests aboard, each with different social statuses and ranks. It went without saying, though, that the majority were merchants or businessmen. However, in order to have the qualifications to take this vessel, all of them were among the richest merchants in the world.

At this moment, someone spoke up from behind Lin Bi. "This commoner, Hai Zhongying, has heard that Your Royal Highness, the Princess of Jiaping, was aboard the vessel and has specially come to pay my respects. Princess, please forgive this commoner for being so presumptuous."

Lin Bi turned around. Beyond the defensive perimeter established by her bodyguards, she saw a middle-aged man in a set of deep blue robes. His appearance was cultured and handsome, his skin color bronzed from exposure to the sun. Following behind him was a youth with a delicate and elegant appearance. He had slightly tanned skin. It was clear that this youth's skin was originally fairly pale and had only been browned by exposure to the sun in the last few years. The appearances of these two were seventy percent similar, evidently blood related.

Lin Bi's heart leapt, as she replied, "So it is Hai Wuya, Sir Hai, and Hai Li, young master Hai! We are extremely honored to have the privilege of meeting you two gentlemen today." As she spoke, Lin Bi gestured with her hand, having her bodyguards allow the two to approach.

"This name, Wuya, is only an alias that everyone presented me with," Hai Wuya smiled. "Because it violates the naming taboo with the Marquis's father, I no longer use it. Your Royal Highness, the Princess, please call this lowly one, Zhongying. For Your Royal Highness to personally arrive at the

Eastern Sea, Zhongying should have come long ago to pay my respects. However, Your Royal Highness's status is majestic. This commoner did not dare to profane your presence. Your Royal Highness, please forgive me."

Lin Bi smiled slightly and asked, "Sir Hai, please do not stand on ceremony. What's going on? Why hasn't Sir Hai gone ahead to help the Marquis of the Eastern Sea with the arrangements for the banquet? Based upon Sir Hai and the Marquis's relationship, you should have gone to help."

Disdain flashed across Hai Wuya's eyes. "The little Marquis's wife-to-be is a daughter of Southern Fujian's Yue family. The Yue family and I have always had our grievances. In order to not wreck the atmosphere, I did not go to help." Speaking to this point, Hai Wuya seemed to return to his senses. Lowering his voice, he continued, "My rare treasures exhibition will be held on the thirtieth day of the ninth month. I wonder if the Princess is interested? This time, I have brought some rare treasures from overseas. There are some that may be of interest to the Princess."

As he spoke, Hai Wuya opened his palm. Hai Li, standing to his side and smiling continuously without saying a word, took out a red invitation and handed it over to Hai Wuya. Hai Wuya then handed the invitation to Lin Bi, stating, "Within is a catalogue of the precious and valuable objects being displayed. If Your Royal Highness is interested, you can take a look beforehand."

Lin Bi accepted the invitation, though she did not open it. She smiled and voiced, "As expected, Sir Hai is an excellent businessman. Southern Fujian's Yue family also has a significant merchant fleet. It may be assumed that the Marquis of the Eastern Sea wishes to gain an additional partner."

A hint of a sneer flashed across Hai Wuya's face, as he declared, "Your Royal Highness has misunderstood. The little Marquis's birth mother is from the Yue family. This marriage is merely to cement the old marriage ties with another layer."

At this moment, the sound of a little girl floated over with a laugh, "Uncle Hai, Uncle Hai! Take a look at what Lanlan has managed to hit!"

Hearing the voice, Lin Bi took a look, seeing a little girl in pink dress,

bouncing up and down vivaciously as she ran over. In the little girl's right hand was a small, exquisite crossbow. In her left hand was a seabird that had its head pierced with a compact crossbow bolt.

Under Lin Bi's nod, the bodyguards did not stop the little girl. In a good mood, she threw herself into Hai Wuya's arms. As if she was presenting a treasure, she held the seabird up for him to see.

Hai Wuya doted, "All right. If your daddy were to learn of this, he would definitely be happy. However, he probably will be even more overjoyed if you acted like a proper young lady."

The little girl retorted, "That's definitely not the case! Daddy has said that I can do whatever I like. In the future, Lanlan wants to accompany elder brother Li to see those barbarians with red hair and green eyes."

Smiling, Hai Li responded, "I dare not agree to this. Who doesn't know that the young master and the madame both view the little miss as a pearl without price? If I were to take you out to sea, at most the young master would ground you. I would likely be chased out."

Dejectedly, the little girl muttered, "If elder brother Li is fearful, then boo hoo … Last time, Lanlan wanted to find someone to deliver a letter to elder brother Jun, and no one dared."

Hearing the little girl speak in such a manner, Hai Li shivered inwardly, shooting a look of worry at Lin Bi. Lin Bi did not seem to have noticed anything, only maintaining a wide smile as she gazed upon the little girl. Only then did Hai Li relax. Apologetically, he said, "Princess, the child is naughty and mischievous, incurring your ridicule."

Lin Bi smiled. "There is no harm. What an adorable little lady. What is your name? Does young master Hai have a master and servant relationship with her father?"

Hai Li returned her smile. "She is called Roulan and is the beloved daughter of Hai Li's master. That year, when this commoner was wandering the world, I was taken as a student by my master. Afterwards, when I learned of my uncle's whereabouts, I came here. Receiving master's grace, Hai Li was able to gain my freedom. It is only that I do not dare to forget past

kindness. As a result, I still use the terms of master and servant."

Lin Bi gazed at Roulan's curious, wide eyes. Reaching out, Lin Bi picked Roulan up. Hai Li took the crossbow and seabird from Roulan's hands. Her hands free, Roulan instinctively wrapped her arms around Lin Bi's neck. Her heart warming, Lin Bi smiled and asked, "Little Lanlan, why isn't your daddy here?"

Hai Li frowned. Just as he was about to interject and answer for Roulan, he saw a warning look given by one of the bodyguards. At this moment, Roulan had already answered, "Daddy is not fond of being around so many people. Only with difficulty was Lanlan able to get mother to agree to allow Uncle Hai and elder brother Li to bring Lanlan to see the bustling scene."

Lin Bi continued to smile, as she asked, "Then what is Lanlan's surname?"

Roulan's eyes lit up, as she answered, "This, Lanlan does not know. Daddy is Daddy. Lanlan is Lanlan. Uncle Hai, what is Daddy's surname?"

Everyone who heard her response could not help but laugh. It was normal for a child to not know their parents' surnames. Lin Bi also laughed and let it go.

Looking at the vivaciously bouncing up and down little Roulan depart, Lin Bi thought, *Am I being too paranoid? Why do I think of that man whenever I meet someone new?*

Just then, the swift running little Roulan banged into a little boy. The little boy seemed to be younger than four, but was taller and more solid than Roulan. When the two children collided, the boy only stumbled, while Roulan fell to the ground.

Hai Li immediately strode over, helping Roulan to her feet. The little boy coldly glanced at the two of them before turning to leave. Roulan shouted, "Hello! You bumped into me! Why are you leaving before apologizing?"

Disdain flashed across the little boy's eyes, as he callously replied, "You are also at fault."

Roulan felt rage in her mind. Although she was young, all those who ran into her would either treat her as a treasure or with respect. The worst

treatment she would get was still quite good, filled with fondness. She had never before been treated so rudely. Her eyes reddened and she leapt towards the little boy. Grabbing onto the little boy's clothing, she screamed, "Quickly apologize to me!"

Just as the little boy was about to struggle free, seeing Roulan's tear-filled eyes, he could not help but soften. However, he refused to admit his mistake, saying, "You are also at fault."

After thinking it over, Roulan released her grip. "It was my mistake. I should not be running around. I'm sorry."

The little boy was surprised. Before he could even respond, Roulan had already placed her hands and on her hips, stating, "I have already apologized. It's your turn."

The little boy was truly stupefied. It was quite some time before he responded, "It was my fault."

Roulan smiled, immensely proud of herself. At this moment, a laugh and a forthright voice resounded, "Good skills! Lin'er, it's rare to see you apologize."

The little boy blushed. Lowering his head, he walked behind a man in brocade silk clothes. The man was over thirty years old. His appearance was handsome and straightforward. His dark eyes carried an icy light. Although he was joking, from his expression, one could not see a hint of delight on his face. This man was surrounded by a cruel and unfeeling aura. At the same time, however, it was filled with grace and calm. This man was like a tamed leopard, causing all those who saw him to anxiously believe that he would break out of his prison at any moment and tear his enemies into shreds.

The little boy's admiring gaze was upon this man. However, the man did not spare the little boy a single glance, instead looking indifferently at the little girl. Disappointment appeared in the little boy's eyes, as he lowered his head.

Alarm emerged from within Lin Bi. This man was definitely a dangerous character. When the man's gaze fell upon Lin Bi, a hint of a smile appeared on his face. Lin Bi trembled inwardly, unhurriedly stepping forward. She

was unwilling to lower her head in front of anyone, especially this man who was likelier an enemy than a friend.

The man impassively stated, “Princess of Jiaping, this is our first meeting. Truly, the stories do you no justice.”[5]

Lin Bi’s eyes flickered, as she returned, “Who would have thought that Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, would leave your army? Truly leaving Lin Bi be surprised and wondering.”

The man laughed heartily. “It is a hundred years of fortune that we share a ship. This Prince is truly fortunate. The Princess of Jiaping is truly a heroine amongst women, helping your father protect Daizhou and casting fear upon the barbarians. This Prince has come incognito to the Eastern Sea with the intentions of meeting the Princess. Since we have met, it is enough to comfort me for the rest of my life. Although Long Tingfei is formidable, this Prince does not care about him. However, this Prince is envious that he has you for a fiancée.”

Lin Bi could tell that although his words were indulgent, his gaze carried an aura of gloom. She suddenly recalled that although this man had a famous reputation of being a dissolute wastrel, after the events of two years ago, he had not only dismissed all of his concubines, but also restricted himself from sexual intercourse. Lin Bi could not help but feel pity for his deep and sincere attachment to his deceased wife. Sighing lightly, Lin Bi distantly replied, “Your Imperial Highness is praising me too much. Why has Your Imperial Highness come to the Eastern Sea? I have heard that your honored country’s envoy is the Prince of Qing, Li Kang.”

The man’s face darkened, as he calmly spoke, “This Prince and the Marquis of the Eastern Sea are cousins. This time, my nephew is getting married. This Prince has come as a private citizen to congratulate him. Chiji, why are you here? Where is your master?”

Footnotes :

同舟共渡, tongzhougongji – idiom, lit. cross a river in the same boat; fig. having common interests, sail on the same tack, pull together in times of trouble

荆楚, jingchu – refers to the original territory controlled by the state of Chu (楚国) during the Spring and Autumn Period (春秋时代) that became Jingzhou (荆州, Jing province) during the Han Dynasty; modern-day Hubei province

南海, nanhai – lit. Southern Sea, refers to what is now known as the South China Sea

后顾之忧, houguzhiyou – idiom, fears of trouble in the rear; fig. worries about trouble back home

闻名不如见面, wenmingburujianmian – idiom, lit. knowing somebody by their reputation can't compare to meeting them in person

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 6: Life and Death Without Regrets

Volume 4, Chapter 6: Life and Death Without Regrets

In the twenty-fourth year of Wuwei, Zhongying was frustrated with the Chang'an market, when suddenly on one day, he was paid a visit by a man surnamed Han. That man used a lot of money to pay off Zhongying's debt. Soon afterwards, Zhongying went to Binzhou, establishing the Hai Family Shipping Company. In the twenty-fifth year of Wuwei, the company received a significant investment, allowing it to build large ships able to travel to distant lands, traveling unhindered for tens of thousands of *li* . As a result, Zhongying received the nickname, Wuya, meaning "without end."—*Yong Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Merchants*

Chiji almost cursed Li Xian out. He did not expect that the Prince of Qi would actually speak to him. Even an idiot who saw him with Lin Bi and company would definitely not casually reveal his name. He did find it strange that the Prince of Qi would remember him; after all, they had only met in Southern Chu when Jiang Zhe had saved Li Xian's life. As he angrily and mentally cursed him out, Chiji smiled insincerely and addressed, "Reporting to Your Imperial Highness, this commoner has long been dismissed by my master. This time, I have come to the Eastern Sea to extend my congratulations. If Your Imperial Highness is interested, this commoner is willing to lead you to the young master."

Li Xian let out an "oh" before indifferently stating, "Your master's temperament is truly strange. Setting aside and not enjoying status and wealth, instead enjoying bringing trouble on himself."

After smiling, he continued, "Princess Bi, although our two countries are enemies, we are currently in the Eastern Sea. This Prince has no wish to cause any incidents. It is rare that I am able to set aside military affairs. I believe that Princess won't be unapproachable.[1] This Prince is of mind to invite the Princess to enjoy the ocean scenery with me. I wonder if I will

have the honor?”

Lin Bi withdrew her attentive gaze upon Chiji, ridicule flickering across her eyes. She replied, “To be able to meet Your Imperial Highness, although Lin Bi is only a woman, We are unwilling to let this opportunity to have a good conversation with Your Imperial Highness slip by. Your Imperial Highness, after you.”

A look of approval appeared on Li Xian’s face before following Lin Bi and walking to the bow of the ship. As he walked past Roulan, he paused. Smiling, he stated, “My Lin’er is a bit younger than you. Are you willing to play with him for a while?”

Bewilderment flashed across Roulan’s eyes. To this seemingly familiar stranger, she replied, “Okay! However, I’m the elder sister. If he doesn’t listen, I’m going to have to discipline him!”

Li Xian broke out in laughter. For the first time, an actual smile appeared on his face. He agreed, “Okay! Lin’er, you should have heard everything. If you don’t listen to her, she can discipline you on my behalf.”

Finished speaking, Li Xian walked to the bow of the ship to Lin Bi’s side. The two’s guards isolated them from the rest of the passengers on the ship, preventing their conversation from being heard by those unrelated.

Pleased with herself, Roulan told Li Lin, “Did you hear? Your daddy has said that you are going to be my younger brother. Very good! My little brother does not yet know how to walk. As such, I can’t teach and discipline him. Let me try it all out on you!”

Vexation appeared on Li Lin’s face. At this moment, his expression was finally like that of a little child. Roulan had started running to the stern of the ship, pulling on his sleeve. She made a big fuss, almost as if she had found a new toy.

Gazing out at the boundless ocean that seemed to merge with the sky,[2] Li Xian seemed to want to say something, but hesitated. Lin Bi flicked her beautiful hair and asked, “Why isn’t Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, speaking? Presumably Your Imperial Highness has some matters to speak to Us privately about? We have not avoided suspicion, treating Your

Imperial Highness with sincerity. Why has Your Imperial Highness remained so reserved?"

Li Xian suddenly chuckled. Lin Bi was startled, immediately realizing that there was a bit of innuendo in her words. Her face flushed and she added, "If Your Imperial Highness is unwilling to speak business, then Lin Bi can only ask to withdraw."

"At this moment, I presume that the Princess bears a heavy responsibility," replied Li Xian casually. "However, has the Princess thought about the consequences?"

The expression on Lin Bi's face sank. She coldly retorted, "I wonder. What is Your Imperial Highness referring to? We have come to the Eastern Sea as an envoy upon His Royal Majesty's order. I wonder what the consequences are? Could it be that the Eastern Sea is Great Yong's territory and cannot tolerate others from benefiting?"

Li Xian sighed. "I usually dislike being meddlesome. Since the Princess has come to serve as an envoy to the Eastern Sea, you are here on official business. I have come to attend the wedding banquet, meaning private business. As a result, regardless of what the Princess wants to do, I am disinclined to pay any attention to it. However, the Princess has been accompanied by quite a few subordinates. This Prince has received a secret report that several disciples of the Sovereign of the Devil Sect, Jing Wuji, should have stayed by General Long's side to protect him. However, in recent days, they have disappeared. I originally believed that General Long was worried about Princess's safety, thus allowing them to accompany you. However, today, I noticed that Princess does not have many people by your side. They are either protecting the Princess in secret or … the Princess has other intentions. Why have you hidden them?"

Lin Bi turned her head slightly, trying to hide the killing intent in her eyes. She smiled and responded, "Your Imperial Highness is overthinking things. It could be that they have been dispatched away by Tingfei. It could be that they are scouting around within your Great Yong's borders."

"Since the Princess is speaking in such a manner, then that'll be the case"

replied Li Xian, smiling slightly. “Binzhou is nominally controlled by Great Yong. In reality, it is under the control of the Marquis of the Eastern Sea. However, although the Marquis of the Eastern Sea’s strength isn’t small, it is primarily naval. As a result, Binzhou is where the Marquis of the Eastern Sea’s strength is at its weakest. After all, no one would be willing to use up one’s energy on a location that can be lost at any moment. As a result, for the Princess to dare to bring so many subordinates to Binzhou and, in addition, has a method of mobilizing them to follow your orders, they will be able to succeed with one strike. Based upon the horse archery abilities of the Northern Han experts, they can naturally retreat back within your honored country’s territory at any moment.”

His voice hardening, Li Xian warned, “This Prince only wants to caution the Princess. There are some people that can be offended. But there are also some people that are best left alone.”

Lin Bi’s mind was a mess. She was the only one who knew the reason why she had come to the Eastern Sea. Everyone else was simply following orders. In addition, she had only received permission to act at her own discretion. Why did it seem from the Prince of Qi’s words that he knew of her intent to assassinate Jiang Zhe? Although she had come up with the plan to assassinate Jiang Zhe, to actually be able to carry it out required that all kinds of conditions be met. She needed to discover Jiang Zhe’s hiding spot. In addition, she needed to have sixty to seventy percent assurance of success before she could execute her plan. Even right now, she could not say that the plan will succeed. Although she had brought many experts with her, most of them were needed to deal with possible moves by the Southern Chu contingent.

Seeing Lin Bi fall silent, Li Xian found it laughable. The reason for his trip to the Eastern Sea was specifically to meet with that man. He originally thought that with the vast and boundless Eastern Sea, without the help of the Marquis of the Eastern Sea, it would be impossible for him to meet that man. Who could have thought that the man would actually dispatch a messenger to meet him? That man had countless spies in Binzhou, knowing everything that happened within the city like the back of his hand. Even his sudden

arrival had been noticed by that man's spies, let alone someone who attracted attention like Lin Bi.

Li Xian did not find it strange that Lin Bi wanted to assassinate Jiang Zhe. Initially, when Jiang Zhe first arrived at Great Yong, didn't the Fengyi Sect and Southern Chu make attempts on his life? That kind of man living in this kind of world would naturally leave many unable to rest and eat in peace. Northern Han and Great Yong had waged war for years and were sworn enemies. Whatever they did would not be surprising. Moreover, Northern Han had its own outstanding talents who would realize that Jiang Zhe was the only individual capable of mediating the tense relationship between the Prince of Qi and the Yong Emperor. Didn't he come himself with this purpose in mind to help resolve his present predicament? However, Li Xian really wanted to know why Jiang Zhe had not set a trap, taking out all of these experts from Northern Han in one go, and instead, allow him to alert the enemy, forcing Lin Bi to give up the assassination plan.

Glancing at Lin Bi, seeing that her killing intent was still hidden and actually gaining some fear and misgivings, Li Xian lightly shook his head. He said, "Your Royal Highness should have seen a spider hunt, correct? Opening an inescapable net, arranging layers of ambushing troops, only waiting for the enemy to enter the net. When the enemy enters, only death awaits them. The man that Princess fears is most adept at arranging such traps. When you are thinking about dealing with him, you would have already fallen into his trap, almost impossible to retaliate. He has spent nearly three years in the Eastern Sea. This area is already his territory. It is impossible for the Princess's movements to be concealed from him."

Lin Bi grew frightened. At this moment, she finally realized the truth behind the rumors. Her activities were within that man's calculations; otherwise how could the Prince of Qi know of her intentions? However, at the same time, doubt grew inside. Could it be that the Prince of Qi had already had secret communications with Jiang Zhe long ago? Otherwise, how could the Prince of Qi know of these things? But why did the Prince of Qi come to warn her when Jiang Zhe held all of the advantages? Wasn't this purposely making things difficult for Jiang Zhe? The more she thought, the

more tangled and complicated it became. Lin Bi forced a smile and acknowledged, “Many thanks for Your Imperial Highness’s advice. We are only worried about my younger sister’s safety, thus brought some extra subordinates. Although the Eastern Sea is neutral, it is increasingly intimate with Great Yong. Your Imperial Highness cannot blame Us for taking extra precautions, correct? However, We are baffled. It can be assumed that that man has long lived in seclusion in the Eastern Sea. Why has the Great Yong court allowed him to live as a refugee like this? Isn’t it a pity that this kind of talent is not properly employed?”

Seeing the killing intent in Lin Bi’s eyes gradually dissipate, Li Xian cheerfully replied, “There is no need for Your Royal Highness to be overly sensitive. If the Princess were to meet that man, then you would understand how truly strange his temperament is. This Prince only met a messenger he sent when I arrived at the Eastern Sea. That man prefers to live a secluded and quiet life. If he can avoid matters of state and military, he will avoid them. In the boundless Eastern Sea and with the protection of the Marquis, although Imperial Brother and I both wish to invite him to come back, he is like a dragon, mysterious, appearing and disappearing at will. We have never been able to find his secluded location. Further, Imperial Father has yet to forgive him and relent. As a result, Imperial Brother can’t look for him with great fanfare. Beyond that, to this day, the Marquis of the Eastern Sea remains uneasy about Great Yong. Imperial Brother has not been willing to offend him. Were it not for the stalemate between this Prince and General Long, this Prince would not be so impulsive, coming so far to ask for his help even though I do not know where he is staying. Originally, this Prince intended to force the Marquis to lead me to him. However, because of Princess, this Prince was able to meet with that man’s envoy just when I arrived at Binzhou.”

Lin Bi’s mood gradually calmed. Originally, her plan to assassinate Jiang Zhe was a last resort. Since it had already been seen through, there was naturally no point in executing it. It was best to improvise. Perhaps she could acquire an even greater harvest. She glanced at Li Xian, amusingly thinking, *Wouldn’t it be more beneficial to assassinate him?*

Seeing the strange smile on Lin Bi's face, Li Xian immediately guessed what she was thinking. Laughing heartily without restraint, he stated, "There is no need for the Princess to be so heartless. To speak of it, General Long and I sympathize with one another. To fight to one's heart's content on the battlefield, isn't that one of the few enjoyable things in life? No matter how useful the results of crafty plots and machinations, their perniciousness is boundless. We are soldiers who use lives to determine victory and defeat. What need is there for plots and schemes outside of the battlefield? It is best to leave those things to civil officials. Why does the Princess not meet this Prince in a life and death battle with General Long? Wouldn't that leave all of us filled with elation, dying without regrets?"

Hearing him speak, Lin Bi was overwhelmed by emotion. This was her original intent. However, with Northern Han relying upon a single province to fight against the entire Central Plains, unable to make ends meet,[3] even if they won, Northern Han would likely be completely exhausted. Further, with the Prince of Qi focused on defense, adopting a scorched earth policy, where could victory be found? She glanced at Li Xian, seeing that his previous gloomy, grim detachment had been swept away, his countenance glowing with health and vigor. Within his smile was a heroic expression that seemed to look disdainfully on the entire world from the corners of his eyes. She could not help but think, *Fighting a bloody battle with this kind of man can truly be counted as one of life's most enjoyable events* . Arriving at this conclusion, a heroic spirit also burst forth from Lin Bi. In a loud voice, she ordered, "Bring wine!"

When two of Lin Bi's bodyguards heard her words, they promptly brought over two wineskins. Lin Bi, herself, took one of them, gesturing at the other to Li Xian. Li Xian understood and took the second wineskin. With a smile, Lin Bi declared, "Within is my Northern Han's best and strongest alcohol. The custom of the people of my Daizhou is to share a drink upon meeting the best of friends or the most admirable of enemies. If friends, then they must henceforth show absolute and sincere loyalty. If enemies, if they meet in a life and death situation, they will not be filled with hatred. Your Imperial Highness's heroism reaches to the clouds.[4] If Tingfei were here, he would surely invite Your Imperial Highness to a drink. Although Bi is a mere

woman, I do not concede anything to men, and would like to invite Your Imperial Highness to share a drink with me. When we meet on the battlefield in the future let us die without hatred and enmity."

Li Xian's eyes shone. It was some time before he replied, "The Princess is truly an outstanding woman and heroine. Brother Long is truly blessed. Good! I will drink this wine." Finished speaking, Li Xian unplugged the cork of the wineskin and began to gulp down the wine. This wineskin was big enough to contain half a catty of strong wine. Relying upon his drinking capacity and his profound internal energy, he drank the entire wineskin in one go. As the alcohol hit his stomach, Li Xian felt his head grow heavy. However, he still turned the wineskin upside down, signifying that he had completely drank it all.

Seeing this, Lin Bi smiled slightly. She also drained her wineskin in one go. Her only reaction was the ruddiness of her face. In a clear, bright voice, she recited, "Strangers meeting by chance become friends, to share these feelings on the battlefield in the years to come." Finished reciting, Lin Bi fell silent. Turning, she departed, heading for the hold of the ship.

Li Xian's heart shook, feeling the upright and straightforwardness of these two verses by Lin Bi, and also the deeper meaning. After reciting several times, he felt himself longing for the day when they would meet again on the battlefield in a life and death situation.

At this moment, behind Li Xian, he heard the sound of his personal guards crying out in alarm. Afterwards, an elegant voice spoke, "Hai Li requests a meeting with His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi."

Li Xian did not turn around, indifferently stating, "Allow him to come over."

Hai Li walked close to the Prince of Qi and respectfully addressed, "This commoner, Hai Li, known as Daoli in the young master's service, pays my respects to Your Imperial Highness."

Li Xian turned around and glanced at Hai Li, replying, "There is no need to stand on ceremony. What? Has Suiyun changed his mind about coming to see me?"

Daoli answered, “The young master has said that since Your Imperial Highness has come to the Eastern Sea, it is best to first pay a visit to the Marquis. Moreover, with Your Imperial Highness’s intelligence and resolution, it is best to not miss the Marquis of the Eastern Sea’s happy occasion. It will definitely not go smoothly.”

Li Xian smiled. “Suiyun is always so secretive. Fine … I am already satisfied that I am able to see him so easily. However, since something will happen during the wedding, wouldn’t it be too dangerous for the two children?”

“Your Imperial Highness, do not worry, the young master has already made arrangements,” explained Daoli. “This is the best opportunity to ensure that the Marquis of the Eastern Sea pledges allegiance to Great Yong. Both sides will have a way out of the embarrassing situation. Moreover, the young master has said that since everything has already been prepared, it is time to close the net. Binzhou was originally the only passage for Northern Han to communicate with the outside world. Once it has been closed, then Your Imperial Highness will be able to complete the glorious deed of conquering Northern Han. Your Imperial Highness must not miss this golden opportunity.”

Thinking pensively, Li Xian replied, “What? Suiyun also feels that the time is right? However, isn’t Northern Han flourishing right now?” While Li Xian spoke these words, he could see the awkwardness on Daoli’s face. Laughing in spite of himself, he said, “I’ve completely forgotten that we aren’t in the army encampments. All right, pass along this message to Suiyun. I’m completely convinced. It seems that Imperial Brother’s letter had reached the Eastern Sea long ago.”

Glancing at Daoli again, Li Xian voiced, “That Suiyun … you are such a talent and yet aren’t interested in getting titles for your wife and children. Why are you, Daoli, acting like a merchant? Why go through all the trouble? If you are interested, I will bring this up with Suiyun, allowing you to become an official.”

Daoli was startled. “This commoner has engraved upon my organs Your Imperial Highness’s deep affection. It is only that although this commoner holds no office, I feel that being able to lead a convoy of merchant ships to

distant lands tens of thousands of *li* away is far more delightful than anything else. It doesn't matter that I do not hold any office. Moreover, by following the young master, this commoner is also serving Great Yong. There is no need to hold an official post."

Hearing his words, Li Xian could feel at ease. From Daoli's words, he could tell that Jiang Zhe had no intention of remaining a spectator. It seemed that although Jiang Zhe had spent these last few years in seclusion, he made quite a few preparations. If that was the case, then it wouldn't be a problem to invite Jiang Zhe out to mediate between him and the emperor. Thinking about the nagging vexations that had plagued him these few years disappear like smoke, Li Xian could not help but beam with happiness.

At this moment, little Roulan's clear, soft, and moving voice came drifting over, sining:

"An illuminated horizon, on a deserted island.My heart follows the lone sail far, my body at ease as an oar.As the ocean spray dances in sunny shadows, the coral island swallows the sound of the rushing waves.Where the broad hazy plain meets the sky, a master crane crosses the sphere leisurely by."[5]

Hearing her sing, Li Xian could feel himself become carefree and relaxed. He thought, *Roulan's song must definitely be Jiang Zhe's new composition. 'An illuminated horizon, on a deserted island' must mean that Changle and him are living together with deep love and passion, enjoying endless pleasure* . Gazing upward, only seeing the mirror-like, bluish-green waves, the unending white clouds and the same colored sky and sea, Li Xian could feel himself grow tranquil.

He did not fear battle. He bitterly hated the political struggles within the court. At present, the entire Great Yong abounded with rumors, the majority of them directed at him. If they weren't talking about his intentions to rebel, they were talking about the emperor's intentions to settle accounts. He did understand that Li Zhi wouldn't be choosing this moment to get rid of him, if that was his wish. In the face of those rumors, it didn't matter that he, Li Xian, and Li Zhi in Chang'an did not believe in those rumors. The problem was that those important ministers of the court and the majority of the soldiers and generals of his army were filled with doubts. As a result, morale

and logistics were unstable. If this were to continue, then Long Tingfei could surely take advantage and attack.

After receiving news that the beloved son of the Marquis of the Eastern Sea was getting married, he suddenly was inspired to do something.[6] He knew that Jiang Zhe was living in seclusion in the Eastern Sea. This was something that both he and Li Zhi were well aware of. Although it was not confirmed, they were positive about it. Living in seclusion for three years should be enough time for him to laze about. If he did not come to help him at this time, then wouldn't he be too heartless? Regardless of what was said, he was now a son-in-law of the Li family. Surely, there was no way that he would watch as brothers fell into conflict, allowing another to reap the benefits?

Just then, the sound of a little boy's stammering singing voice could be heard. Presumably, Roulan was forcing Lin'er to sing a song. However, after hearing two verses, Li Xian felt a sharp twinge in his chest, his face paling.

"A pair of swans came flying by,Soaring from the southeast.In tens and fives, the others grouped,Spreading out as they begin the difficult journey.Suddenly illness and exhaustion struck,They could no longer fly together.He looked back at five *li* ,He faltered at six *li* .

I wish to lead you and go,But my mouth is closed and unable to speak.I wish to carry you,But my plumage is lost and ruined.

Our happy friendship has just begun,How mournful is it to part now.Hesitating and wavering towards gathered companions,Tears falling freely and unopposed.

Birdsong far removed from seclusion,Sorrowful wails like caws.The wounded sincere heart weeps blood,Shedding tears of farewell.

Seeing you fall to the northwest,How can I go the southeast?Remembering the former affection towards my beloved,And yet unable to speak of it in hiding."[7]

The miserable singing almost drove Li Xian insane. It was the song he sang while within his desolate tent, garrisoning the border, a dirge of endless tears shed under the moon. Just as he was about to weep, Li Xian suddenly

came back to his senses. He walked towards the cabins at the back of the ship, catching sight of Li Lin singing, his face covered with despair and heartbreak. Roulan gazed at him, her face filled with alarm and fear.

Before Li Xian could get close, Roulan had already covered Li Lin's mouth and said, "I'm not going to force you to sing. There's no need for you to feel so sad from singing."

Li Xian's heart shook. What did Li Lin understand at such a young age? The little boy had clearly seen his everyday mood and copied it. An intense self-loathing welled up from the pit of Li Xian's stomach. He had only thought to keep Li Lin by his side so that he wasn't harmed or bullied and humiliated by others. He did not expect that his own forlorn feelings had been completely observed by his son. In addition, as he was busy with military affairs on a daily basis, in order to protect this son of his, Li Xian was inevitably aloof and distant to him. Speaking from the heart, Li Xian did not know how to properly take care of this child. It could be assumed that over these last nearly three years, not only had he been suffering, the most miserable and helpless individual was this Lin'er, losing his mother and unable to obtain the love of his father.

At this moment, Li Lin caught sight of his father. He could not help but retreat behind Roulan. To him, his father was an icy tyrant. As for this little girl who was smaller in size than him, her soft and small, pampered body, and her fragrant scent, caused Li Lin to feel like he had returned to his once wonderful childhood, as if he were back in his mother's embrace.

With large strides, Li Xian walked over and picked up Li Lin. In an amiable manner, he said, "Lin'er, there is no need to be afraid. It is all daddy's fault. This time, daddy will bring you to see your auntie. Do you want to stay by auntie's side?"

A frantic look appeared in Li Lin's eyes, as he replied, "Daddy, please don't drive away Lin'er." His hands tightly gripped Li Xian's clothes, increasingly unwilling to relinquish his hold.

Li Xian smiled and said, "You silly child. Daddy is busy fighting a war and does not have time to take care of you. Your auntie is merciful and kind, and

will definitely treat you as her own. Moreover, there is also a little elder sister who will play with you."

With a suspicious look, Li Lin gazed at Roulan. Li Xian smiled and said, "Real smart! That's right! Call her elder sister Lan from now on."

A rarely seen brilliant smile appeared on Li Lin's face. Li Xian felt his heart ache, tightening his embrace around his beloved son.

***

When she walked out of her cabin, Lin Tong saw Chiji standing in the distance, in a daze. Her heart ached. She had already learned what had happened moments earlier. Since this man's real identity had been revealed, even if she wanted to pretend as if she didn't know, it would be impossible. She directly walked out, almost as if she didn't see Chiji. Chiji suddenly reached out and pulled on her arm, bringing her to a halt. Lin Tong's complexion darkened, as she said, "What are you trying to do?" However, her voice wasn't loud so as to not disturb anyone else.

Chiji apologized, "I did not deliberately mislead you."

Lin Tong callously retorted, "What did you mislead me about, 'Divine Doctor Bo Le?'" She sounded resentful and sorrowful.

After falling silent for a moment, Chiji replied, "I did not say a single lie, only not revealing that my former master was Jiang Zhe, Jiang Suiyun. Moreover, the promise I made to General Long to serve Northern Han was just a stop-gap measure. I have no intentions of staying in Northern Han to gather military intelligence."

Lin Tong apathetically conveyed, "I know that you did nothing wrong in this matter. The two countries are at war and we are only serving our separate masters."

Chiji felt a stab of pain from her icy gaze. He could not help but release her. Although he clearly felt that he had done nothing wrong, he still felt guilt bubbling up from within.

After taking several steps, Lin Tong stopped. "You do not owe me anything. It's my temper that is poor, taking out my anger on you. Wang Ji, are you

going to follow your master and attack our Northern Han?”

Chiji was startled. Resolutely and decisively, he replied, “I won’t.”

Startled for a moment, Lin Tong stated, “You are very suitable to serve as a scout. Moreover, you should also be extremely familiar with Northern Han.”

In a low voice, Chiji muttered, “The young master has never forced us to do anything that we do not want to. The world is so large. There are other things that I can do. In addition … in addition, I do not wish to run into you on the battlefield.”

Lin Tong laughed. Although Chiji could not see the expression on her face, he could tell that she was laughing uproariously from the way her shoulders shook up and down. However, the laugh carried a thick sorrow. After a while, Lin Tong stopped laughing. She said, “You are too cowardly. It would be better if you were like my elder sister and Prince Li Xian of Qi. Although sympathetic towards each other, they still have made an appointment to meet on the battlefield, dying without hatred and enmity. If you wage war upon us, I will kill you on the battlefield. When the time comes, I will naturally not hate you. As for your hate, what use is it then? An ignorant fellow without a brave and unyielding character. I, Lin Tong, will definitely not be lenient towards a coward like you!”

Chiji did not speak. Having undergone extensive and rigorous training as a spy, he understood what it meant for Lin Tong to tightly grip her hands into a fist and the shaking of her body. However, he did not step forward to console her, because he knew how wide the chasm was between them. Rather than wallowing in a beautiful dream, it was better to sever all the entanglements of emotion. This young lady, as beautiful as a flame, would become a secret that he would hide in his heart.

In silence, he walked out. Just as the door was about to close, he heard sounds of sobbing. With great difficulty, he ignored the temptation to turn and look. Perhaps he did not recall Southern Chu or Great Yong fondly. However, that figure, as deep as the sea and as straightforward as the wind, was his master that he could never disobey or betray.

***

On one corner of Penglai Island in the Eastern Sea, on a small harbor overlooking the sea with its back to the mountain, stood an elegant and hospitable little manor. It was known as the Tranquil Sea Manor. Although the grounds of the villa were large, there were few buildings and pavilions. The few that existed were hidden by greenery. It seemed like a paradise. Halfway up the mountain, within a small and exquisite red house, a handsome scholar in azure robes was practicing calligraphy. Upon the fine snow-white paper was a natural and flowing handwriting. Just then, a gentle voice somewhat concerned expressed, “Lan’er is still young and yet you allow her to go to that place without any worries. As a father, if you aren’t even a bit distressed, I, as the mother, am worried.”

The handsome scholar in azure set down the brush. With satisfaction, he gazed at his just completed work of calligraphy. He smiled and replied, “It is said that a warm, caring mother will spoil a child. These words aren’t false. You should not worry yourself about this matter. Do you think that I wouldn’t dispatch men to protect Lan’er?”

The beaded curtains moved slightly and the snow-white figure of a beautiful woman with a graceful demeanor walked out from the room within. Pouting playfully, she said, “You are always so mystifying.[8] Fine … I won’t argue with you about this. If something happens to Lan’er, I won’t spare you.”

The scholar in azure chuckled loudly. He reached out with his hands and pulled the woman in snow-white into his embrace. Smiling, he replied, “Okay, okay! If anything happens to Lan’er, I’ll allow you to punish me as you see fit.” As he raised his head, he revealed his delicate, handsome, and cultured appearance. His age was a bit difficult to ascertain. From his appearance alone, he was probably between twenty and thirty years of age. However, his black hair, although still as lustrous as his youth, bore the marks of age. His temples were graying. It would be normal if someone said that he was between forty and fifty. However, from his expression and bearing, as serene as a deep pool in the depths of the mountains, it would be enough for someone to say that he was around sixty or seventy years old. No one would doubt that he had reached the age of seeing through the

entire world and feeling the effects of changing temperature.

The woman in white, seeing his appearance, could not help but sigh softly. Supple and yielding, she snuggled into his embrace, not speaking a word. At this moment, the crying of an infant came noisily over. The two exchanged a look and giggled. Holding hands, they walked towards the inner room.

Footnotes :

拒人于千里之外, jurenyuqianlizhiwai – idiom, lit. keep somebody a thousand li away; fig. keep at an arm's length, keep a good distance from someone, unapproachable

水天一色, shuitianyise – idiom, lit. the waters and the sky are the same color; fig. the water and the sky seem to merge into one in the horizon

捉襟见肘, zhuojinjianzhou – idiom, lit. pulling on the lapels exposes the elbows; fig. strapped for cash, unable to make ends meet

豪气干云, haoqiganyun – idiom, lit. heroism reaching to the clouds

This is adapted from a poem by the infamous Chinese World War II traitor, Wang Jingwei (汪精卫), entitled *Composed in my Dream* (梦中作).

突发奇想, tufaqixiang – idiom, lit. suddenly have a thought; fig. to be suddenly inspired by something

This song is adapted from a Han Dynasty *yuefu* (poems composed in the style of folk songs), entitled *Pair of Swans* (双白鹄).

装神弄鬼, zhuangshennonggui – idiom, lit. dress up as a deity, playing the demons; fig. to mystify, to deceive people, to scam

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 7: Brothers Meet

Volume 4, Chapter 7: Brothers Meet

Hai Li, the second generation owner of the Hai Family Shipping Company, was Hai Zhongying's nephew. In the year that he turned sixteen, he accompanied Zhongying and traveled to the Southern Sea, visiting various countries. Afterwards with Zhongying busy, Li personally led the convoys south and then west.

The rise of the Hai family was partly a result of Li's efforts. Skilled in painting, Li personally drew twelve sea maps that were incomparably precise and are used to this day. In the seventeenth year of Great Yong's Longsheng[1] era, in order to reward him for enhancing the national prestige overseas, Li was anointed a marquis by Emperor Taizong. Although Li was bestowed with a noble title, his behavior did not change, sailing forth across oceans even at the age of seventy. In the fifteenth year of the Wenzong[2] Emperor's Zhaoning[3] era, Li took a nap in his cabin. In his dreams, he met an old friend. When he awoke, he smiled and stated that he was about to die. Burning incense and playing the zither, he died before finishing the song. He was seventy-one.

Li's character, although seemingly amiable on the outside, was distant and aloof inside. However, at the root of his character was honor and trust. When Zhongying died, his sons were still young. Everyone argued that Li would inevitably cease control of his uncle's assets. Li taught his younger cousins as his own children. After fifteen years, when Li choose the most capable of his cousins as his uncle's successor, everyone knew of his moral integrity.

Li was fond of studying the Confucian classics and was known as a scholar. Not marrying and having no children, everyone found this strange.—*Yong Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Merchants*

When Chiji walked into his cabin in a daze, he caught sight of Daoli within,

quietly gazing at him. Daoli impassively stated, “She’s no more than a little girl. How could have you taken her so seriously? You will very quickly forget her and she will very quickly forget you.”

With an aching pain in his heart, Chiji replied, “I also do not know why. Originally, I only considered her to be a troublesome little sister. However, the day before yesterday, when I saw her walk out of the Princess of Jiaping’s room, she suddenly became so dazzling. In the face of that kind of beauty, I could not help but feel distress. A phoenix bathing in fire, although beautiful, experiences bitter anguish. How unbearable it must be? At that moment, I finally understood. The entire journey, the reason I treated her half-heartedly, even going so far as to find her arrogant and willful, crafty and unruly, was because I knew that the day would arrive when we were ultimately going to part ways. As a result, I did not want to fall in love with her. I truly did not want to harm her. However, right now, she has still been seriously hurt, while I am powerless to help. Daoli, you can’t understand.”

Daoli stoically said, “No, I understand completely. One day in the past, when I was handling a matter on the young master’s orders, I once stayed within a small faction. I even got to know an innocent and kindhearted young girl. She fell in love with me, while I was also moved by her. However, ultimately, I personally killed her father and elder brother.”

Chiji’s heart stirred, remembering the important task that Daoli had handled before. After Daoli returned, he remained silent for several days, almost as if he had died. At the time, Chiji had also gone to console him, but discovered that Daoli’s eyes were completely lifeless. It was only after the young master secretly summoned Daoli that he recovered his previous spirit. From that point on, Daoli was dispatched to the Eastern Sea.

Hesitating, Chiji asked, “That girl ... is she … is she dead?”

A hint of unknowable sorrow flashed across Daoli’s eyes, as he answered, “At the time, I also thought to allow her to live, to allow her to hide in a remote and desolate place, thus not affecting the young master’s plans. However, I understood that if she were to remain alive, she would very likely fall into others’ hands, becoming a tool used by others to deal with us. Moreover, she had seen me kill her father and elder brother with her own

eyes. I did not have any idea what lengths she would go to in order to avenge that kind of grievous hatred. As a result, I personally killed her. I had gone on this mission filled with malice and knew of this conclusion from the beginning. However, I still fell into her constant affection. This was my mistake. Therefore, I must personally rectify this mistake. You are also the same. As long as you are able to kill her with your own hands, you can eliminate the malignant tumor in your heart. As such, you must go to Northern Han, otherwise you will never be happy in the rest of your life."

Chiji was silent for some time before he said, "I understand the meaning of your words. You personally killed your beloved in order to not harbor resentment against the young master and your comrades who have been through life and death with you. What you say is true. She is the same as her elder sister, both heroines amongst women. The day that she dies will surely be comparable to the descent of a meteorite, passing away at her most splendid and brilliant. If I cannot witness it with my own eyes, my entire life will be filled with remorse. I will ask the young master to serve in the army in the northern campaign. However, I will not allow her to learn that I am also on the battlefield. It is enough that I alone suffer this pain."

"It is best that you understand," expressed Daoli distantly. "Now that your identity has been exposed, starting tomorrow, stay by the side of His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi. The young master has some things that he wants you to take care of."

Finished speaking, Daoli handed over a wax pellet. Chiji took the pellet. Removing the wax, he looked at the instructions on the paper within. Then he burned it. As the ashes fell to the ground, Chiji showed a determined smile.

***

Once the ship that carried Li Xian, Lin Bi, and company arrived at the small nameless island that served as the main base of the Marquis of the Eastern Sea, the eyes of the two individuals, standing at the bow of the ship, brightened. Gazing into the distance, this little island was in a crescent shape, almost as if two arms were extending out in a hug. The island was surrounded by steep precipices. The smooth rocks were fundamentally

impossible to climb. In addition, there were no covering trees, allowing the patrols on the cliffs above the ability to easily spot any intruders or invaders. At the center of the crescent was an excellent harbor, capable of allowing large ships to shelter from the elements. The Marquis of the Eastern Sea was a maritime overlord. Aside from the envoys from the major countries, those who came to participate in the wedding celebrations were either merchants who made a living via shipping or pirates who plundered oceangoing ships. As a result, there was clear separation within the harbor, as the various factions were on guard against each other. The warships of the Marquis of the Eastern Sea surrounded the island and ensured that no one would get in without permission. Even if Jing Wuji and Great Master True Compassion had come, it would be impossible for them to do as they please in this kind of dangerous location.

On the dock stood several dozen sturdy-looking men, serving in a welcoming capacity, dressed in red, festive clothing. At their front stood the little marquis, dressed in crimson wedding garb, fully displaying his martial disposition and filled with jubilation. After he had been cured from the poison, Jiang Haitao had returned to the Eastern Sea, proving that he was without rival when it came to naval warfare. He annihilated or forced the surrender of numerous pirates. Before, the Marquis of the Eastern Sea was only the largest faction on the high seas. Now, he had become the commander of all of the pirates. To attain these achievements, Jiang Haitao had contributed mightily over these last two years. Not only was Jiang Yong comforted in his old age by the abilities of his son, even the distant Yong Emperor *Emeritus* in Chang'an was overjoyed at this news. During the two years he had spent in retirement, Li Yuan was very regretful for failing to leave some leeway for his brother-in-law and elder sister.

Seeing the beautiful woman standing at the bow of the ship, Jiang Haitao shouted, "Jiang Haitao, under my father's orders, is here to welcome the envoy from Northern Han, Your Royal Highness, the Princess of Jiaping!"

Lin Bi smiled slightly. Raising her voice, she returned, "Little Marquis, there is no need to be too polite."

Finished speaking, Lin Bi walked down the gangplank and onto the dock.

After the two exchanged salutes, Jiang Haitao's gaze fell upon the figure of Li Xian who had followed Lin Bi down. An incredulous, but happy look appeared on Jiang Haitao's face, as he cried out, "Sixth uncle!" In high spirits, he ran over and grabbed onto Li Xian's arm. Laughing heartily, he continued, "Why didn't sixth uncle inform us in advance that you were going to come celebrate nephew's wedding?"

Li Xian also smiled slightly. He replied, "I've come in private. The Emperor doesn't know that I have come. Don't spread the news."

Jiang Haitao excitedly said, "Nephew remembers sixth uncle's help. For sixth uncle to be able to come today, Father will definitely be overjoyed as well. Sixth uncle, quickly come with me to see Father."

Smiling, Li Xian agreed, "Okay. I have not met elder cousin in many years and should first reminisce. This is Lin'er, my son. You don't recognize him, right?"

Seeing Li Lin, Jiang Haitao's heart leapt. He knew of Li Xian's current situation. This boy was definitely the son of Qin Zheng. However, Jiang Haitao was a broadminded and magnanimous individual. Since this boy's mother had already died, he wouldn't make a fuss. He said, "So it is younger cousin. Let's bring him along to see my mother."

At this moment, a tender and lovely voice spoke up, filled with dissatisfaction, "Lanlan is also here."

Only then did Jiang Haitao discover the little girl standing at Li Lin's side. With one look, Jiang Haitao was elated. Walking over, he picked up Roulan, stating, "Lan'er has also come! Does that mean Sir has come as well? Father has sent several invitations, but all were declined by the Sir."

Pleased with herself, Roulan declared, "I came with Uncle Hai with Daddy's approval."

Disappointment flashed across Jiang Haitao's eyes. After greeting Hai Wuya and Hai Li, standing behind the Prince of Qi, Jiang Haitao set down Roulan. Leading the way, he guided all the guests towards the distant wedding hall.

In the last several years, the Marquis of the Eastern Sea had taken up

permanent residence upon this island. From the dock upwards, there were layers of buildings. Among them, halfway up the mountain, the largest and most magnificent hall served formerly as the conference hall, but today served as the wedding hall. A feast was arranged in the side halls on both sides with over a hundred tables to entertain the ordinary guests. In the main hall, aside from the center that was covered in red that served as the wedding hall, on each side was placed eighteen tables for the special guests. Reportedly, because the wife of the Marquis was in poor health and frequently ill, she was unable to attend the wedding. Only the Marquis was present, leading his subordinate commanders and trusted aides, beaming with happiness as he welcomed and entertained the guests. Those people experiencing happy occasions would frequently be vigorous and invigorating. The already forty-five-year-old Marquis was glowing with health and vigor. Even before the banquet had begun, he had already downed several drinks.

The most important guests in the main hall were the envoys from Great Yong and Southern Chu.

Li Kang, the Prince of Qing, was thirty-seven years old. Since the fall of the Fengyi Sect, his status and position immediately increased significantly. As Li Yuan's third son, with the eldest son, Li An, forced to commit suicide and the second son, Li Zhi, now emperor, Li Kang's status as the next oldest son was only below that of his father and elder brother. As for the other adult princes, the seventh prince, the Prince of Ning, Li Qi, had poor health since birth. He was not doted upon by Li Yuan and did not participate in governmental affairs. It was only after Li Zhi ascended to the throne that Li Qi was enfeoffed as a prince of the second rank. Although the Prince of Qi had been pardoned and was granted command of a large army, because of the suspicions upon him, his status had been demoted from an imperial prince to a prince of the second rank. All the other princes and princesses had not yet reached adulthood. Because of his contributions in defending the Yong territories in Sichuan, Li Kang was promoted from a prince of the second rank to an imperial prince. With this change, the Prince of Qing, who controlled the army and government of Yizhou, became one of the individuals that was second only to the emperor.

This time, he had come on the emperor's orders to serve as an envoy to the Eastern Sea. Li Kang was extremely willing and happy to do so. He had long ago formed secret communication channels with Marquis Jiang Yong. If he could convince Jiang Yong to pledge allegiance to Great Yong, it would be an enormously meritorious contribution. As a result, Li Kang, seated in the chief guest's seat, was chatting freely, replete with charm and cordiality. With this handsome and heroic, influential imperial prince acting like so, it caused his entire table to feel as if they were being bathed by a soothing spring breeze.

Southern Chu's envoy, Lu Can, had a completely different style. Although he was only twenty-five, Lu Can was already the Chief Controller of Southern Chu's armies. His expression was serene and calm, making it difficult to know his thoughts. In fact, although it was normal for Great Yong to dispatch a high-ranking envoy in Li Kang, the Prince of Qing, it was strange that Southern Chu had dispatched Lu Can. These last several years, Lu Can had simultaneously defended the Southern Chu half of Sichuan against Great Yong's invasions and raids, while reinforcing the defenses at Xiangyang and Fancheng, and the defensive line along the Yangtze River. He was practically buried under a heavy workload on a daily basis. As the Grand General, Lu Can could be said to be Southern Chu's foremost general. For such an important individual to leave the court and travel to the distant Eastern Sea was utterly unimaginable. As a result, many began to suspect that there were some changes to Southern Chu's political situation.

Although Lu Can's expression was calm, not revealing any hints for people to make conjectures, one look at the completely carefree and unrestrained manner of Lu Can's deputy, Fu Yulun, one could jump to all kinds of conclusions. Who didn't know that this Fu Yulun was the son-in-law of the Southern Chu Prime Minister, Shang Weijun, and King Zhao Long's uncle-in-law? Could it be that conflict had arisen between Southern Chu's two regents, Shang Weijun and Lu Xin? Was Lu Can sent to the Eastern Sea because he was being supplanted? With the current chaotic state of the world, who didn't want to understand the situation, so as to avoid being implicated?

Just as the guests in the hall were chatting, the herald announced, “The Princess of Jiaping and the Crimson Clouds Princess have arrived!”

Everyone looked over, catching sight of a woman in an emerald-green dress walk in. In order to attend today’s festivities, Lin Bi did not wear her usual barbarian riding clothes that made it easier to lead troops into battle, changing instead into a splendid attire befitting of her status. She wore a light-green embroidered coat and a lake-green skirt. The gold and bluish-green outer garment denoted her respected position as a princess of Northern Han. At her waist was tied a pearl encrusted precious saber. Her deerskin shoes reminded everyone of her other status as the commander of the Daizhou army.

Everyone in the hall rose to their feet to welcome the new arrivals. Even the Prince of Qing and Vice Minister of Rites, Gou Lian, from an enemy country, were no exception. Regardless of friend or foe, this commander who defended the northern border against barbarian incursions, the female general who protected the common people and the lands of the north, was deserving of their respect.

With a smile, Lin Bi greeted everyone. At this moment, a melodious and beautiful voice drifted over. “Elder sister, is that Lu Can, Grand General Lu?”

Only then did everyone notice that standing behind Lin Bi was a young lady in red. Her beauty was stunning, as lovely as a fire. It was just that everyone had been drawn by Lin Bi’s elegant bearing and had not noticed this young lady in red following behind. Moreover, from all signs, she was not a maid. Hearing her talk, everyone realized that the herald had announced the arrival of two individuals.

Hearing the young lady’s question, Lu Can smiled. Having spent years in the military, the former undisciplined and out-of-control, mischievous youth had already become a reticent general. His eyes fell upon Lin Bi. At this moment, Lin Bi glanced at him with an apologetic smile. She said, “My younger sister is mischievous. Grand General, please forgive her.”

Lu Can bowed slightly and acknowledged, “Your Royal Highness is being too courteous.”

At this moment, the young lady in red, Lin Tong, asked with curiosity, “So you are Lu Can. I have heard that you are a formidable commander, causing Great Yong’s elite horsemen to fear to invade the south. Everyone states that in the north, there’s Long, in the south, there’s Lu, causing Yong to be apprehensive. Who could have thought that you are so young?”

Lu Can glanced at the ashen-faced Prince of Qing, Li Kang, and calmly answered, “Princess is overly flattering me. Grand General Long has two hundred troops under his command, suppressing the five hundred thousand Yong border troops. He is the foremost commander of the present age. Great Yong and Southern Chu are still friendly and have no hostilities. I deserve not the Princess’s praise.”

Lu Can was simply speaking the truth. Although in these last several years, Southern Chu did not have the strength to launch an offensive against Great Yong, Great Yong was also too preoccupied to worry about Southern Chu. However, this did not mean that the two countries did not have small-scale skirmishes. Lu Can commanded troops in an almighty fashion, ensuring that Great Yong did not gain the slightest bit of advantage. That was why his name was said in the same sentence as General Long Tingfei as a nemesis of Great Yong. However, nominally, the two were suzerain and vassal, and the relations had not been broken off. Lu Can would absolutely not admit to Lin Tong’s words. As expected, the Prince of Qing’s complexion improved upon hearing his words.

Dissatisfied, Lin Tong mumbled a few words before falling silent under Lin Bi’s warning gaze. Lin Tong obediently followed her elder sister and took her seat. At this table were already seated the envoys from Southern Chu and Great Yong. Even with the addition of Lin Tong and Lin Bi, there were still many open seats. However, ordinary individuals would not even think about sitting at this table. At present, the world was divided in three. How could anyone be able to compare to the envoys from these three countries?

Lin Tong glanced at the Prince of Qing. Caustically, she greeted, “Hello! Are you Great Yong’s envoy, the Prince of Qing?”

Li Kang coldly glanced at Lin Tong. He had no wish to have an argument with a little girl. That sort of behavior would be below his dignity. As a

result, he callously replied, “That’s right.”

“You seem to look impressive,” said Lin Tong with a smile. “But compared to His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, you’re quite lacking. No wonder he’s commanding five hundred thousand troops protecting the border, while you are at the bottom of the well gazing up at the sky in the Hanzhong region.”

Hearing her words, Li Kang was immediately greatly enraged. He scolded, “Princess of Jiaping, please properly discipline your younger sister.”

Seated next to him, Gou Lian frowned. This young lady seemed to be extremely familiar with the Prince of Qi. Reasonably speaking, she should never have had the opportunity to meet the Prince of Qi. Although the Prince of Qi was facing off against the Northern Han army, it was rare for opposing generals to meet.

Just as suspicions grew in Gou Lian’s mind, the herald announced, “Great Yong’s His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, has arrived!”

The entire hall was immediately thrown into an uproar. No one had expected that the Prince of Qi would actually come here. Not only had an envoy from Great Yong already arrived in the Prince of Qing, and the Great Yong court would not likely dispatch two princes, the Prince of Qi held a heavy responsibility as the commander of the Yong border army. By rights, he should remain with the army, not appearing here. However, as everyone was wondering if they had misheard, the Prince of Qi’s grave and stern figure had already appeared at the entrance to the hall. His icy and merciless gaze took in his surroundings. Immediately, the hall was absolutely silent.[4] Everyone believed that with this kind of majestic presence and imposing bearing it was truly the Prince of Qi who had arrived.

Although practically everyone avoided the Prince of Qi’s severe gaze, there were a few individuals who did not fear the Prince of Qi’s prestige. Lu Can was one of them. When he heard the announcement of the arrival of the Prince of Qi, he was first astonished before regaining his serenity. He only gazed placidly at the Prince of Qi, an appraising and admiring light in his eyes.

Li Kang, the Prince of Qing, had a frosty expression. He was extremely resentful towards the Prince of Qi. Not long ago, the Prince of Qi's faction was attached to the former Crown Prince, never even taking the Prince of Qing seriously. In addition, the Prince of Qi's deceased consort was a disciple of the Fengyi Sect. This was already enough for the Prince of Qing to hate someone with a passion.[5] But what caused Li Kang to detest this arrogant and obstinate sixth brother of his was Li Xian's unwillingness, even under the present circumstances, to give in to him. According to their statuses, Li Kang was an imperial prince of the first rank, while Li Xian was only a prince of the second rank. Li Kang was a favorite, a distinguished individual who was second to none, while Li Xian still carried the suspicions of involvement in the former crown prince's coup d'état. However, even under these circumstances, Li Xian had never taken Li Kang seriously.

This year, when Li Zhi had ascended to the throne, Li Kang and Li Xian had both returned to the capital to take part in the ceremony. Originally, Li Kang thought that he could put their past feelings to rest based upon his status as an older brother and as a prince of the first rank. Surprisingly, Li Xian did not even spare him a single glance, let alone exhibit a shred of respect.

Because of this, Li Kang had once secretly petitioned Li Zhi, stating that Li Xian was too arrogant and unyielding. However, Li Zhi merely smiled wryly and said, "Sixth brother is the same even in Our presence. That is his temperament. It is best if third brother doesn't offend him."

This sentence had caused Li Kang to immediately understand. Unless Li Xian died, it would be impossible for him to gain the advantage over Li Xian. Seeing the respect and reverence of the military commanders and important court ministers towards Li Xian, while disaffected and distant to him, Li Kang's bitter hatred of Li Xian grew increasingly grievous. For what reason was this unfilial and rebellious individual so arrogant and yet able to properly suppress him from above? This question was the resentment that Li Kang hid in the deepest depths of his heart.

However, in front of so many outsiders, Li Kang would naturally not reveal such hatred. Even in the Yong court, he would only reveal the slightest hint of his discontent. Li Kang once again rose to his feet. Forcing a smile on his

face with difficulty, he said, “Sixth brother, you’ve also come. Have you come with the Emperor’s edict?”

Li Xian glanced at Li Kang, coldly replying, “I have come as a private citizen. What need do I have for an edict? If third brother has doubts, you can go back and ask the Emperor.”

Seeing him so insensitive, Li Kang’s face immediately froze, almost as if he were going to explode with anger. Gou Lian promptly tried to smooth things over, stating, “Prince of Qing, there is no need to worry. The Prince of Qi is here merely because of the depths of his familial affection. Presumably, the Emperor will not blame him.” For him to speak in such a manner, he seemed to suggest that the Prince of Qing was worried that the Prince of Qi would offend the emperor by leaving the army without approval due to brotherly affection.

Li Xian glanced at Gou Lian, actually giving him face. Li Xian said, “Third brother, there is no need to worry. When I go back, I will submit a memorial to the Emperor apologizing for my offense.”

So speaking, Li Xian revealed a languid smile. Then, in a forthright and imposing manner,[6] he took a seat. At this moment, everyone in the hall finally relaxed, and could not help but exclaim in admiration at the weighty, baleful aura exuding from the Prince of Qi. It was truly rarely seen. Of all the generals who commanded troops, Lu Can was carefree and calm,[7] possessing the bearing of a scholarly general; the Princess of Jiaping had a natural calm that caused everyone to be filled with admiration; while the Prince of Qi carried the acute aura of death and battle. To be able to see the three sit at the same table made this trip truly worthwhile to many who saw them.

Although everyone had relaxed somewhat, they could still feel an oppressive atmosphere. With the arrival of the Prince of Qi, no one at his table could relax and enjoy the banquet. Just as everyone was finding the situation awkward, a bold and unconstrained hearty laugh roared from the rear hall. A voice came booming, “What? Sixth brother has also come?”

All who heard it knew that the Marquis of the Eastern Sea, Jiang Yong, had

arrived. In the Eastern Sea, aside from the Prince of Qing, Li Kang, the only other individual who could address Li Xian in such a fashion was the Marquis himself. Sure enough, a middle-aged man of about fifty in a set of crimson robes walked out of the rear hall. His hair and beard were the color of ash. His expression was hale and hearty, and he possessed skin that was slightly darkened. As he walked, he seemed to do so with the breeze. The guards behind him seemed unable to keep up with his pace. Arriving at the table, Jiang Yong hoisted up Li Xian and said, "Good sixth brother! Your older cousin hoped for your arrival! Without your righteousness and loyalty, that nephew of yours not only wouldn't be able to marry, his life would have been lost long ago. Come, come, this time, I'm going to definitely have your nephew and niece-in-law properly thank you for your great kindness. Don't worry about your Great Yong's envoys being unpopular here, you're different! Aside from pledging my allegiance, as long as sixth brother has any requests, feel free to say them. I, Jiang Yong, will definitely not fall short."

Jiang Yong's words deeply frightened many people in the hall. Looks of concern even appeared on the faces of Lu Can and Lin Bi. If the Prince of Qi were to ask that the marquis cease cooperating with Southern Chu and Northern Han, then what could be done?

Before the Prince of Qi could respond, the herald, in an untimely fashion, announced, "Hai Family Shipping Company: Hai Wuya and Hai Li have arrived! Young Miss Roulan has arrived! Young master Li Lin has arrived!"

In the wake of the announcement, the Hai uncle and nephew entered with smiles on their faces. Behind them was a vivacious little girl, pulling along an unwilling little boy. Aside from Lin Bi's and Li Xian's entourages, everyone was dumbfounded. What was going on? When did the herald start announcing children?

Little Roulan's whirling eyes took in the stupefied[8] looks on the guests' faces. She discontentedly said, "Why are you glaring at Roulan? Little brother Lin, these people are quite rude! Help me teach them a lesson."

Li Lin gloomily glanced at the guests, coldly replying, "Are you an idiot? Who out there can I beat?"

Little Roulan seriously took a look. Somewhat vexed, she stated, “It is a bit challenging … They are all a lot bigger than you. It would be good if big brother Jun was here. He definitely could have helped me vent my anger.”

Li Lin resentfully voiced, “Your big brother Jun isn’t all that big himself. I don’t believe that he’ll be able to help you vent your anger. Just wait. When I’ve grown up and become a general, I’ll help you vent your anger.”

Rubbing her nose, little Roulan mumbled to herself, “Big brother Jun is really quite formidable. Whenever Daddy bullies me, he’ll always help Lanlan tell on Daddy.”

Afterwards, little Roulan slowly lowered her head, her voice carrying the sound of tears, as she said, “*Boo hoo* , Lanlan hasn’t seen big brother Jun in a long time. Daddy has even prohibited me from writing to big brother Jun.”

Raising her head, she gazed at Li Lin and asked, “You can help me bring a letter to him, correct?”

Li Lin was in a tough spot. Seeing that everyone’s suspicious eyes were looking on with hilarity, Li Lin very fiercely replied, “All right. I agree, okay?” Li Lin’s expression became even more depressed. Earlier, Roulan had pleaded with him for a long time. However, feeling embarrassed, Li Lin had said that he couldn’t go to Chang’an and deliver the letter, and could only harden his heart and refuse. He didn’t expect that Roulan would choose this moment to force him to agree. Disliking being the focus of attention, Li Lin could only agree. In his head, he wondered if it was possible for the military messengers to deliver the letter for him.

With these two children playing around, everyone’s states of minds finally relaxed. It wasn’t clear who, but someone began to laugh. That person was swiftly joined by everyone else in the hall. The atmosphere in the wedding hall lightened significantly.

Li Lin blushed scarlet, staring daggers at Roulan. Roulan ignored him, walking forward with pride written all over her face. Pulling on Jiang Yong’s robes, she said, “Uncle Jiang, Lanlan has come on my daddy’s behalf to offer congratulations.”

Jiang Yong did not know whether to laugh or cry, as he declared, “Good!

Uncle has already heard. Little Lan’er, do you want to go to the back and take a look at your new sister-in-law?”

Roulan promptly nodded her head. Jiang Yong gestured with his hand. Two maids standing to the side hurriedly came over, leading little Roulan towards the rear hall. Li Lin frowned. Raising his head, he glanced at his father. Seeing Li Xian nod his head lightly, Li Lin followed behind Roulan. Everyone only assumed that this little boy was together with Roulan. As such, no one paid him any mind and allowed him to follow Roulan inside.

Footnotes :

隆盛, longsheng – lit. grand magnificence
文宗, wenzong – lit. the cultured ancestor; likely Li Zhi’s grandson by Li Jun and Roulan
昭宁, zhaoning – lit. manifest peace
鸦雀无声, yaquewusheng – idiom, lit. crow and peacock make no sound; fig. absolute silence, not a single voice could be heard
恨之入骨, henzhirugu – idiom, lit. to hate somebody to the bone; fig. to hate someone with a passion
大马金刀, damajindao – idiom, lit. big horse and golden saber; fig. forthright and a grand manner
神闲气静, shenxianqijing – idiom, lit. possessing the leisurely calm of an immortal; fig. carefree and calm
目瞪口呆, mudengkoudai – idiom, lit. eyes and mouth fixed; fig. stupefied, bewildered

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 8: Southern Fujian's Yue Family

Volume 4, Chapter 8: Southern Fujian's Yue Family

Fujian's Yue family was involved in shipping for generations, surviving and never weakening for a long time. The upstart Hai family had a long-running dispute with the Yue family, never able to be resolved …—*Yong Dynastic Records* , *Biography of Merchants*

Within the red house of the Tranquil Sea Manor, I gazed at the geographic map of the world. Smiling, I said, "Fujian's Yue family is the world's largest shipping company in the world. It has been passed down for several generations, never weakening. The family not only has capable descendants, it also has shrewdly formed marriage alliances throughout the world. Since the collapse of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, the Yue family seized the opportunity to take control over Fujian's army and government. After Southern Chu was established, Fujian remained independent. Under pressure from Great Yong, Southern Chu did not have the energy to pacify Fujian. As a result, the Yue family is a *de facto* independent faction. While Fujian is nominally a vassal of Southern Chu, in reality, it is similar to Binzhou, and remains outside of Southern Chu's control. However, the Yue family will not be unduly excessive. After all, if Southern Chu is determined—even though the Yue family can pledge allegiance to Great Yong and receive benefits—in the short-term, they will be forced to retreat to the ocean, causing their assets in Fujian to suffer tremendous losses. As a result, to the Yue family, the best solution is for the world to remain fragmented, allowing them to reap the most benefits."

Sitting on the soft couch at the start, focused on her embroidery, Princess Changle raised her head. Pensively, she replied, "From the outset, when elder cousin fled to the Eastern Sea, the Yue family took the initiative to get close to cousin and formed a marriage alliance with him. It seems that they want cousin to curb Great Yong."

I evenly stated, “That’s right. Although the Yue family is based in a secluded location on the Southern Sea, and are incapable of seizing the throne for themselves,[1] they have the ambition of setting up an independent regime. ‘Three thousand guests get tipsy and drunk in the hall; a glint of steel earns twelve prefectures.’[2] This is a famous saying used to denote the Yue family’s prestige. The twelve provinces refer to Fuzhou, Jianzhou,[3] Quanzhou, Zhangzhou, Tingzhou,[4] Nanjianzhou,[5] and Shaowu of Fujian; Xinghua of Jiangsu; Meizhou, Jieyang, Yuedong, and Nan’ao of Guangdong.[6] Although Nan’ao can’t be considered as a prefecture, that location has always been acclaimed as the throat to Fujian and Guangdong. Merchant ships converge there. Its thriving surpasses even Binzhou. As a result, that is why there are twelve prefectures. Although the Yue family only directly controls Zhangzhou, Quanzhou, Jieyang, and Nan’ao, all of these locations are important strategic locations with their backs to the mountains and facing the sea. Southern Chu is powerless to do anything, while it is beyond Great Yong’s reach.

“Although the Yue family is low-key, never fighting for supremacy, nor declaring themselves as a monarch to build a personal fiefdom, we can tell from the line, ‘Three thousand guests get tipsy and drunk in the hall,’ that the Yue family has thousands of retainers in its service. In order to maintain its position, and then become the vassal of the strong, they must ensure that the chaos not end. This time, the marriage between the Jiang and Yue families was done on the Yue family’s initiative.”

Frowning slightly, Princess Changle replied, “It is truly awful that the Yue family is so motivated. They probably view the suffering of the common people as insignificant. Suiyun, since that is the case, why are you watching the marriage go through? With this, wouldn’t their desire be fulfilled? Moreover, at present, the Hai family is working for you, engaging in oceangoing trade. Binzhou has already become a harbor second only to Fujian’s Quanzhou. In addition, cousin places heavy importance upon military force. Right now, the Yue family is likely also trying to muscle their way in on the ocean trade. If they obtain the Hai family’s secret shipbuilding technology, wouldn’t their power be a like a tiger gaining the power of flight? From this factor alone, they cannot be allowed to succeed with their

plan of forming a marriage alliance with the Jiang family."

"Although the Yue family's intentions aren't good, it is my desire to have them become involved in the ocean trade," I serenely explained, playing with the jade paperweight in my hands. "The matters of this world are like this: Aside from the Imperial Throne, which can only be occupied by one person, everything else, regardless of what, must not be held by one person alone, ensured by using any means necessary. Right now, the ocean trade is monopolized by the Hai family. Who knows how many people are green with envy? At present, it is fine because the world is not yet united. Once the world has been unified and peace falls upon these lands, the first person to target the Hai family will likely be the Son of Heaven. Even if he temporarily does not move against the Hai family out of respect for me, once I have passed on, the Hai family will be exterminated. Since that is the case, it is best to allow the Yue family to get in on the action. With this, although there will still be those who seek to attack and suppress them, as long as they are capable, they will be able to survive."

When Changle heard me speak that the "first person to target the Hai family will likely be the Son of Heaven," her hands shook, causing her embroidery needle to prick her finger. As she continued listening, she gradually calmed down. She voiced, "You speak the truth. Although Imperial Brother is wise and brilliant, he can't pretend that he doesn't see something like this. Since you have such intentions, there is no need to worry about the marriage alliance between the Jiang and Yue families. It is only that the Yue family's power is formidable, is leaning towards Southern Chu, and is unwilling to swear allegiance to Great Yong. For Husband to allow them to get involved in the ocean trade, aren't you helping to foster their strength?"

In a profound voice, I replied, "How will there be such a good thing? Although the Yue family can participate, it is not presently. If the Yue family is not weakened, not only will I not be at ease, even elder brother Hai will not rest easy. I have made preparations to strike a critical blow at the Yue family before allowing them to participate in the ocean trade."

With concern, Princess Changle asked, "But since the Yue family is the overlord of the Southern Sea, how can Husband strike a critical blow at

them? After all, at present, Fujian is still the territory of Southern Chu. Wouldn't it be even more bothersome if the Yue family becomes infuriated and completely supports Southern Chu?"

"All things must pass, this too shall pass," I recited, shaking my head. "Right now, the Yue family inheritance has been passed down for over a dozen generations and is already weighed down by layers of private worries. Especially problematic and infuriating is the Yue family's business methods that are excessively overbearing. Against their business rivals, they frequently use all methods available to suppress them. All those who comply with them thrive, while those who do not, perish. The merchants of Guangdong and Fujian only work under the Yue family in order to survive.

"Zhongying has spoken of offending a manager of the Yue family in the past. Later, when he set sail, he ran into pirates. All of his assets were lost. Afterwards, Zhongying suspected that all of this was the Yue family's doing. Although he didn't have any proof, the Yue family has always had dealings with pirates. Moreover, Zhongying should have been able to continue to do business. His debtors originally did not have any intentions of forcing him to settle, hoping that he could continue and repay the enormous sum owed. Because of the Yue family's interference, although Zhongying ultimately used up all of his assets, he could not repay everything that he owed. Unable to stay in Fujian, he could only wander to Great Yong. It was a complete coincidence. Managing the Pavilion of Heavenly Secrets, Wuji took a fancy to Zhongying's ability, helping him stage a comeback. Afterwards, Daoli discovered that Zhongying was his paternal uncle. And since I had retired into seclusion here to the Eastern Sea, I used all my efforts to help the Hai family.

"At the time, Marquis Jiang was also quite dissatisfied with the Yue family, thus leading to today's situation where the upstart Hai family has outstripped the Yue family. The Yue family's conduct and style has naturally gained them many enemies. Under normal circumstances, it would be impossible to tell. But at the crucial juncture, they will be assaulted from all sides. In addition, the Yue family itself has many worries. The conflict over the position of the head of the family is as unstoppable as wildfire. This is

the perfect time to strike a blow at them."

Princess Changle sighed. "The succession struggle in the imperial clan is admittedly extremely bloody. For aristocratic and influential families, the struggle for the position of the head is also a catastrophe."

In a soft voice, I asked, "Zhen'er, are you remembering again what happened at the Hunting Palace?"

Sorrow showed on Princess Changle's face. "How can I forget something like that? Eldest brother committed treason and was forced to commit suicide. Sixth sister-in-law committed suicide to apologize for her sins. Her Imperial Majesty, the Empress, also died from suicide. Zhen'er does not want to remember such a calamity."

I walked over to Princess Changle's side, lightly pulling her into my arms. I said, "There is no need for you to overthink things. They got what they deserved. In addition, we owe our love to the turmoil in the Hunting Palace. Forgetting everything else, for this alone, you should not feel such grief."

Princess Changle could not help but blush. Although she had been married for close to three years, remembering what had happened in the Hunting Palace—completely losing her self-control publicly in front of everyone—would still cause her to be unable to hide her bashfulness. Only after seeing that she was no longer sad, I continued, "Since you do not want to hear about the domestic matters of the Yue family, I won't speak of it any further. Right about now, Shen'er should wake. Go take a look. I still need to look over some documents and won't go over."

Gathering up her embroidery, Princess Changle complained, "These last two years, on the surface you've left the court, relaxing and convalescing, and yet you are still unable to let these things go. If one had known earlier that things would be like this, it would have been better not leaving. Even your hair has grayed. Why are you going to such lengths?"

"Zhen'er, I've told you long ago that there is no helping my hair," I replied, unable to help but smile wryly. "At the time, although the Nine Revolutions Heart Protection Pill preserved my life and Sir Sang diligently nursed my health when we arrived at the Eastern Sea, the medicinal properties were

still too intense, causing my hair to become like this. These last few years, I have calmed my heart and *qi* , sincerely convalescing. As for the trifling matters relating to the Hai and Yue families, they are only things that I have handled to alleviate my boredom. Have you seen me completely wrapped up in my work?"[7]

Princess Changle rolled her eyes. "Fine … I'll believe you. At the time, if you weren't helping second brother, you would not have nearly lost your life in Chang'an. In the future, I won't permit you to work as if your life depended on it. Do you think that I do not know about what happened after second brother's letter arrived? You immediately got to work. It seems that our days of leisure are coming to an end. I won't stop you. It is only that all tense things need relaxation. It will be good as long as you don't shed your blood, sweat, and tears as before."

I promptly consented, "Definitely, definitely. How could I refuse to obey my wife's order? How about I go with you together to see Shen'er?"

"Don't make trouble," smiled Princess Changle. "Do you think that I don't know that if you go to see him, you'll go to tease him? He's at that age when he likes to sleep. I don't know this temperament of yours … Before, I heard second brother speak of your constant bullying and teasing of Lan'er. And now, you won't even let Shen'er off. You truly don't act like a father."

I could not help but shrink into my shoulders. This was not something that I dared to refute. On several occasions, I had teased my son to the point of tears and been caught by her.

After the princess's figure disappeared, I retracted my reluctant to part gaze. I walked over and took a look at the embroidery that she had left behind, finding the bloodstain upon it. I could not help but feel sad. These last few years, although we lived in marital harmony, I constantly carried my guilt around. That day when the princess and I eloped and ran away to the Eastern Sea, our marriage was presided over by Medical Sage Sang Chen. Forget about the many and complicated etiquette and rites required for a princess's marriage, we didn't even adhere by the six pre-wedding customs. In addition, the number of witnesses could be counted on one hand.[8] Aside from our attendants, there was not a single outsider.

After we were married, I had spent half a year in recovery, surviving by taking medicine. During that period, the Princess was my wife in name only. However, she did not have a single complaint, setting her heart to attending and taking care of me. In addition, she took over management of the household and the responsibility of caring for Roulan. Although she had the help of Dong Que and Head Maid Zhou, it took a lot for the pampered daughter of the Son of Heaven to be able to handle the trifling domestic matters. It was only in these last two years that my health improved dramatically. Although our mutual affection was great, the joys of the bed chamber were quite restrained. She continued as always, carefully taking care of my everyday life, providing me with nourishment. In order to help nurse my body, she took out the rare imperial medicinal cuisine cookbook and asked for guidance from Sir Sang. Right now, all of my eats were prepared by the princess. Even Sir Sang could only admire the princess's ability.

But even in the face of the princess's affection, I was still intent upon returning, abandoning this ordinary, peaceful, and happy life, returning to that stormy and dangerous, vulgar world. I had no alternative. A few days ago, Emperor Li Zhi had Hualiu deliver a letter, explaining the current situation, indirectly asking for my return and help. Even if I were to ignore Li Zhi's grace towards me, considering the Princess Changle's face alone, I had no choice but to become involved. If another grave mishap were to happen to Great Yong's imperial clan, the princess would likely be unable to bear it. Further, this was the perfect opportunity to allow Princess Changle reunite with the Emperor *Emeritus* and the Empress Dowager. Whatever was going to happen, the princess's elopement had infuriated Li Yuan. Now that I had received Li Zhi's imperial edict to return, it could allow the father and daughter to reconcile. In all likelihood, the princess would be delighted. In addition, I understood clearly, as a son-in-law of Great Yong's imperial clan, that my destiny was already intimately and irrevocably intertwined with Great Yong. If Great Yong failed to unify the world, then it would be impossible for me to live the rest of my days in peace.

Gazing at the documents on my desk, I flipped through them again. A frozen smile appeared on my face, as I softly muttered, "Eastern Sea, Yue

family, Southern Chu!" My tone gradually acquired a somber and desolate intent.

***

Concurrently, in the harbor of the island where the Marquis of the Eastern Sea was holding his beloved son's wedding, inside of an extremely hidden cabin aboard the Yue family's ship delivering the bride, a refined and exquisite looking young man with an elegant bearing was paging through some documents. The windowless cabin was only illuminated by the dusky light of a single candle, shining upon this man of about thirty years of age. Perhaps because of the light, the handsome man's features carried a hint of a malicious, killing intent.

"Eastern Sea, Yue family!" read the young man in a low voice, disdain flashing in his eyes. Setting down the document in his hands, the young man picked up the candle and walked to a corner of the cabin. On the wall was hung an exquisite map that showed the limits of the Eastern Jin Dynasty. The territory controlled by Great Yong, Northern Han, and Southern Chu were all displayed with different colors. The young man's gaze fell upon Binzhou in the north and Quanzhou in the south. After revealing an icy grin, his eyes fell upon Jinyang and Zezhou, where the Northern Han and Great Yong armies were in a stalemate. Talking to himself, he muttered, "Northern Han will seize the opportunity to attack Great Yong. They will surely not miss this kind of golden opportunity. Although the loss of the Eastern Sea isn't a fatal blow to Great Yong, the damages will still be serious. Moreover, gaining control over the Eastern Sea has another benefit … I may be able to capture that man."

Thinking of that man, a look of implacable hatred appeared on the young man's face. He ferociously shouted, "Jiang Zhe! Li Zhen! I will definitely not let you off! Li Zhen, under the pretext of chastity, you refused to marry me. That is by itself nothing. But, you actually eloped with Jiang Zhe! How does such an impure and corrupt woman have the face to continue to live in this world?"

Just as the young man revealed a cruel and sinister expression, someone outside of the cabin reported, "Chief, all the preparations have been made.

Yue Wujiu has sent word requesting that Chief not act if there aren't any mishaps."

Ridicule flashed across the young man's face, as he replied, "Come in."

The door to the cabin was opened, and a thin middle-aged man walked in. Respectfully, he said, "Chief, letters have arrived from both the Heads of the Yihuang[9] and Fengwu[10] Halls, asking you when to mobilize."

The young man indifferently asked, "What's the rush? Wouldn't it be better to act once both sides have suffered losses?"

The middle-aged man smiled slightly and answered, "Yue Wujiu can be considered an astute individual. This time, he surprisingly fell into Chief's trap, trying but failing to live up to his illustrious reputation. Chief is wise and formidable. How can those merchants be a match?"

Without showing the slightest hint of conceit, the young man responded, "I once suffered a crushing defeat and learned from my mistakes.[11] I learned two things. One: there is no one in this world without weaknesses. Two: before something has succeeded, one cannot relax. Yue Wujiu is not a fool. However, his weakness is also too obvious. Speaking of which, it's all due to the excessive ambition from the Yue family's inheritance method.

"The ancestor of the Yue family was quite visionary and sagacious.[12] He understood that wealth never survives three generations[13] and that future generations would be unable to take up heavy responsibilities if they were permitted to live like a prince.[14] However, he also did not want the direct line of descent to be supplanted by ancillary branches of the family. As a result, he set up a strange custom. Each family head is permitted to select a suitable successor from his descendants. If all the successors are unworthy, then the family head is permitted to select one of them as the interim family head, while appointing the most capable and outstanding clansman to manage things, handing the clan's authority to said manager. Simultaneously, the family head will select a trusted individual to serve as the protector. With this, if the interim family head has a capable descendant, he can retrieve the family head's authority from the manager with the help of the protector. If even the third generation does not have a suitable

successor, then the manager can inherit leadership over the clan. This not only provides an opportunity for the children of ancillary branches to become the family head, it also provides an enormous safeguard for the main branch. Imagine, if the powerless interim family head still did not know to properly educate his children, then it would be reasonable that that branch would be supplanted. As a result, after this custom was set, the Yue family has been passed down for seventeen generations. Although the main branch once lost power, they managed to seize it back. This is exactly why Yue Wujiu is so anxious and frightened, willing to work with us.

"At present, although the current Yue family head, Yue Wuling, is mediocre, he is not a fool. He married his own younger sister to the Marquis of the Eastern Sea, Jiang Yong, consolidating his own authority. Now, he has even married his beloved daughter, Yue Qingyan, to the Little Marquis, Jiang Haitao. His eldest son, Yue Wenhan, possesses great talent and bold vision. Tell me, will Yue Wujiu stand idly by and watch as the power and authority be taken away? We will exploit this weakness. For the sake of power and status, why wouldn't Yue Wujiu take the bait?"

The middle-aged man hesitatingly spoke, "Although that is the case, Yue Wenhan is deeply respected by the younger generation of the Yue family. If we were to help Yue Wujiu in this manner, the Yue family will likely be unwilling to accept Yue Wujiu as the family head."

The young man laughed. "There are some things that you don't know. Although that Yue Wenhan certainly possesses ability, he did something that he should not have done. He should not have blocked our path, he should not have a good younger sister who is always considering him, and most definitely should not have taken that concubine."

The middle-aged man suddenly understood. He asked, "Don't tell me that Lady Xue is someone from the Yihuang Hall?"

"That's not the reason," responded the young man after hesitating momentarily. "In the past, Lady Xue was a close friend. She hailed from honorable origins. Even now, her father is a first-rank minister in the Yong court. A young lady from such prestigious origins. If not because of a slip-up in her conduct, how would she become someone's concubine? To speak of it,

the Sect Master and Chiefs Ji and Yan all feel that Lady Xue is an embarrassment to the sect. However, regardless of what is said, without Lady Xue convincing Yue Wenhan and his sister, they would likely have killed themselves long ago and not allowed us to manipulate them. Who let Lady Xue be so fond of saving face and unwilling to reveal her past to her husband? If it weren't for us blackmailing her using this, how would she have been willing to submit?"

"But hasn't Chief agreed that after this matter has succeeded that Yue Wenhan's life will be preserved and Lady be made the formal wife?" asked the middle-aged man. "Will Yue Wujiu be willing to agree to these conditions?"

The young man sneered. "We won't let him refuse. Yue Wenhan's survival is a tool to curb Yue Wujiu and ensure that he doesn't get too arrogant. In any case, when the time comes, it will be impossible for Yue Wenhan to escape our control. For the grave crime that he has committed, who aside from Southern Chu and us can protect him?"

When the young man finished speaking, the cabin fell into an incomparable silence. He subconsciously recalled all of the arduous work that he had put in these last several years. It was not easy to gain a foothold in the initially hostile Southern Chu. In addition, the members of the sect were not of one mind. After nearly three years of struggle, he was able to rebuild the Fengyi Sect with difficulty, creating the Fengwu and Yihuang Halls, splitting up the Fengyi Sect's power. Ji Xia and Yan Wushuang were assigned leadership of the two halls. Owing to their philosophical differences, the two would frequently scuffle in secret. As for himself, he had founded the North Star Hall, recruiting outsiders into the sect, managing external matters and offensive work. On the surface, he was neutral. But with the two other halls mutually attacking one another, his North Star Hall became the most important force in the sect. Sect Master Ling Yu had long been made a mere figurehead by the three halls. Aside from her personal guards, she did not have any other forces. As for himself, he knew that it would be impossible for him to seize control of the Fengyi Sect, thus smartly preserved Ling Yu's position and the sect's balance. The entire process to control the Fengyi Sect

and embark upon his revenge had been exceedingly difficult. In addition, he had finally managed to convince Shang Weijun to cooperate with him. To Shang Weijun, the Lu family's domination over the military was too great of a threat, even surpassing the danger posed by Great Yong towards Southern Chu. Destroying one's own defenses was probably the favorite task of those who wielded political power in Southern Chu.

When the young man thought about Lu Can, contempt flickered in his eyes. Were it not for the need to rely upon Lu Can to resist Great Yong, the young man would have caused Lu Can to die an unnatural death long ago. This would not be because of the useless Shang Weijun, but because Lu Can was once that man's student. In his chest, he felt a fiendish beast roar and wail. He was determined to remove everything left by that man on this world. This was his—Wei Ying's—only obsession.

***

At the rear of the wedding hall, behind layers of heavy curtains, the bride-to-be, attended by maids, was waiting for the auspicious time. Hailing from the prestigious Yue family and as the daughter of the family head bore by his formal wife, Yue Qingyan had many maids and an ample closet. Her escort was her own elder brother, the young family head, Yue Wenhan, and the manager of the Yue family, Yue Wujiu. Of course, at this moment, both of them were up front in the wedding hall. In the rear hall, aside from the female members of the Yue family, there were only the Jiang family's maidservants. The one responsible for looking after the bride wasn't an outsider; she was Yue Wenhan's concubine, Lady Xue.

This Lady Xue had been married into the Yue family for nearly two years now. She was a young lady that Yue Wenhan had inadvertently ran into. Reportedly, she hailed from a prestigious northern house. Because she offended a ruler, she traveled to the Mount Putuo's[15] Black Bamboo Nunnery to meditate without taking vows. Three years ago, Yue Wenhan came to Mount Putuo to fulfill a promise made by his deceased mother. Unintentionally, he ran into this Lady Xue. Falling in love, he persistently wooed her. However, this Lady Xue remained frigid, repeatedly rejecting his advances. After pursuing her for more than a year, Yue Wenhan was finally

able to move the beautiful woman. According to Yue Wenhan's intentions, he wanted to take her formally as his wife. However, this was met with disapproval from the senior generations of the Yue family. The hopes that they placed upon Yue Wenhan were profound, treating him as the future family head. The Yue family head's marriage could not be so casually determined. Although Lady Xue's behavior and appearance were both outstanding, no one knew of her origins. As such, she could not be permitted to become the formal wife. Without any other choice, Yue Wenhan beseeched Lady Xue, hoping that she would be willing to become his concubine and wait for the right moment to raise her to formal status. Surprisingly, after thinking it over in seclusion for several days, Lady Xue actually agreed, stating that she did not have the qualifications to be the wife. Although Yue Wenhan found this strange, he was deeply in love. As a result, he happily took Lady Xue as his concubine. Originally, the love between the two was excellent. However, after Yue Qingyan became engaged, a chasm appeared in the relationship between the two, as Yue Wenhan suddenly became aloof and distant towards Lady Xue. Lady Xue paid it no mind though, instead enthusiastically arranging her sister-in-law's wedding.

Under the guidance of female servants from the Jiang family, Roulan and Li Lin arrived at the rear hall just in time to watch Lady Xue direct the maids to help the bride fix her makeup. Lady Xue was about twenty-six or twenty-seven years old. She was as beautiful as a spring flower, with a physique like a willow. Her expressions were natural and unrestrained, carrying a poised bearing. Although there were many people in the rear hall, under her direction, everything proceeded smoothly and orderly.

However, Roulan's attention was completely focused upon the bride. Looking carefully, one could tell that the bride, Yue Qingyan, was no more than sixteen or seventeen years old. She looked slender and frail, possessing picturesque eyebrows, looking beautiful and elegant. Even though she was still young, she had the stunning looks of a beautiful woman. The only flaw was that her skin was too pale, almost as if it were transparent. It made it seem like her *qi* and blood were lacking. As a result, Lady Xue was personally applying rouge to her face. Only after carefully applying the

makeup for some time did Lady Xue finally stop with reluctance. It could be assumed that Lady Xue was skilled at makeup and appearances. With her brilliant skills, young Miss Yue seemed to gain a bit of color, gaining beauty. She was fully dressed in a red wedding gown with a phoenix crown and a red cloud cape. The entire ensemble gave her an unearthly beauty.

The maidservant leading Roulan and Li Lin gasped in surprise and said, “The little mistress is truly stunning. The little Marquis is truly fortunate.”

The maid’s words startled Lady Xue and company. Lady Xue smiled and said, “So it’s wet nurse Li who has come. They are?” Her gaze fell upon Roulan and Li Lin.

The maid kneeled. “Reporting to Lady Xue, this is young Miss Lan. She is the daughter of the little Marquis’s master. The Marquis has allowed her to come to the rear hall to take a look at the little mistress.”

A bright light flitted across Lady Xue’s eyes, as she smiled and replied, “So it is young Miss Lan. Qingyan, come say hello.”

Yue Qingyan was originally silent, not speaking. Hearing Lady Xue’s words, she lifted her head and gazed at Roulan. An indescribable mournful look flashed across her eyes, as clear as a cold spring. Bowing slightly, she said, “Younger sister Lan.”

Finished speaking, she stretched out her right hand, indicating for Roulan to go to her side. It was a pale and slender hand, with icy flesh and snow-white skin, almost as if carved from fine jade. Roulan walked over and could not help but grasp that slender hand. As their hands touched, Roulan felt a chill crawl up her arm. She thought, *Could it be that this bride is made from ice?* She could not help but shiver.

Footnotes :

逐鹿中原, zhulu Zhongyuan – idiom, lit. hunting deer in the Central Plains; fig. to attempt to seize the throne
This is a modified line from a poem by the Buddhist poet and painter, Guanxiu (贯休, note surname from Li Zhi’s adviser) who lived during the waning days of the Tang Dynasty and early stages of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period (五代十国). The poem is entitled *Offering Tribute to*

Imperial Father .
建州, Jianzhou – modern-day Jian'ou (建瓯), Fujian Province
汀州, Tingzhou – modern-day Changting (长汀), Fujian Province
南剑州, nanjianzhou – modern-day Nanping (南平), Fujian Province
All of these are major sea or river ports in southeastern China.
"废寝忘食, feiqinwangshi – idiom, lit. to neglect sleep and forget about food; fig. to skip one's sleep and meals, to be completely wrapped up in work
寥寥无几, liaoliaowuji – idiom, lit. just a very few; fig. tiny number, you can count them on your fingers
仪凰, yihuang – lit. ceremonial (female) phoenix
风舞, fengwu – lit. (male) phoenix dance
吃一堑, 长一智, chiyiqian, zhangyizhi – idiom, lit. fall into the moat and you'll be wiser next time; fig. learning from one's mistakes
远见卓识, yuanjianzhuoshi – idiom, lit. visionary and sagacious; fig. having foresight
富不过三代, fubuguosandai – idiom, lit. wealth does not last more than three generations
养尊处优, yangzunchuyou – idiom, lit. to live in style; fig. to live like a prince
One of the four sacred mountains of Buddhism in China, Mount Putuo (普陀山) is located in Zhoushan (舟山), Zhejiang Province.

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 9: Wedding Joy Turns Tragic

Volume 4, Chapter 9: Wedding Joy Turns Tragic

Roulan promptly pulled her hands back, exclaiming, “So cold! Why are elder sister’s hands so cold?” She gazed with bafflement at Yue Qingyan. Why were this bride’s hands freezing when the princess’s hands were so warm and soft?

Smiling apologetically, Yue Qingyan replied, “It’s because elder sister’s health is poor, causing my extremities to be cold.”

Thinking it over, Roulan declared, “Is elder sister’s health poor? My daddy and great granddaddy are both great doctors. In a few days, elder brother Hai will definitely bring elder sister to pay a visit to Daddy and Mommy. When the time comes, we can have Great Granddaddy take a look at elder sister’s illness.”

A helpless smile flashed across Yue Qingyan’s face, as she whispered, “It’s useless …” Her voice was extremely soft. Even Roulan, standing at her side, did not hear her words.

However, Li Lin, standing behind Roulan, had a clear view of Yue Qingyan’s face. That face was filled with downhearted despair and helplessness. Although Li Lin was young, he completely understood what that look signified, because he had seen such expressions before. Within the army, Li Lin was not a little or young master who lived like a prince. Although he was still too young, so much so that he could not lift up weapons, Li Xian would practically always bring him along. Li Lin had frequently seen these expressions before on the faces of captured enemy spies or soldiers who violated military regulations, and were about to be executed by his father. Every time, at this moment, regardless of how any of them begged pitifully or remained unafraid of death, Li Lin would always be able to see looks of helpless despair, so similar to the eyes of hunted beasts on the verge of death. Li Lin knew that individuals with these expressions were the

exceedingly terrifying and dangerous. One time, because he had sympathized with a soldier about to be executed, he had walked over and tried to console him. However, that soldier unexpectedly broke free from his bounds and attempted to take Li Lin captive to force Li Xian to allow him to leave. Although the soldier was ultimately killed by a crack archer in the army, saving Li Lin's life, Li Lin from that point onwards would always be vigilant and wary of those with such expressions. He pulled Roulan behind him. With a gaze filled with hostility, he stared at Yue Qingyan.

Roulan glanced with confusion at Li Lin, not understanding what he was trying to do. However, Roulan could sense Li Lin's tension and taut body. As a result, she smartly did not make any effort to resist.

At this moment, Yue Qingyan suddenly forced a smile onto her face, reaching out with her hands to pull on Roulan. Li Lin's actions caused the entire atmosphere in the rear hall to become extremely awkward. Roulan pulled gently on Li Lin's sleeve, while Li Lin obstinately refused to permit Yue Qingyan from approaching Roulan. In his young mind, there was only one thought: to prevent anyone from being allowed to harm the little elder sister behind him.

Lady Xue walked over. With practiced ease, she picked Roulan up. When Li Lin was about to stop her, Lady Xue had already pulled Roulan into her embrace, causing a look of humiliation and anger appeared on Li Lin's face. With a smile, Lady Xue stated, "Young Miss Lan, Qingyan's temperament is poor, presumably causing young Miss Lan to be startled. This is because Qingyan is nervous and anxious. Who made this very moment the most important for women? In a few days, when Qingyan has gone to pay her respects to your esteemed father, I will definitely have her apologize to the young miss. Young miss, how about going to pay a visit to the Marchioness? These last few days, she has had poor health, such that she has been unable to attend the wedding. Were it not for the need to increase luck, we wouldn't have agreed for Qingyan to be married over so hastily."

A look of bewilderment flashed across Roulan's eyes. Regardless of how clever she was; she was still only a child after all. Lady Xue's long-winded words left her completely mystified.[1] However, with Lady Xue speaking

thusly, the atmosphere in the hall became quite gentle and natural.

At this moment, an icy voice suddenly spoke up from outside the hall, “Young Miss Roulan, the elderly mistress is inviting you over.” That voice was as remote and cold as a spring hidden deep within the mountains. Within the voice were hints of feminism, a graceful voice pleasant to the ear, causing everyone to feel as if they had swallowed an ice cube.

Roulan was overjoyed, as she cried out, “Uncle Shun!” Then she ran outside in high spirits. Li Lin was startled momentarily before also following her out. In the hall, they saw a young man in azure robes standing with his hands behind his back. His face, as cold as ice, had a sincere smile upon it. Happily, Roulan leapt forward with practiced ease. Well-coordinated with her, the young man in azure lightly gave her a push on the soles of her feet, allowing Roulan to easily take a seat upon the young man’s shoulders. With elation, Roulan asked, “Uncle Shun, why are you here? Don’t you always refuse to leave Daddy’s side?”

The young man in azure robes smiled faintly and replied, “Young master has dispatched me to protect the young miss.” His eyes flicked past Li Lin. When those eyes swept past him, Li Lin felt as if his five viscera and six bowels were completely seen through. Li Lin greatly wanted to take a step back. However, he was prevented from stepping back further by his intense feelings of humiliation. Instead, he glared at the young man.

Just then, Lady Xue’s shadow appeared in the doorway. However, she did not walk out. Instead, she retreated back inside. There was a look of shock on her face, as she asked herself in a whisper, “How come there is a man here?”

Wet nurse Li who had been sent over by the Marquis’s family glanced out the door and explained, “Reporting to My Lady, that is Lord Li from young Miss Lan’s household and has always been permitted to come and go from within the inner residence without any obstructions. There is no need for My Lady to become concerned.”

A look of understanding appeared in Lady Xue’s eyes, and she exchanged looks with a maid standing in the corner of the hall. Killing intent flashed

across the maid's eyes, almost as if she wished to step outside. However, with a cold and strict look from Lady Xue, the maid halted, a look of discontent flitting across her eyes. Afterwards, the maid's gaze fell upon Yue Qingyan, giving her an inquiring look. Yue Qingyan nodded her head slightly, biting down upon her lips. Her makeup-less lips were originally pale and completely bloodless. Presently, there was a hint of blood. Subconsciously, she used her right hand to grasp her left wrist to check her pulse. Under the concealment of her red wedding clothes was a red damask handkerchief fastened to her left wrist.

When the auspicious time arrived, the bride was escorted out. The husband and wife exchanged the proper ceremonies—bowing to the Heavens and the Earth and the ancestors. Li Xian stood on the side with a smile on his face. His eyes fell upon two individuals standing in a corner of the hall. One was a middle-aged man with a tall stature and an arrogant expression on his face. At his side was a young man of about twenty-four to twenty-five. What piqued Li Xian's interest was that the faces of both men were too apathetic and tranquil. This in itself wasn't anything strange. However, these two were the bride's kin—the family head's uncle, Yue Wujiu, and the bride's older full brother, Yue Hanwen. During a day of such celebration, even if they were emotionally disinterested in the bride, they would still assume an expression of joy, let alone the fact that Yue Qingyan was Yue Wenhan's only full younger sister. Moreover, the relationship between brother and sister was supposedly very deep. Li Xian looked around, discovering numerous other unusual circumstances. The expressions on the faces of the two envoys from Southern Chu were somewhat strange. Fu Yulun, the vice emissary, had a somewhat tense and flustered expression. As for the main emissary, Lu Can, he was leisurely and calm, a faint smile on the corners of his mouth.

Just as the new couple had bowed to the Heavens and the Earth, parents, and each other, and were about to be sent into the bridal chamber, the bride's elder brother, Yue Wenhan, suddenly shouted, "Marquis, this little nephew has a matter that requires your decision."

The Marquis of the Eastern Sea, Jiang Yong, was startled. Displeased, he

replied, “Wenhan, regardless of what it is, it would only be proper to wait until after the ceremony has concluded to discuss.”

Yue Wenhan laughed cruelly, his aloof and distant features revealing a look of ridicule. He said, “It is best if this matter is discussed publicly. After all, this matter is of interest to everyone present.” After he finished speaking, his eyes scanned the assembled individuals in the hall one by one. There weren’t many individuals with the qualifications to be in the main wedding hall. Aside from the emissaries from Great Yong, Northern Han, and Southern Chu, the only others present were the Marquis’s trusted subordinates and people from the Yue family. Even the Hai uncle and nephew did not have the qualifications to be within the hall. As a result, everyone present had illustrious identities, experienced with war or the machinations of the bureaucracy. How could they be suppressed by Yue Wenhan’s aura? Were it not for their consideration towards the Marquis, they would likely have lashed out long ago.

The expression on Jiang Yong’s face became cold and grave. He was no longer the father who was celebrating his beloved son settling down. At this moment, he had returned to his identity as the head of the pirates of the Eastern Sea, the overlord of the Eastern Sea. He gently waved his hand. With tacit understanding, all of the subordinates of the Marquis took control of every single entrance and corner of the hall, slightly surrounding everyone within the hall. Jiang Haitao’s originally jubilant expression became extremely frigid. Shaking off the red damask handkerchief wrapped around his arm, he withdrew to his father’s side.

However, Yue Wenhan did not seem to be disconcerted by these developments. He callously stated, “The Yue family began through shipping by the sea. If someone attempts to become our adversary, the Yue family will naturally not be afraid. However, the Hai family’s sudden rise suppressed our Yue family such that we dared not speak up. The reason why the Hai family is more powerful than us is because they control the technology to build giant ships. Moreover, they also have Uncle’s elite navy to serve as escort. It is no wonder that they have been so successful.[2] Although Uncle has forgotten the help provided in secret by the Yue family

in the olden days, this little nephew does not dare to demand repayment for our former grace. In addition, the Yue family does not crave much, only that the Hai family hands over the ship designs and the sea maps. The Yue family has the confidence that we will able to protect our own merchant convoys."

Jiang Yong did not speak, glancing at Jiang Haitao. Understanding, Jiang Haitao replied, "Cousin's words are incorrect. Doing business relies upon one's abilities. What does the Hai family's ability to build those large ships have anything to do with the Yue family? If the Yue family wants to cooperate with the Hai family, you should, reasonably speaking, go discuss this in private with Lord Hai. Why are you here disturbing little brother's happy occasion?"

An indescribable look showed in Yue Wenhan's eyes, as he asked, "Who doesn't know that the behind-the-scenes supporter of the Hai Family Shipping Company is Uncle? Isn't it Uncle's wish to see the Hai family monopolize the ocean trade? If Qingyan and I complete the marriage alliance with you, you will probably provide some benefits to the Yue family as we are relatives. However, you will definitely not provide the large ship designs to the Yue family. When the time comes, when my little sister has already become part of your Jiang family, she will be the same as a hostage. When that happens, wouldn't the Yue family have suffered losses in vain? It is best that all of this be discussed now."

"What's the meaning of this? This is my Eastern Sea, not your Fujian," countered Jiang Haitao with indignation. "If cousin wants to interfere with this business, you must come with cold, hard cash to discuss this matter with us. Does the Yue family always use this kind of sophistry[3] to do business?"

Yue Hanwen callously explained, "It is said that power is reason. This lowly nephew is attaching serious importance to righteousness and is unwilling to lightly betray allies. That is why I am only demanding the ship designs and the sea maps. If we followed the intentions of the manager, we would have invited Uncle to divide up the assets of the Hai family long ago. What's the point in relying upon someone else's leftovers to survive? Wouldn't it be better to completely control the moneymaking operations?"

Jiang Yong's complexion changed several times. Listening to this point, he coldly expressed, "The Hai family is Eastern Sea's ally. Are you trying to force our Jiang family to abandon this alliance and betray our ally? Who could have thought that you are actually such a person? Fine … for the sake of your aunt, I will allow your Yue family to depart. You can take Qingyan with you. Our Jiang family does not deserve to take a daughter of the Yue family."

At this moment, the quarrel between the two families had disturbed the entire island. The Yue family troops dispatched to escort the bride had drawn near the wedding hall. All of them had weapons hidden on their bodies. As for the subordinates of the Jiang family, they had responsibility for the entire island's security, and were full equipped. Both sides confronted each other outside of the wedding hall. As a martial household, the Jiang family had dispersed all of the guests and their servants, arranging for the guards of the distinguished guests to rest temporarily in the side halls. The Jiang family subordinates' reactions were swift. Aside from the people of the Yue family who had prepared long ago and had already arrived before the wedding hall, everyone else had been placed under house arrest for their protection.

Pretending as if he didn't see these developments, Yue Wenhan actually laughed humorlessly. He shouted, "My Yue family's daughters are very respected. Even if the Jiang family desires to wed one, it may not necessarily be successful. Qingyan, since the Jiang family is not impressed by you, come back then."

Standing majestically at the side, the silent bride bowed slightly. Then a lily-white hand the color of a snow rose pulled the red damask veil off of her phoenix crown, revealing an absolutely beautiful mien. The pupils, as ice-cold as the cold river in winter, of her eyes, as clear as limpid autumn waters, were seen clearly by everyone in the hall. Lowering her head and controlling her eyebrows, Yue Qingyan walked to and stood by Yue Wenhan's side.

The smiling and silent Yan Wujiu suddenly spoke up, "Niece, since the Jiang family is heartless, there is no need for us to be compassionate. Niece,

please demand justice for yourself."

Everyone was stupefied when hearing this. Everyone would understand if Yue Wujiu had ordered the Yue family subordinates outside of the hall to attack. However, Yue Wujiu actually ordered Yue Qingyan to act. This was completely unimaginable. A daughter of the Yue family was a precious young lady both in name and fact. How could she have the methods to attack someone? However, everyone still raised their guard. Since Yue Wujiu had spoken thusly, then Yue Qingyan definitely had some special skills.

Yue Qingyan's gaze turned to Yue Wenhan. Seeing her brother lightly nod his head, a look of distress flashed across Yue Qingyan's eyes. She closed her eyes. In this split second, the guards defending the entrance to the wedding hall suddenly let out blood-curdling screams, collapsing to the ground unconscious. Jiang Haitao was greatly alarmed. Pulling out one of the guard's sheathed sword, he charged towards Yue Qingyan, yelling, "Witch! You dare to use poison here? Die!"

Jiang Yong frowned and warned, "Tao'er, do not be reckless!"

However at this moment, Jiang Haitao had already exchanged blows with the defending Yue Wenhan. Yue Wenhan's martial arts were mediocre. With only a few exchanges, Jiang Haitao had already forced Yue Wenhan aside. Jiang Haitao charged to Yue Qingyan's side. Just as he was about to raise his hand to seal Yue Qingyan's acupoints, her eyes opened. That pair of eyes that glittered like a clear spring were now filled with blood. She revealed an icy smile. Jiang Haitao felt as if his organs were burning from the pricks of acupuncture needles. With a miserable scream, he collapsed to the floor. Yue Qingyan slowly looked around the hall, her eyes falling upon one person. With one look, that person felt dizzy, falling to the ground. In red dress, Yue Qingyan seemed like a beautiful rakshasa from hell, and like a rakshasa, able to frighten everyone stiff.

The Prince of Qi, Li Xian, suddenly spoke up, "Heart Toxin Insect! You are using the Heart Toxin Insect!"

Yue Qingyan's gaze fell upon the Prince of Qi, her blood-red eyes carrying a look that seemed to agree with an idiom by Confucius: despair is the

greatest sorrow.[4] Afterwards, she lightly frowned, a bead of sweat rolling down her forehead.

Li Xian unfeelingly stated, “Young lady Yue, there is no need to trouble yourself. Although the Heart Toxin Insect is formidable, this Prince has an amulet capable of warding off evil. Your Heart Toxin Insect is incapable of harming this Prince.”

Yue Qingyan’s brows furrowed, as she replied, “There aren’t many treasures capable of warding off evil in the world. Which item does Your Imperial Highness have on your person? The Evil Warding Lavender Jade Pendant or the Sea of Bitterness Bodhi?”

Li Xian smiled faintly. Stretching out his hand, he took out a thin, black gold chain. On the chain was a jade pendant the color of purple and palm-sized. It was engraved into the shape of the mythical lion-like animal that warded off evil. It had a faint aura of an amulet; the color of its jade was luminous. Startled, Li Kang shouted, “Imperial Father actually bestowed this jade pendant upon you?” Hot rage appeared on his face.

Lin Bi smiled. “I have long heard that the Evil Warding Lavender Jade Pendant is capable of repelling poisons and warding off evil. Surprisingly, Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, actually is wearing it upon your person. It seems that we are truly fortunate. Young lady Yue, although your Heart Toxin Insect is formidable, it is powerless before the Evil Warding Lavender Jade Pendant. In addition, in order to use the Heart Toxin Insect, you are also harming yourself as you harm others. Young lady Yue, why not cease using this?”

Yan Qingyan’s gaze fell upon Lin Bi, a hint of savage hatred flashing across her eyes. Just as she was about to utilize the poison, Yue Wujiu shouted, “Second Miss, how can you use the forbidden Heart Toxin Insect? Did the young family head know of this beforehand? What about the family head? Why didn’t you inform uncle of this beforehand?”

A smile of ridicule appeared on Yue Qingyan’s face, ceasing her attempt to use the poison upon Lin Bi. She stated, “No, Daddy does not know. Elder brother knows about this though.”

Yue Wujiu's complexion changed, as he replied, "As the manager, this subordinate is truly incompetent and failed my duties. The young family head is of mind to annex the Eastern Sea. This lowly one was unable to persuade him otherwise and could only comply. Who could have thought that the young master would actually collude with the Miss and use the Heart Toxin Insect to harm others? Although this subordinate is an underling, I dare not obey such chaotic commands. Young master, Miss, it is best to wait to be captured, returning to beg for forgiveness from the family head."

These words spoken by Yue Wujiu were filled with sincerity. Those experts from the Yue family blocking the doorway exchanged looks of dismay. One of them stepped out and stated, "Young family head, what the manager has said is correct. Young master and Miss, please do not use such poison to harm others, and return with us to be punished by the family head."

Yue Wenhan and Yue Qingyan's faces simultaneously revealed expressions of understanding. Yue Wenhan callously declared, "You are all subordinates of the Yue family. None of you have the qualifications to speak here. Qingyan, if anyone dares to disobey, take their life."

Yue Qingyan smiled slightly. Her eyes that had gradually turned black suddenly became blood red again. Simultaneously, the Yue family subordinate who had walked out and spoken up collapsed to the ground, his complexion terrible, dying. Almost in unison, everyone took in a cold breath. Yue Qingyan cruelly stated, "Everyone set down your weapons and surrender. All those who disobey will die. Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, although you are protected by an amulet, you can only protect yourself. Your elder brother and your subordinates do not have a hope for surviving. If you don't surrender, I can temporarily leave you alive."

Lin Tong's eyes were filled with alarm, gently pulling on her elder sister's sleeve, asking, "Elder sister, what is the Heart Toxin Insect?"

Lin Bi gazed at Yue Qingyan. As Yue Qingyan turned her head, Lin Bi sighed and replied, "The Heart Toxin Insect is one of the most peculiar venoms from the southern frontier. This kind of venomous insect is fond of the yin-

principled cold, only fond of consuming the blood of young girls. It's also known as the king of the venomous insects, because as long as one is poisoned by its toxins, then it will be impossible to survive. Raising the Heart Toxin Insect requires a young girl who has just reached marriageable age. They must be fed everyday with blood and medicines. In addition, the young girl must keep the Heart Toxin Insect King by her side, being attached upon one's skin day and night. One must not be remiss in raising it, requiring three to seven years of care to raise them depending upon the young girl's body and natural endowments. After several years, after the insect king has been raised, this Insect will take up residence as a parasite in its host's chest. The insect and the girl will be as one. As long as the host wishes it, the insect king will spread its children to the target's body. Afterwards, the one poisoned will have his or her life in the hands of the host. This poison has a distinctive characteristic. Once someone has been so poisoned and takes the drug produced by the insect king, the person poisoned will be connected with the host. No matter how far apart they are, there is nothing that can prevent them from having similar thoughts. That is why it is called the Heart Toxin Insect. Miss Yue presumably has an exceptionally good body, suitable for raising such an insect, able to raise the insect king in less than three years. She probably has spent much effort in raising it."

Finished speaking, Lin Bi gave Yue Qingyan a pitying look. She continued, "Tong'er, the most fearsome aspect of this venomous insect is that it is capable of not only harming others, but also harming its user. The insect must consume its host's blood every day. As it grows with each passing day, as the host harms others, the insect requires massive quantities of blood. Miss Yue's *qi* and blood deficiency, and her appearance as pale as snow, is all probably a result of this consumption. This by itself can probably be dealt with. One must know that although the toxin of this insect is formidable, there is a way of restraining it. If Miss Yue were to die and bleed, then the insect king would break out of her body, completely consuming Miss Yue's blood. Afterwards, the insect king will be able to live completely freely upon this world. Wherever he takes up residence, within a perimeter of ten *li* , there will be neither human nor animal surviving. Even if there is no blood

shed and the insect king does not have any way of breaking out of the body, dying with Miss Yue, then all those who have been poisoned with its venom will die simultaneously. This is all if Miss Yue is capable of controlling the insect king. If Miss Yue's blood supply is insufficient, then she will be consumed by the insect. The result will be that Miss Yue will be incapable of controlling the Heart Toxin Insect. This is why the world has forbidden such a method. It is only that the Heart Toxin Insect inheritance has long been thought to be extinct. Who would have thought that there was someone capable of nurturing it?"

Yue Qingyan's face was completely glazed over, as her left hand could not help but grasp her right wrist. There, under the damask silk, were the scars from where she used an acupuncture needle to let blood out.

Lin Tong lamented, "*Aiyah* ! Elder Sister Yue, this Heart Toxin Insect is truly fearsome … how … how much blood do you have to feed it? It is best to think of a way to remove it as soon as possible."

Warmth flashed across Yue Qingyan's eyes. Just now, she had allowed Lin Bi to explain everything, intending to use Lin Bi's words to sow terror in everyone's heart. This would better allow her to control everyone present. However, seeing Lin Tong so deeply concerned, she was deeply touched. In her mind, she resolved to not kill her. Yue Qingyan's eyes fell upon Jiang Yong. She asked indifferently, "Uncle, why haven't you handed over the design and maps yet?"

Agony appeared in Jiang Yong's eyes, as he responded, "You were originally the distinguished daughter of an influential family. Why have you developed such a vicious, demonic technique? You must know that even though your current power is impressive, your life will be like a flower, short. Who was it … who was it that had you develop this kind of technique?"

Yue Qingyan revealed a hint of resolve, as she apologized, "Uncle, pardon me." Finished speaking, she was about to utilize her venomous technique when the golden drum outside of the hall sounded. The Yue family guards defending the door screamed repeatedly. Everyone looked, seeing that those guards' vital points were pierced with arrows.

Yue Wujiu frowned. He walked to the door and looked out. He saw that a hundred paces away, behind layer upon layer of protection from shields were archers in the uniforms of the Eastern Sea's marines, waiting with bows notched. A large man shouted, "Everyone inside, listen up! This location has already been surrounded! We of the Eastern Sea don't have much, but we have plenty of skilled archers. If you dare to continue to be unbridled, don't blame us for being heartless!"

Finished speaking, the man raised his bow and loosed a whistling arrow. Following, over a thousand arrows flew out. Yue Wujiu was greatly alarmed, promptly kicking closed the door to the hall before ducking to the side. A sound similar to hailstones could be heard as the door was pierced through by the sharp arrows. From outside, the large man's voice was heard again to shout, "Your Lordship, please give the order! If there is anyone who dares to disobey, in a quarter of an hour, I will set fire to the building."

Yue Wujiu's expression fell heavily. He cried out, "Your Lordship, I have heard that every naval squadron of the Eastern Sea has a number of crack archers who can pierce a willow leaf at one hundred paces[5] and take someone's life. They are as powerful as the sound of thunder. Seeing them today, they truly deserve of their reputation. Your Lordship, please order them to temporarily withdraw, otherwise, if Qingyan is harmed, none of us will likely be able to escape the insect king's slaughter."

"This is the Eastern Sea, not someplace that any outsiders can make decisions," replied Jiang Yong indifferently. "Niece Qingyan, are you able to cease and withdraw the poison in Haitao's body?"

Yue Qingyan's complexion was pale as paper, and she glanced at Yue Wenhan. Yue Wenhan calmly and impassively answered, "Uncle, since things have progressed to such a state, we already have no route of retreat. In addition, as long as Qingyan is given some time, it will be impossible for those archers to escape the venomous, secret attacks."

"Yes, Qingyan is capable of utilizing that toxic technique," replied Jiang Yong with a smile. "However, she must consume a lot of her blood to do so. Are you not afraid that she will be consumed by the insect king?"

Yue Wenhan uncaringly stated, “There’s nothing bad about it if that happens. Everything will be destroyed here. Dying together with all of these high-ranking officials and dignitaries will allow Wenhan and my sister to perish without regrets. Uncle, you should understand. If information of Qingyan’s possession of the Heart Toxin Insect were to spread, countless individuals would likely come to punitively attack her. They would not rest until they forced Qingyan to immolate herself. The people of the world are the enemies of us brother and sister. There is no harm in taking a few extra people with us. If Uncle does not order your subordinates to set down their bows, I’m afraid that this little nephew can only offend you.”

Li Xian suddenly leapt forward. With one move, he slapped Yue Wenhan aside. Afterwards, the sword at his waist was unsheathed, pointing at Yue Wenhan’s throat. His movements were extremely fast and nimble. Everyone was afraid to act, in fear of harming each other. Who could have expected that Li Xian would be so bold? Although he was protected by the amulet, everyone present here was of precious status. If a few were to truly die, it would likely be impossible for Li Xian to justify his actions. As expected, seeing what had occurred, the expression on Yue Qingyan’s face changed, immediately utilizing her technique. The Prince of Qing, Li Kang, let out a miserable shriek and collapsed to the ground.

Li Xian’s complexion actually didn’t change. Smiling, he stated, “Miss Yue is addled. Have you ever heard of an imperial family that had any familial affection? As long as I, Li Xian, am safe and sound, what do I care about others’ survival? Miss’s affection towards your elder brother is deep. If you are willing to surrender, I am willing to guarantee that I will not harm you two. Moreover, does the Miss not desire to escape the fate of being consumed by the insect king? If Miss is willing, this Prince can petition the Emperor, convening the famous doctors of the world to treat Miss. Although there is only a shred of success, it is better than being resigned to your fate.”

Yue Qingyan seemed to waver. However, she swiftly regained her calm. Coldly, she replied, “I do not believe your words. You don’t even care about the life of your own elder brother, how can I be sure that you will keep your promises?”

Li Xian was overjoyed inside. Yue Qingyan had begun to waver. This was excellent. The expression on his face changed. “Miss Yue, since you are engaged to Haitao, you must understand the character of me, Li Xian. This Prince does not have any other good qualities except for never breaking any promises that I have made. It is only that this Prince’s temperament is queer. If someone tries to compel me, I will make things difficult for that person until the very end. Even if Miss kills my third elder brother, cousin, and nephew today, this Prince will definitely not bow my head and beg for forgiveness. However, this Prince vows that if Miss acts thusly, I will break out alone, and one day, there will be the time when Fujian’s Yue family will perish at my hands. I won’t perform the nine familial exterminations on Miss, only turning the entirety of the Yue family into slaves, forcing them to be stepped on by others for generations, as lowly as the mud.”

Yue Qingyan’s expression gradually changed. She hailed from a prestigious house and had studied the law, naturally understanding that slaves could never marry normal people. Those handsome men and beautiful women of slave backgrounds would almost always be reduced to become prostitutes or catamites. Li Xian’s threats were not only terrifying, but also quite direct. At this moment, Yue Wenhan suddenly threw his throat towards Li Xian’s sword. Li Xian immediately reacted, moving the sword point away. Yue Wujiu seized the opportunity to save Yue Wenhan.

Li Xian helplessly glanced at the hint of blood on Yue Wenhan’s throat. Smiling, he stated, “It seems that you have won.”

Yue Wenhan rose to his feet, ignoring Yue Wujiu’s help. Staggering, he walked over to stand by Yue Qingyan’s side. He said, “Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, please do not make any rash movements, otherwise don’t blame us for beginning the massacre.” Turning to Jiang Yong, he stated, “Uncle, please have your subordinates discard their weapons and surrender, otherwise this lowly nephew can only first take cousin’s life before speaking again with Uncle.”

Jiang Yong shook inside. Helplessly, he shouted, “Yuanxin, stay your hand temporarily! Wait for my command!”

A look of determination on Yue Wenhan’s face, while everyone smiled with

bitterness inside. Why was this brother and sister pair so ferocious and unafraid of death? Children of an influential family were never in danger. Why were they going so far?

Footnotes :

云里雾**里**, yunliwuli – idiom, lit. amidst the clouds and mist; fig. mystified, puzzled

顺风顺**水**, shunfengshunshui – idiom, lit. sail with the wind and the current; successful

强词夺**理**, qiangciduoli – idiom, lit. to twist words and force logic; fig. sophistry, loud rhetoric making up for fallacious argument

哀莫大于心死, aimodayuxinsi – idiom, lit. nothing sadder than a withered heart; fig. despair is the greatest sorrow

百步穿杨, baibuchuanyang – idiom, lit. pierce a willow leaf with an arrow from the distance of a hundred paces; fig. shoot with great precision

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 10: Eastern Sea Swells Pacified

Volume 4, Chapter 10: Eastern Sea Swells Pacified

Yue Wenhan and Yue Qingyan exchanged looks. In a clear and bright voice, Yue Wenhan stated, “Regardless of how capable you all are, you are all under the control of us, brother and sister. Although His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, does not fear the toxin, I presume that His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, won’t allow His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qing, to die here. When the time comes, even if His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, is able to fortunately escape, His Imperial Majesty, the Emperor of Great Yong, will likely suspect that he used someone else to do his dirty work.”

Li Xian smiled sardonically. Even without this reason, he could not watch the Marquis of Eastern Sea, the Marquis’s son, and his third elder brother die here. Ignoring familial affection and morality, if the marquis father and son were to die, their formidable navy that was about to be obtained by Great Yong would immediately disintegrate. When the time came, the coastal regions will likely never know peace from pirate raids. Moreover, when attacking Southern Chu in the future, they needed a formidable naval commander. In naval combat, Great Yong was unlikely to have anyone surpassing the marquis and his son. In addition, the issue relating to the Prince of Qing had already been hit on the mark by Yue Wenhan. Li Xian knew that he could not take the Prince of Qing seriously, but the Prince of Qing was the highest ranking imperial prince of Great Yong and his elder brother. If he were to watch as the Prince of Qing died here, not only would the Prince of Qing’s subordinates not take things lying down, even the ranking ministers of the court would suspect that he had ulterior motives to harm an important minister of the state and an imperial prince of the imperial household. When the time came, he would be surrounded and attacked. Even the emperor would be unable to protect him. Even if he was not denounced and punished, his position as commander-in-chief would be

handed over to another. When the time came, who would be capable of holding off Long Tingfei? Beyond all that, Lin'er was still on the island. Even if he was heartless and rejected righteousness, could he also have the heart to sacrifice the only child left behind by his first wife?

The more he thought, the more Li Xian became indignant. When had he ever been so humiliated? If someone dared to use hostages to threaten him, he normally would destroy the enemy and hostages together. However, this Yue family brother and sister had grasped his weakness, using hostages that he could not sacrifice. Li Xian could only continue smiling wryly. He could not help but think, *Damned Jiang Zhe, if you did not have me attend this ritual, I would have arrived at your location long ago and not have to be caught in such a predicament* . He cursed in his heart for some time.

Li Xian suddenly came to his senses with a start. Jiang Zhe knew of his arrival here. Moreover, Jiang Zhe's beloved daughter, Roulan, was also on the island. Jiang Zhe had additionally dispatched a messenger to inform him that something would happen during the wedding banquet. Now that something had happened as expected, then surely Jiang Zhe had made preparations. Thinking of this, Li Xian's mind calmed somewhat. He silently prayed, *Jiang Zhe, Sir Jiang, good brother-in-law, I don't ask for anything, just quickly and fully display your methods to settle the Yue family's brother and sister.*

Almost as if the Heavens were responding to Li Xian's prayer, someone calmly stated, "Young Family Head Yue, Miss Yue, there is no need for the two of you to continue your farce. Before the wedding banquet began, I, Lu Can, received news that your esteemed father and the several managers of the Yue family have already been rescued."

Yue Wenhan and Yue Qingyan simultaneously cried out in surprise, "What? How is this possible?"

Li Xian was overjoyed, turning his head to look. The expression on his face froze. The one who had spoken was Southern Chu's grand general, Lu Can. Although anyone could hypothetically resolve this impasse, Li Xian had zero expectations that it would be Lu Can who acted. Although, he understood that this Lu Can was a disciple of Jiang Zhe's, hadn't Jiang Zhe already

become implacable enemies with Southern Chu? Having been attacked by an assassin and taking a princess of Great Yong as a bride meant that Jiang Zhe had no way of ever serving Southern Chu.

Lu Can had a tranquil expression on his face, almost as if he had spoken something totally ordinary. Glancing at the precipitously changing expression on Yue Wujiu's face, Lu Can stated, "I truly respect Manager Yue's scheming, exploiting Miss Yue's feeling of uselessness and desire to help her elder brother to entice her to nurture the Heart Toxin Insect. Afterwards, you pressed closely, forcing the Miss to take action to kill several of your trusted subordinates. When the time came, with the Miss having nurtured the Heart Toxin Insect and having blackmail material on the Miss for murdering several members of the Yue family, you originally could have forced the Young Family Head to renounce his future position as Family Head. It is a pity that Manager Yue was too extreme. You yourself are cold and ruthless, believing that others will be the same. As a result, in order to prevent the Young Family Head from one day making a comeback, you sought to eradicate all those Yue family members loyal to the Family Head. However, if you were to act in such a manner, not only wouldn't those family members be unwilling to wait for death, even those supporting your succession would not allow a situation where you monopolize power. As a result, you came to the difficult decision to purge the Yue family. You would rather weaken the Yue family than allow anyone the ability to contest its authority with you. An initially simple contest within the Yue family was actually transformed into a conspiracy affecting the entire world. Speaking of all this, I have no choice but to admire you."

Lu Can's words were somewhat filled with ridicule. Gazing upon Yue Wujiu's already ashen face, Lu Can continued, "Manager Yue has truly arranged a good spectacle, imprisoning the Family Head and all of the other elders of the Yue family, then forcing the Young Family Head and the Miss to follow your plan and perform this play. After news of this incident is spread, everyone will learn that the Young Family Head of the Yue family dared to violate the prohibition and incite Yue Qingyan to raise the forbidden Heart Toxin Insect. Beyond murdering one's own clansmen, Yue Wenhan would actually attempt to willfully slaughter innocents in order to obtain a ship

design and some sea maps. Those unfortunate victims would include the Great Yong's Prince of Qing, Li Kang, and the Prince of Qi, Li Xian; Southern Chu's Lu Can; the Marquis of the Eastern Sea and his son; and Hai Zhongying and his nephew. Ultimately, the Yue Family Head would be forced to execute his son and daughter in order to apologize to the world. From henceforth, affairs of the Yue family would fall into Manager's hands. With the Eastern Sea disintegrated into disparate factions and the Hai family exterminated, the Yue family would be able to seize control of the ocean trade, submitting to Southern Chu. This would leave both you and the one inciting matters behind the scenes perfectly satisfied by this result. It is only a pity for those ghosts of those who died unjustly."

Yue Wujiu felt as if he was buried in an ice cave. This plan had been painstakingly prepared by himself and the head of the North Star Hall. The only ones who knew the entirety of this plan were the two of them. How was this youth, whom he had to kill, so familiar[1] with all this? This man was a part of a separate faction within Southern Chu. Could it be that he had fallen into a trap? He could not help but yell out, "Qingyan, kill him! It is impossible for the Family Head to escape. Do not believe his words!"

Yue Qingyan was at a loss. Stunned, she asked, "Is this true? Manager? Didn't you agree that if we obeyed, you would let off my father and elder brother after I died? Have you really decided to massacre my entire family beforehand?"

Hearing all this, Yue Wenhan's expression shifted. He icily stated, "Yue Wujiu! Didn't you agree that once I committed suicide to atone for my crimes, you wouldn't harm my father, all of the family elders, and Qingyan? So you actually intended to exterminate all of us! To think that Qingyan and I actually desired to acquire the ship design and sea maps to ensure that our Yue family would be unchallenged even if we die … Who could have thought that you would completely betray our family!"

An awkward look flashed across Yue Wujiu's face, as he replied, "This man is only talking nonsense. Right now, Qingyan's affair is already known to all of them. If you don't want her to be immolated, you must silence and kill everyone here, otherwise it will be impossible to protect Qingyan even if we

wanted to."

Yue Wenhan coolly said, "Manager, you have lost your way. There are already differences between your promises to Qingyan and I. Compared to Grand General Lu, there is no need to guess who we will believe. Fine … I have already seen the vicious and merciless methods of your partners. Destroying root and branch was originally the iron rule of the *jianghu* . It is we, brother and sister, who have been too naïve, believing that you would remember the Yue family's progenitor. Unfortunately, we have run into a turncoat who has completely forgotten one's roots."[2]

Yue Wenhan gently grasped onto his sister's hands. Sadly, he stated, "Qingyan, it will be impossible for this brother of yours to continue to protect you. There is no need for you to worry. Regardless of life or death, brother will accompany you. I will take all of the responsibility for the mistake that you have made."

He aloofly stared at Lu Can, stating, "General Lu, my sister is young and ignorant, and was instigated by another. If General Lu has truly rescued my father and my seniors, then we, brother and sister, are willing to accept death. However, General Lu must also accept some of Wenhan's conditions, as we will not go to our deaths for nothing."

Yue Wujiu furiously shouted, "Lu Can! How did you learn of this matter? Is he conspiring with you, scheming to acquire the Yue family?"

His words were more useful than the coaxing words that he had spoken to the brother and sister. A questioning look appeared on Yue Wenhan's face. He knew that the one conspiring with Yue Wujiu was influential in Southern Chu. Moreover, what Yue Wujiu said was true. Lu Can knew too much. If Lu Can were deliberately defeating both opposing factions within the Yue family and seizing control of the Yue family's shipping, then this would be of benefit to Southern Chu.

Yue Wenhan's suspicious gaze caused Lu Can to smile wryly. Lu Can replied, "Manager's ability to make bogus accusations[3] is truly formidable. I am aware of all this because of one individual, my respected master, Jiang Zhe, Sir Jiang. He sent me a letter a month ago, warning me that someone

was conspiring to seize the opportunity of my journey here to harm me. If you two, brother and sister, desire to learn how I learned these things, it is best to think of a way to ask Sir Jiang."

Hearing this, Li Xian scolded, "Sure enough, this is him playing games! However, Lu Can, why did he go to seek your help? What is going on? Don't tell me that he has forgotten that Southern Chu has many people who seek to kill him?"

"Your Imperial Highness, I truly wish that my master can return to Southern Chu," answered Lu Can, smiling softly. "Unfortunately, I'm afraid that my master will never have any engagements with Southern Chu ever again. However, with regards to the location of the Yue family hostages, it was inconvenient for anyone else to make a move. In addition, it is likely that master still takes me, this disciple, into consideration, not wishing to see me be harmed by another." In his head, Lu Can thought, *Surely, I can't tell you that the hostages from the Yue family have been placed under house arrest in the Royal Guard encampments in Jianye.*

Yue Wenhan's gaze was still filled with hesitation. Regardless of how he hated Yue Wujiu, he was still worried about his father and his elders. However, there was one thing that he understood clearly. Even if Yue Wujiu ultimately won, his hands were also stained with the blood of the Yue family. If this man were permitted to control the Yue family, then Yue Wenhan knew that his sins would never be pardoned. After thinking it over, Yue Wenhan suddenly saw the light. Regardless of how much truth was in Lu Can's words, his father was likely already in Lu Can's hands. If that were the case, then even if he and his sister were willing to die, the best course forward was to see how to gain the biggest benefits for the Yue family. Regardless of his actions going forward, he could not injure the Marquis of the Eastern Sea and his son. After all, only they shared the same interests with the Yue family.

Thinking of this, Yue Wenhan smiled and said, "Qingyan, since things have turned out like this, there is no need for us to betray our intentions. First, have Haitao regain consciousness."

Qingyan nodded her head gently, shame and guilt appearing in her eyes.

Whatever the case, Jiang Haitao was her husband. Jiang Haitao, lying on the ground, let out a low moan. However, he quickly regained consciousness. Waking up, he immediately grasped his precious sword. However, he did not attack the brother and sister. After all, he wasn't reckless.

"Young Family Head Yue, you need to remember one thing," stated Lu Can with a faint smile. "Although it is impossible to save someone afflicted with the Heart Toxin Insect, it is not impossible to expel it from one's body. In the final years of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, after the Heart Toxin Insect had created countless tragedies, all of the famous doctors of the world began to study how to cure it. His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, has the Evil Warding Lavender Jade Pendant bestowed by the Heavens, ensuring that His Imperial Highness was protected from being harmed by the Heart Toxin Insect. The Sea of Bitterness Bodhi has the same effect. However, there is also a secret recipe to manufacture a spice bag. Those wearing it will not be harmed by the poison. Although the effects do not last long, if it were a rich and powerful family, it would be easy to produce them in sufficient quantity." Finished speaking, Lu Can took out a spice bag from his bosom. Although she was far away, Yue Qingyan frowned, retreating several steps.

The Marquis of the Eastern Sea's expression changed. "General Lu, was this also given to you by Sir Jiang?"

Hearing this, everyone understood that he had gotten suspicious. If Jiang Zhe had not told him any of this, it would inevitably be somewhat excessive.

"I wish that I could say that was the case, but unfortunately I cannot," replied Lu Can with a wry smile. "I did not know beforehand that Miss Yue would use her mastery of the Heart Toxin Insect to control everyone. Some of what I just said came from Sir's information, while others are from my conjectures. Although this prescription is hard to create, it isn't a difficult matter for everyone present here. It is only that the Heart Toxin Insect has disappeared for many years, causing no one to be prepared. This spice bag originally belonged to Fu *daren* . In my youth, I was naughty and mischievous, learning how to pickpocket. Fu *daren* was too tense. Before leaving the ship, he subconsciously touched the spice bag several times. As a result, I immediately stole it once I entered the wedding hall. Just now,

hearing about the Heart Toxin Insect, I truly feel that my luck is indeed great."

To everyone present, Southern Chu's deputy envoy, Fu Yulun, was a nobody. As a result, no one had paid him much attention. At this moment, however, everyone could see that he had already been collapsed onto his chair, paralyzed, for some time now. Originally, everyone dismissed him as a useless scholar and did not take notice of him. Hearing Lu Can's words, they finally discovered that Fu Yulun's acupoints had been sealed, his eyes wide open and filled with terror.

Lu Can brought the spice bag to his nose and took a whiff. Smiling, he asked rhetorically, "Fu *daren* , you were probably planning on delivering my corpse in a coffin back to Southern Chu, correct? Unfortunately, I cannot allow your wish to be fulfilled. Young Family Head Yue, there are at least two individuals on your kill list who will not die at your hands. As long as the two of us are able to leave alive, then the Yue family's fate will be determined. For the sake of the Yue family, I believe that the two of you will make the best decision."

Yue Wenhan sighed and replied, "Fine … The Yue family has performed many unjust acts. No wonder we have fallen into today's predicament. The Yue family falling into General's hands is better than falling into others'. Qingyan, retract the toxin. There is no need for us to continue to be someone else's catspaw."

Yue Qingyan voiced her agreement, retracting the poison. All those who had fainted gradually regained consciousness.

Yue Wujiu's complexion was the color of ash. At this moment, there was only one thought in his mind. *Why had those people not appeared* ? If those people were here, he would have the strength to capture everyone here in one swoop. Wenhan and Qingyan would be forced to obey his instructions. Yue Wujiu began to move backwards, seeking to rendezvous with his helpers.

At this moment, a beautiful married woman walked out from the rear hall. In her hand was a sword that had traces of blood upon its edges. Gazing at

Yue Wujiu, she callously stated, “Manager, there is no need for you to remain deluded and seek to meet with them. I have already killed all of the inside agents that they have arranged with the matrons of honor and maids. Right now, they do not yet know that you have failed. Perhaps you will have the opportunity to meet them again after they have been captured.”

Gazing upon this woman, Yue Wujiu agonizingly voiced, “Lady Xue, the Head of the Fengwu Hall claimed that you are one of them. Why would you betray them?”

With a cold and calm expression, Lady Xue replied, “That’s right, I was one of them before. However, they have forgotten that I cut off all ties with them long ago. Correct, they have said that they can preserve my husband’s life and have promised that they will ensure that I become his formal wife. However, I married an indomitable[4] man, not a puppet eking out an ignoble existence. Yue Wujiu, there is no need to feel aggrieved by your failure. They never had the intentions of handing the entirety of the Yue family to you. They promised to preserve my husband’s life for the sake of finding an opportunity to eliminate you.”

“I clearly made preparations long ago when I began to conspire with those so ferocious,” said Yue Wujiu bitterly. “I would definitely have ensured that they would be unable to control the Yue family. As long as I can preserve the Yue family’s foundation and obtain the Hai family’s secrets, then the Yue family can soon monopolize the ocean. As far as I’m concerned, the assets that they wish to control are insignificant. Lady Xue, are you truly unafraid that I will reveal your past to everyone? What face does a woman who was deserted by her husband, a woman who wished to poison to death her husband’s children, have to stand at Wenhan’s side?”

Her expression unchanging, Lady Xue indifferently replied, “I was already punished for the mistake that I made in the past. Moreover, my husband has long known of these things. It is impossibly stupid that you would seek to use this to threaten me.”

Yue Wujiu turned to look at Yue Wenhan. Seeing the serene expression on his nephew’s face, Yue Wujiu could not help but exclaim, “So your estrangement was fake!”

Yue Wenhan icily declared, “No, we have not been able to reach a state. During this period, Xue Qiuxue and I have truly had our differences.”

The look on his face calming greatly, Yue Wujiu inquired, “Presumably, the outside help was all you, Lady Xue, acting on your own initiative without Wenhan’s consent?”

Lady Xue did not reply, a hint of melancholy within her brows. Yue Wenhan stated, “Manager truly understands me like the back of my hand. That’s correct, Qiuxue concealed from me that she wrote a letter to her former husband. This is why I cannot forgive her.”

Yue Wujiu could not help but smile bitterly, stating, “So that’s why … Lady Xue is worthy of being a disciple of the Fengyi Sect, thinking of such a circuitous method to ask for help. Lady’s former husband, General Pei, is now a trusted general of the Yong Emperor, overseeing the lands north of the Yangtze River and waiting for the Emperor’s order. His presence has caused the entirety of Southern Chu to be filled with worry and fear, not daring to make any untoward moves. Moreover, I have heard that after the coup d’état instigated by the Fengyi Sect, if he had not petitioned the Emperor on his sickbed to plea for leniency on your esteemed father’s behalf, it is likely that your esteemed father’s position would have been lost. Unfortunately, I have always thought a woman would be narrow-minded. Who could have thought that Lady Xue was actually willing to ask him for help? If he had received the letter, learning that the Yue family was going to act against the Eastern Sea, it is natural that he would make preparations. However, why does it seem to me that the Eastern Sea seems to be unaware of all this?”

At this moment, Lady Xue could only smile wryly. Since she arrived at the Eastern Sea, she had spent every day hoping that someone would get in contact with her. However, no one had come. If she had not met Roulan and Jiang Zhe’s personal guard, Demonic Shadow Li Shun, today, she would likely have fallen apart before the traditional wedding ceremonies had even begun.

The Prince of Qi mumbled to himself, “Could it be that Suiyun was making everything unnecessarily complicated again?”

Just then, a refined voice as cold as ice came from outside, “Your Imperial Highness, you must not wrongly accuse my young master. Lady Xue’s letter arrived too late. When he learned what was happening, General Pei immediately reported it to the Emperor. The Emperor thought of a way to communicate all of this to the young master. However, there was only half a month until the little Marquis’s wedding. Moreover, the Marquis would likely not have dared to believe the accusations of the Yue family’s evil intent without good reason. Furthermore, Lady Xue’s letter was not particularly detailed. Miss Yue’s methods were not written clearly. As a result, my young master could only send a letter asking General Lu to save the Family Head of the Yue family, taking drastic measures to deal with the situation.[5] As long as Miss Yue was no longer threatened, then everything could be resolved. This is all because the remnants of the Fengyi Sect and Manager Yue were too greedy, seeking to obtain both the Eastern Sea and the Yue family, and also deal with the Prince of Qing and General Lu. This insatiable greed[6] has led to this reversal. Were it not for their desire to deal with General Lu, it would have been impossible for my young master to resolve all of this.”

Everyone lifted their heads and looked over. Standing at the door was a young man in azure robes. His features were delicate, handsome, and feminine. He had a tranquil and calm countenance. His sinister and feminine bearing was proud and aloof, almost as if he had accumulated the spring snow—although ice-cold, it could thaw at any moment to become clear and clean snow water that could go anywhere.

Yue Wujiu was already completely downhearted. A single name appeared within his mind. He blurted out, “Demonic Shadow Li Shun!” Just as he spoke, the young man in azure robes pointed into the air. Yue Wujiu felt his four limbs grow limb, as he collapsed to the ground. He gasped with surprise in his mind at his acupoints being sealed from a distance. In despair, he closed his eyes.

The young man in azure smiled slightly and stated, “That is indeed who I am. Manager Yue, just now, this one has already paid a visit to the ship that delivered the bride. Fortunately, the Marquis had the foresight and had

once given this one the authority to mobilize the Eastern Sea's troops. As a result, this one mobilized three warships and over a thousand soldiers, capturing everyone aboard the Yue family's ship. Of course, unfortunately, the remnants of the Fengyi Sect were truly crafty and cunning, actually disembarking at an early time. However, this is an island in the middle of the ocean. It may be assumed that they are still on this island."

Li Xian smiled. "Xiaoshunzi, I don't believe that your master has placed all of the hopes upon someone else. Quickly speak! What is his trump card?"

Bowing, Li Shun replied, "Your Imperial Highness understands clearly. My young master would naturally not dare to be careless. With so many people's lives at stake, young master said since everything relies upon Miss Yue to act, then it likely won't come down to martial arts. The likeliest outcome was poison. If it is an ordinary poison, one only need be careful. It will be enough to ensure that Miss Yue does not have the chance to do so. But the young master also said that it is extremely difficult to control poison. In addition, the Yue family does not have the custom of using poison. Therefore, young master thought of witchcraft or the toxins of venomous insects. The young master ordered this one to bring some medicines and items capable of warding off evil. However, the young master did not expect that Miss Yue would actually employ the Heart Toxin Insect. It is likely that the medication that this one has brought to expel venomous insects will not be that effective. As for the trump card …"

Li Shun paused momentarily before taking out a small, exquisite circular cylinder. He continued, "This can shoot out the flame of the Divine Heavens-Soaring Flame. It can shoot three times. The gunpowder within is meticulously mixed. Once lit, it is impossible to extinguish. The young master said that regardless of poison or witchcraft, there will be nothing left once burned. This will be quite effective." Finished speaking, Li Shun pointed the cylinder at a chair within the wedding hall. He gently activated the mechanism on the cylinder. As expected, a white flame shot out. That chair very swiftly disappeared into smoke under the fire, not even leaving ash behind. What was even more unusual was that nothing happened to another chair that was within a meter or so of the burnt chair. Seeing this,

everyone could not help but feel their hearts leap into their throats, secretly commenting on the lethality of the flame. All of them were of noble statuses, knowing many things that were unknown to the general public. The Heart Toxin Insect was eradicated years ago by being burned by a raging inferno. Fire had always been the nemesis of venomous insects. Today, the only reason that Qingyan had been able to seize the advantage was because no one had made any preparations.

Gazing at Li Shun's elegant features, Lin Tong felt fear well up from deep within. She whispered, "Elder sister, the Demonic Shadow is already so frightening…. Presumably his master is even more so."

Lin Bi forced herself to smile, as she thought, *If I had known that Li Shun was not at Jiang Zhe's side, I would have thought of a way to find Jiang Zhe's whereabouts long ago and had him killed.*

Li Shun continued, "Your Lordship, the matters outside still need to be handled. It is inconvenient for this one to do so. Your Lordship, please take charge."

Jiang Yong gazed deeply at Li Shun. In his mind, he thought, *I have always respected Jiang Zhe because he saved my son's life. Only today was I able to see his sharp edge. It seems that, as expected, I can no longer continue to be Great Yong's enemy, otherwise my son and I will lose our lives at his hands.*

In a loud voice, he commanded, "Tao'er, go placate and console all of the guests. Simply state that the Manager of the Yue family attempted to seize control and that he has already been captured."

He glanced at Yue Qingyan, somewhat hesitating. Everyone in the world knew that his beloved son was getting married. If everything was thrown out, wouldn't it garner the world's ridicule? However, Yue Qingyan had the Heart Toxin Insect within her body. Not only was her life at risk, moreover, with this girl's loyalty to the Yue family, even if she were to be married over, it was likely that there would be problems.

As Jiang Yong was hesitating, Li Xian quick-wittedly smiled and stated, "Qingyan, come over here. Since you have already been married to Haitao, you are my niece-in-law. Sixth uncle does not have an appropriate gift upon

our first meeting. As such, I will give this lavender jade to you." So speaking, he untied the purple jade and shoved it into Yue Qingyan's hands, who had come over with her head lowered. Yue Qingyan was dumbfounded, her luminous face revealing an incredulous and bewildered look.

"Qingyan, although I do not understand anything about venomous insects, at the very least, this lavender jade should be able to suppress the Heart Toxin Insect within your body for a period of time," said Li Xian in a calm tone. "Even if it cannot, this is also a gift that I have given to my niece-in-law. Although you are somewhat confused, I have taken a liking to your temperament. For your elder brother, child, you developed such a method that harms others and yourself. I believe that although you did not know of the harm of the Heart Toxin Insect, at the very least, this Prince does not have the courage to use my own blood to feed the insect king. Hearing your words just now, child, you were actually thinking about using your life to save your father and elder brother. In the past, you obeyed your father. As such, this Prince will not speak of your faults. However, you are already a daughter-in-law of the Jiang family. Having been married, you must obey your husband. From now on, you must not act on your own initiative. Although this nephew of mine is a bit simple, he understands love and hate. In the future, you must play the traditional roles of the wife, scrupulously abiding by the proper conduct of a wife. Understand?"

Holding back tears with difficulty, Yue Qingyan asked in a whisper, "Qingyan does not yet know father-in-law and husband's intentions?"

Li Xian glanced at Jiang Yong and Jiang Haitao. Jiang Yong thought to himself, *This daughter-in-law has a tough and strong temperament. If she is properly instructed, she will definitely be a good wife to Tao'er and ensure that Tao'er does not flounder in officialdom in the future. However, is it even possible to expel the venomous insect from her body* ? After thinking it over, he could not bring himself to reject Li Xian's face and also unwilling to cause his wife to feel sorrow. Thus, he said, "Since the rites have already been performed, I will naturally acknowledge this daughter-in-law."

In comparison, Jiang Haitao had an unsophisticated temper. Earlier, he hated that he was unable to kill Yue Qingyan. However, now, blushing, he

stated, “I leave the decision to Father and sixth uncle.”

Laughing brightly, Li Xian replied, “All right! Lady Xue, first escort Qingyan to the bridal chamber. Yue Wenhan, go with Haitao to take care of the aftermath outside. As for everything else, it’s not my concern. Finally, although everything has been pacified for now, everyone should still remain careful. The remnants of the Fengyi Sect have not yet been found. As for the matter involving the Yue family, Lu Can, what do you say?”

“The Yue family naturally is still Southern Chu’s Yue family,” spoke Lu Can placidly. “Our Southern Chu’s ocean trade still relies upon the Yue family. However, the Hai family should not mind and continue to cooperate with Southern Chu, correct?”

The Marquis of the Eastern Sea and Li Xian exchanged meaningful glances. The current family head of the Yue family was still in Lu Can’s hands. Jiang Yong smiled and said, “General Lu, there is no need to worry. As long as there’re business opportunities, the Hai family will definitely not refuse.”

“Good!” replied Li Xian, clapping his hands. “Let’s quickly reset the banquet and leave the affairs outside for Haitao to handle. We still need to drink a couple of cups! After all, today is a day of celebration!”

Hearing Li Xian’s words, everyone reacted differently. The Marquis of the Eastern Sea and company could only smile wryly and obey. After all, the pressure from the Prince of Qi’s awe-inspiring authority was quite substantial. Since regaining consciousness, the Prince of Qing’s face had remained ashen without speaking or making a sound. Gou Lian was quite fortunate and had always stood on the side as a bystander. Moreover, he did not have the qualifications to interject. Lu Can only smiled slightly. To his side, Fu Yulun gazed cautiously and solemnly at Lu Can, his expression extremely tense. A wry smile was on Lin Bi’s face, while Lin Tong was gazing with curiosity at Li Shun. He was someone who she had long heard about.

Footnotes :

如数家珍, rushujiazhen – idiom, lit. as if enumerating one’s family valuables; fig. to be very familiar with a matter
数典忘祖, shudianwangzu – idiom, lit. to recount history but omit one’s

ancestors; fig. to forget one’s roots
倒打一耙, daodayipa – idiom, lit. to strike with a muckrack (referring to the weapon used by Zhu Bajie (猪八戒) from Journey to West (西游记)); fig. to counterattack, to make bogus accusations (against one’s victims)
顶天立地, dingtianlidi – idiom, lit. able to support both heaven and earth; fig. indomitable
釜底抽薪, fudichouxin – idiom, lit. take away the firewood from under the cauldron; fig. taking drastic measures to deal with a situation
贪心不足, tanxinbuzu – idiom, lit. greedy and never satisfied; fig. insatiable greed

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 11: Gathering at Tranquil Sea

Volume 4, Chapter 11: Gathering at Tranquil Sea

Jiang Haitao, the Marquis of the Eastern Sea's capable successor, was skilled at naval warfare, possessing a loyal and brave character. Taizong loved him as a son. In the second year of Great Yong's Longsheng era, he mobilized the Eastern Sea's military and surrendered to Great Yong. In the campaign to conquer Southern Chu, he repeatedly made military contributions. In the ninth year of Great Yong's Longsheng era, he was enfeoffed as the Duke of the Tranquil Sea. His first wife, Lady Yue, was renowned for her virtue, but had a strict and proper temperament. It was rumored that Haitao was afraid of her. Lady Yue had an abundance of ability and wisdom. Some even claimed that her husband's memorials and documents were under the control of Lady Yue.—*Yong Dynastic Records* , *Biography of the Duke of the Tranquil Sea*

In the hazy darkness of night, Lin Bi stood before the window of her guest room, gazing up at the dim, starry sky. Behind her, a middle-aged guard was reporting the intelligence that he had gathered.

"When the turmoil erupted in the wedding hall, all of the guests, and attendants and guards like us, were all tightly surrounded by the Marquis of the Eastern Sea's subordinates, impossible to break out. As expected, the Marquis's training methods are not ordinary. The Yue family's ship was very quickly and heavily damaged by the Marquis's navy. We went to take a look … the sea was filled with bodies and the shattered fragments of the ship. Without repair, that ship will never sail again."

Lin Bi sighed. "This is, after all, the territory of the Marquis of the Eastern Sea. Only if a massive army were to attack ... for just over a hundred men to cause chaos, they are no more than another's catspaw. If Yue Qingyan had not employed the long thought extinct Heart Toxin Insect, it would have been impossible for them to take any advantage. Speaking of this, We admire

the one who planned this all out. If they had been successful, they would not only have seized control of the Eastern Sea, and the Hai and Yue families, they would have also caused Great Yong and Southern Chu to suffer disastrous losses. As for us, although we would not have obtained any practical benefits, we would also not suffer any losses. Those people probably even want us to take advantage and invade Great Yong … Who would have expected that at such an ideal wedding, not only increasing marital ties, but also the union of a perfect couple, the bride would be hiding the intent to murder without rhyme or reason? The behind-the-scenes plotter truly has extensive schemes. If the Prince of Qing, the Marquis of the Eastern Sea and his son, and Lu Can all perished, the world would likely instantly fall into chaos. And to think that they were able to find someone willing to nurture the Heart Toxin Insect, especially someone who has natural endowments like Yue Qingyan. Reportedly, raising the Heart Toxin Insect, the requirements upon the host are demanding to the extreme.

"However, what leaves Us shocked is still Jiang Zhe's response. In a short period of half a month, he employed all of the resources that he could mobilize. He took drastic measures to contact Lu Can to remove the need for the death of the Yue family brother and sister. With one cylinder of Divine Heavens-Soaring Fire, he ensures that he can nimbly respond to any situation. So many people came to the Eastern Sea, making it difficult to tell friend from foe. However, that man has the ability to force all of us to follow and cooperate with the execution of his plan. Sir Xiu, tell me, what can we do to extricate ourselves from that man's threat?"

The middle-aged guard hesitated momentarily before responding, "Your Royal Highness, this time, my esteemed master dispatched us with the purpose of helping Your Royal Highness eliminate the outsider. However, with the present situation, the Eastern Sea has already been disturbed. It will be very difficult for us to make our move. We also saw that Li Shun. That man's martial arts skills are extremely great. We do not have the ability to fight him. Aside from my esteemed master, there is likely no one who can be sure of victory. Moreover, even if we were barely able to execute an assassination attempt, we likely would fail to assassinate Jiang Zhe himself. Instead, we would have incurred a deep grievance with him. The man's

schemes are sinister and insidious. If he pledges his life to retaliate, our losses will likely not make up for our gains."

"I understand this principle as well," said Lin Bi with a sigh. "However, if the man were to return to service, he would become our enemy. I am deeply worried that Tingfei will fall into the man's crafty schemes."

"Your Royal Highness, do not worry," proudly stated the middle-aged man. "The Grand General's military strategic ability is unmatched. In addition, he has our protection. Regardless of what machinations are employed, as long as we ignore them, how would we be fooled? On the battlefield, it is upright and blunt hand-to-hand combat. What use will that man be? Moreover, Great Yong has its own problems. The younger princess has stated that the Prince of Qing, Li Kang, has quite a deep hatred of Li Xian. Indications of their disharmony are extremely obvious. If we were to help them along, it may be possible for us to cause Great Yong to inflict wounds upon itself."

Lin Bi sighed again. Just as she was about to speak once more, the sound of Lin Tong's voice came floating over from outside. "Little sister, why have you come?"

Lin Bi's heart leapt, and she bent her ears to listen. From outside, the sound of a little girl's young and tender voice could be heard to answer, "Roulan is here on my father's orders to invite the Princess of Jiaping and the Crimson Cloud Princess to be a guest at the Tranquil Sea Manor."

The sound of Lin Tong's hesitating voice could be heard to ask, "Little sister, who is your father?"

Proud of herself, the little girl answered, "My daddy's surname is Jiang, his given name is Zhe."

Lin Bi was not shocked by this revelation, only feeling carefree internally. She had long suspected this little girl's identity. Unfortunately, Northern Han's intelligence on Jiang Zhe was limited to important information, knowing little about Jiang Zhe's personal matters. As a result, Lin Bi was simply not sure. Hearing this, she opened her door. With a smile, she declared, "Little sister Roulan, receiving your esteemed father's invitation, Lin Bi is deeply honored. We will definitely attend."

Roulan happily replied, “That’s great!”

Lin Bi looked carefully, seeing that Roulan still had several invitations in her hands. She smiled and asked, “Does little sister still need to deliver invitations?”

“That’s right,” answered Roulan. “There’re still invitations I need to deliver for Grand General Lu and His Imperial Highnesses, the Princes of Qi and Qing.”

Lin Tong inquired with curiosity, “Roulan, you’re so young. Why aren’t you having someone else deliver them for you?”

Cocking her head, Roulan responded, “This is a mission that Daddy assigned to Lanlan. It is only natural that Lanlan can’t let anyone else finish it.”

Gazing at little Roulan’s naïve, childish nature and seriousness, Lin Bi could not help but laugh. She thought, *I definitely need to pay a visit and see this Jiang Zhe, capable of raising such an adorable daughter.*

Under the same starry sky, Lu Can was weighed down by anxiety.[1] Fu Yulun had already been placed under house arrest. It would take only the slightest of efforts[2] to have him killed. However, remembering that this man was Prime Minister Shang’s son-in-law, Lu Can wavered in making the decision.

Just before he was about to depart, Lu Can had received a letter from Jiang Zhe. There were only a few words on the letter, merely informing Lu Can that a high-ranking minister of Southern Chu was conspiring to seize the Eastern Sea, taking this opportunity to set up Lu Can. The letter further had Lu Can seek out where the Yue family head was being held, mentioning several potential locations. As expected, Lu Can’s subordinates found the Yue family head in the royal guard encampments. After years of campaigning, Lu Can was no longer a naïve child. He wouldn’t follow Jiang Zhe’s instructions and damage Southern Chu’s interests. At the time, after thinking it over, he felt that, although Shang Weijun wanted to conspire to murder him as he was warned beforehand, it would be easy for him to preserve his own life. In addition, if the plan were successful, then the

benefits to Southern Chu would even arouse Lu Can's interest.

However, after some consideration, Lu Can discovered that he could only play the role of Jiang Zhe's pawn. Since Jiang Zhe had already received intelligence, he would definitely set a trap. When the time came, Southern Chu would definitely fail, enraging the Eastern Sea. Instead of the spoils of success, the likely losses would be disastrous. Moreover, relying upon the remnants of the Fengyi Sect, Shang Weijun had become increasingly arrogant and rampant these last two years. Although the Fengyi Sect had already become targets of scorn, they were still a formidable force. To Southern Chu, the Fengyi Sect was a double-edged sword. Properly employed, it could be used to confront Great Yong. But if used improperly, it would likely result in internal strife within Southern Chu. Even if they had been lucky enough to succeed, it would likely be detrimental and not of benefit to Southern Chu. As a result, Lu Can still adhered to Jiang Zhe's proposal and rescued the Yue family hostages. Although they were held under house arrest by the royal guard, based upon the Lu family's authority and influence in the Southern Chu military, they were still rescued by Lu Can. Moreover, Lu Can was able to prevent the information from spreading. In addition, Lu Can had managed to have the current decision maker of the Yue family, Yue Wenhan, acknowledge his favor. As a result, it would be unlikely for the Yue family to immediately pledge allegiance to Great Yong. Furthermore, by giving the Yue family face, the Eastern Sea would not be overly hostile towards Southern Chu. Even though, when it came to it, the Yue family was unreliable. However, it was unlikely that they would pledge allegiance to Great Yong and act up behind Southern Chu.

To speak of it, Southern Chu did not lose out. However, Lu Can was still gloomy, depressed, and restless. Sir's stratagems were increasingly bold and imaginative. In the future, when Great Yong and Southern Chu went to war, would he be able to deal with it? After thinking for some time, Lu Can whispered, "Sir, you are especially fond of using the discord ploy. I wonder if it's possible to sow discord between you and the Great Yong court?"

Rising to his feet, Lu Can walked to the guest room next door. This guest room had two of his bodyguards standing at the door. This was where Fu

Yulun was being held under house arrest. When Lu Can entered the room, he saw Fu Yulun seated in a chair with his complexion pale. Seeing Lu Can arrive, Fu Yulun promptly kowtowed and begged, “Grand General, this lowly official was acting on my father-in-law’s orders. Grand General, please spare my life!”

With a tranquil and calm expression on his face, Lu Can replied, “Get up … I know that you aren’t the one making the decisions. However, since matters have reached this point, tell me, how should I punish you?”

In alarm, Fu Yulun answered, “I only ask that the Grand General can spare my life. With my life spared, this lowly official will obey all of your orders.”

“I want you to go back and tell Prime Minister Shang,” stated Lu Can, smiling slightly, “That I, Lu Can, have no intentions of getting into a power struggle with him. However, I will not allow anyone to take unfair advantage of me. I know that the remnants of the Fengyi Sect are hidden by Prime Minister Shang’s side. I don’t care about Prime Minister Shang’s methods, however, I want you to remind him that the Fengyi Sect has always been rebellious. They can be used, but they must also be guarded against. If Prime Minister Shang uses them to eradicate dissent, Southern Chu will likely one day be theirs.”

Fu Yulun was overjoyed, realizing that his life was finally preserved. He promptly pointed to the Heavens and made a vow, promising to lobby Shang Weijun. Lu Can mentally sighed, thinking, *If I were to kill this man, it is likely that the only path left to me is to rebel. Although it was possible that this man would try to retaliate in the future, I cannot create irreconcilable differences with Shang Weijun right now.*

Walking out of Fu Yulun’s room, Lu Can ordered his personal guards, “Take care of Fu *daren* properly. Do not allow him to have contact with any outsiders.” Before returning to Southern Chu, Lu Can did not want anyone to influence Fu Yulun, causing him to change his promise to help alleviate the problems between the Lu family and Shang Weijun.

Just as he had taken a few steps, he caught sight of a little girl bouncing vivaciously as she walked into the courtyard. In her raised hands was a

large red invitation. Behind her were two guards of the Marquis's household. Seeing Lu Can, the little girl smiled and cried out, "Senior apprentice brother Lu! Lanlan has come on Daddy's behalf to deliver an invitation!" She gazed at this youth with curiosity. She had learned from others that this young man was her daddy's first disciple. As a result, she had taken advantage of delivering the invitation to come see this eldest apprentice brother of hers.

Lu Can had long known that this little girl was his master's daughter. Although he did not when his master had such a daughter, it did not prevent Lu Can from looking for indicators of his master on this little girl. Gently, he walked forward, reaching out and picking Roulan up. He looked carefully. This little girl was alert, graceful, clever, and beautiful. Although still young, her countenance already had a measure of his master's depth.

With curiosity, Roulan asked, "Senior apprentice brother Lu, are you also a general who has led troops into battle?"

Revealing a sincere smile, Lu Can answered, "That's right. I've led troops before."

Pulling a face, Roulan declared, "I had always thought that generals would be like little brother Lin's father, awe-inspiring and majestic. However, Princess Bi is beautiful, while senior apprentice brother Lu seems so refined and cultured. So it seems like generals do not have a specific model."

Lu Can laughed. Setting Roulan down, he organized his emotions and accepted the invitation. After taking a look, he stated, "Junior apprentice sister, please inform Sir that it is inconvenient for Lu Can to go and offer my congratulations. Please ask Sir to forgive me."

Baffled, Roulan asked, "Senior apprentice brother Lu, why aren't you going? My little brother is really cute! Do you not want to meet him?"

A faint, wry smile appeared on Lu Can's face. If he were to truly go, it would likely incite unnecessary criticism. Although he himself didn't care, however, if he were to leave such a pretext to others, how would he continue to lead troops? Right now wasn't the time for him to return to civilian life. It was impossible for Shang Weijun to justly and forcefully blame

him from what happened in the Eastern Sea. After all, nominally, the remnants of the Fengyi Sect could not appear in Southern Chu. However, if he were to pay a visit to Jiang Zhe, then it would be nigh impossible for him to explain away suspicions of communicating with the enemy. But how was he going to explain this to this little girl? Therefore, he only placidly explained, “Please pass this message to Sir that Can solemnly expresses good wishes upon my little apprentice brother, a life filled with happiness and longevity. However, please ask Sir to understand that it is inconvenient for Can to visit and forgive me.”

Roulan cleverly replied, “Oh … when I go back, I’ll inform Daddy.” Finished speaking, she vivaciously departed from Lu Can’s courtyard.

Gazing at her departing figure, Lu Can thought, *What is the reason for Sir inviting me to take part in little apprentice brother’s grabbing test right now?*

Lu Can revealed a slight, wry smile. Lu Can understood that regardless of whether he went or not, it would be impossible to completely eliminate Shang Weijun’s suspicion and jealousy towards him. His own intentions now were to ensure that Shang Weijun did not have a legitimate reason to act against him. Were it not for this, Lu Can truly wished to go and see what Jiang Zhe was up to. Even if he were to fall into a trap, it was better than knowing nothing. Suddenly in his mind, a thought appeared. He was faintly aware of the secret alliance that Shang Weijun had formed with Northern Han. Before, he had never shown an interest in these things. However, having run into an important member of the Northern Han’s military here in the Eastern Sea, the Princess of Jiaping. If he could come to a mutual understanding with her, then it would benefit both Southern Chu and Northern Han. Although it was rude to seek a meeting this late at night, it was unlikely that the Princess of Jiaping would keep the door closed and refuse to see him. Moreover, regardless of the result, everyone would misunderstand and believe that Lu Can had already reached an agreement with the Northern Han military. This would only be of benefit to him. Gazing at the concealing darkness of night, Lu Can’s heart felt extremely agonized. Before, he had been completely filled with thoughts of attacking the enemy and dedicating himself in service to his country, loyal to the end and

performing his duties. *Who could have thought that I, Lu Can, would one day go to so much trouble to preserve my life?*

In another guest courtyard, in a comfortable set of plain robes, Li Xian leaned on a soft couch. His heads were clasped behind his head, serving as a pillow. He seemed to be carefree and relaxed. However, in reality, there was worry on his countenance. He was not a dullard. He had clearly seen the hatred and jealousy in the Prince of Qing's eyes. This time at the Eastern Sea, he had completely stolen the Prince of Qing's limelight. Li Xian was unsure about this third brother of his temperament. Was he grave or extreme? That year, although Li Kang had displayed his determination and courage to fulfill his vow to exact retribution by attempting to assassinate Noble Consort Ji, it was a bit of a joke to attempt to assassinate an expert from the Fengyi Sect and a noble consort. This incident made clear that Li Kang wasn't sufficiently calm and too excessive. However, Li Xian was suspicious. If Li Kang had not committed this seemingly reckless act, would he have had the opportunity to garrison the Hanzhong region? Moreover, Li Kang had clearly and publicly revealed his irreconcilable hostility towards the Fengyi Sect. However, because of his status as a prince, it was impossible for the Fengyi Sect to deal with him. If something were to happen to Li Kang, then the Fengyi Sect would be the greatest suspect. As a result, over these years, although Li Kang was always suppressed by the Fengyi Sect, he not only remained safe and sound, his forces had also steadily increased. If Li Kang had foreseen all this long ago, then it would not be enough to simply call his scheming "profound."

In addition, Li Xian understood his present situation well. If imperial brother, Li Zhi, became even a tiny bit suspicious or afraid, then he, Li Xian, would be attacked on all sides. When the time came, the loss of his military authority would be light. He would likely be placed under house arrest until his death. At this moment, he had grievously offended third brother, the prince who had the highest and most respected status in the court. In fact, Li Xian very clearly understood that as long as he was to personally pay a visit to Li Zhi, sincerely apologizing and acknowledging his mistakes, then it would be very possible for this situation to be reversed. However, whenever he thought about having to bend his knee to Li Zhi, Li Xian would

always be filled with gloom. The elder brother who he had been chasing to surpass was now the Emperor of Great Yong. If he were to bow his head towards Li Zhi, wouldn't he be a servile weakling seeking to preserve his life, riches, and honor? The more he thought, the more vexed Li Xian became. *I need to see Jiang Zhe as soon as possible* . He could feel that the only one capable of allowing him to extricate himself from this impasse was that weak and feeble scholar.

Thinking of Jiang Zhe, Li Xian felt a burst of warmth well up in his heart. That man … They had met for the first time in Southern Chu, Jiang Zhe had been aloof and distant, on his guard. However, Li Xian did not know why, but he was always felt that Jiang Zhe's weak and scholarly build was hidden a terrifying power. The second time they had happened upon each other, they had met as enemies and yet Jiang Zhe had saved his life, probably preparing for the eventuality that he needed to disengage himself from the Prince of Yong. Although he had let Jiang Zhe off, Li Xian was nevertheless full of regret. Afterwards, Jiang Zhe had been brought back by Li Zhi to Chang'an, treating Jiang Zhe as a brother and teacher in hopes of recruiting him. However, Jiang Zhe had actually instead accepted the recruitment offer of him, Li Xian. At the time, he was filled with an indescribable joy. However, that ultimately was a farce. When he wrathfully departed the Prince of Yong's residence, Li Xian hated that he could not kill Jiang Zhe.

However, when Jiang Zhe was nearly assassinated, the first thought that came to Li Xian's mind was to save that scholar's life. Later, when the crown prince and the Prince of Yong became irreconcilable, causing the disastrous events of the Hunting Palace, he had been placed under house arrest. For all kinds of reasons, he had attempted to seize Jiang Zhe, whether it was to protect his life or to take the scholar hostage. However, he had still saved Jiang Zhe's life and had no intentions of having Jiang Zhe repay him for his kindness. As a result, when the coup d'état failed and he had been placed under house arrest by the Prince of Yong, Li Xian did not hope that Jiang Zhe would save him.

However, the man actually returned a minor kindness with a great one. First, Jiang Zhe invited him to serve as a hostage to the Fengyi Sect Master,

giving him the opportunity to redeem himself for his crimes. Afterwards, when Northern Han seized the opportunity to invade, it was Jiang Zhe again who left behind a message recommending him, giving Li Xian the opportunity to don his battle gown and return to the battlefield. Li Xian had already considered Jiang Zhe to be close friend. Although Jiang Zhe's schemes were profound, he was someone who valued friendships and morality. If he considered someone as one of his people, then there would be no worries of betrayal.

As a result, Li Xian had risked accusations of misconduct and come to the Eastern Sea in the hopes of acquiring the assistance of that man, allowing himself to escape from his current predicament. Before he had conquered Northern Han and pacified Southern Chu, he, Li Xian, was unwilling to be so framed and killed. A man ought to give his life on the battlefield, dying upon it. How could he die in a prison cell under the machinations of vile characters?

Just as Li Xian was worrying about personal gains and losses, one of his personal imperial bodyguards walked in to report, "Your Imperial Highness, young Miss Roulan has come on Sir Jiang's behalf to deliver an invitation, inviting Your Imperial Highness to the Tranquil Sea Manor to attend the little young master's first birthday celebrations."

Li Xian's jaw trembled, excited that he finally was receiving the formal invitation. Smiling, he said, "Allow Roulan to come in."

Roulan walked in. Seeing Li Xian, she walked over and kowtowed. The last time they had met on the ship, as the Prince of Qi's identity had not just been made public, naturally no one would inform Roulan of his identity. Although she had met him before within the Yong imperial palace, Roulan was still little and naturally had no memories of the Prince of Qi's appearance. Now that the Prince of Qi's identity had been revealed, Roulan abided by the proper ceremonies on this visit. From a young age, she had been raised by the Princess of Yong and had entered the imperial palace numerous times. She was highly familiar with the proper etiquette. Her kowtow was practiced and natural.

Smiling, Li Xian stated, "Roulan, quickly get up. You are now Changle's

daughter and should, by rights, call me uncle. There is no need for such ceremony." So speaking, he picked Roulan up and placed her on his lap. He inquired, "Are your mom and dad both well? I have heard that they already have a son. Both of them have poor health. How is your little brother's health?"

Excitedly Roulan responded, "Little brother is quite robust. Moreover, he is not fond of crying. Great Grandfather has stated that because mother was nursed to health, little brother is quite healthy. Daddy and Mother Princess are both well. They frequently take a boat out to sea. However, all of Daddy's hair has turned a light gray. According to Great Grandfather, it's because of the effects of the medicine that Daddy took. However, in the future, there is no need for Daddy to worry about his illness coming back again."

With curiosity, Li Xian asked, "Who are you referring to when you say great grandfather?"

Roulan's eyes sparkled, as she answered, "Uncle doesn't know? Great Grandfather is surnamed Sang. Daddy and Mother both treat him as their own grandfather."

"So it's Sir Sang," replied Li Xian with a smile. "I should have figured … When Suiyun left the capital, he was in desperately poor health. As expected, only someone with Sir Sang's ability was able to rescue him."

Shaking her head, Roulan related, "Great Grandfather said that only Daddy could cure his illness. The only difference is that it would take a few years longer and the effects wouldn't be as good."

Li Xian could not help but ask, "Has your dad also invited the Prince of Qing?"

"Uncle Shun has said that since His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qing, is the Emperor's emissary, it would be too inappropriate for me to deliver the invitation" responded Roulan. "As a result, Uncle Shun has gone personally to do so."

Li Xian smiled knowingly. It seemed that in Jiang Zhe's mind, the Prince of Qing was no more than an outsider. In the future, if he were to be attacked

by the Prince of Qing, he would have backup.

At this moment, Li Xian saw from the corner of his eye a tiny figure hiding in the doorway of the room inside hesitating, too afraid to come out. Li Xian could not help but find it funny. Although on the surface Lin'er seemed to be somewhat indifferent and impatient, it seemed that he was extremely affectionate towards little Roulan. However, since the hour was growing late, it was time for Roulan to go back and rest. As a result, Li Xian could only pretend that he did not see his son. After gossiping a bit with Roulan, he had men escort Roulan back. After seeing Roulan off, Li Xian was full of expectation. It seemed that he would have a satisfactory result from this gathering at the Tranquil Sea Manor.

Within the bridal chamber, Yue Qingyan was deeply restless. Having shared the customary nuptial drink, Jiang Haitao went to deal with the aftermath of the Yue family's disturbance. Moreover, Yue Qingyan understood that before the insect king was removed from her body, it would be impossible for the marriage to be consummated. However, she could sense that Jiang Haitao was somewhat indifferent while he was in the bridal chamber. She could not help but become anxious. At this moment, Xue Qiuxue walked in. Seeing Yue Qingyan's anxious look, she smiled and said, "What? You're that nervous? I'm here to help you remove your makeup. It is inconvenient for the groom to come over tonight. Aunt has asked that I come over and keep you company, ensuring that you don't become lonely."

With difficulty, Yue Qingyan forced a smile on her face. With Xue Qiuxue's help, she removed her hairpins and phoenix crown. Apprehensive, she asked, "Sister-in-law, tell me, do you think that husband is still angry with me?"

Xue Qiuxue giggled. "Foolish child. Since the little Marquis did not decline to marry you to your face, it means that he still loves you. It's only that before the two of you had entered the bridal chamber, you caused your groom to faint to the ground. It's a bit embarrassing for him. Since the ceremony has already been completed and the two of you are married, the groom will inevitably remember what's happened. All of these men are

afraid to be embarrassed. Isn't your elder brother sulking because I asked General Pei for help?"

Yue Qingyan bashfully replied, "Sister-in-law, elder brother is just being jealous. Were it not for this method that you thought of, our entire family would likely have been split apart, dying unnaturally. Elder brother won't fall out with you over this for long. Thinking back to when elder brother was desperately wooing you, he practically ripped his heart out of his chest to show you."

Bashfulness and happiness flashed across Xue Qiuxue's eyes. However, her expression remained proper, as she said, "Qingyan, there is one thing that your elder brother has told me to warn you of. At present, the Yue family's crisis has still not passed. Although most of those loyal to Yue Wujiu have died here in the Eastern Sea, he still has plenty of supporters alive within the Yue family. Moreover, the Family Head and Elders are in the hands of Lu Can. Having been granted a favor by Lu Can, we will have to repay it sooner rather than later. Great Yong and Southern Chu will never be able to peacefully coexist. When the time comes, our Yue family will still have to make a choice. When we go back this time, your elder brother will take over the family. A purge must happen within the family, while Southern Chu's influence in southern Fujian will increase. Although your elder brother has already reached an agreement with the Hai family, obtaining the ship design and the sea maps, he was also forced to yield a part of the ocean trade to them. With this, even within a couple decades, it will be impossible for us to overtake the Hai family. Your elder brother is not worried about this. However, once Great Yong and Southern Chu begin to fight, the Hai family can concentrate on following the Eastern Sea, while we will be forced to wobble between the powers. Ultimately, we may still be forced to cut our losses in order to preserve the Yue family. As a result, going forward, the Yue family's road is exceedingly difficult."

Her expression gloomy and filled with worry, Yue Qingyan asked, "Then what does elder brother want me to do?"

"Qingyan, your elder brother has said that he only wants you to do one thing," answered Xue Qiuxue firmly. "Be a good and proper daughter-in-law

to the Jiang family. Do not do anything to help the Yue family that would damage the Jiang family. In addition, do not seek to try to win benefits for the Yue family. These are the affairs of men. You have already done everything you can as a daughter and younger sister. Right now, you are a daughter-in-law of the Jiang family. In the future, you will be the mother of the children of the Jiang family. You must ensure that everything you do is for the Jiang family."

Yue Qingyan's luminous eyes were brimming with tears, as she asked, "Sister-in-law, you can't have me simply watch on as elder brother endures hardships?"

Comfortingly, Xue Qiuxue responded, "Foolish child, you're forgetting that the Jiang family and the Yue family are in-laws. As long as you gain their respect and love, on your behalf, they will naturally look after the Yue family if needed. However, if you were to lose your husband's love, then you would be of no help to the Yue family. Therefore, remember. You only need to be a wife. Beyond all this, it's not that easy to cripple or destroy the Yue family."

"Sister-in-law, do not worry," replied Yue Qingyan, ferociously nodding her head. "Qingyan will definitely not be exploited by anyone else. If the Jiang family remains resentful in the future and is unwilling to aid the Yue family, at most, Qingyan will die along with the Yue family. Qingyan will definitely not do anything that is in violation of a wife's duties."

Xue Qiuxue smiled, continuing, "We have already received an invitation to attend the gathering at the Tranquil Sea Manor. When the time comes, you will accompany Haitao to pay your respects to his master. Moreover, the insect king in your body will have to rely upon his help. As such, you must rest properly. That man's status is unique and special. If you gain his recognition, it will be of enormous help to your position within the Jiang family."

A look of longing flashed across Yue Qingyan's eyes, as she said, "Sister-in-law, I really wish to see Sir Jiang and Princess Changle. Are the rumors true? Are they really immortal companions?"

Laughing, Xue Qiuxue answered, "You will be able to ascertain for yourself

very soon. However, don’t forget. That man is resourceful and intelligent without compare, and can be considered to be the most terrifying individual in the world.

Footnotes :

愁肠百结, chouchangbaijie – idiom, lit. hundred knots of worry in one’s intestines; fig. weighed down with anxiety
举手之劳, jushouzhilao – idiom, lit. the exertion of lifting one’s hand; fig. a very slight effort

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 12: Satisfied with a Son

Volume 4, Chapter 12: Satisfied with a Son

On the thirtieth day of the ninth month of the twenty-seventh year of Great Yong's Wuwei era, although an unforeseen event plagued Jiang Haitao's wedding, it still proceeded as if nothing had happened. In order to prevent all the guests from leaving disappointed, the rare treasures exhibition was held as planned. Taking advantage of all the gathered guests coming from the corners of the world, the success of the rare treasures exhibition naturally attracted even more investment and merchants into the ocean trade. As a result, those responsible for holding the exhibition, Hai Wuya and Hai Li, spared no effort to ensure that it was a success. Since it was rare that distinguished visitors from Great Yong, Northern Han, and Southern Chu were all going to be present, invitations had been sent out long ago. In addition, on the back of the invitation was a list of the treasures that were going to be auctioned off during the gathering. Within there was no lack of exotic and foreign treasures. As a result, many of the invitees who were ranking officials in their home countries were greatly interested.

Moreover, they had also received invitations from Jiang Zhe. In order to wait for the ship that would pick them up, they had to wait on the Marquis of the Eastern Sea's island until the second day of the tenth month. If they did not attend this rare treasures exhibition, it would make it seem as if they were specially affected by the turmoil that the Eastern Sea had just underwent. As a result, everyone took part in the pageantry.

As expected, the exotic treasures that Hai Zhongying brought out were a feast for everyone's eyes, allowing all to feel as if they had not made this trip in vain. As for the distinguished guests who attended the rare treasures exhibition—Prince Li Xian of Qi, Prince Li Kang of Qing, Princess Lin Bi of Jiaping, Crimson Cloud Princess Lin Tong, Grand General Lu Can, Marquis Jiang Yong and his son, Jiang Haitao—were the individuals who attracted

everyone's attention. They were all influential and powerful ministers of their respective countries. Each and every movement that they made was tracked, as everyone hoped to gain an inkling of their inclinations. After all, everyone knew that in the current world, the fires of war were already raging and dark clouds densely covered the state of affairs. Although the Eastern Sea was, at least for now, temporarily uninvolved, once war fully broke out, the lives of these merchants and their families were in the hands of these powerful individuals.

On the first day of the tenth month, the first to leave was the ship carrying the Southern Chu delegation. After departing from the patrol lanes of the Eastern Sea Navy, Lu Can walked to a secret cabin located in the bowels of his ship to meet someone who should not appear within the Southern Chu delegation—Wei Ying.

His expression icy and his eyes sinister, Wei Ying watched as Lu Can walked in. Taunting, he mocked, "General Lu is truly cautious, only coming to see me today. I wonder how General Lu wishes to handle me?"

With a tranquil and calm expression on his face, Lu Can retorted, "Head Wei was only afraid of disturbing the soldiers of the Eastern Sea. That is why you stayed in here. Moreover, don't tell me that Head shouldn't thank me for rescuing you?"

A hint of a gloomy and chilly smile appeared on Wei Ying's face, as he replied, "That's right. I should thank General Lu. General Lu dispatched someone to use the signal that this seat and Fu *daren* arranged beforehand, allowing this seat to bring my subordinates aboard the ship carrying the Southern Chu delegation. Unfortunately, waiting for us were General Lu's elite troops. At present, this seat's subordinates have either been killed or captured by General Lu. Right now, as the ship has left Eastern Sea waters, is General here to get revenge on me? Since that is the case, it is better to hand over this seat to Great Yong. With this, wouldn't the benefits that General receive be greater?"

Lu Can sighed. "Why is the head speaking so in anger? This general could only act in spite of myself with regards to the recent situation. Prime Minister Shang was going to get someone else to do his dirty work, having

me killed in the Eastern Sea. Of course, this general did think about executing you and Fu Yulun in order to prevent my Southern Chu from following in Great Yong's footsteps. However, this general very clearly knows that if I killed the two of you, my Lu family would become hostile towards Prime Minister Shang. Prime Minister Shang is the King's maternal grandfather, controlling all of the internal affairs of the court. If the military and the Prime Minister fall into discord, my Southern Chu will be finished without Great Yong needing to launch a southern invasion. Therefore, I will not kill you. You and your Fengyi Sect harbor an implacable hatred towards Great Yong, while my Southern Chu also holds deep animosity against them. Since we have a common enemy, we should be working together. If you continue to retain thoughts of framing me, you'll have to think carefully to see if there's anyone capable of replacing me and commanding the Southern Chu armies in battle."

Wei Ying was silent for a moment, before responding, "I originally did not agree with Prime Minister Shang's desires to weaken the defenses by trying to kill you. However, you are a student of Jiang Zhe. Prime Minister Shang cannot cease being anxious because of this singular point and neither can I forget. In addition, with regards to the Fengyi Sect, I cannot make all of the decisions. If everything proceeded according to my plans, I would not have given Xue Qiuxue an opportunity to exploit."

"Although Sir Jiang and I are master and student, I am an important minister of Southern Chu," replied Lu Can unflinchingly. "It would be impossible for me to betray my country and my liege. Moreover, to speak bluntly, I have learned at least fifty percent of my master's strategy. I am not unduly humble. These last few years of continuous warfare, I have the confidence that my command abilities are not worse than anyone's. As a commander-in-chief, at the very least, I can resist Great Yong's cutting edge. If I'm replaced with a general trusted by Prime Minister Shang, Southern Chu will likely fall sooner rather than later. When the time comes, without anything to depend upon, how will you exact your vengeance upon Great Yong? In today's discussion, I have no need for you to pledge your allegiance to me. I only want you to cease all attempts at interfering with Southern Chu's military affairs and halt all intentions to betray your superiors.

Everything else, I am disinclined to show any interest."

Wei Ying's expression changed several times before he replied, "I alone cannot make a decision on this matter."

"I'm not in a rush," stated Lu Can, smiling. "Right now, I've already seized the advantage. Therefore, you can slowly think it over. My original intent is to have you all eliminated. Although you can become a threat to Great Yong, in this general's eyes, you are the source of chaos for Southern Chu. It is a pity that Prime Minister Shang values you so highly. As such, I cannot eliminate all of you. This time, although I have killed many of your subordinate who have vicious reputations as bandits, I believe that you won't bother me about them."

Wei Ying smiled faintly. He did not pay much mind to his subordinates who were killed by Lu Can. After all, with all of his trusted subordinates left alive, the losses weren't that heavy. However, this was not a point that he would concede to prevent himself from gaining a reputation as an inconstant and heartless.

Seeing that Wei Ying had already calmed down, Lu Can spoke, "This general visits today because I want you to handle a matter for me. If you can do this properly, it may be possible to redeem the losses."

Wei Ying fell silent, only revealing a look of inquiry. Lu Can lowered his voice, speaking some words. Wei Ying's face was grave, the expression on his face changing several times. It was some time before he said, "As expected, General Lu is vicious. If this matter is successful, it will not matter if you kill my few subordinates; there will not be any problems even if you kill Fu Yulun. General, do not worry. Wei Ying will definitely strive my hardest and not be remiss in the slightest."

A hint of distress flashed across Lu Can's eyes. "Since that is the case, then I invite young master Wei to disembark in a little while. I have already made all of the preparations, so as long as the young master arrives at my indicated destination and hands over the token to the assigned individual, it is possible that your cherished desires are fulfilled."

Showing a sinister smile, Wei Ying did not speak any further, although

there was smugness and confidence in his expression.

***

On the second day of the tenth month, the heir of the Marquis of the Eastern Sea, Jiang Haitao, personally commanded a fleet of ships, escorting the Prince of Qi, Lin Bi and company to the Tranquil Sea Manor. The Tranquil Sea Manor was located on Penglai Island and was not far from the Marquis's island base. Setting out at early morning, it took only four hours before the convoy arrived at Penglai Island. Standing at the bow of his ship, Jiang Haitao pointed at the small harbor up ahead and told the Prince of Qi and company, "This is called the Crescent Moon Bay, because it is in the shape of a new crescent moon. The waters here are calm. Even if there are great waves surging in the ocean, there will be no effects here. As a result, Sir Jiang specially constructed the Tranquil Sea Manor here. Sixth uncle, please look. The Tranquil Sea Manor is set against the mountains and faces the ocean. The scenery is elegant and refined. Sir is fondest of leaning on the railings to watch the seas. In fine, sunny weather, he even frequently sails a boat out. Little nephew once waited upon Sir as he was fishing."

At this moment, Roulan walked over pulling along Li Lin. Smiling, she said, "Uncle, Uncle! Daddy loves to fish! However, he can never catch anything. Up until today, Lanlan has never eaten a fish that Daddy caught himself. Even Lanlan, herself, was able to catch a big fish. All four seasons, there's always plenty of fish and shrimp."

"Was it that time you were pulled into the water by the fish?" asked Jiang Haitao, laughing. "I have heard that that was truly a big fish. However, I wonder if it was a human fishing a fish or a fish fishing a human?"

Hearing this, Roulan angrily stuck both of her hands onto her hips. "Elder brother Tao is the rottenest, always exposing other people's shortcomings! Oh! I'm not talking to you … Daddy and mommy are both on the dock!"

Finished speaking, Roulan jumped up and down, gesticulating wildly, as she ran towards the distant Xiaoshunzi. With practiced ease, Xiaoshunzi helped Roulan onto his shoulders. Afterwards, Roulan waved her hand, as she shouted, "Daddy! Mommy! Lanlan has returned! Lanlan has returned!"

However, at this moment, no one was paying attention to her excited antics. Everyone's eyes were glued to the shore. The master of the Tranquil Sea Manor stood at the small private dock in front of the manor.

Although the distance was still large, practically everyone present had trained in martial arts. Most of them could clearly see the features of those standing ashore. Standing in front was a scholar in azure robes. From his features, he had not yet reached thirty years of age. Although his hair was a silver color and his temples were flecked with white, from his graceful and calm manner, the moving radiance from his countenance, no one would mistake him as an old man. Instead, his appearance exuded a special temperament that was peaceful and remote. Standing half a step behind him was a lucid and exquisite, young married woman as charming and tranquil as an immortal. She was Princess Changle. Behind her stood a pretty woman of thirty in the dress of an unmarried woman and a youngster in his late teens. The youngster's clever and handsome appearance carried crafty astuteness.

Lin Tong's eyes did not gaze at Jiang Zhe. Although she had voiced her curiosity before, in her heart, what she was most interested in was the individual as famous as her sister, Princess Changle. With her sharp vision, Lin Tong had continuously and carefully sized Princess Changle up. Lin Tong could see that although the princess's appearance was elegant and exquisite, her looks were a bit inferior to her own elder sister's.

With the end of autumn approaching, the princess wore a luxurious dress with silver lining. Wrapped around her was a cloak the color of autumn yellow. Although she was only standing there, it was actually impossible to call her gentle and elegant. Her jet-black hair was only held in place by a single jade hairpin. Aside from a pair of earrings, she wore no other ornaments on her body. Simple and yet elegant—this was the deep feeling that she gave everyone. At this moment, an ice-cold sea breeze blew. Princess Changle frowned. Turning her head, she gave an order. The teenager standing behind her immediately handed her the black cloak that he had been holding. Everyone watched as the princess took a step forward and spoke to the scholar in azure robes. Because of the distance, Lin Tong

naturally could not hear what the princess had said, but she could see the slight frown on the princess's long, shapely eyebrows and the annoyance in her smile. Afterwards, the scholar in azure draped the cloak around his shoulders. Princess Changle revealed a faint smile, reaching out and helping the scholar tie the cloak. Although these were a few simple and uncomplicated actions, the sincerity of those actions completely made the enmity in Lin Tong's heart illusory. Lin Tong truly felt that only this kind of woman was worthy of being compared to her elder sister.

Standing on the dock, I gazed at the familiar and strange guests on the deck of the ship. An indescribable mood welled up from within. At long last, I had once again returned to the battlefield where the fate of the world was to be decided. Although I regretted that the happiest and most tranquil days of my life were about to end, my decision had already been made.

I examined each of the individuals on the deck of the ship one by one. The Prince of Qi, Li Xian, possessed a domineering aura that had not declined in the slightest. He also had acquired an intense, gloomy, and dense killing aura. It seemed he had been suffering bitterly these last few years. Standing not far from the Prince of Qi was a man in luxurious clothes. His appearance was a bit similar to Li Xian's. His disaffected expression was full of lofty arrogance. This must definitely be the Prince of Qing, Li Kang. Wasn't the one standing behind him with shining eyes in a set of fluttering blue robes someone I had not met for many years, Gou Lian? Beside them were two women in tight-fitting clothes and cloaks with precious sabers at their waists. Both of them were beautiful beyond compare with countenances radiating heroic spirit. These kinds of heroines amongst women could only be the Lin family's sisters from Northern Han. As for the young lady standing beside Jiang Haitao in red clothes the color of fire and with a frosty appearance, she must be the new bride, Yue Qingyan. After I had scrutinized everyone, my eyes fell upon the young man in azure robes standing at the bow of the ship with a fussing Roulan on his shoulders. I could not help but smile. Aside from him, there was no one who could complete such a task so perfectly.

After the ship stopped, a gangplank was lowered. As expected, the first one

to descend was Roulan. Having not seen her for several days, she seemed to be more vivacious than before. Bouncing up and down, she ran over. Behind me, Zhen'er laughed and said, "This child, Lan'er, is always so naughty and lively. She was originally personally raised by Imperial Sister-in-law … How did her temperament become so restless?"

With a guilty conscience, I did not dare respond. Roulan's bad habits were most likely the product of my actions. If I had not constantly teased and chased her about with all kinds of snacks, she would likely be an even-tempered and calm lady.

At this moment, Roulan arrived at my side. Like a little monkey, she jumped into my embrace. Using all my strength, I held her small, delicate body, once again sighing mournfully. In my mind, I lamented, *Everyone says that a scholar doesn't have the strength to even truss a chicken. It looks like it's indeed the case* . Helpless and vexed, I said, "Lanlan, it seems you've gotten heavier in the days we haven't seen you."

Roulan's face flushed red with anger. In retaliation, she reached out and pulled on my hair. As I cursed my bad luck in my mind, Zhen'er helped me out of the embarrassment, stating, "Lan'er, stop messing around with your daddy. There are guests present."

Thinking with her head cocked for a moment, Roulan unwillingly jumped out of my arms, going to stand by the side.

By now, Li Xian had taken the lead and walked in front of Princess Changle and me. Princess Changle took a step forward and paid her respects, stating, "Is sixth brother well? Are Imperial Father and the Empress Mother well, too?"

Li Xian carefully regarded Princess Changle. Smiling, he answered, "Imperial Father and the Empress Dowager are both well. However, both of them miss you greatly. You are really bold, a grand Imperial Princess leaving without saying anything, truly causing me to sit up and take notice in shock."

Princess Changle's face reddened, and she ignored this teasing sixth brother of hers, going off to greet the Prince of Qing. The Prince of Qing and

Changle had only met on a few occasions. As a result, their sibling affection was thin. Although they exchanged greetings, it was only in accordance with the proper rites. However, towards Lin Bi and Lin Tong, Princess Changle was extremely cordial and enthusiastic. Stepping forward, she smilingly welcomed, “Changle has long heard of Your Royal Highness’s name. I have heard that Your Royal Highness defends Daizhou for Northern Han, rendering celebrated military service and is a heroine amongst women. Changle has always been scholarly and weak, and has also respected and esteemed women like younger sister. It is an honor to have the privilege of hosting the Princess’s visit to my son’s grabbing test celebration.”

Lin Bi returned Changle’s courtesy, replying, “Princess is being too modest. Bi has long heard of Your Imperial Highness’s heroic heart and intelligence. Being invited by Sir Jiang to the Tranquil Sea Manor and to be able to see such a virtuous and worthy couple ought to be Bi’s honor. Having come hurriedly and failing to bring a congratulatory gift for your esteemed son is already an act lacking in manners. However, neither Your Imperial Highness nor Sir Jiang are people of the mundane world, so presumably neither of you will take offense.”

“Your Royal Highness, there is no need to be so courteous,” promptly returned Princess Changle. “For Princess Bi to be willing to come is already Suiyun and Li Zhen’s great fortune.”

At this moment, Princess Changle caught sight of Lin Tong yawning as she stood behind Lin Bi, her almond eyes hazy. Lin Tong seemed to be extremely tired. As such, Princess Changle inquired, “Is the Princess tired? If you do not look down on it, Li Zhen can arrange for the Princess to nap for a short period.”

Embarrassed, Lin Tong nodded her head. She had not slept properly last night, her mind completely filled with thoughts of meeting that legendary couple. After meeting the two of them and with her excitement gone, sleepiness had consumed her.

Smiling slightly, Princess Changle ordered, “Xiaoliuzi, attend to the Princess and take her to rest. Invite her over to the hall when noon arrives and it is time for the feast to begin.”

The clever and refined looking youth walked over. Extending his hand, he indicated for Lin Tong to follow him. Lin Tong was different from Lin Bi and had grown up in Daizhou. Her father's household did not have any eunuchs. In addition, she had never been to the Northern Han royal palace. Seeing that Princess Changle had a young man to accompany her, Lin Tong could not help but be stupefied. Lin Bi and Princess Changle exchanged grins, understanding why Lin Tong was so confused. Laughing lightly, Princess Changle explained, "Xiaoliuzi is an inner attendant bestowed upon Us by my Empress Mother. He is most clever and quick-witted. If the Princess has any requests, feel free to ask him."

Only then did Lin Tong understand. Blushing with shame, she laughed, realizing that this Xiaoliuzi was a court eunuch who had been brought along by Princess Changle from the Yong imperial palace. Settled, she bade her farewells to Princess Changle and Lin Bi.

Although Lin Bi was conversing with Princess Changle, she was always mindful of Jiang Zhe, watching from the corners of her eyes. After all, he was the individual that she was most concerned about.

When I walked forward to welcome my two brothers-in-law, I was filled with awkwardness. Before, I had always felt that my elopement with Princess Changle was our own private matter. After all, neither of us owed Great Yong anything. However, meeting the Princes of Qi and Qing today, it was obvious that they had something to ask of me, and yet I felt completely uncomfortable. I did not have my usual confident, easygoing, and composed mentality. Cautiously, I advanced and bowed, stating, "For the two Imperial Highnesses to arrive at the Tranquil Sea Manor is Zhe's honor."

The Prince of Qing showed a gentle smile. Returning my salute, he said, "This Prince has long heard of Suiyun's talented name and has long wished to meet you. It is only a pity that Suiyun is mimicking the yellow crane, gone never to return, making it difficult for this Prince to find traces of an immortal. Now that you and Changle are already married, when you return to the capital, your rank will be the Commandant of the Attendant Cavalry. You must not copy Fan Li's[1] and Ziling's[2] conduct. This Prince wishes to ask for your advice to bring peace and stability to the country."

I smiled slightly, thinking inwardly, *There are naturally those capable of bringing peace and stability to the country, not just I alone. This Prince of Qing is too vulgar and tacky* . However, with his status, I could only courteously reply, “Zhe has engraved Your Imperial Highness’s instructions into my heart.”

The Prince of Qi was smiling strangely on the side, and he voiced, “What a good Jiang Zhe! Usually, this Prince took you as a cultured and refined individual, thus spoke with proper etiquette. Now that you have kidnapped Changle and have even had a son together, this Prince does not know whether to first give you a punch to teach you a lesson on behalf of Imperial Father and the Empress Dowager, or to first thank you for leaving Changle’s face aglow with smiles, no longer possessing the misery and bitterness of the past.”

With a grin on my face, I watched as Xiaoshunzi silently stood behind the Prince of Qi when he spoke of punching me. I expressed, “Your Imperial Highness, please spare me. Although Zhe’s health has recovered, if I were to take Your Imperial Highness’s heavy fist, it is likely that Zhe’s life would be lost. Although there is no need for Your Imperial Highness to worry about my life, if someone were to retaliate, Your Imperial Highness would likely suffer for your actions.”

Li Xian could sense the cold aura behind him, promptly uttering, “I’m just joking, only joking! All right. The sea breeze here is too windy. Let’s go take a look at my little nephew. I wonder if he resembles you or Changle.”

Seeing Li Xian admit defeat, I seized the opportunity to help him disentangle himself, stating, “Zhe has prepared refreshments at the Hearing Surf Pavilion. The scenery there is beautiful and secluded, able to watch the tides, sunrise, and sunset. My son’s grabbing test will be held there as well, scheduled for the noon hour. There are still two hours until then. I would like to invite the ladies and gentlemen to the Hearing Waves Pavilions to partake of refreshments and gaze upon the ocean.”

At this moment, Lin Bi had already followed Princess Changle over and arrived by my side. Hearing my words, she smiled and stated, “Imperial Highnesses, the Princes of Qi and Qing, are Sir Jiang’s in-laws. Speaking of

guests, it is only We who can be considered as such. We are interested in leaning on the railing to look at the ocean."

My gaze fell upon Lin Bi. This Princess of Jiaping was the Northern Han King's niece and adopted daughter. Having defended Daizhou for generations against the northern barbarians, the Lin family's position within Northern Han was extremely majestic. In her capacity as the current leader of the Lin family, having the status of a royal princess, and finally her engagement to Long Tingfei, this woman was an important figure in determining whether Great Yong would be able to bring Northern Han's territory into the fold. That was why I had invited her. She, like me, would greatly value this opportunity to meet today to study the enemy at such a close distance. This was not a normal opportunity … it was only a pity that I could not meet Long Tingfei.

Only now did Jiang Haitao have the opportunity to bring his new bride over to pay their respects. I smiled and greeted, "Although you are my student, you are a guest today. Come with us. Duanniang, lead the young mistress to pay a visit to grandfather."

At this moment, the middle-aged, beautiful woman walked over and voiced her compliance. Li Xian's memory was excellent, immediately recognizing this woman as the former head maid of Princess Changle's residence, the Jade Phoenix Palace Hall. He remembered that she was surnamed Zhou. Duanniang was probably her given name. Yue Qingyan already knew that Jiang Zhe's grandfather who they were going to meet was the Medical Sage, Sang Chen. Whether she could be cured or not relied upon that person's medical expertise. She could not help but grow tense. Before, she did not fear death because she knew that she had no hope for survival. However, now with everything to live for, she would naturally not be reconciled to death. The middle-aged woman seemed to notice Yue Qingyan's tension, gently tugging her arm, guiding her into the manor.

Although Yue Qingyan was nervous, she could not help but take in the Tranquil Sea Manor from the corners of her eyes. After all, this place's master was the one who had resolved the desperate crisis, Jiang Zhe. With these examinations, she could not help but become filled with respect. The

Yue family could be said to be a regional overlord with its inheritance passed down for over a dozen generations. Naturally, as a result, their main residence seemed to extend forever into the distance, splendid and majestic.[3] In addition, Yue Qingyan was knowledgable with the arrangements and furnishings within a palace. Now, she used this expertise to inspect, seeing that all of the rooms, although in seeming disorder, possessed a charming effect. It was elegant and refined to the utmost; not a single location did not move the heart. Walking through the manor, she felt her worries fall away and her spirit relax. From all this, she concluded that this manor's master was truly extraordinary.

Everyone followed the host couple up the smoothed limestone pathway up the mountain. On the wide and level mountaintop, a two story hexagonal pavilion occupied a quiet corner, almost as if it stood alone in the world, arrogant and unyielding. This was the Hearing Surf Pavilion.

The Hearing Surf Pavilion's location was the highest point in the entire manor. There was nothing blocking the view of the entire surroundings within a hundred paces, be they foliage or other buildings. The pavilion looked graceful on the outside and stately within. On each corner of the pavilion was hung brass wind chimes. Those wind chimes would jingle with every gust of wind. Each and every one of them was carefully designed, but with subtle differences, causing their blended jingling sounds to be like that of nature.

Li Xian's gaze fell upon the blue robed young man standing at its entrance. This man's appearance was well-favored, his skin fair to the point of sparkling and being translucent. He recognized this man as Jiang Zhe's personal guard, Dong Que. However, with more than two years having passed, although the figure remained the same, his features had undergone minute changes, causing Li Xian to almost fail to recognize him. Li Xian always had his doubts about this man. Although he had met this man years ago by Jiang Zhe's side, Dong Que always seemed to avoid him, whether intentionally or otherwise. Li Xian had once suspected this man. However, later, when he became completely swamped with military affairs, Li Xian did not think much of it. Meeting him again today, although a hazy thought

appeared in Li Xian's mind, he did not pay Dong Que much attention.

Dong Que advanced and reported, "Young master, everything within the pavilion has been prepared."

With satisfaction, I nodded my head. These last few years, Dong Que had managed the Tranquil Sea Manor properly, performing his duties as the manager well. Xiaoshunzi, aside from my personal matters, did not pay attention to anything else.

Leading everyone, I guided them to the second floor of the Hearing Surf Pavilion. Because there were outside guests, my subordinates had practically not made appearances. Only Daoli and Chiji followed everyone into the pavilion. Daoli had nothing to worry about. As the Hai family's young master, he naturally had the qualifications to take a seat. Chiji had come in his identity as my former servant. Under normal circumstances, he would not have been able to even enter the pavilion with such a status. It was the Prince of Qi who treated him as an attendant and brought him inside. As a result, the Hearing SurfPavilion, aside from the people of the Tranquil Sea Manor, had eight guests—Prince Li Xian of Qi, Prince Li Kang of Qing, Princess Lin Bi of Jiaping, Gou Lian, Hai Wuya, Hai Li, Jiang Haitao, and Chiji. Although the reception hall of the second floor of the pavilion was extremely wide, when a large table was placed in the middle, the movement area was greatly reduced. As a result, all of the distinguished guests leaned on the railings and gazed upon the sea.

The view here was quite expansive. Standing within the pavilion, one could overlook the landscape inside and outside the bay. Within the bay, it was tranquil and calm. The turquoise waters were like a mirror. Outside the bay, there was a precipitous difference. The waves were swift and rapid. As a result, within this pavilion, one could see the ocean's two faces. It was, as expected, a perfect building to gaze upon the sea.

However, Lin Bi realized that this Hearing Surf Pavilion could clearly see the entire Tranquil Sea Manor. If someone with excellent martial arts were to keep watch, then they would be able to protect the entirety of the manor.

At this time, Dong Que led a group of servants to deliver and serve

refreshments. The aroma of the fragrant tea and exquisite pastries quickly inundated the entire pavilion. Stepping forward, I saluted Lin Bi, stating, “As thanks for the Princess’s visit, my wife, fond of cooking, has personally prepared refreshments. Princess, please have a taste.”

With a smile on her face, Lin Bi expressed her thanks. “For Sir Jiang to dwell at such a paradise with the company of Princess Changle, and living such a leisurely existence truly leaves one filled with envy. No wonder Sir is unwilling to pay notice to the affairs of the mundane world. In fact, Bi truly envies Sir for being able to keep far away from war. It is not everyone that has this kind of good fortune. Casting aside needs and wants, treating riches and honor as no more than fleeting—this truly deserves Bi’s admiration. If I were Sir, I would definitely not abandon such a life and once again tread upon the dust of the mundane world.”

Hearing this, I happily laughed. “Your Royal Highness has forgotten one thing. ‘Now that I’ve got a son, everything’s done.’ Now that I have both son and daughter, I am reluctant to lightly part from such a life.”

Hearing this, Li Xian’s face changed. His goal for coming was exactly to extract Jiang Zhe from seclusion in the Eastern Sea. However, with Lin Bi speaking thusly, it was clearly a hidden warning to Jiang Zhe to not become involved in the conflict between Great Yong and Northern Han, while Jiang Zhe had vaguely expressed his unwillingness to part from such a life. Although it was impossible for Jiang Zhe to completely cut off his ties to Great Yong, Li Xian knew that Jiang Zhe was especially fond of such a leisurely and carefree lifestyle. If Jiang Zhe refused to come out of seclusion, even if Li Zhi were here, Li Zhi would be unable to force him to do so. Thinking of this, Li Xian could not help but become vexed. Could Jiang Zhe’s special invitation be because of his desire to tactfully decline?

Footnotes :

Fan Li (范蠡) originally hailed from the state of Chu, but served the state of Yue (越国) during the Spring and Autumn Period. He helped King Goujian of Yue (越王勾践) rebuild the state of Yue and conquer the state of Wu. After this success, Fan Li was said to have resigned from his positions and spent his life living as a hermit at Lake Tai (太湖).

Yan Guang (严光), styled Ziling (子陵) was a fellow student and close friend of Emperor Guangwu of the Han Dynasty. After helping Emperor Guangwu restore the Han Dynasty, he retired into seclusion, becoming a hermit within Mt. Fuchun (富春山).

富丽堂皇, fulitanghuang – idiom, lit. sumptuous mansions; fig. splendorous and majestic

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 13: Betraying Beloved Son

Volume 4, Chapter 13: Betraying Beloved Son

At this moment, the sound of light footsteps came tramping from outside. From the sound of the footsteps, everyone could tell that they were not trained in martial arts. Two maids then pushed open the door. Escorted by a number of maids, Princess Changle walked in carrying an infant in her arms. Behind her were Roulan and Li Lin. Just now, when Roulan had accompanied the princess to bring over the infant, she did not forget to drag Li Lin along.

Li Xian was the first to jump to his feet. Smiling, he stated, “I want to see if this child resembles Changle or Suiyun.” Of course, aside from the joy of meeting this little nephew of his, he also wanted to briefly avoid the awkward atmosphere. There would be ample time for everything to be decided. *At worst, I can kidnap Jiang Zhe* , thought Li Xian, vexed. However, he quickly focused all of his attention upon the infant.

Although the infant wasn’t even a year old, he was very vigorous. His large, inquisitive eyes whirled around wildly. He inherited the strong points of his parents’ appearances. Although still young, one could tell that once he had grown up, he would definitely be a handsome and elegant young man.

The more he looked, the more Li Xian felt that this child’s eyes were extremely like his own. He could not help but pick the child up. Although he already had several children, he never paid any particular attention to them. It could be said that Li Xian wasn’t a real father. As a result, to him, it was more difficult holding this child than picking up a weapon. Moreover, that soft and delicate body of the infant caused Li Xian to be flustered, fearing that if he used too much strength, he would hurt the infant. However, this child seemed to be quite vigorous. As if he noticed Li Xian’s predicament, he giggled incessantly. Li Xian was increasingly delighted and could not help but raise the child up high.

Frightened, Princess Changle called out, “Sixth brother! Don’t frighten Shen’er!” Interestingly, the infant was actually unafraid, instead laughing joyfully. His glittering eyes were sparkling with excitement and curiosity. A warm feeling welled up from the depths of Li Xian’s heart. For Li Xian, this tiny infant brought him the never before felt emotion of parent and child.

Familial love within a ruling family was already aloof and distant. Furthermore, with his incongruous relationship with Qin Zheng, Li Xian had never paid much attention to his son, Li Lin. It was only after Qin Zheng died that Li Xian began to attach importance to Li Lin out of guilt and shame. However, because of their former estrangement and the suffering in Li Xian’s heart, Li Xian seemed more like a commander and teacher rather than a father towards Li Lin. He had diligently instructed Li Lin, hoping that, even if his son did not have the ability of inheriting his principality, his son would be able to inherit his mantle and become an excellent military commander.

However, towards this little nephew, Li Xian was fond of him from the depths of his heart. For a moment, he hated that this child wasn’t his own. These years, aside from war, Li Xian had no other interests. This was actually the first time that his thirst for life had been reignited.

In a daze, Li Lin gazed at his father. He had never seen his father so happy. At this moment, he wished more than anything to supplant this little infant to have a taste of the warmth of his father’s embrace. At this moment, a hand suddenly began to gently pat his head. Looking up, Li Lin caught sight of a scholar in azure robes smiling at him. The scholar gazed with a quiet warmth. Li Lin felt tears fill his eyes. He promptly turned his head away, not wanting anyone to see his moment of weakness. A look of pity flashed across the scholar’s eyes before turning away.

Smiling, I stated, “All right … Your Imperial Highness, don’t tease Shen’er. If he is frightened, Zhen’er will ache with sorrow.”

Reluctant to part with the infant, Li Xian handed him over to Princess Changle. He mocked, “Don’t pretend. I have heard from Imperial Sister-in-law and the Crown Prince that you were the one who loved most to bully Roulan. I have never seen a father like you, only knowing to tease your son and daughter. How about you hand over Shen’er to me, so that he isn’t

tormented by a poor father like you?”

Listening to him speak, I was furious. This Prince of Qi had always been fond of searching for my shortcomings. Every single time we met, he would always cause a mess to the point of making things uncomfortable. Crossing my arms, I mischievously replied, “I naturally can’t give this child to you. However, you are still his uncle. How about this? If you take a new wife who gives birth to a daughter, how about I let Shen’er call you father-in-law?”

Hearing this, the expression on Li Xian’s face was fleetingly gloomy. He was filled with guilt and shame towards Qin Zheng. As a result, he had not only dismissed all of his concubines, he had also rejected all attempts by others to have him remarry. This was something that many people knew. Li Xian did not believe that Jiang Zhe did not know this. As a result, he naturally became somewhat angry and resentful.

However, he did not know why, but after a few moments, Li Xian gradually felt that this idea was actually not bad. If this Jiang Shen was to become his son-in-law, with a son-in-law being considered as half a son, he would be left perfectly satisfied. However, although he had two daughters at present, they were born of concubines and were much older than Jiang Shen. If he wanted Jiang Shen to be his son-in-law, he needed to have another daughter. It was not unreasonable for Jiang Zhe to have him take another wife and have a daughter. After all, Jiang Shen was Princess Changle’s eldest son. In addition, Jiang Shen’s father was such an individual. This kind of marriage would probably cause many people to covet it.

Thinking of this, Li Xian came to the resolution that in order to acquire this son-in-law, he needed to marry a new consort. Moreover, he recalled that there was no one managing his household. There was no one to discipline his daughters born of concubines, and he was basically allowing them to grow and die without outside interference. If he were to take a virtuous consort, she would be able to take care of them for him, saving him a lot of trouble and preventing those children’s future from being delayed. Moreover, seeing the harmony in Jiang Zhe’s family, Li Xian could not help but feel guilt and shame. It was said that one must regulate the family and rule the state, and with his household in such disarray, it was no wonder he

was defeated by the current emperor. Unexpectedly, the pent-up fixation upon the defeat suffered in the battle to succeed their father was somehow loosened.

The obsession in his heart eliminated, Li Xian's mind immediately became far sharper. Instantly, he realized that this was an exceptionally good opportunity. He promptly declared, "Then it's settled. If I am to take a consort and have a daughter, in the future, Shen'er is to be my son-in-law!"

Looking at my beloved son, I thought, *Son, don't blame me for casually arranging a marriage for you. Being my son, I'm afraid that it will be impossible for your happiness to be decided by you. Even if I am unconcerned, there will be others who will be concerned. Although the Prince of Qi is pigheaded, he is a straightforward individual. His daughter should be quite outstanding. However, for your happiness, I'm going to give you a few more choices* . Thinking of this, I continued, "That's good. While it's not rare that an engagement is formed before the children are born,[1] I don't want to harm Shen'er. How about this? In the future, give birth to a few extra daughters and allow Shen'er to choose for himself."

Not caring that his future daughters were going to undergo a selection, Li Xian replied, "Then let's clap our hands together to signify this promise.[2] There are so many guests here to serve as witnesses, and Changle is also here. You won't be able to renege on this engagement!"

I smiled slightly, thinking, *If in the future, if Shen'er has another sweetheart, if worst comes to worst, I'll expel him from the family, allowing him to live leisurely. If he is not fond of fame and profit, riches and honor, I can only be happy. Don't tell me that I will be blamed? Moreover, it is said that a couple who grow up together as childhood friends become familiar and affectionate. In the future, if the Prince of Qi's daughter does not have the ability to cause Shen'er to be tempted after the opportunity of meeting every day, then I will not be blamed* . Thinking this way, I stretched out my hand and stated, "Of course I won't renege. If Your Imperial Highness takes a consort and has a daughter who is well-matched to Shen'er, even if Your Imperial Highness is disinterested in their marriage, Zhe will pay a visit to seek the completion of the engagement. The only way that doesn't happen is if he is not my son,

otherwise this engagement is set."

Although Li Xian was exceptionally skilled at military strategy, he naturally would not pay attention to such trifling wordplay. He also stuck out his hand. Our hands clapped together to seal the promised engagement.

Watching Jiang Zhe and Li Xian seal the agreement by clapping hands, the distinguished guests within the pavilion all had different thoughts. Lin Bi was shouting "not good" mentally. If the Prince of Qi and the Great Yong upper stratum were to be reconciled, it would be detrimental to Northern Han. However, Lin Bi did not reveal any of this concern, simply smiling and offering her congratulations.

Li Kang felt a raging fury deep inside. He did not want the Prince of Qi to once again suppress him, feeling a boundless resentment even towards Jiang Zhe. But after thinking it over, how could a child be had so easily? He still had the opportunity to pull apart this happy union. As a result, he did not reveal any hint of displeasure.

In comparison, Gou Lian was truly delighted. Although the Prince of Qi had a stubborn character, the emperor treated him as a beloved subject. Since the Prince of Qi had agreed to take a new consort, then it would be a great opportunity to make up for the shortcomings in the relationship between the emperor and the Prince of Qi. As expected, Jiang Zhe was truly formidable. Using only a few words, he had resolved such a difficult problem. *When the Emperor learns of this, I wonder how happy he will be?*

Regardless of what everyone thought, everyone displayed looks of jubilation. Only little Jiang Shen, who did not know that he had been sold by his father, gazed with curiosity upon the different kinds of objects placed upon the large table in the middle of the room, frequently wanting to reach out with his hands to touch them. However, he was too far away and was unable to touch them. Unable to help himself, Jiang Shen's face began to distort. Just as it seemed as his face was about to be a downpour of tears, the door to the pavilion was smashed open. In a loud voice, the hurriedly arriving Lin Tong asked, "Has the grabbing test begun? What has he picked?"

The small infant was also frightened by Lin Tong's actions. Before he could start crying, his tears were scared away. Forgetting to wail and cry, Jiang Shen watched Lin Tong with curiosity.

Princess Changle smiled slightly. Just now she was a bit unhappy, criticizing Jiang Zhe for making the decision and arranging a betrothal for Jiang Shen without discussing with her. However, she was after all born of the imperial family, naturally understanding that with the rise of one's status, the greater the impossibility of arranging one's own wedding. Ignoring the fact that Shen'er was her own son, based upon Jiang Zhe's position within imperial brother's heart, she and Jiang Zhe likely did not have the power to select a wife for their son. Now that Jiang Zhe had arranged such a future marriage for their son, it was actually a good way of planning ahead. If sixth brother was able to change his mind, ceasing his confrontational stance against imperial brother, this would be a cause for celebration. Seeing the happy atmosphere within the room, Prince Li Kang of Qing and Princess Lin Bi of Jiaping both had different thoughts. Just as they were trying to figure out how to resolve this vexing situation, seeing Lin Tong impulsively barge in, Li Kang smiled and spoke up, "There is no need to be worried, Princess. It'll still be a little while. Just now, the maids went to invite the Princess over to ensure that Princess does not miss this event."

Having slept for more than an hour, Lin Tong was now thoroughly awake. Embarrassed, she expressed her apologies, retreating to Lin Bi's side. Seeing that the set time was approaching, Princess Changle smiled. "Suiyun, I think we should start. Otherwise, Shen'er will get anxious."

Glancing at Shen'er's curious gaze, I replied, "Then let him go grab. I really want to see what Shen'er will grab."

The grabbing test was a popular custom that had been handed down through the generations. As long as one's household was well off, families would invite their relatives and friends to hold a celebration at their children's first birthday. The large wooden table at the center of the Hearing Surf Pavilion was already covered with a multitude of objects. As neither Jiang Zhe nor Princess Changle were ordinary individuals, the objects used for this grabbing test were all extremely exquisite and precious.

Upon a silver tray was placed a golden seal. Upon the two sandalwood trays, one had three elaborately packaged books—*The Analects* of Confucius, the *Dao De Jing* by Laozi, and the *Diamond Sutra* of Buddhism—, while upon the other tray were the four treasures of the study—an ink brush from Huzhou,[3] ink from Anhui,[4] fine Xuan writing paper,[5] and high-quality Duan ink stone.[6] On a tray made from Chinese boxwood were an abacus, a silver ingot, and an accountant book. On a piece of red silk were an exquisitely manufactured white jade zither that was only half a *chi* [7] in length and a priceless *weiqi* set made from black jade and crystal. On a jet-black metal tray were a sword and a scimitar in extremely luxurious scabbards, made from shark skin with gold encrusted mouths and yellow velvet handles. However, at the center of the table was a box of fragrant snacks that Princess Changle had personally made, capable of causing all to drool.

All of these objects were extremely extravagant. Even the Prince of Qi and company, who all held power, riches, and influence, felt they were a bit excessive in their extravagance. Seeing them, the Prince of Qi smiled and stated, “Since it’s my son-in-law, then he should have to put up with anything.” Finished speaking, he took out a lavender jade military tally and put it on the table.

Shocked, Princess Changle cried out, “Sixth brother! Isn’t this your military tally that allows you to command your army? How can you bring this out for Shen’er’s grabbing test?”

“It’s only to fill out the scene,” replied Li Xian with a smile. “Even if Shen’er grabs it, I will take it back. I just want to see if this child has the destiny to become a military commander.”

Smiling faintly, I said, “Your Imperial Highness will likely be disappointed … Military commanders require a fierce and savage heart. I can see that my Shen’er is a tenderhearted soul. He is unlikely to lead troops.”

Waving his hand, Li Xian uttered, “This may not necessarily be the case. Who when born is fierce and savage? In this Prince’s army, the majority of the warriors are too afraid to even kill during their first battle. But now, they view human life as grass, shedding blood at will and possessing hearts

as savage as wolves."

Disdain flashed in the Prince of Qing's eyes. Smiling, he stated, "Since sixth brother is so enthusiastic, as a third uncle, I must also express my affection." From his waist, he removed an old and faded, embroidered pouch that was yellow in color. Upon it was a dragon with four claws. The pouch was bulging. However, no one could tell what was inside.

Bafflement flashed across Li Xian's eyes. Others probably didn't know, but he knew what was inside. That year, when the Prince of Qing's birth mother died tragically, Li Xian had still gone to console him although he viewed this somewhat cowardly elder brother with some contempt. Li Xian had seen Li Kang holding his mother's makeup kit, shedding tears. Although Li Xian was blunt, he understood that it wasn't the right time to go disturb his elder brother. Observing Li Kang in secret, Li Xian saw Li Kang take out a jade bracelet from his mother's makeup kit and place it within the yellow embroidered pouch. The next day, Li Kang disappeared from the palace. Many years later, when Li Kang reappeared in the Yong court, he would always carry this embroidered pouch by his side. Although no one else paid it much attention, Li Xian stored this away in his mind. He was rather moved by the Prince of Qing's filial piety. It was only that their temperaments did not match and Li Xian was a part of the crown prince's faction, so he had not gotten close to the Prince of Qing. To this day, the affection between the two of them was extremely thin, difficult to repair. Naturally, Li Xian would not bring up his desire to comfort his elder brother. As such, Li Kang did not know that Li Xian knew what was within the embroidered pouch.

I looked at this embroidered pouch, feeling a bit baffled. I did not want something so shady. As such, I inquired, "I wonder what Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qing, has generously bestowed? If too precious, it would be too much for my young child to accept."

Smiling, Li Kang answered, "This object isn't precious and is only a leftover object of my deceased mother. If your esteemed son is fond of it, it could be that our two families are also fated to be tied by marriage."

I was startled. Just now, I had arranged for Shen'er to be the Prince of Qi's son-in-law. Why was the Prince of Qing proposing marriage now? At this

moment, I could see that Li Kang's eyes had fallen upon Roulan. I immediately understood. An object passed down from a mother was naturally the best gift to one's wife or daughter-in-law. The Prince of Qing wanted Roulan to be his daughter-in-law.

I was unable to contain my fury. Although I had sold Shen'er, arranging a marriage for him even though he was so young, this did not mean that I would hastily arrange a marriage for Roulan. I knew that my son could naturally be more casual. At worst, he could leave my family. A daughter, however, was to be spoiled and pampered. Let alone the Prince of Qing's good-for-nothing son, I had no intention of allowing my daughter to marry any son of the imperial clan. My Roulan could only be married to a man who would treasure her. How could those sons of the imperial clan with multiple wives and concubines be fit husbands for Roulan?

The expression on my face became stony, as I unenthusiastically stated, "Zhe is grateful for Your Imperial Highness's kind intentions. However, Zhe has also doted upon this daughter. Her marriage requires her own willingness. Right now, Lan'er is still young, making it inconvenient to talk about matrimony."

My words did not give the Prince of Qing any face. Even I was a bit worried that he would immediately turn hostile. However, beyond my expectations, the expression on Li Kang's face did not change in the slightest. Instead, he smiled and responded, "It seems like my son does not have the good fortune. Sir Jiang's daughter is naturally noble and precious. Reasonably speaking, she has better options."

His tone stung with jealousy and ridicule, although Li Kang's words were uttered placidly. Seeing that his anger did not flare up, I inwardly relaxed, a bit regretful that I had also invited him. Originally, he had been invited because of his status. After all, he was a prince of the first rank and Changle's elder brother. However, his arrival had not only created a new enemy for me, he had completely exposed Great Yong's internal divisions to outsiders. Unfortunately, I could not give him face and a harmonious façade to harm the latter half of Roulan's life. Seeing the pensive look flashing across Lin Bi's eyes, I knew that the gains from inviting her would not make

up for the losses. Alas, it was too late for regrets. *Fine … in the future, there will be ways to make up for today's losses* . I forced a smile onto my face, stating, "All right … Zhen'er, quickly have Shen'er to make his move. I can tell that he can't restrain his patience any further."

Princess Changle smiled tenderly, personally placing her beloved son on the table, allowing him to act as he pleased. Jiang Shen's eyes were opened wide, revealing a happy and inquisitive expression. A moment earlier, he had been completely focused on these fascinating objects. But right now, he seemed to be unwilling to reach out with his hands, only carefully measuring them up.

After a short while, the little infant began to move. He rapidly crawled to the center of the table, picking up a fragrant pastry.

I could not help but let out a groan. It was said that if a child were to first grab pastries, it represented that he would be a lazy and gluttonous individual. However, the guests were mostly polite in their words, stating that this child would never have want for food and clothing in the future. I had originally wanted to remove the pastries, because I was also fond[8] of Princess Changle's pastries. It was likely that Shen'er would be unable to resist such a lure. However, Zhen'er had disagreed, stating that it was customary. Now, as expected, Shen'er had picked up pastries first.

At this moment, Xiaoshunzi, who had been standing at the corner of the room silently, suddenly began to laugh. I shot him a glare, asking, "What are you laughing about?"

Li Shun laughingly replied, "The little master is truly young master's son. Didn't young master tell this servant that on your first birthday, you also grabbed pastries first?"

Hearing his words, the entire room fell silent. Then Li Xian began to laugh heartily. Although everyone else gave me a bit of face, they were all full of smiles. Though somewhat embarrassed, I understood that no one would laugh at Shen'er. Although Xiaoshunzi had caused me to lose face, he had preserved Shen'er's face. This could be considered as meritorious service.

Just then, Shen'er set down the pastry, his large eyes gazing at the objects

surrounding him. He then picked up an abacus. My heart shook. Afterwards, I laughingly stated, “That’s good, that’s good … I always have a headache when I go over accounts. If I did not have the help of trusted subordinates to supervise my assets, I would likely be impoverished.[9] If Shen’er is adept at these matters, then there will be no need to fear that he will lose all of his inheritance.” These words were not only an effort to console myself, but the truth. Although I had the ability to create new enterprises, I had great difficulty managing all of my assets. Fortunately, I always played to my strengths[10] and never interfered. If Shen’er was adept in such fields, I would have no worries that he would be a spendthrift wastrel in the years to come.

Afterwards, Shen’er set down the abacus, reaching out to grasp that scimitar. I was regretful that he had not picked up the sword. Everyone knew that the sword signaled that an individual would be a master of brush and sword. Those who picked up the saber-like scimitar were mostly hotheaded military men.

A bit anxious, I walked several circles around the table, hatefully stating, “Shen’er, what’s going on with you little brat? In the past, your father picked up the four treasures of the study second. Do you not like books, brush, and ink?” Everyone in the pavilion burst out laughing. It was enough that those familiar with me laughed. However, Li Kang, Lin Bi, and Lin Tong all found this ridiculous. Who could have thought that this outstandingly brilliant Jiang Suiyun would actually have such a childish nature? However, I paid no attention to their expressions, completely focused on Shen’er, hoping that he would give me some face.

At this moment, Shen’er set down the scimitar, reaching his hand towards one of the sandalwood trays. I was overjoyed, waiting with bated breath, afraid to disturb my son. Shen’er’s hands swept over the objects. The four treasures of the study were immediately made a mess. He then reached out his hand towards the other sandalwood tray. I rejoiced silently, hoping that he would pick up one of the books. As expected, Shen’er reached out and picked up a book. Then he ripped it apart with curiosity.

I could feel a buzzing sound in my head. Walking over, I pulled Shen’er up by the collar of his clothes, scolding in a loud voice, “Stinky brat, what’s

going on? At the time, although your father picked up a copy of the *Dao De Jing* , I first picked up *The Analects* . As for you, you are actually holding onto the *Diamond Sutra* without letting it go. You can be anything you want…. Why would you want to become a Buddhist monk? Preposterous! Quickly toss aside this book. It doesn't matter if you aren't literate, but you cannot be a monk!"

Not knowing whether to laugh or cry, Princess Changle came over and replied, "Suiyun, don't be impetuous. Picking up a Buddhist scripture means that he will have ties with Buddhism. What does it have to do with becoming a monk? The grabbing test is no more than a ceremony. Who takes it as seriously as you do? Quickly let go! Don't injure Shen'er!"

Blushing with shame, I apologized, "That's right … that's right … I am being too impetuous. Who can blame me for this child not giving me any face?" Finished speaking, I glanced at Shen'er, worried that he would be startled by my actions. However, seeing that he was fine, I did not know whether to cry or laugh. Although he tightly held onto the *Diamond Sutra* , his legs were swinging back and forth, as if he were on a swing.

Resentfully I stated, "My household's misfortune … How could I have produced such a cheeky brat?"

Li Xian could not help but laugh, replying, "Suiyun, there is no need to be worried. I can see that although this child is naughty and vivacious, he will surely be an excellent candidate to practice martial arts."

Suddenly, Xiaoshunzi's eyes shone as he gazed out the window. He ruthlessly questioned, "Which master has come to the Tranquil Sea Manor? Demonic Shadow Li Shun pays his respects. Please show yourself."

I was greatly startled. Although a surface glance wouldn't show, the manor was completely covered with countless hidden mechanisms and traps and covert sentries. How could someone arrive here without anyone noticing?

At this moment, a gentle voice drifted over, reciting one of the many names of the Buddha. Then he stated, "Benefactor Li's martial arts progression truly leaves this old cassock filled with admiration. Just now, this old cassock saw that Benefactor Jiang was disciplining his son, so it was

inconvenient for me to disturb. Please forgive me."

After this, the door to the pavilion was slowly pushed open. A middle-aged monk in a gray cassock stood there, smiling. I felt my scalp stiffen. Blushing with shame, I expressed, "Great Master True Compassion, I'm not saying it's not good to be a monk. Great Master, please forgive me." In my mind, I cursed my bad luck. How could my words be allowed to be heard by this grandmaster? What was to be done if he felt I was prejudiced against Buddhism?

Great Master True Compassion smiled slightly, replying, "This old cassock understands Benefactor's thoughts. Benefactor is thirty years old and only has this lone son. It is difficult to not hold high hopes for him. However, this old cassock sees that this child's aptitude is exceptionally good. If Benefactor is willing, this old cassock wishes to take him as my disciple. What does Benefactor think?"

When I was about to blurt out my refusal, I saw Xiaoshunzi lightly shaking his head. I suddenly realized that Great Master True Compassion would not have my son take vows and become a monk. Shen'er was the son of a princess and my only son. No matter how fond Great Master True Compassion was of this child, he would not have Shen'er become a monk.

Just then, Great Master True Compassion continued, "Although Pei Yun is my Shaolin Temple's protector disciple, he holds a mighty military command at present. As such, it is inconvenient for him to handle many *jianghu* matters. This old cassock can see that your esteemed son's aptitudes are outstanding, thus I am filled with fondness. If Benefactor gives the nod of approval, this old cassock is willing to take your esteemed son as my last disciple. Benefactor and Princess, do not worry. From your esteemed son's physiognomy, this old cassock can see that he will definitely have happiness and longevity, having many descendants and will definitely not become a monk."

I understood this senior monk's intentions. It was possible that Shen'er truly had unusually good aptitude, however, I believed that this old monk most likely wanted a hostage. If Shen'er were to enter the Shaolin Temple, Xiaoshunzi and I would naturally be unable to cause trouble for the Shaolin

Temple. This old cassock was still afraid and suspicious of me…. However, thinking it over, Shen'er was never still and peaceful. It seemed he would not have the abilities to become a scholar. If he were to train martial arts, there was no better master than Great Master True Compassion. It was said that the Shaolin Temple's martial arts were the most orthodox in *jianghu* . Even if Shen'er trained greatly, he would not be spoiled. With this kind of master, who would make trouble for Shen'er in the future?

These thousands of thoughts galloped through my mind swiftly. With a smile on my face, I returned, "For Shen'er to be able to become a disciple of the Great Master is naturally his blessing. However, we, husband and wife, only have this one son. We only hope that he will grow up safe and sound, happily spending his time with us. If Great Master were to take him away, wouldn't it harm our hearts as parents?"

Great Master True Compassion smiled slightly, replying, "This old cassock has already decided to temporarily take up residence and cultivate at Chang'an's Floating Clouds Temple. At present, your esteemed son is still young. This old cassock can temporarily teach him at Sir Jiang's home."

I was exultant, exclaiming, "It's a deal!" When I blurted these words out, I realized that I had made a slip of the tongue. Promptly, I added, "Since that is the case, Zhe humbly thanks Great Master's kind intentions. However, why has Great Master come here from afar?"

Footnotes :

指腹为婚, zhifuweihun – idiom, lit. propose a marriage by pointing to the stomach; fig. boy and girl have been engaged before they were born
In ancient China, promises were sealed by the two parties slapping their hands together.
湖笔, hubi – lit. Hu brush; Huzhou (**湖州**), modern-day Zhejiang Province, was known for its long history of manufacturing ink brushes that traces its way back to the Qin Dynasty
徽墨, huimo – lit. Hui ink; was an ink manufactured in Huizhou (**徽州**), located in modern-day Anhui Province, known for manufacturing high quality ink
宣纸, xuanzhi – lit. Xuan paper; also known as rice paper, produced at Jing

County (泾县), Xuanzhou (宣州), modern-day Anhui Province, renowned for its softness and fine textures suited for calligraphy and painting

端砚, duanyan – lit. Duan ink stone; a high quality ink stone that was historically manufactured in Duanzhou (端州), now modern-day Zhaoqing (肇庆), Guangdong Province

Over nine inches

爱不释手, aibushishou – idiom, lit. to love something too much to part with; fig.to hold admiring, to be fond of

一穷二白, yiqiong'erbai – idiom, lit. be poor and blank; fig. impoverished, poor and uncultured

扬长避短, yangchangbiduan – idiom, lit. to foster strength and avoid weaknesses; fig. to play to one's strengths

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 14: Nemesis

Volume 4, Chapter 14: Nemesis[1]

Standing on the deck of the ship, Lin Bi stonily watched the Tranquil Sea Manor recede into the distance. A middle-aged bodyguard walked over to her side and asked, “Your Royal Highness, what should our next step be?”

Lin Bi lightly furrowed her long, shapely eyebrows, replying, “When I first entered the Tranquil Sea Manor, I still maintained the thought of finding an opportunity to act. However, sensing the faint and hidden aura of death within the Tranquil Sea Manor, I knew that we could not act blindly without thinking. Originally, I thought that knowing the location of the Tranquil Sea Manor could still create a chance. Surprisingly, Great Master True Compassion arrived at the Eastern Sea. We are quite relieved that We did not act rashly. It seems like We can only attempt to assassinate him en route.”

The middle-aged bodyguard frowned. “However, hasn’t Great Master True Compassion come on the Yong Emperor’s command to escort Princess Changle and Jiang Zhe back to Chang’an? Their entire journey will proceed under heavy escort. In addition, they also have experts like Great Master True Compassion and Demonic Shadow Li Shun. Even if Master came himself, he would be powerless to act. If we casually suffer losses, it would be too unfortunate.”

Lin Bi did not respond to his question. Instead, she brushed away her beautiful hair from her forehead, saying, “Bodyguard Xiao, you have spent years by Tingfei’s side and are a disciple of the State Mentor. Your discerning ability is naturally quite capable. How do you view the Prince of Qi and Jiang Zhe?”

Although Bodyguard Xiao had not seen the scene within the Hearing Surf Pavilion, he had heard Lin Tong’s lively and realistic narration. After hesitating, he replied, “The Prince of Qi is certainly a famous general.

However, compared to the Grand General, he is quite lacking. The Prince's actions and bearing are excessively arrogant, his power and influence too overbearing. These are flaws that we can exploit. As for Jiang Zhe, this subordinate finds him completely ridiculous. This subordinate has heard that the man possesses surpassing intelligence and wisdom. But from the Princess's words, this subordinate feels as if he is still an immature child … This subordinate is a bit suspicious of whether he truly is clever and brilliant enough to be the Prince of Yong's chief strategist."

Lin Bi smiled faintly and replied, "We also found this laughable at first. Before meeting Jiang Zhe, I believed that he was a frightening and monstrous talent, a meticulous genius. When I first met him at the seaside, We felt as if he was an individual who was untouched by the vulgar matters of the world, a man not of the banal world. However, what happened within Hearing Surf Pavilion truly caused me to open my eyes. Jiang Zhe is actually as innocent as a child in his sincerity. However, that's what makes him so formidable. Before, I was only on my guard against him. However, now I am thoroughly terrified of him."

"Although his conduct may be somewhat ridiculous, if the Princess said he was adept at disguise, this subordinate would not find it strange," claimed Bodyguard Xiao with bafflement before inquiring, "But why does the Princess believe that he is even more frightening with such a nature? This subordinate has also once studied the art of war and tactics. Only a calm and ruthless general can be an invincible military commander. I believe that a strategist must be the same. Isn't it said that a wise man is ruthless? If Jiang Zhe has emotional weaknesses, why does the Princess believe that he is even more frightening?"

Lin Bi's expression was highly serene yet hidden in depth, expounding, "My Lin family have been generals for generations. Although we cannot be considered as experts at the art of war, we have our specialties. Some say that a military commander must be cold-hearted and unfeeling. This is truly the case. However, from my years of military experience, if the enemy commander is completely ruthless, acting completely in accordance with the art of war, he would definitely be defeated. If a commander is excessively

ruthless, he will not only treat his subordinates as inhuman, he will also treat the enemy as inhuman. Although he would not make any mistakes because of his emotions, a commander must rely upon his soldiers in warfare. While a commander can be ruthless and callous, his subordinates are all flesh and blood. They will be filled with fear, with hatred. This kind of commander will find himself thoroughly and utterly abandoned.

"It is the same for strategists. The different types of strategists can be roughly divided into three categories. The third strategist type has strengths, but also weaknesses. If they were to fight against one another, victory and defeat would not be easy to determine. There is no need to fear these kinds of strategists.

"The second type of strategist possesses a callous and heartless mentality, acting according to one's interests and for one's own benefit. Although this kind of individual is terrifying, that person possesses weaknesses that can be exploited. After all, if a man is heartless, no matter how capable his stratagems, he will underestimate the feelings of the enemies whom he has schemed against. Since ancient times, ambitious and ruthless characters have often met unnatural deaths. People too skilled at scheming and machinations will often find themselves reaping what they sow, because they will have forgotten that to some people, it is impossible for interest and benefit to completely be above loyalty and affection. Moreover, if a person only has one's own interests at heart, then there will be flaws in conduct and deeds. With this, if the opponent is resourceful and intelligent, this kind of strategist's plans and machinations can be seen through. As long as the opposition's strength is sufficient, it will be easy to attain victory.

"The most terrifying first type of strategists are those who are rich with sentiment. However, when necessary, they can escape from the influence of their emotions. This kind of strategist is already few and far between,[2] and difficult to deal with. However, this kind of strategist also has weaknesses. The talent and schemes also leave others with fear and make them unwilling to approach the strategist. As a result, it is often difficult for these types of strategists to completely showcase their abilities, as they are unable to have those close to them do their utmost to implement the stratagems.

“Although these three types of strategists are terrifying, they all have their weaknesses. However, Jiang Zhe is not like them. He has surpassed those limits.

“You have experienced his stratagems, able to completely discern others’ thoughts. They are like water, able to infiltrate every nook and cranny. He is most skilled at utilizing all external forces that he can exploit, his gaze able to penetrate and see through people’s thoughts. However, when I met him today, I learned that his most terrifying aspect is his sincerity. Regardless of how vicious and malevolent his stratagems are, he treats those by his side with utter sincerity. With this, and not handicapped by those on his side, he can completely utilize his abilities.

“You must know that not only the Great Yong Emperor, Li Zhi, completely trusts him, but even the Prince of Qi, Li Xian, who has always been on bad terms with Li Zhi, also treats him with fondness. Surprisingly, Li Xian was not infuriated when Jiang Zhe purposely rubbed him the wrong way. Now, Jiang Zhe’s son has not only become the Prince of Qi’s future son-in-law, he has also become the last disciple of the Shaolin Temple’s Great Master True Compassion. As such, the Shaolin Temple will not consider him a hidden menace. This kind of individual has the methods to alarm the Heavens and shake the Earth, and charisma that is like the spring wind and rain. With his existence, Great Yong will never fall into civil strife. Tell me, is this man not terrifying? To speak from the heart, that man is our Northern Han’s nemesis. As long as he is alive, I cannot be at ease.”

Killing intent flashed across Bodyguard Xiao’s eyes, as he suggested, “How about we dispatch men and think of a way to assassinate him at any cost?”

Lin Bi declined to comment, instead asking, “When compared to Tingfei, is the Prince of Qi better or worse?”

Startled, Bodyguard Xiao retorted, “Why would Your Royal Highness ask this question? How could that Prince of Qi compare to the Grand General? Ignoring the fact that the Prince of Qi has never gained any advantage against the Grand General, didn’t he also suffer a crushing defeat at the hands of Southern Chu’s Prince of De?”

“In reality, while commanding soldiers could be said to be incomparably complicated,” sighed Lin Bi, “It is in fact merely leading elite troops, and knowing when to advance and when to retreat. Knowing all of this, one can already be a rare capable general. Paired with the ability to utilize ingenious tactics, there are only one or two individuals in this world capable of all this. The Prince of Qi is not an ordinary military commander. Of the famous generals of the present age, when speaking of leading from the front, no one can compare with the Prince of Qi. In addition, Great Yong’s elite and crack cavalry units are not inferior to our Northern Han army. However, the Prince of Qi has always been suppressed by Tingfei. Even against Southern Chu, he was defeated. This is all because his nature is too pigheaded, ambitious and aggressive, filled with the desire to surpass others. Although there are benefits to this kind of personality, able to continue fighting after suffering a defeat and eventually attaining victory, such an individual will also not retreat when needed, giving others the advantage. The Prince of Qi’s personality is arrogant and proud, unwilling to submit to others. If the one admonishing the Prince wasn’t someone he sincerely admired, that individual would most certainly fail with his tail between his legs.[3] That is why he has been unable to defeat Tingfei even though he has been at the northern frontier for years.

“Alas, the Prince of Qi does have the talent to be a commander-in-chief. Moreover, after experiencing the battle over succession, he has learned to bear with things patiently. That is why Great Yong’s northern frontier has been stabilized. Seeing the Prince of Qi this time, I was originally unconcerned, because although his aura was threatening and oppressive, his temperament remained stubborn and difficult to change. Moreover, his desire for death is far greater than that of survival. We initially had wanted to inform Tingfei when We returned that this weakness of the Prince of Qi could be exploited.

“However, the Prince of Qi became completely different after he met with Jiang Zhe. That stubborn will softened. Moreover, his temper became a lot more cheerful and carefree, so much so that his previous desire for death transformed into vitality and vigor. This kind of Prince of Qi is not something that I want to see. However, I worry most about Jiang Zhe staying

by the Prince of Qi's side. With this kind of Prince of Qi supported by the advice from this kind of trusted strategist, the pressure on Tingfei will be too heavy."

Bodyguard Xiao replied, "Your Royal Highness, isn't that Jiang Zhe going to return to Chang'an? We only need to ensure that he is not allowed to arrive at the Prince of Qi's army."

"I do not believe that Jiang Zhe will return to Chang'an," asserted Lin Bi, laughing humorlessly. "Under these circumstances, he will likely directly follow the Prince of Qi to the northern army. The Prince of Qi's nature is despotic. Even if Jiang Zhe wished to accompany Princess Changle back to Chang'an, the Prince of Qi won't allow him to do so."

In alarm, Bodyguard Xiao declared, "Impossible! Great Master True Compassion had come to issue the Emperor's edict. Don't tell me that Jiang Zhe would violate the Yong Emperor's edict? Moreover, he's not worried that the Yong Emperor would be suspicious of his relationship with the Prince of Qi?"

Smiling, Lin Bi riposted, "Did you see the imperial edict? We only heard the Great Master's words. How do you know what is truly upon the imperial edict? In addition, is Jiang Zhe someone who would obey an imperial edict?"

Bodyguard Xiao inquired, "Then what does Your Royal Highness plan to do?"

Gazing at the distant horizon, Lin Bi responded, "I want to see whether Jiang Zhe has the ability to arrive at the Great Yong army encampments. Prince of Qi, Jiang Zhe, the two of you are our Northern Han's nemeses. I will not allow you to reach the battlefield so easily. Strangers meeting by chance become friends, to share these feelings on the battlefield in the years to come. Li Xian, oh, Li Xian, do you still view life and death without regrets?"

***

With the dawn's light breaking through the heavy layers of clouds, the quiet of the wilderness was broken by the sharp and clear sounds of horse hooves and wheels. Upon the wide government road, a carriage covered by azure cloth curtains traveled rapidly, surrounded and protected by four

hundred cavalrymen. These horsemen were divided into four units. One unit was the vanguard and one was the rearguard. The two other units were escorting the carriage on the right and left. The armors of each of the units had different colors. Of the two units escorting the carriage, one wore black armor, while the other had gray armor. The horsemen before and behind the carriage had scarlet armor.

Those who knew the details about Great Yong's army would definitely be bewildered by the scene before them. Regardless of unit, the Great Yong army mostly wore azure-colored armor. Although azure was close to black, there was only one unit that wore black armor—the Prince of Yong's household troops. Aside from this, the Prince of Qi wore scarlet armor, while Qin Yi's personal troops wore white armor, and the Imperial Guard wore yellow armor. Now that the Prince of Yong had ascended to the throne, the former Imperial Guard was renamed the Rising Dragon Guard with the responsibility of protecting the Imperial City. The Prince of Yong's former household guard was renamed the Stalwart Tiger Guard and tasked with protecting the Palace City. Combined, the two were regarded as the Imperial Guard. The Stalwart Tiger Guard still wore black armor, their style not changing even though they were now responsible for protecting the Son of Heaven. At present, everyone knew that aside from the Imperial Guard, no one else was permitted to wear black armor. As such, the unit of horsemen in black could only be Emperor Li Zhi's trusted Stalwart Tiger Guard. However, seeing that the Prince of Qi's household troops shared responsibility for guarding the carriage, everyone was bewildered about the identity of the individual within.

With a smile upon my face, I gazed at the frowning Prince of Qi, inquiring, "Your Imperial Highness, this time, I asked the Marquis of the Eastern Sea to help seal the Eastern Sea for half a month. It will be impossible for Lin Bi to transmit the news in advance. Based upon the strength of the troops with us, we should be able to return to Your Imperial Highness's encampment. Why is Your Imperial Highness still so worried and anxious?"

The Prince of Qi sighed and responded, "I also believe that it will be impossible for Northern Han to deliver the information. I only learned

yesterday that you invited Lin Bi in order to restrict Northern Han's reaction. Next, you asked the Marquis of the Eastern Sea to mobilize his forces in order to prevent the Northern Han army from receiving the information in advance and laying an ambush on our journey. After all, this road is only dozens of *li* from the border. If Northern Han's cavalry laid an ambush on the road, it would be difficult for us to escape. This stretch of road is close to the border. Great Yong's army may not have the advantage. In addition, I cannot mobilize too many troops to serve as escort to prevent inadvertently alerting the enemy and giving them an opportunity to exploit. With my three hundred personal troops and Imperial Brother's one hundred Stalwart Tiger Guard serving as your bodyguards, the four hundred cavalry will be enough for us to breakthrough even if we are ambushed and have to defend until reinforcements arrive. Further, without several days of planning, I do not believe that Northern Han is capable of creating an inescapable net."

Speaking to this point, the Prince of Qi could not help but laugh in spite of himself, continuing, "To speak of this, you and the Emperor are truly cautious. Who would have expected that the Stalwart Tiger Guard had already arrived at Binzhou? Moreover, when Great Master True Compassion arrived and Lin departed, you immediately set out. It is likely that Lin Bi is still behind us. Even if Lin Bi were able to send the news now, it would be too late."

I instinctively asked, "Since that is the case, why is Your Imperial Highness still so worried? Could it be you are worried about Li Lin? With Zhen'er taking care of him, why are you still worried? Although Lin'er is still young, no matter how anxious you are, it will be impossible for him to go onto the battlefield. There is no need to worry with him going back to the capital with Zhen'er this time. In addition, they are traveling under Great Master True Compassions' protection."

Frowning again, Li Xian answered, "I know that Changle will properly protect Lin'er. I was never worried. I don't know why, but I feel like I've overlooked something. Although we have temporarily cut off communications between Lin Bi and Northern Han's intelligence network,

Northern Han has experts like the Sovereign of the Devil Sect. If they have received the news, I fear that they will try to ambush us on the road. Suiyun, you don't know martial arts … if you run into the enemy, I am worried about your safety."

I smiled lightly and replied, "We have to take the risk. This is the shortest route. Going as fast as possible, we will reach your encampment in five or six days. When the time comes, protected by three hundred thousand troops, there will be no need for Your Imperial Highness to worry. Even if we run into the enemy, under Your Imperial Highness's leadership, Zhe will not worry. Moreover, Xiaoshunzi is always traveling with us. At worst, he can protect me and escort me out of the encirclement."

Li Xian's brows slightly smoothed over. It was truly strange. Originally, he also felt that Jiang Zhe's plan was extremely meticulous. However, during the entire journey, Li Xian had sensed that something was off. This area would frequently see Northern Han light cavalry. However, during this return trip, they had not run into a single one. This caused Li Xian to feel the danger of an approaching storm.

At this moment, someone reported from outside of the carriage, "Your Imperial Highness, Jiang *daren* , the scouts that we sent out have not responded."

Li Xian frowned. "The terrain up ahead is level, the best battlefield to employ cavalry. We must take precautions. Dispatch two men to take a look. Have them leave behind their horses and go on foot."

Two of the Prince of Qi's soldiers dismounted from their horses. Taking off their heavy armor, they changed into civilian clothes and sprang into the brush on both sides of the road. They instantly disappeared from sight.

Pushing aside the window curtains, I gazed out. It was late autumn, the withered grass on both sides of the road taller than a man. Under the autumn breeze, they undulated like the cresting waves on the sea. In addition, because the road was higher than its surroundings, I could see far off into the distance. Even if there were thousands of troops hidden in the area, it would be impossible to discover them. I could not help but feel my

heart grow cold. Could it be that there were truly ambushers here? Could it be that all of my false trails, leading them to believe that I was returning to Chang'an, had failed? However, in this short time, how could they have set an ambush here? Although Great Yong's present frontier was not fortified against Northern Han, this did not mean that they could enter Great Yong's territory without a thorough and meticulous plan.

At this moment, a sharp copper whistle sounded from before us. I shook inside. This was a warning issued by our scouts. For them to be unable to quietly return meant that they had run into grave danger. It seemed like there were not only ambushing troops, but in all likelihood many of them.

Hearing the warning whistle, the Prince of Qi's bladelike brows tightened. Jumping out of the carriage, he mounted a blazing red warhorse. All of the escorting soldiers were well-trained and quickly arranged themselves in a formation to break through the enemy encirclement. Responsible for driving the carriage, Xiaoshunzi revealed a look of worry. He carefully took a look at the carriage's horse and whispered, "Young master, the speed of the carriage is too slow. We won't be able to keep up. What should we do?"

In these critical circumstances, I instead calmed down. I coolly replied, "You and I are not capable of commanding a battle. This will naturally be handled by His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi. This carriage is manufactured from steel. There are steel plates all around the carriage. As long as the carriage is protected, there is no need to worry about my safety. In a moment, listen to His Imperial Highness's instructions. If we do not make a surprise move under this kind of situation, we will all die here."

By this time, the Prince of Qi had already issued orders to wheel towards the interior of Great Yong. It seemed like he wished to rendezvous with the local garrison. At this very moment, bugle horns simultaneously sounded from all directions. I had already completely covered the windows of the carriage with steel plates. Through the small window on the carriage door, I stared out, seeing that the entire horizon was covered by Northern Han cavalry, traveling as fast as lightning—their riders like tigers, their horses like dragons. They very quickly surrounded our unit. Diligently counting, there were more than three thousand cavalrymen. This was not a chance

encounter. The raiding parties from Northern Han usually numbered around a hundred. Just then, I could see that directly in front was a black banner with a red character. On that banner was a large “Shi” character.

I heard the Prince of Qi shout, “Flying Tiger General Shi Ying! You dare to infiltrate my Great Yong to wreak havoc! Do you truly so despise my Great Yong?”

Beneath that banner was a middle-aged general of over thirty years of age with a slim face and a grim look. He shouted back in response, “Northern Han and Great Yong are enemies! Your Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, you cannot blame me for your failure to conduct yourself properly and instead take such risks. Today, you can only die! If you dismount and surrender, I may spare your life with your respected status.”

Beside him was a man in the uniform of a soldier of Northern Han. Because his helm’s visor was down, I could not see his appearance. However, based upon my heightened senses, I could see that he was pointing at my carriage and saying something. Afterwards, I saw that the general’s eyes also fell upon my carriage. When that icy gaze swept past, I could feel a chill run through my body.

The middle-aged general yelled, “Boys! Kill Li Xian and capture that carriage for me! I will reward whoever brings me Li Xian’s head a hundred catties of gold! I will reward whoever captures that carriage a thousand catties of gold!”

Then the middle-aged general pulled down his visor and raised the lance in his hand. He led the charge and attacked. The Prince of Qi, Li Xian, smiled coldly. Pointing his precious saber forward, he shouted, “Break through!”

After this order, I could feel the carriage begin to move forward rapidly. I grabbed onto a handle on the wall of the carriage. The small window on the door of the carriage had been covered by Xiaoshunzi, leaving the carriage interior pitch-black. While I could not see what was going on outside, I could hear the deafening war cries outside.

At this very moment, I was smiling wryly in silence within the darkness. I had already thought through many things. Why did it seem like troops had

been waiting in action here for a long time even though Lin Bi was still far behind us? That was because I had forgotten about one individual—Lu Can. The only possibility was Lu Can. His meeting with Lin Bi wasn't to form an alliance or anything else, but to reach an agreement with Lin Bi. Southern Chu was responsible for passing on the information, while Northern Han was responsible for the ambush. Regardless of how resourceful I was, against thousands of enemies, there was only one outcome. Lin Bi and Lu Can both understood how to achieve victory.

It was a bit strange though…. By rights, I should be filled with dismay and sorrow. The first disciple of my life, Lu Can, was so heartless, ferrying his master to the underworld. However, I felt a faint hint of joy. In my eyes, Lu Can was exactly missing this heartlessness and stubbornness. Only with this could he be considered as a disciple that I could be proud of. I silently listened to the sounds outside. I understood that I was basically useless in this situation. If I were to die here, I wonder how ridiculous it would be.

Footnotes :

心腹之患, xinfuzhihuan – idiom, lit. calamity within one's bosom; hidden great danger or trouble; in this case, it's referring to a nemesis that needed to be removed

凤毛麟角, fengmaolinjiao – idiom, lit. as rare as phoenix feathers and unicorn horns; fig. few and far between

无功而返, wugong'erfan – idiom, lit. to return without any achievement; fig. to go home with one's tail between one's legs

The Grandmaster Strategist - Chapter 15: Abyss of Suffering

Volume 4, Chapter 15: Abyss of Suffering[1]

After a short period had passed, my mind finally calmed down, and I began to calculate how to respond to the present situation. Four hundred versus three thousand. Although both sides were elite troops, our side had the inconvenient nuisance that was me. Escape was likely impossible. The matter relating to Lu Can was better left to the future. At present, the primary priority was escape. I forced myself to forget that I was presently in the darkness within the jolting carriage, carefully thinking about how I could save myself. After a while, I suddenly came up with an idea. That Flying Tiger General had issued the order to capture me alive and kill the Prince of Qi. It seemed that to him the importance of the Prince of Qi and me were quite different. From the reward being offered, I was of greater importance. However, in my view, this was not the case. For any military commander, the death of the Prince of Qi was more important. In comparison, those soldiers probably could not comprehend my importance. To them, I was merely an objective that they needed to accomplish. Perhaps because of this reason, the bounty placed upon me was so high. This was to avoid all those soldiers from being focused on chasing the Prince of Qi. Even if my calculations were incorrect and they treated me as more valuable than the Prince of Qi, it would not be of great effect upon my plan.

Just as I was thinking of this, the door to the carriage was forcibly pushed open by someone. I saw the Prince of Qi, in a blood-soaked gown, yell at me, “Suiyun, we must split apart.”

I thought, *Great minds truly think alike* ! I promptly replied, “Zhe was also of this mind.” Sticking my head out, I saw that we had reached a fork in the road. On both sides of the road was mountainous terrain. The Prince of Qi had ordered troops to block the road, temporarily hindering pursuing troops. I hurriedly grabbed that specially manufactured azure cloak,

draping it around my shoulders.

Afterwards, I commanded Xiaoshunzi, “Quickly change into armor. Then bring me a horse. The Prince of Qi and we must separate. Your Imperial Highness, please give me fifty men. This way, we can split our pursuers.”

A gratified look flashed appeared Prince of Qi’s face, as he stated, “However, Suiyun, you have to be careful. If their target is you, I’m worried that it will be difficult for you to escape.”

Smiling, I replied, “Mayhap … However, in the minds of the Northern Han troops, you are likely the primary target. As a result, this time Your Imperial Highness will be the one bearing the brunt of the pressure.”

Afterwards, the Prince of Qi and I quickly studied the particulars about our fighting escape. After a while, the troops stationed at the crossing had exhausted themselves. Xiaoshunzi had already fully prepared for this eventuality. He untied the two steeds from the carriage. These two horses had been carefully selected and were fully capable of serving as warhorses. Xiaoshunzi handed the reins of one of the horses to one of the cavalrymen. After that, he changed into an exquisite set of white armor. From underneath the carriage’s seats, he took out two pikes, tying them together to form a pike that was two *zhang* in length.[2] Xiaoshunzi then walked over and helped me mount one of the horses. Then he also jumped on, having me sit behind him. Using rope, he carefully tied me to him. Right then, the hundred strong Stalwart Tiger Guard and fifty of the Prince of Qi’s troops had formed a unit. On the horse, I glanced at the Prince of Qi, and coolly stated, “Your Imperial Highness, this subject will go ahead.”

When I finished speaking, under Xiaoshunzi’s command, our unit, including the hundred strong Stalwart Tiger Guard and fifty of the Prince of Qi’s troops charged into the wilderness. After galloping for several *li* , I turned and looked. I saw the Prince of Qi lead the remaining troops and charge off in another direction. The carriage that I had specially designed was overturned at the crossing, blocking our pursuers. Because of its design, my carriage was extremely heavy. It seemed like it would take some time for our pursuers to get past it.

The decision to split the troops was something that I had made after careful deliberations. The Prince of Qi to also reaching this conclusion left me with admiration. After all, while I had the time to think, he was busy fighting. The enemy had two targets. Even if the two of us were together, our strength wouldn't be that significant, allowing the enemy to focus completely. Right now, although our separation greatly reduced our strength, the enemy would also hesitate over the decision of how to split troops. When all was said and done, we would not suffer. Moreover, fleeing and unable to strike back would only lead to our defeat. At present, it could be said that the Prince of Qi had nothing to worry about and he could think of ways to counterattack.

At this moment, Xiaoshunzi, out in front, spoke up, "Young master, there are about a thousand troops chasing after us. What should we do?"

I was delighted. As expected, to those unruly soldiers and their commander, the Prince of Qi, as the commander-in-chief of Great Yong's northern army, was the most important target. However, a thousand pursuers wasn't a small number. If we could not destroy them in one blow, it would be impossible for us to escape to go help the Prince of Qi. Examining the surrounding terrain, I instructed, "Have Huyan Shou move towards the wilderness. I have twenty Divine Heavens-Soaring Flame cylinders."

Comprehending my intentions immediately, Xiaoshunzi nodded his head. "I understand. Water and flame are merciless.[3] A good plan, indeed!"

Finished speaking, he began to discuss this matter with Huyan Shou, commander of my escort. When I was serving within the Prince of Yong's household, Huyan Shou was originally an imperial bodyguard assigned to me. On this occasion, the emperor had dispatched him over because of this reason. Otherwise, why would a Vice Supervisor of the Stalwart Tiger Guard deign to serve as my escort? I listened as he and Xiaoshunzi discussed how to lure the enemy to take the bait. As expected, Huyan Shou was a skilled military commander. I silently prayed that we would succeed at the first attempt, otherwise my life would be left behind here.

At this moment, the pursuers behind us had gradually closed. There was nothing that could be done…. Although Xiaoshunzi's horsemanship was

outstanding, when compared to those troops who spent most of their lives on a horses, he was quite lacking. Fortunately, Huyan Shou's leadership was fairly good. As we ran around in circles, we had not been caught and surrounded by the enemy. After a while more, our pursuers had been lured to a brush-filled wilderness. At the end of autumn, the dried up yellow brush would be so parched that they could be easily ignited. Seeing that the wind direction was suitable, Xiaoshunzi let out a shout. Everyone spurred their horses faster, while our pursuers maintained their speed. This was within our expectations.

When cavalry was chasing fleeing cavalry, their greatest taboo was forcing their horses to run at the fastest possible speed. If this were to happen, it would consume their horses' stamina, easily falling behind. As a result, generally speaking, they would only spur their horses forward when they had already surrounded the enemy or when the enemy had no road to escape. As a result, they would usually control the speed of their horses, unhurriedly and calmly pursuing the enemy, waiting for the enemy's horses to become exhausted before violently attacking, attaining victory in one go. Of course, this was applicable only when the quality of the horses on both sides was equal. If the enemy was too weak, they would naturally exhaust all methods. As a result, when we spurred our horses forward, increasing our speed, our pursuers had fallen behind a bit, not increasing speed in order to prevent their horses from being exhausted by the chase.

Unfortunately, that was their mistake this time. When the distance between us and our pursuers had reached approximately two *li* , Huyan Shou whistled. Our unit split into a dozen or more smaller groups, scattering in all directions. I heard the chasing Northern Han troops break out into laughter. It was clear that with us splitting up in our escape they would definitely win. From their laughter, I could hear their delight at being able to successfully hunt their prey.

At this very moment, Xiaoshunzi suddenly turned our horse around. Afterwards, a small, silver cylinder appeared in his hands. He repeatedly activated the mechanism on the cylinder. Several flames shot out from within the cylinder, swiftly igniting the dry grassland. If using normal arson

methods, the Northern Han pursuers would have likely already broken through the fires by the time the flames were ignited. However, the Divine Heavens-Soaring Flame that Xiaoshunzi was using was not ordinary. In only an instant, a conflagration had already spread greatly. At the same moment, the scattered Great Yong troops had set numerous, similar conflagrations. The flames swiftly combined into one. The crescent-shaped fire swept towards our pursuers. The entire area was covered in dry brush. By the time the Northern Han cavalry took a detour to continue their pursuit, it would be too late. Right now, their only option was to retreat. However, they were located downwind. The flames and black smoke chased them. After they had fled for seven to eight *li* , they despairingly discovered that the fires blocked their retreat.

I could hear the miserable screams within the sea of fire. I could feel myself shiver inside. At the same time, I could not help but be proud of myself. Fortunately, because of the small, exquisite design and enormous power of the Divine Heavens-Soaring Flame, I had brought twenty cylinders on the carriage. At present, although we had practically used them all up, we had completely destroyed a pursuing unit of a thousand elite cavalry, truly cost-effective. Although I knew that it would be impossible to kill all of our pursuers, I believed that we would be able to at least kill more than half of them.

However, I regretted that the four individuals I had left behind were unlikely to have escaped. In order to achieve our goal of defeating our pursuers, I had Huyan Shou dispatch four men to leave our formation mid-journey and hidden off to the side. When they saw the fires blaze before them and the Northern Han pursuers retreat, they were to create two more fires. With this, the separate fires could join together and cut off the enemy's retreat. But the Divine Heavens-Soaring Flame was too formidable. With the current force of the wind, it was impossible for the four of them to make their way back to us. However, I greatly admired their bravery. Although they knew of the dangers of staying behind, each and every one of them had competed for a place. I could not help but blush with shame.

Alas, there was no time to worry about this. Huyan Shou had reformed all

of the scattered troops. We quickly departed. Right now, we were too close to the conflagration. If the wind were to change, we would likely also be buried here.

Leaving behind our pursuers who we did not have news about, we rushed towards the planned rendezvous point. Great Yong had numerous strongholds and bases scattered across the frontier. The Prince of Qi and I had arranged one of them as our meeting point. When the time came, the Prince of Qi could rely upon the stronghold's defenses to stoutly defend, while we could launch a surprise attack from behind on the Northern Han army. This was a plan that we cooked up because we had no other choice. It would be impossible to use twenty Divine Heavens-Soaring Flame cylinders to deal with three thousand cavalrymen. As a result, I could only trick them into splitting troops before crushing one of the two divisions. Fortunately, there weren't that many troops chasing me. Otherwise, we would likely have been forced to experience a bitter battle.

As I listened to the wind rushing past my ears, I prayed that His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, would be able to safely arrive at our decided rendezvous point. Otherwise, I had no contingencies.

At this very moment, I obviously did not know that over an hour later, once the fires had gradually diminished, leaving behind blackened ash, a number of burned horse corpses would be pushed apart and a man covered completely in ash would stand up. In a grave, terrible voice, he shouted, "Jiang Zhe! You and I cannot exist together in this world!"

This man was Wei Ying. That day, he had abided by Lu Can's orders. With Lin Bi's token, he had arrived in the Northern Han army encampment. Under orders to provide support to Lin Bi, when the Flying Tiger General, Shi Ying, received Lin Bi's orders, he led three thousand cavalrymen and set an ambush on the Prince of Qi's return road. Wei Ying, who hated Great Yong to the bone, volunteered to take part in this operation. And what caused his spirit to be aroused was the fact that Jiang Zhe, as expected, was traveling with the Prince of Qi. Afterwards, when Shi Ying had split up his force, Wei Ying had chosen to pursue Jiang Zhe. However, instead of success, he had been trapped by the fire. Wei Ying was quite astute. He knew that his

horsemanship was poor and it would be impossible to escape the sea of fire. Taking advantage of the chaos, he had killed several Northern Han cavalrymen who had fallen behind. After also killing their horses, Wei Ying had hidden himself under the horses. Covered with blood, he was barely able to escape the fate of being buried in this sea of fire. After angrily cursing, he began his journey back to Southern Chu. He was not so stupid as to continue to pursue Jiang Zhe. He did not have the courage to deal with over a hundred horsemen by himself.

When we finally arrived at the Gu[4] Mountain Stronghold, although I was brought along by Xiaoshunzi, I was already extremely exhausted. The skin of my inner thighs had been rubbed raw by the saddle. This year, I was to be thirty years old, but I had never experienced this kind of suffering. Only when I was awakened by the deafening battle cries did I discover that this unit of horsemen had stopped on a slope. Not far from our position was the mountaintop. I could clearly hear the sounds of fighting on the mountain.

After Xiaoshunzi had helped me off the horse, he spoke, “Young master, ahead of us is the Gu Mountain Stronghold. His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, is surrounded outside the stronghold. The troops within have tried on several occasions to rescue him, but have failed.”

My mind tightened. Gritting my teeth, I stood and replied, “Support me and let me take a look.”

Xiaoshunzi picked me up at the waist. Seeing that I did not resist, he brought me up the mountain. After we had hidden behind a boulder, I poked my head out to observe the battlefield.

Gu Mountain Stronghold was so named because of its position atop a small mountain. In reality, rather than calling it a small mountain, it was just some rock outcroppings. Moreover, within the stronghold was a spring with an enormous quantity of water, following the terrain and flowing down the mountain. When building the stronghold, a two to three *zhang* [5] deep moat had been dug around it. Afterwards, the moat was filled with water from the spring. The Gu Mountain Stronghold, topographically well positioned and with the moat to keep the enemy at a distance, was a strategically important stronghold. However, because of the excessive sturdiness of the stronghold,

the majority of the troops inside it were infantry. There were only three hundred horsemen garrisoned within.

Looking down, I could see that a thousand paces from the stronghold, the Prince of Qi was leading over a hundred wounded cavalrymen charging non-stop, seeking to break through. He was surrounded by a thousand Northern Han horsemen. The remaining seven to eight hundred horsemen were tasked with harassing the Gu Mountain Stronghold, deterring any reinforcements. I clearly saw that beside the moat there were a large quantity of corpses and several masterless horses wandering about. At the highest point of the stronghold, I saw black smoke curling up into the sky.

By this point, Huyan Shou had followed over. Deeply worried, he stated, "*Daren* , just now, the soldiers within the stronghold sought to provide support and rescue His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi. However, they were driven back. Although the stronghold has used the fire beacons to notify nearby strongholds and encampments, they likely won't arrive for another two hours. *Daren* , we must rescue His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi."

I stared with admiration at the two sides battling below. This was the first time I had seen two units of elite cavalry fight. Although the disparity in strength was clear, the Prince of Qi did not reveal a single hint of cowardice and timidity. Every single time he charged, he would target the enemy's weakness. Although Flying Tiger General Shi Ying's responses were swift, ensuring that the Prince of Qi's force was surrounded within the formation, he was unable to suppress the Prince of Qi. A bit baffled, I asked, "Huyan Shou, although it could be that His Imperial Highness, the Prince of Qi, has brilliant tactics, why does it feel like Shi Ying does not live up to his reputation?"

Huyan Shou replied, "*Daren* , there are some things that you don't know. Each of Northern Han's ranking generals has their individual strengths. Shi Ying is adept at performing long-range raids. This time, the fighting ability of the elite household troops by His Imperial Highness's side is better than Shi Ying's. As a result, Shi Ying cannot be in a rush to succeed. Within the Northern Han army, the one most able at marching and formations is Tan Ji,

the Ghost-Faced General. Within our Great Yong military, there aren't any who can compare to the Prince of Qi when it comes to leading cavalry from the frontline. That is why such a situation has arisen."

I thanked my lucky stars. If the one responsible for ambushing us was Tan Ji, the Ghost-Faced General, I would likely have been only able to collect the Prince of Qi's corpse. Of course, this was only if I had been able to escape the calamity. It wasn't that the preparations made by Northern Han weren't comprehensive, but rather that they hadn't realized that I would bring along the Divine Heavens-Soaring Flame that I had originally prepared for the Eastern Sea. In addition, they had forgotten that late autumn was the perfect time to use fire to attack. As for Shi Ying's tactics being restrained by the Prince of Qi, this was something outside of everyone's control. Northern Han probably had never expected that the Prince of Qi would make this journey to the Eastern Sea. They had probably hurriedly dispatched the nearby Shi Ying over just after receiving the news. If any of those conditions were different, then we would not see today's situation.

After carefully observing for some time, I grimly stated, "Xiaoshunzi, in a moment, follow General Huyan to seize the advantage and penetrate into the Northern Han army. Although your horsemanship isn't as good, you should be able to compare with the typical horseman. These last few years, you have trained in the Marquis Jiang family's spear techniques. It should be of use. If you can take Shi Ying's life, that would be the best. If you cannot, you must ensure that Shi Ying is unable to command the enemy army. What do you two think about these arrangements?"

Xiaoshunzi and Huyan Shou both frowned slightly. Huyan Shou spoke first, "*Daren* , this general has once witnessed Lord Li's superb martial arts before. However, *daren* 's safety is more important. If Lord Li joins the fight, when the time comes, if *daren* is harmed in the chaos, we cannot take the responsibility …"

Smiling wryly, I replied, "General Huyan, this is something that we do not have a choice over. You have to command the troops. As such, it will be difficult for you to undertake the task of killing the enemy commander and seizing the banner. Moreover, if we cannot win, even if you stay behind to

protect me, it will be of no use. How about this? Leave behind several of the Stalwart Tiger Guard to protect me. As long as you resolve this in the shortest time, I should not fall into too great a danger." Of course, I couldn't bluntly state that I feared that Huyan Shou did not have the ability to completely subdue Shi Ying.

Xiaoshunzi did not say anything. He understood our current predicament clearly and the weight behind Jiang Zhe's words. He could only kill Shi Ying as swiftly as possible so that he could return to Jiang Zhe's side. This was the best solution. He could not help but regret his failure in convincing Jiang Zhe to bring a few of his trusted guards.

At this moment, the Prince of Qi's formation was becoming disorderly. It seemed that they were completely spent. I promptly ordered, "General Huyan, quickly act! If His Imperial Highness is harmed, we surely can't take responsibility."

Huyan Shou uttered his agreement in a low voice. After assigning several of the Stalwart Tiger Guard with excellent martial arts skills to protect me, Huyan Shou remounted his horse. Xiaoshunzi glanced at me and also mounted his horse. At this moment, I remembered something, promptly leaning over and shouting, "Xiaoshunzi, there's something else!" A look of inquiry appeared on Xiaoshunzi's face. When he leaned over and lowered his head, I hurriedly whispered a few sentences into his ear. After that, I immediately retreated to the side.

Seeing that everyone had finished making preparations, Huyan Shou lifted his cavalry lance, soundlessly pointing it up at the sky. Afterwards, he abruptly plunged it down. Close to two hundred horsemen charged up the slope. As fast as lightning, they then violently charged down. Standing off to the side, I could feel the earth quake and the mountains shake. With rocks shaking and rolling down chaotically, I almost lost my footing and toppled to the ground. Fortunately, there were several of the Stalwart Tiger Guard left behind to protect me by my side. They steadied me.

These Stalwart Tiger Guard were part of my protection detail during the years I had lived within the Cold Courtyard. These last several years, they had been promoted. At the worst, they were military officers of the sixth-

rank. However, when they met me again after years apart, they had complained. After I had departed that year, because of their failure to protect me, they had been thoroughly reprimanded by the then Prince of Qi and the current emperor. Fortunately, the Prince of Yong also knew that they had grievances and had not punished them. On the contrary, because they had served at my side, they had all been placed in important positions. However, they were still unable to raise their heads for some time. Fortunately, they were the ones here and would not ridicule me. At the time, within the Cold Courtyard, they paid close attention to my health. Whenever they saw that my complexion was poor, they would immediately go to invite the imperial physician who the Prince of Yong had assigned to look after my health. Although I had basically completely recovered, in their eyes, I was probably still an invalid who could collapse at any moment.

When our footing had stabilized, we watched as Xiaoshunzi accompanied Huyan Shou and charged into the Northern Han cavalry formation. A white horse, a silver spear, a snow-white battle gown, truly majestic and awe-inspiring. It made me quite envious. It was a pity … it was impossible for me to go into battle. The black-and scarlet-armored iron tide was an irresistible force. The Northern Han army did not realize that they would be ambushed. In a moment, their formation was thrown into disarray, while the Prince of Qi's troops were reenergized. They spared no effort, fighting desperately. At this moment, the troops within the stronghold were also sent out. The stronghold gates were opened and the remaining slightly over one hundred horsemen charged out. Although the fighting ability of the Great Yong army was inferior to that of Northern Han's, they were caught in a pincer attack from within and without. With just fierce attacks from three sides, the Northern Han army was thrown into chaos.

Shi Ying had absolutely not expected that a hostile force would appear at his rear at this moment. Beforehand, he had eliminated a significant quantity of Yong scouts. Moreover, under the Prince of Qi's strict command, the garrisons of the strongholds and encampments did not lightly deploy troops. As a result, he was under the impression that he was secure in his assault on the Prince of Qi. He completely did not worry about the escaped Jiang Zhe. A talented and brilliant strategist would not necessarily have the

ability to be a battlefield commander. If Lin Bi's orders had not expressly commanded Shi Ying to capture or kill Jiang Zhe, or due to the insistence of the Southern Chu emissary, Shi Ying would definitely not have dispatched a thousand men to pursue Jiang Zhe. Shi Ying did not expect that Jiang Zhe would be able to escape. As such, he did not anticipate that there would be reinforcements nearby. Seeing the black-and scarlet-armored troops approach, Shi Ying's first thought was the safety of those troops whom he had sent to pursue Jiang Zhe. While he shivered inwardly, his command to hinder the ambushers was inevitably delayed. In this instant, his loss was already determined.

Shi Ying was extremely decisive, immediately giving the command to retreat, while he personally led his household troops to serve as the rearguard. Based upon their numerical superiority, the Northern Han elite cavalry scattered to the wind. Just as Shi Ying had swept a intercepting Yong soldier off his horse, a white silhouette flashed by in front of him. A rider in white armor and a battle gown obstructed his path. The man's face was covered by a visor and he could not see his appearance. However, his build wasn't large. Shi Ying heartlessly smiled, conceited by his great strength and bravery, stabbing down with his lance. The rider did not dodge, his silver spear shooting out at an angle. When the spear and lance slammed together, Shi Ying felt as if he had attacked a cotton ball, not knowing whether the force was solid or fluid. Shi Ying felt himself stagger. At this moment, the rider's spear swiftly split, creating numerous spear afterimages that covered the entire sky. The spearhead stirred up countless small, but ice-cold bursts of air that swept towards Shi Ying. Shi Ying gave a loud grunt, his lance arcing through the air, creating a fervent gale that blocked the spear's offensive. With the noise of metal clanging, the sharp sounds of weapons clashing and the resulting storm prevented anyone within a radius of several *zhang* from remaining on their feet.

Shi Ying was a celebrated general of Northern Han. Although he had met opponents on the battlefield before, he had never found things as difficult as today. If he had not discovered that there was a big disparity between his opponent's spear techniques and horsemanship, and using the superiority of his own horsemanship, it would have been impossible for him to fight

evenly with his opponent. The two exchanged over a dozen bouts. Shi Ying's opponent gradually gained the advantage. Suddenly, the silver spear became like a shooting star or a lightning bolt, piercing through Shi Ying's defenses. Shi Ying spared no effort to dodge, but was still pierced through his right side by the spear. Shi Ying let out a miserable scream. Not caring about his life or death, Shi Ying struck back with his lance. His opponent reined back his horse and retreated a step. Shi Ying turned his horse and fled. Acting together, a dozen or so Shi Ying's household troops immediately prevented the enemy from giving chase. The silver spear transformed into a meteor shower. In the air, numerous captivating blossoms of bright red flowers spurted into existence. As the dozen or so household troops died under the silver spear, Shi Ying fled far away under the protection of others of his household troops. Seeing that it was too late to give chase, the warrior in the snow-white battle gown shouted, "Shi Ying! Inform Her Royal Highness, the Princess of Jiaping, that Southern Chu does not have any good intentions! They only passed along the message, while you have lost troops and commanders! Can you not see through the strategy—'two parties fight, only the third party benefits?'"[6]

Hearing this, Shi Ying understood. Although he knew that the enemy was trying to sow discord, he still felt an unexplainable resentment grow in his heart and could not help but become suspicious of Southern Chu's intentions. From that emissary's words, the instigator was Southern Chu's Lu Can. Reportedly, Lu Can was Jiang Zhe's student. How could it be that the student did not know of his master's abilities? Could it be that Lu Can understood that he could not succeed easily and thus passed along the information?

From my position, I could hear Xiaoshunzi's shouts. A smile appeared on my face. Lu Can and Lin Bi's cooperation to harm me must be avenged. Northern Han's military leader was Long Tingfei. If he were on guard against Lu Can, then it would ensure that the collaboration between Northern Han and Southern Chu would not be too elaborate. This will also lessen my troubles.

After a while, the battlefield had settled down. The only ones remaining

were the Great Yong soldiers cleaning up the battlefield. Only when I saw this did I finally walk down the mountain under the protection of the Stalwart Tiger Guard. It was a short journey and would be quickly completed if mounted. However, my inner thighs were badly chafed by the earlier ride. I did not want to ride again. Although it was painful to walk, I could only do so. When I reached the foot of the mountain, the Prince of Qi came over to welcome me with his troops. He was completely covered in wounds and blood, cutting an extremely sorry figure. However, he did not care about his appearance. Seeing my arrival, he laughed loudly and declared, “Suiyun, you’re truly skilled! In the future, you might as well command an army into battle!”

Resisting the urge to look at him with derision, I replied, “Your Imperial Highness, you’re trying to make things difficult for me. If even I can go to battle, then all of Southern Chu will be capable of leading troops into the battle.”

Just then, the stronghold garrison commander came over to respectfully invite us to enter the stronghold. Seeing that Xiaoshunzi and Huyan Shou were cleaning up the aftermath, I felt that there shouldn’t be any danger. I walked alongside the Prince of Qi towards the drawbridge. There were many corpses there and they had not been cleaned away. However, the people here, aside from me, were all experienced in war and did not take things to heart. I could only turn a blind eye and walk towards the interior of the stronghold, focused on bathing, changing, and sleeping.

***

In the hazy moonlight, Li Hu opened his eyes. He was a lowly cavalry squad leader under the Flying Tiger General, Shi Ying. While impeding the reinforcements from the Gu Mountain Stronghold, he had been inattentive and been pierced, falling off of his horse. As it turned out, his head had struck a rock, knocking him unconscious. In the chaos of war, no one had noticed that he was not yet dead. He had been unconscious until Shi Ying had been defeated and retreated. During this extended period of time, no one had expected that there would be someone alive in this area filled with corpses. The Yong soldiers busy cleaning up the battlefield had not yet had

the time to clean this area up, only dragging away the bodies blocking the drawbridge before moving to other parts of the battlefield to clean up and administer first aid. For those heavily injured Northern Han soldiers, they either sent them on their way to the underworld or taken captive.

As a result, no one showed an interest to Li Hu lying unmoving on the ground. When he had opened his eyes, he saw a general in the golden armor of an imperial clansman and a scarlet battle gown and a scholar in azure walk side by side towards the drawbridge. Li Hu's heart burned like a raging inferno, immediately understanding that the Northern Han army had been defeated. He tightly gripped the cavalry lance that he had never released. Gathering all of his strength, he suddenly sat up and stabbed the cavalry lance forward. He had seen that almost everyone was wearing armor and was worried that he was too weak to succeed with one strike. As a result, his lance hurtled towards the scholar in azure. Having used up the last of his strength, Li Hu felt his vision grow dark.

As the scholar in azure's back was pierced, his body on the verge of collapse, everyone watched flabbergasted as the man fell off the bridge. Li Hu did not have the strength to resist as the Yong army rushed over to bind and batter him. Li Hu was filled with joy, beginning to laugh heartily.

Footnotes :

水深火热, shuishenhuore – idiom, lit. deep water and scorching fire; fig. abyss of suffering, extreme misery, untold suffering
Roughly 5.9 meters
水火无情, shuihuowuqing – idiom, lit. water and fire are merciless; fig. flood and fire have no mercy for anybody
固, gu – lit. sturdy, solid, strong
Roughly five to seven meters deep.
鹬**蚌相争**, 渔**翁得利**, yubangxiangzheng, yuwengdeli – idiom, lit. when the oyster and the kingfisher fight, a fisherman benefits, catching them both; fig. if two parties fight, a third party will benefit

