

GUAN ZHONG

Among Rivers and Lakes

a Wuxia Short Story Collection

First published by Guan Zhong in 2018

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to my former self: you did alright, kid.

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Preface

The stories collected in this book are translations of random wuxia stories which mostly came from a wuxia magazine in China called · (Legends Old and New: Wuxia Edition) which began in 2001. I'm not sure if it's still in operation. Somehow I found a large collection of digital text files from this publication back in later 2010 or early 2011, and I used some of the stories to practice translating.

I first published twelve of these stories on an online wuxia forum I used to run called *Among the Rivers and Lakes*. This was 2011-2012. I shut it down because there was little activity and I couldn't afford server hosting at the time. The stories I had published there disappeared with the forum and so almost no one has read these stories.

I happened to discover the translation files by chance recently while rummaging through an old hard drive. I thought I had lost them, but since I found them again I thought it would be neat to collect them and tidy them up and release them in ebook form so they could actually be read.

The stories in this collection are ordered based on when I translated them, from earliest to latest, according to the file dates. The earliest one, "Whirling Snow", was translated on December 24, 2011. The latest of the original twelve, "Brother, Lend Me Your Head", was translated March 7, 2012. This was very early in my translation career. I must have

begun translating earlier in 2011 because I first started out by translating old stories written in Classical Chinese, the first being “Nie Yinniang” which you can read at *volare novels*.

Looking back at these stories now, I am most struck with how good the stories are, much better than I remember them being back then. At that time I thought most of them were only so-so. I had chosen them based on length and title alone, aiming for the shortest stories so I could actually finish something, because back then it took me a long time to translate. All the stories have been lightly edited, though I didn’t change much, mostly just fixing typos. I wanted to preserve how they came out originally as a means to gauge my progress as a translator. Fortunately, I think they turned out pretty good.

The final two stories are newly translated for this book. “Crescent Moon Sabre” was a story I had started translating in February of 2012, but for some reason I only translated the first sentence and then stopped. I’m not sure why. The final story, “Sand’s End”, was chosen right before publication, and again, was chosen based on length (short) and the title. Like old times. I added these two stories to commemorate the occasion.

This collection offers a nice sampling of what short short wuxia fiction is like. Most wuxia stories are longer than these, but I think the brevity adds to the emotional impact some of these stories deliver. Personal favorites are “Plain Wooden Spear”, “Day In and Day Out”, “Whirling Snow”, and “Witness”. Though I’m actually pleased with how strong the entire collection turned out.

These are fan translations, unauthorized, and unfortunately I know nothing about most of the authors, of which twelve are represented here. This book is to be distributed freely to anyone who wants to read it. Do not sell it. Do not pay for it.

Please do not post the contents of this book online in any other form.

Enjoy the read.

Guan Zhong

2018.09.25

Taiwan

Whirling Snow

Chen Jiye

In the afternoon, snow falling. Snowflakes fluttering about, frequently blowing into Old Shangguan's simple wine stall in the village. Old Shangguan suddenly recalled when Shangguan Wuxue left home at the age of fourteen; that day the sky was also full of dancing snowflakes. His son looked back a few times as he departed, ultimately fading away, lost in the midst of the thick snowfall.

The door curtain was stirred, snow mingling with the wind as it blew inside, snapping Old Shangguan out of his remembrances of eight years ago. Two men of the rivers and lakes entered, both of them young. They didn't say much. Shangguan brought out wine and beef. Shangguan had specially added more wine and beef to their dishes, as was his custom whenever travelers of the rivers and lakes stopped by; they always seemed to want more wine and meat. Shangguan would always think,

perhaps my son Wuxue is at this moment sitting in some shop, drinking wine and eating meat.

Shangguan stayed off to the side, smoking and smiling as he listened to his guests' idle chatter. Shangguan always enjoyed listening to the conversations of people from the rivers and lakes. He believed his son ought to be having his own astounding encounters to talk about. Not only that, but occasionally he would pick up some news of his son from listening to these discussions.

The first few years he heard of his son defeating several martial arts experts, and that he had performed numerous chivalrous deeds. When people spoke of his Shangguan Wuxue, they all called him the same thing: "Shangguan, the Young Xia". But after a while he heard no further news from the rivers and lakes concerning his Wuxue. In fact, he heard rumors that it seemed like Wuxue had fallen into some deep abyss and died. But Old Shangguan didn't believe that at all. Not long ago he had received news of his son. He had fallen off a cliff, but in the end it had been a blessing in disguise that ended in an adventure. Not only had his martial arts improved, but he had also fallen in with a fellow lady xia who was as pretty as a heavenly immortal. The past year or two, though, it seemed there had been no news of his son. He didn't know what kind of adventures Wuxue had encountered.

The two rivers and lakes travelers finished their conversation, paid their bill, and stood up, ready to be on their way. Old Shangguan brought in two bowls of piping hot plain tea to warm and settle the travelers' stomachs before they departed. The two youthful travelers were touched and repeatedly thanked him. When they had finished their tea, they saw that one of the wine shop's support posts was loose, so one of them lifted

the post up with one hand and placed a brick under it, making the post much more stable. Only then did the two men, with warm hearts and high spirits, set off from the wine shop. With a hurried pace they stepped out into the wind and snow and were back out onto the road, among their wanderings.

As the sky grew darker, the snowfall became heavier and heavier. Old Shangguan put his pipe in his pocket, put out the stove fire, and cleaned up and tidied his cutting board and other things. He packed his bowls and chopsticks in the bag on his carrying pole and, step by step, headed into the village. Shangguan didn't know that his son, Wuxue, two years ago had been killed amongst the ever-fluttering snowflakes on a snow-covered mountain by those same two men who had just ate and drank in his shop. Naturally, there was no particular reason for it, just another senseless fight.

He left behind a track of distinct footprints on the snowy ground, which were little by little covered up by the falling snow. This sky full of whirling snow! Like it was trying to turn this monstrous and multicolored world into a single color.

Witness

Fragrant Hyssop

The afternoon air was fresh and cool in the forest, quiet, flower petals blown by the wind, carrying with them a faint scent of calamus. She wore an old bamboo hat, and on her back she carried an herb basket. She raised her hand to wipe the sweat from her brow and recalled that at the rear of the mountain the hyssop were in bloom with their light purple blossoms. She figured she could collect some. She couldn't help but smile; in the sixth month, under the burning sun, the hyssop grass would give off a strong fragrance. In twenty-two years this was the first time she knew that a summer day could be so dazzling.

A delicate yellow daylily swayed among the green thicket, and she bent down towards it. Suddenly, a blackish-blue-tipped short arrow brushed close over her back. She was completely unaware. Her fingers only touched a stem and she changed her mind, only lightly carressing the petals instead. Such a

pure and fresh life; no need to hasten its death. Her new straw sandals were rubbing against her feet, so she squatted down to re-fasten them. Five blackish-blue-tipped arrows scraped across her bamboo hat and flew by. When she was finished with her shoes, she raised her eyes and through the grass saw a bunch of pinellia with plump green leaves, shiny and brilliant under the hot sun. She happily stood up and went over to the plants and was ready to start digging them up when she suddenly slipped and slid down the slope a good six meters or so. More than a dozen blackish-blue-tipped arrows hit the spot she had been standing.

When she slipped she had her hands around the bunch of pinellia, and it came away uprooted in her hands as she fell. The bunch of round rhizomes at the base of the leaves would be excellent for reducing fever. She got up and brushed the reddish-brown mud from her pant legs and dropped the bunch of pinellia into her herb basket.

“Mingyue, you gathered a lot of herbs today,” the villagers called out enthusiastically, greeting her at the mouth of the road.

“Yes, today I picked a bunch of hyssop grass.”

She returned to her thatched cottage and spread her herbs out on the big hot rock out in front so they could dry in the sun, their rich fragrance filling the air. From her well she raised up a pot of cold orchid tea, and, reclining on her bamboo couch, in the evening southern wind from the north side of the mountain, slowly poured her tea and drank a cup. A short arrow shot in from outside the window and hit a bamboo tea cup, splashing tea out and sprinkling her red apron. She raised her head and saw a man dressed in white standing by the south-side window, huge castor-oil plant leaves swaying behind him.

"Mingyue, you're luck is quite good, unusually good. I shot many arrows at you, and they all missed." The man in white sneered. "By the looks of it I'd say Miss is no ordinary apothecary."

"Who can say what's ordinary and what isn't? I pick my herbs and you all kill people, there's no connection between the two."

"We killed that dog of an official, and Miss seems to be a witness! You decide. Either poison yourself, or fight me."

She lowered her eyes, raised her cup, and drank the rest of her tea, then filled her cup again and passed it through the window.

The man in white took a blackish-blue arrow and dipped it in the tea, and smiled forlornly. "Since Miss Mingyue has treated me so sensibly, I will make sure to bury her properly."

"You're so kind."

The man in white saw a dark flash before his eyes before his lower jaw was already caught, his mouth forced open wide, and a cup of cool tea slid delicately down his throat. He cried out, and only saw the woman's face towering before his eyes, her pure, clear beautiful countenance in a flash turned into an unspeakable, gruesome malevolence.

"You fool. Just like I said, I pick herbs and you all kill people. Well water and river water all have no connection to each other. If I had wanted to kill you, I could have killed you then. It was only that I had washed my hands of it all, no longer wanting to intervene in the old scores among the rivers and lakes. But this time you forced me to silence you."

He felt a deep burning like fire in his chest, his features already beginning to contort. He croaked, "You, who are you really?"

"Mingyue Bi."

"Ah, it's you...the Demon...the Demon Cult's...number one...assassin..."

She couldn't help smiling wickedly. That thick, bright blood spurting from his mouth suddenly reminded her of her former blood-soaked career. She thrust her hand into his chest and mercilessly pulled out his still-beating heart. She held his beating heart in the palm of her hand and crushed it between her fingers; what a good feeling!

But, this was forbidden, definitely forbidden. She had taken an oath, absolutely forbidden.

She let out a deep sigh and returned the heart, placing it back inside his gaping chest wound. She took some bone-dissolving powder and sprinkled it over the corpse's blood. When she had wiped all the blood away, she felt someone looking at her from behind a bamboo thicket.

She quickly leapt up, and in the blink of an eye she was in front of her, a small girl holding a once-bitten green peach, looking at her blankly, frozen in fear. She only need extend her hand to silence this little witness. She reached out and placed her fingers around the frightened girl's neck. The green peach in the girl's hand gave out a sour, beautiful scent, the fragrance drifting up against her face, and she suddenly recalled that dazzling summer day, the bundle of herbs giving off their safe fragrance, reclining on the bamboo couch amidst the southern wind, leisurely drinking orchid tea, such a pure and tranquil life.

She let go of the girl's neck. At worst, she would have to move, move to a perfect, peaceful, tranquil village where she wouldn't have to uphold justice, and wouldn't have use for her forbidden martial skills. There ought to be some place like that in this world. She smiled, and reaching out with her hand, wiped the bloody handprint off the girl's neck and lightly stroked her soft hair. Letting this witness off made her feel light and happy, and

most likely the he in that world would be satisfied with her.

Yes, she had really washed her hands, for good.

She gathered her herbs from the big rock in front of her door and slipped on her herb basket. This evening she would roam to a distant place. Along the way, the herb basket would fill and replenish her heart. She had fallen in love with these herbs. She would live together with these bitter fragrant herbs in earnest for the rest of her life, until one day she had used those herbs to help twice as many people as she had killed. On that day, she would be able to go to the other world with a clear conscience, and she would meet him, and they would love each other, deeply, generation after generation, never to be separated.

Brocade Bridge Hand

Chen Zhiyu

I killed him using these two swords. These two swords are very thin and narrow, almost like chopsticks.

When my father was fifty-five he took his sixth concubine, and a year later she became pregnant with me. Father beat his chest and stamped his feet, because at that time the Qiao family was without an heir. My aunt told my father he should take another concubine, but my father said forget it; for a middle-aged man without a child, trying to force it was useless. Father said he was ashamed to face his ancestors, ashamed about the fate of his Bridge Hand technique. But he nevertheless loved me dearly, and my five aunts loved me as well. I was the Qiao family's only child, so of course they would cherish me.

At seven years old I began practicing martial arts. I saw Father in the courtyard sparring with my uncle; that was the first time I saw my father fight with another person. Father

said it was not a serious fight, just practice. At that time, Uncle used a spear to jab at Father; Father used his arms to ward off the blows, continuously delaying, blocking, collapsing, withstanding, evading, tying up, until Uncle could no longer hold onto his spear.

Father said this was called "Bridge Hand", a skill handed down from our ancestors. What a pity there was no successor, because a girl couldn't practice it. Father had a pair of arms like iron pestles, muscles like rough, lumpy stones, blood vessels bulging like twined rope. When Father swung his arms, he could truly smash stones to pieces. Father said if a girl grew up with arms like this, all her life she would never marry. But I still wanted to learn. I told him I could. I really could—after watching him a few times, I was able to pick up a few moves. Father said it was Heaven's will and so he taught me.

When I was fifteen, even Father's sword could not stab me. But my arms were still white and tender, like tender bamboo shoots, because I didn't practice on the wooden dummy, only with my father. Father said I could finish my apprenticeship, and then use silver silk thread to wrap a pair of bracelets over my wrists. Father said it was the custom, that all Qiao family members wore them as a talisman. Then Father smiled, because there was a successor to carry on his Bridge Hand.

My happiness at fifteen was at its peak, because I had met someone. Under a willow tree, he was wearing a light cyan robe, leading a white horse. His beautiful, flashing eyes were looking at me. His eyebrows were thick, black, like a sword, the hair at his temples swept back. And beautiful lips, which as he looked at me, were turned up at the corners like an enchanted crescent moon. He let go of the reins and pulled out a vermilion bamboo flute, and smiling and looking at me, began to play.

At that time I felt the sound coming out of that flute was so pleasant.

Father didn't like him, and my mother and five aunts didn't like him either, but I liked him, and that was enough. My family cherished me; they couldn't bear seeing me so wan and thin. Finally, Father told me, "Jin'er, I hope I'm wrong about all this."

The next year, when I was sixteen, I married him. He was quite intelligent. After three years, he could already lock up both my hands and arms. From then, he began leaving home to roam around the rivers and lakes, not paying much attention to me. Later, the days he would return home became less and less, the days he spent away becoming more and more, leaving me by myself at home to stay by the willow tree in the courtyard and practice my Bridge Hand. Just me and the delicate willow catkins fluttering in the breeze—even though they drift about, they will never enter my heart. But, even if I could wrap up my unrequited love, I would be unable to tie him down.

At twenty-three years old, I killed him. I saw him entwined with another woman. I thought about what my father had said, that he had married me only so he could learn my Bridge Hand.

I said, "How could you do this?"

He said, "Why can't I?"

"Do you love me?"

"No. From the beginning I never loved you."

"So what are you going to do?"

"The divorce letter is already written."

I wanted to kill him. He could be cold to me; he could not pay attention to me. But he couldn't humiliate me like that. Because my last name is Qiao, I'm a Qiao. No member of the Qiao family could accept such an insult. Also because I loved him, when he loved only my Bridge Hand.

I decided to kill him. Dying at my hand would be better than him leaving me. I said, "Let's you and I practice our Bridge Hand, one last time. How about it?"

He thought about it for a long time, then looked at me and said, "Alright."

He was like my father—both were very strong. His arms also hit like iron, very hard, very heavy. I couldn't seal off, couldn't ward off, couldn't find an opening, couldn't shake his attacks. Every time he struck, my arms suffered badly. My heart suffered more. I could only wrap him up. Like fine willow branches fluttering about in the wind, I gently and softly, lightly and quickly, quietly and peacefully wrapped his arms tightly. Then I pulled his wrists, and broke them apart, and the silver bracelets on my wrists transformed into two strange, yet beautiful cold lights which vanished into his chest. He lowered his head and looked at me, his eyes looking like they had ten years before, that time he first looked at me; they still held that same brightness, like a spark in the midst of a tranquil night...

The night before I was to be married, Father called me out to the rear courtyard. He said he wanted to practice the Bridge Hand with me once more. Father was powerful, but I was also pretty good. Later in the fight, when our arms locked, I was still at a disadvantage. Four arms locked together. Suddenly Father broke off with both hands and broke off my bracelets. In his hands were two swords, very thin and curved, resembling chopsticks. Father said this is the secret of Bridge Hand, that only a Qiao has the right to know. He said this to me with a severe look in his eyes. I knew his meaning. I said, "Father, I understand."

Afterward, among the rivers and lakes there were still those who practiced Bridge Hand; they were all my uncle's disciples.

Only I knew the real Bridge Hand, which had already vanished from the rivers and lakes.

Six Arhats Fragrance

Lang Xiaojing

“There are two wounds, one in the abdomen, and another run through the heart. It’s obvious the murder weapon was a sword, his own soft sword, in fact.”

“Oh, how did it happen? The old man actually couldn’t keep his precious darling soft sword?”

Of course he couldn’t hold onto it. Though in front of others, he looked normal, but in fact, he had long ago gone mad. Every night he would withdraw into his little room, crying out and making a raucous, knocking his head against the wall.

In his heart, he was quietly laughing.

I have long said that if a person does evil all his life, he’ll definitely come to a bad end.

This room is small and narrow. No windows, no furniture, only a big bed in the center of the room. Even during the daytime one would have to rely on candlelight for illumination.

Now, with four people standing in the room, along with the corpse on the bed, it already seemed too crowded.

"It's a bit strange." That was Elder Brother, the one who had first spoken. "Usually the old man, whether he was eating, sleeping, or taking a bath, would always have seven or eight kinds of fatal poisons concealed on his person. How come we couldn't find even one? He didn't even have any hidden in his mouth."

"Oh, you're right." Third Sister opened the corpse's shirt, looked through the secret compartment on the inner side of his waistband. "Looks as if he didn't use them up, he just never carried them from the start."

Because he had relapsed. Whenever he fell ill, he made sure not to have any poisons around; even his soft sword he kept in a separate, secret room.

If he had had any poisons at hand, I wouldn't have dared take action. When he thought of this, he couldn't help but want to laugh, but the cut on his arm stopped him.

"It looks as if the old man didn't go without a fight. There was no damage done to the room that I can see, so the fight must not have lasted long." Elder Brother used a piece of white medicine-smelling cloth to wipe his hands. Even though the old man's fighting skills were not as good as his poisons, he was still first-rate. To be able to snatch his soft sword from him and then kill him—whoever did it would have to be quite talented."

You flatter me. Actually, I was scared to death. I never thought the crazy old man could move so fast. I originally planned to stab his belly, but instead I only managed to wound him. Not only did he dodge it, but the tip of his sword immediately spun around and nicked my arm.

But he was nevertheless on the verge of death, otherwise I

would be the corpse lying there right now.

Hehe, one's time is all according to fate.

"According to you, then, who is the culprit?" Little Sister asked. "How did he get in? How come none of us heard anything?"

"Who knows?" Third Sister flipped her hair back. "The old man had a lot of enemies, from nobodies to respected masters, too many to count. He knew he was hated, that's why he kept a low profile and hid himself away, morning and night, in this separate house. Even we weren't allowed to come in. This house is kind of far from our residence. Not to mention the killer, even if a whole army of people came storming through, we might not hear it."

"But, Master placed a lot of traps outside; entering wouldn't be easy."

"Didn't I just say that?" Third Sister frowned impatiently. "The old man made a lot of enemies in his day. If they wanted to break his traps, there's always a lot of ways it could be done."

Tsk, tsk. Look at these people. Master is dead, and not only do they not show any grief, they're not even willing to call him "Master".

But, it's no wonder. The old man offended everyone who came and went. Especially us disciples. We were really out of luck. When enemies came to kill him we were used as a shield. Our painstaking poison research was taken over by him. At every turn he would slip poison into our soup or water without our knowledge. Originally there were eight disciples; half of them were killed by the old man. If not for our lack of ability, the old man would have died many times by now.

"In that case, how will we ever catch the killer?"

"Good point, Little Sister."

I already knew they weren't serious about catching the killer.

The old man was dead and they were ecstatic.

“Alright, alright. Rather than sit here and talk nonsense, we should make arrangements for the funeral.” Elder Brother turned and went to the western corner of the room, squatted down, and lifted a stone slab from the floor. “Here are Master’s notes. Why don’t we take a look.”

“So you already knew about that hiding place? Okay, let’s take a look.” Third Sister, though she did her best to fake it, couldn’t hide her joy.

Heavens, it seems everyone knew about that hiding spot. The old man thought we didn’t know, thought it was his safe little secret, and wouldn’t let any of us near the spot.

“Let’s first read the one on the top.” Elder Brother retrieved a thick, yellow volume and opened it to the first page. Everyone wasted no time in crowding in behind him, looking over his shoulder to see.

This book was a compendium of poisons. The first page was the index, listing the names of all the poisons the old man had researched. After that, details on how to administer the poisons, their properties, as well as the old man’s commentary and evaluation of the poison. Of course, included among these were his disciples’ own painstaking effort, but there was no mention of their contributions.

They already knew most of the poisons, so it wasn’t all that interesting a read. They were just pressing Elder Brother to change to a different book when a strange, unfamiliar name caught their eye—Six Arhats Fragrance.

Before anyone could open their mouths, Elder Brother had found the page number and turned to it.

“Six Arhats Fragrance, deadly poison. Made into a powder, it gives off a deadly vapor. When boiled, the steam is colorless

and odorless. Once poisoned, there is no external or internal indication. After being poisoned, within two years one becomes weak and feeble, and dementia sets in. Within three years, death. There is no antidote, no cure. It is communicable, able to be passed from person to person via saliva or blood. This drug originated from the Wester Regions, its method of production already lost. I have devoted half my life to this, pledging solemnly to rediscover how to concoct Six Arhats Fragrance. Alas, Heaven has not granted my wish. Thirty years used up, Six Arhats Fragrance still not complete. But because of long-term exposure to the ingredients involved in its production, I've become poisoned without knowing it. I have myself already turned into Six Arhats Fragrance."

Silence.

Everyone was scared stiff. Finally, Little Sister regained her composure and said in a loud voice, "Good lord! How can there be such a poison? Is this not as bad as leprosy?"

"God, how dangerous! The old man was already poisoned and didn't bother to tell us!"

"Good thing we long ago learned to be well-behaved, taking everything he handed us with care, lest we become one of his experiments. Otherwise we would all be done for right now."

While those three were hurling abuse, he slowly raised his hand, and pressed down on his sleeve.

His whole body went cold. He very clearly remembered the bloody side of the blade he had cut the old man with swinging back and nicking his arm.

Right now he really didn't feel like laughing.

Plain Wooden Spear

Gao Sui

At the moment the plain wooden spear pierced the grey-shirted man's belly, the fourteen-year-old youth became a man.

But the lady in white, that innocent corpse, on that sinful soil, would never return...

It was hot, so Stone pushed open the window. The sun would soon be sinking behind the mountain, the dazzling gold sunlight beaming in. The whole sky was bright. In the courtyard he could hear the cries of the hens laying their eggs, the cicadas rattling long among the tree branches. Elsewhere a rhythmic metallic clank, probably his mother in the kitchen chopping up a fresh chicken. Some of the fragrant plantain lilies Lanlan had planted were in bloom, their fragrance mingling with the cool breeze wafting in through the window.

Stone suddenly jolted. Opening his eyes, he saw the green leaves of the big poplar tree swaying in the wind, blowing with

it the sound of water. It was already light, though a few stars still shone through. Stone thought a moment and realized he had dreamt the whole thing.

Fortunately, he was following the main road heading east; in two or three days he would be back home. These past few months, he had missed his mother, missed Lanlan, but at last he was almost there. Stone got up, picked up his spear, stamped his feet, and continued on ahead. The summer dew was heavy, the bottom of his pant legs wet. Yesterday he had again spent the night in the wilderness.

It was said that, since last autumn, the state of Cao's attacks had become more frequent, and from time to time soldiers riding tall, big horses would ford the river, enter villages and kill the inhabitants, steal the livestock, and set fire to the houses. There had been fighting for over ten years, and at first no one feared such rumors. Unfortunately, last winter it didn't snow at all, and it was a dry spring, the wheat never ripening. At any rate, there was a total crop failure, and those who had some means to get away did so, and took their families and headed south.

As a result, nowadays any small town or village you entered, even the finest house would be empty, thin strands of spiderweb covering the walls, swallows flying down from the roof beams, a new nest already made, the baby swallow chicks opening wide their yellow beaks and chirping.

Stone just yesterday at dusk had passed by a beautiful residence, but he didn't dare stay there. He had tried it once, without success. When the wind blew at night through the broken window paper, Stone always felt it sounded like a woman crying. He was only fourteen years old, and was somewhat frightened. It made him think of and miss his mother,

with the result that for half the night he was unable to sleep.

The sun was up, hanging red and round in the sky. Before long it had ascended high, warming him up. The dew on his pant legs was dry, and the sky was very bright. Stone walked quickly head-on into the cool wind, yet he still sweated a little.

He suddenly stopped. Before him was a vast field, with a road running north to south. Stone stopped at the intersection. At the crossing there was a three-room thatched cottage, with a small sign out front, crudely written in very black characters. But there were too many words, and Stone didn't recognize them, though the place looked to be a restaurant.

Before the town was sacked, he had eaten once at the military camp. A big tray of cornbread buns shaped like a bird's nest. Because there was little wheat bran added, it looked golden-bright and dazzling, and smelled great. Stone devoured three of them and put four in his pockets. An old, grizzled soldier from Hangwu Ward had told him to eat whenever he could, because once the fighting started it was every man for himself.

These past few days, Stone had relied on those four steamed cornbread cakes as he made his way back home, and it made him miss his mother more. If he were to give that same cornmeal to his mother, she could turn them into cakes even more fragrant than these. Stone ate frugally, but even so, after a few days, he had eaten every last crumb. He swallowed his saliva and couldn't help but proceed toward the thatched hut.

There had been fighting with the state of Cao for over ten years, both sides contending for control of the river. Stone heard an old soldier say the state of Cao had deposed the emperor, or something like that. Seemed like some kind of strong enmity, but of what nature he never did figure out. But even if there was more fighting, people still needed to live, and

people still needed to eat, so it was quite possible the restaurant would still be open.

It wasn't yet noon, but there were already several people sitting under the grass awning. The air was dry, with a lot of dust. Everyone who had stopped to rest was covered from head to foot in dust, their eyes set in a state of fatigue and boredom. Even those resting at the tables didn't speak, just sat sullenly or ate.

He didn't need to see, Stone could smell what they were eating. Scent of white steamed buns, noodles with vegetables, pickled radishes in sesame oil, and... steamed buns stuffed with bean paste, all made his mouth water!

Even though the smell made him more hungry, Stone still leaned against the wall and sat down, setting his spear on the ground, the spear which he had relied on all the way to repel dogs and beat snakes. He had already walked half a day, so he had to rest for a bit.

It was a bright, sunny day, not a cloud in the azure sky. It was almost the end of the fifth month. It had been a dry year; the peach and apricot blossoms didn't bloom, but shriveled up, and it got hot early in the day.

Stone was a bit sleepy so he decided to sit for a while before starting out again. Mother and Lanlan would be ecstatic to see him. That year, when his father left and didn't return, his mother still made winter clothes for him. This year, Stone thought, he was definitely going to wear the winter clothing his mom made for him.

Just then, far down the road a cloud of yellow dust was rising. If you listened carefully you could hear a clopping mixed with the tinkling sound of bells. Before Stone could react, a horse had already ran up to him, its tail nearly brushing his face. He

instinctively held out his hand to ward it off, and heard the horse's long neigh, the rider already pulling up on the reins, the horse's forehoof knocking against the ground, spraying him with dust.

Stone got up quickly and beat the dust off his clothes. He still wore his military-issued overcoat, which was grey, very thick, and not filthy-looking on account of its color. Unlike the white horse before his eyes. Not too tall of stature, and not thin, just dirty, its hair all black, its no-longer-new bridle and saddle also dirty.

With a swish the reins were laid upon the saddle. Stone turned to look, and a lady dropped down from the horse, dressed in white, with a white cloak, red boots, and a cold, snow-white face. She made quickly for the grass awning, brought two long benches and finally, turned around and sat by a table on the adjacent side of the road. The vinegar pot on the facing table was knocked over with a crash by her cape, smashing on the ground. Everyone stared blankly, no one including the shopkeeper daring to go over to greet her.

Before long, a yellow horse stopped by the grass awning's entrance. Stone lost no time in hiding himself far away. The man on the horse looked about the grass awning, then dismounted.

The man was young, not tall, and he wore a jacket and trousers, sweat on his brow. He walked toward the lady in white, then stopped, hesitating, after a moment calling to the shopkeeper, "Two bowls of noodles and ten bean paste buns." Only then did he continue on toward the girl and stood next to her quietly. The girl didn't move or speak.

The man looked around for a bit, then finally sat down on the bench next to her. Maybe he sat wrong, or had something

on his mind, but he faltered, nearly slipping off the bench.

Stone figured they probably knew each other. But even after a long while, neither made a sound. Everyone present kept their heads lowered, only stealing a peek every now and then out of the corner of their eyes.

The man was the first to open his mouth. "Sister... Come back with me. Master is worried. This turbulent, chaotic war..." His voice becoming more and more faint, Stone didn't catch the last part. The girl still moved not, spoke not.

Stone thought, maybe she's hungry. His mother had said, a person is iron, rice is steel. She was so right. He himself had walked half the day without eating, so that right now he was too exhausted to move, no energy to talk.

The shopkeeper came from behind the counter carrying a black wooden tray containing two bowls of noodles and ten bean paste buns, which he placed on their table. The noodles were steaming hot, the buns white and fat. But the girl didn't eat, didn't move, didn't speak.

The man brought forth a little smile, his face all red, likely from the hot steam. "Let's eat first and talk about something else, then we'll talk..." He reached out his hand to tug at her sleeve.

This time the girl responded. She jerked her hand and stood up, and with one smooth sweep knocked the plate of buns to the ground. Then she took a step back as if to leave, but he grabbed her hand.

Stone finally heard the girl speak. "In this big world there's nowhere I can't go. Who do you think you are? You can't tell me what to do!"

"I... Sister, I..." The man seemed somewhat speechless, Stone thought. He must have really been concerned about that plate

of bean paste buns. Those snow-white buns now on the ground.

The two were talking now, but what they said Stone couldn't hear. He only thought, since those two are bickering, probably no one would bother to pick up the bean paste buns. Ten buns! This past New Year, because Stone Bridge Village's Do-Gooder Zhang took his whole family south, no one came to collect the rent, so Mother was able to steam ten bean-paste buns. They were quite big, and Lanlan ate seven in only two days. He had eaten two, his mother only one. Lanlan jumped up and down happily around the house, and he had lightly rumped her braid. His mother had praised him, saying "Stone has matured."

Stone squatted, lowered his head, and sneaked his way over to the grass awning. One, two steaming hot buns wrapped in his embrace. Stone thought to bring them back and give them to Lanlan; that would really make her happy.

As he went to pick up a third bun, a red boot flashed before his eyes and kicked the bun across the dirt road. Then he heard the girl's loud voice above his head. "This military-garb-wearing, lousy-spear-carrying big brother ought not be a deserter! Now that Dingzhou has been captured, and Hangzhou captured, and you've had to do battle with the state of Cao, you all run so fast, come here and pick up food so quickly!" As he listened, he felt someone jerk him up by the collar.

He was pulled to his feet at once. He never thought the girl would spot him while in the midst of her quarrel. "I'm not a deserter... Dingzhou was captured and I fled with everyone else. I thought to go back home... The buns I thought I'd give to Lanlan..." His mother often said, "My Stone is already a dauntless man", but now, seeing the lady in white's pinched brow, tears coursed down his face.

The lady in white again didn't speak, looking him up and

down. She gradually loosened her grip on his collar. "Don't cry, don't cry. Tell Big Sister, how old are you?"

"Fourteen. I'm not a deserter... I miss Mother..." Stone wiped away his tears roughly with the back of his hand.

The lady in white shook her head, sighed, and took his hand and let him sit on the bench, put a pair of chopsticks in his hand, and pushed a bowl of noodles in front of him. "Eat, eat. You can have that other bowl as well."

Stone didn't really understand at first, but he didn't ask any questions. His mother had said, "Talk little, eat more." He lowered his head and devoured it, and in a moment, both bowls of noodles were empty. Stone never expected that relying on his uniform and his plain wooden spear would get him even one bite of food, much less noodles.

He thought as he ate, since the lady in white isn't angry, maybe he could stay a bit and still be able to pick up those left-over bean paste buns and take them back with him. But in the end he didn't have to pick them up. As soon as he finished eating, the lady in white placed a plain white cloth bundle on the table, and said she was giving it to him. Stone picked it up. It was hot, the scent of white flour just out of the steamer emanating from within. He didn't know what he should say, and for fear that the lady in white might go back on her word, he merely took the bundle and left.

After walking a pace, Stone stopped and opened the bundle to have a look—ten clean bean paste buns. Stone was delighted. He thought, tomorrow he would eat those two he already had tucked away, and would likely reach home.

For half the day Stone followed the main road east. Because he had eaten, he had energy. This area was all wasteland, though occasionally he came across some corn only about as thick as

his thumb, yet already tasseled. He also passed by a thicket, a small grove of trees, standing feebly under the sun with only a few pale green leaves.

Stone thought, I wonder how everything is at home? Did the plantain lilies Lanlan planted last year come up? Did Mother have time to take advantage of the third month spring rains to plant the corn? With all the young people of the village gone, he didn't know if it would be like last year. Did Uncle Yu still help? Thinking about these things, Stone quickened his pace.

The sun in the west, Stone suddenly saw some people coming toward him, first some scattered young people, then an old man on a donkey cart, the parents calling after their children. They passed through the wasteland and crossed the main road heading south.

As they crossed paths, he vaguely heard talk of Hangzhou, and so forth. He recalled what the lady in white had said and figured they were refugees escaping the captured towns.

If Cao people see you, they kill you. Stone still remembered, when Dingzhou was sacked, he ran along with a stream of people south, the Cao army at their backs, pursuing. All a single-color mass of big, tall horses, shiny armor and torches twinkling, their spears looking longer than his own. A man running alongside him called out and fell. Stone didn't dare turn his head to look, just ran straight ahead, clutching his spear tightly in his hands...

Thinking of this, Stone felt his legs weaken. Maybe the Cao army had fought in Stone Bridge Village? He dared not carry the thought further, just lowered his head and continued east, carrying his spear, on which hung the white cloth bundle. The sun cast a longer and longer shadow before him.

Stone finally entered a small grove beside the road. After

stopping to rest for a bit, he would continue on until dark, then tomorrow he would be home and would see his mother and Lanlan.

It was a grove of poplars, all no bigger around than the mouth of a rice bowl, not densely populated, about a hundred steps square. In the center was a clearing, several horse carts standing within, along with several men and women, old and young, either sitting or laying down. Stone looked for a shady and cool place along the edge and leaned against a tree and sat down.

Sitting beside him was a family, the parents wearing coarse cloth, a little girl wearing a red shirt and pants. The girl was about the same age as Lanlan, also with a small thin braid. She looked at Stone and crawled toward him, extending her hand to grab the red tassel at the end of Stone's plain wooden spear he had set down beside him. Stone whipped it away and the girl grabbed air, but she wasn't angry, she just laughed, two dimples like an opera clown appearing on her cheeks. Stone laughed as well. The little girl's mother walked over and picked the girl up in her arms, and stayed to talk with him.

It turned out that the family really were refugees from Hangzhou. It seemed that the Cao army especially liked attacking in the evening; they had overrun the town the day before yesterday, at night, then set fire to the town. The little girl's mother said they had walked a dozen *li* before turning to look. Hangzhou already roasted under a great fire, lighting up half the sky. She said this time only half the townspeople managed to escape.

Stone recalled those people, when he had fled, when they fell, never to get up again. He was silent for a time.

Suddenly, Stone heard the sound of horse hooves outside the grove; the others heard it as well. Nobody made a sound,

nobody moved. The childrens' mouths were covered for fear they would cry. The sound outside gradually subsided. He thought he heard talking, but he couldn't make out what they were saying. Stone raised his head to look, and saw a cloud of dust kicked up amongst the trees, reflected in the sunlight.

He gripped tight his plain wooden spear—he'd only used it once to stab a scarecrow, but a real person... He didn't want to think about it. So he waited, listening to the sound of footsteps as a cluster of shadows crept in from without the grove.

Stone took his white cloth bundle and tucked it away inside his overcoat, but he saw the soldiers didn't wear shiny armor. There was about a dozen of them, all wearing the same grey overcoat as him. Stone released his breath, put his white cloth bundle back on the ground and loosened his grip on his spear.

He said to the little girl, "Don't be afraid, these are our troops." He figured the Cao army had finished razing, pillaging, and killing, and had went back up north. It was impossible the Cao army would chase after such a small group of people.

The sound of a sword pulled from its scabbard. Stone raised his head and saw a shiny steel sword, bright as snow. "If you want us to spare your lives, hurry up and hand over all your valuables." Stone recognized the voice as his hometown dialect.

He was dazed, These aren't Chen's troops? He still remembered, at Dingzhou, every night he took off his shoes and listened to the men and women sing mountain songs, tell him stories, all wearing the same grey overcoat. Were these not his own people?

Stone watched as a number of soldiers rushed toward the horse carts, the women crying, their hair dishevelled, getting out of the cart, then tossing down colorful clothing. There were soldiers all over the clearing; when they saw a bundle

they ordered it opened up. They had swords and spears; the men and women all sat on the ground, not saying a word, only trembling nonstop.

A blade flashed down before Stone. The soldier spotted the white cloth bundle on the ground, and saw Stone's spear, then looked him over. Stone eyed the soldier: very thin, long face, thin wisp of a beard. He looked a lot like Uncle Yu.

He didn't know if the soldier could make out his dress, but the man didn't take his white cloth bundle, and instead turned toward the little girl's family and walked over. The soldier took a small blue cloth bundle and opened it; several articles of clothing and head ornaments dropped out.

As he was rummaging through their valuables, suddenly the clear voice of a child said, "Mom, why do they want to steal our things? Didn't he say they were our troops?" It was the little girl in red.

All around, the soldiers paused. Stone watched as their faces took on a faintly knowing and murderous air.

Stone thought to stand up, but he still sat, and in the end didn't move at all. He thought to call out, but he didn't dare. So he just sat there stupidly watching as a soldier in front of the horse cart, with one stroke of his steel blade, plunged his sword into a woman's chest.

Then he heard cries, men standing up thinking to run. They were all cut down from behind. Blood splattered the soldiers' grey overcoats. Stone grabbed his spear and made his way slowly into the deep recesses of the grove. He saw men stand and fall, all of it happening quickly.

The grove was by no means bright, the sun likely about to set, or maybe Stone just didn't see clearly. He just felt a shadow flash past and felt something wet splatter against his face. He

dared not reach up to wipe it off, he dared not even think, he just stepped backward slowly, risking his life, grasping his plain wooden spear.

He suddenly saw a trace of white flash by and a grey-jacketed soldier dropped to the ground. Stone started, and heard a voice yell out, "In broad daylight, do you not know we have laws?" It was the white-clothed, white-cloaked, red-boot-wearing lady.

The soldiers all seemed to have heard her, because their swords and spears all turned to point at her. Stone watched as the girl's silhouette flew up from amongst the crowd and a man was thrown out. Her once white clothes were now streaked with red. He couldn't help but thinking, why doesn't that man from before come?

The fight gradually moved from the horse cart out into the center of the clearing. The lady in white's cloak had already vanished, a lock of hair plastered against her face. Stone recalled her pinched eyebrows, her snow-white face, how she had given him noodles and the bean paste buns. He recalled his mother saying he was fourteen years old, already grown up.

He suddenly didn't think of running. He looked around, at the stream of people's blood all over the ground, at the little girl's mother just about to pick up the child and carry her off into the woods. He glimpsed the flash of a blade, then a soldier dropped beside him. Then he saw the lady in white, her sword raised. The soldier grabbed her and...

The lady in white froze.

Stone later thought, for the rest of his life he would never forget that moment. He saw the lady in white's big eyes, the tip of a glittering sword protruding from her chest. He saw her fresh blood spurt out like a fountain. She slowly, slowly, collapsed.

Stone rushed out from his hiding place, raised his plain wooden spear, and with all his effort plunged... He seemed to hear the internal organs smash to pieces, and he looked down to see his own spear sunk into the soldier's belly, and the very red blood immediately come pouring out.

In the end he had killed a person, he had avenged her. He considered himself to have really grown up. He looked at the soldiers laying on the ground. The little girl in red was surprisingly still laughing, her small, deep dimples showing.

The remaining soldiers rushed over. Stone suddenly thought that actually, death wasn't that extraordinary. He only thought that it was such a shame that it was too late to go back home, that he wouldn't see his mother and Lanlan.

But in the end, Stone didn't die. Though somewhat late, the lady in white's senior brother finally showed up. He made short work of the remaining soldiers. But he was too late; the girl he had quarreled with would never be coming back.

Stone scanned the corpses. Guilty, innocent, they would none of them ever come back. Stone suddenly felt it was all no more than a dream that he was waiting to wake up from, and then he would smell the scent of the plantain lilies in the courtyard...

Stone, supported by his spear, left the grove. The little girl's family quietly headed south. The lady in white was carried by her senior brother, who went back west, the dirty white horse following a few steps behind.

Stone settled down, took up his plain wooden spear and continued on east. After all was said and done, he hadn't died, and tomorrow he would be home, with Mother and Lanlan all there waiting for him.

Behind him a round red sun, very big, was just sinking below the horizon to the west.

A Lone Wisp of Smoke Rising

Treading Snow

1

Vast and desolate grasslands. Undulating hills stretching unbroken in the distance, the dark red wheel of the setting sun hanging over the end of the Sangda River. The meandering surface of the water suffused with a golden shimmer, contrasting with the magnificent rosy evening clouds on the horizon.

Amidst the rosy evening clouds, a wisp of singing drifting about, accompanied by a *matougin*, chanting a remote, disconsolate melody:

The kingfisher green grasslands are the white sheep's home.

The fountainhead of the Sangda River, where the powerful

eage spreads its wings.

*The distant chimney smoke, the place where horses gallop
toward.*

*The rosy clouds of dawn high in the sky, that's my
hometown...*

"Old Wei, don't always sing that; today is a happy day, sing something else," Suhe Balu said to the old man sitting cross-legged playing the zither behind him. He ordered the troops to make fires and barbeque meat. Today really was a great day; they should sing a song of celebration! He looked satisfyingly at the loot loaded onto the horses, plundered from the Han settlement, at the same time admiring the Han girl huddled up by herself, crying. Meat, wine, women. Such a life, what more could one ask for?

"Alright, Ferocious Tiger of the Grasslands, as you wish." Old Wei adjusted his *matouqin* and opened his mouth to sing. No sound came out, however. He stared blankly into the distance.

Following Old Wei's line of sight, Suhe Balu saw a person on horseback galloping toward them at full speed. Red horse, red man, bloodcolored clothing rising in the wind, racing directly out of the midst of the setting sun like an arrow. "Who is that?" The person's clothing suggested a Han person rather than his own people.

The multitude of bandits stopped what they were doing, watching the rider approach closer and closer.

"That's..." Old Wei, as if lost in thought, squinted into the distance, the lines at the corners of his eyes forming deep fish tails. He mumbled, "A Han constable."

"I've come for her." The young constable pointed to the cowering, sobbing girl.

The woman raised her head in shock, her hair already a mess. Her eyes, swollen from crying, were needless to say a wreck as well, within an expression of hopeless despair giving way suddenly to a flash of hope, blazing at the constable.

"Oh?" Suhe Balu assumed a stout posture, sized the constable up with his eyes, his men behind him glaring ferociously. "Who are you?"

"I'm the constable of Three Locust Town, Gu Zhaolu." He was about thirty years old, dressed in red, carrying a sword, a black belt around his waist. He wore a black hat, the ordinary constable garb. He looked like he hadn't passed twenty years.

"Ha!" Suhe Balu threw his head back and laughed, his men joining in, roaring with laughter. "The entire Han army couldn't handle us, yet one single constable dares to come and provoke us Ferocious Tigers of the Grasslands?"

Gu Zhaolu cocked his eyebrows and sneered, "You all harrass the border, but that's not my jurisdiction. We have troops to take care of that. But right now that woman is both a victim and a witness. I must bring her back."

"Hmph! What do your Han laws have to do with us?" Suhe Balu chuckled and sized up the constable: he cast a thin and weak stature, with delicate and pretty features like a woman. Han people! Including men, all were weak and frail. He shook his head and said, rather arrogantly, "She's part of my plundering booty. According to Mongolian custom, if you have

the ability, come and take her.” His Chinese was lousy, so it took a moment for Gu Zhaolu to understand.

He asked, “By what method?” He couldn’t help but grasp the grip of his sword.

Suhe Balu laughed, untied his sabre and tossed it to his men, then slipped out of his upper garment and tied it around his waist, exposing his strong chest. All around, his men saw his demeanor and cheered him on, forming a circle at the edge of the campfire, enclosing the two men within. They hooted and called out loudly. Gu Zhaolu’s eyes swept across the crowd, his brows wrinkled, unsure of Suhe Balu’s intentions.

Old Wei came forward to explain. “This is *bökh*, a kind of wrestling. According to Mongolian custom, if you demand something, and the other party doesn’t consent, you can have a *bökh* competition to settle the matter.” His voice was husky, his Chinese actually rather good.

Gu Zhaolu nodded and likewise took off his sword and put it to the side. The campfire light projecting off his red clothing cast a deep black shadow. He concentrated, raising *qi*, and stood by the fire, his right hand stretched out before him, waiting for his opponent to attack.

The woman stopped crying, her heart caught in her throat.

3

Suhe Balu gave a loud shout and took two quick steps forward, wheeling his arms powerfully in a circle, and advanced on Gu Zhaolu. The crowd of bandits at once whooped up and called out in mighty voices. Gu Zhaolu leaned to the side to let Suhe

Balu pass, and gave a light push outward with his right hand, warding off the attack. Suhe Balu seemed rough and rash, but he was very nimble, his arms turning over and coming down on Gu Zhaolu's shoulders, grasping them tightly and vigorously twisting to one side, a Mongolian wrestling move. This kind of rough hand movement Gu Zhaolu had never encountered before and it surprised him, but he controlled his breath and turned his arm to resist the blow.

The two men grappled by the campfire. Suhe Balu set himself, taking up a firm, stable stance. Gu Zhaolu, though was a light and graceful Central Plains martial artist, warding off blows without using much power, lightly hopping out of the way to escape and attack, very refined and graceful. The two men's methods were not at all the same, the differences in style making for a fresh kind of match. The crowd spared no effort in hooting and hollering.

The two men were deadlocked. Gu Zhaolu was watching for an opportunity, feinting, suggesting left then attacking right, accomplishing much with little use of force. With a thump, Suhe Balu toppled over by the fire, the flames licking out and singeing his hair and giving off a burning odor.

"The Han man cheated!" several of the bandits shouted.

"Do you submit?" Gu Zhaolu twisted tightly Suhe Balu's arms.

"No!" Suhe Balu said, facing the dirt and struggling fiercely to turn and look up at his opponent.

Gu Zhaolu loosened his grip. Suhe Balu rolled away and jumped up, shouting. "The Han man is cunning! Again!" The words were barely out of his mouth before he charged Gu Zhaolu again. He had always been skilled at bökh. Plus, he was burly and proud of it. He had lost face by losing in front of his own men, so he couldn't help being furious.

The two men once again grappled. After several rounds, Suhe Balu was again thrown to the ground. Red eyes, his whole face excited, he didn't wait for Gu Zhaolu to open his mouth, instead cutting in with "I don't submit! Again!"

Gu Zhaolu didn't object. He released Suhe Balu and the two men again fought. After two rounds, Gu Zhaolu was getting the hang of Mongolian wrestling, and it wasn't but a few more rounds before Suhe Balu once again was thrown to the ground.

"Do you submit?" Suhe Balu lay on the ground panting heavily, but he grinned and laughed and sprang to his feet.

"Great form. Today I was defeated by your hand. My 'Ferocious Tiger of the Grasslands' sobriquet need never be used again!" He pointed at the girl. "The woman, she's yours!"

The woman's heart jumped suddenly. Gu Zhaolu went over and untied her. When her hands were free her heart was free also. Tears rolled down her face, but her throat suddenly constricted and she had no words.

4

Roasted meat, good wine, *matouqin*.

Old Wei sang in his old, hoarse manner, echoing throughout the vast and peaceful grasslands. Cow dung crackled in the bonfire, the flickering flames lighting up the shiny dark faces of the bandits gathered around.

"To travel so far for just one unimportant case—if all Han people were like you, we wouldn't dare steal from you." Suhe Balu was already half drunk. He threw back his head and laughed and passed the wineskin to Gu Zhaolu. "You guys'

kungfu is really weird. If your men were all like you, we would definitely not dare to take your women.”

Gu Zhaolu smiled faintly and declined Suhe Balu’s wineskin. “I don’t drink.”

“You’re no fun!” Suhe Balu took back the wineskin and took a big drink. “I respected you, took you for a man... Turns out you don’t drink!”

“Actually, just finding the woman is unusually lucky.” Gu Zhaolu sighed and poked the fire with a stick. “This case seems small, but it involves the grand preceptor... Going back won’t be easy either.”

The sound of the *matouqin* paused imperceptibly before continuing on.

“You Han people are more troublesome than women! Even an obvious, simple matter you have to go and make all complicated!” Suhe Balu grabbed a leg of mutton and gnawed at it, chewing as he spoke. “We’ve all heard about your treacherous grand preceptor. Put that kind of villain on the grasslands, one hack of the blade will decide it. No need for it to be so troublesome. These past ten years, what have you constables done? It’s not as good as banditry.”

Gu Zhaolu shook his head. “Have you heard about Wei Yang, who caught criminals ten years ago in the Central Plains?” He stared into the flickering flames and chuckled, the corners of his mouth turned up as he recalled the past. “When I was young he was my role model.”

“Ha!” Suhe Balu laughed. “Stealth Sword” Wei Yang, Criminal Nabber of the Central Plains, solver of countless cases. Just give the case to him and, whether bandit chieftain or high official, he dealt with them all the same, impartially, and using irrefutable evidence. Even Mongolians held him in high esteem.

He clapped Gu Zhaolu on the shoulder. "I also admired him, but he's been dead ten years, and all because of the grand preceptor!"

Gu Zhaolu was silent. He raised his head and looked out into the night sky, and said softly, "I would rather believe he's not dead."

The *matouqin* struck up as before, and the hoarse old voice again sang that old ballad, "The rosy clouds of dawn high in the sky, that's my hometown..."

The twinkling stars in the night sky, deep and profound, enveloped the grasslands.

5

The sound of horse hooves, red clothes fluttering in the wind, Yanmen Pass before his eyes. Through the pass, and then into the rich and populous, tranquil land of the Han, that magnificent, vast expanse of rivers and mountains... Land of that old, dictatorial, shifty grand preceptor.

Gu Zhaolu glanced back at the horse behind him, the woman doing her best to keep her grip on the saddle. Looked like she was having a hard time of it. He slowed his horse to a walk for a time; once they were through the pass, there would be no hurry.

The Three Locust Town case, wherein the people were killed and the woman kidnapped, had already been under investigation for a long time. The details of the case were quite clear. It was only because the culprit was the grand preceptor's grandnephew that the judge turned it around and falsely accused the woman and sent her into exile to the border

region. The case was settled, however an official in the capital wouldn't let it go, and used the case as a pretext for toppling the grand preceptor. Gu Zhaolu, as constable for Three Locust Town, was sent to the border area to retrieve the girl, but he unexpectedly encountered some mishap—maybe it was no accident—the victim was kidnapped by bandits.

Gu Zhaolu was lost in thought when he suddenly heard the whistling of arrows coming from the forest. He didn't have time to think, he just jumped up and flipped over, the arrows soaring past beneath him, just grazing the saddle. Gu Zhaolu unsheathed his sword and hacked down the arrows heading for the girl, and with his left hand lifted her from the saddle, using his remaining energy to roll over and dropped to the ground. The second wave of arrows came. The horse brayed as they hit, sending it toppling to the ground, kicking up a burst of dust. Gu Zhaolu pulled the woman behind the dead horse. The woman began to shake, unable to hide her fear.

"You hide here and don't come out. I'll be back." Gu Zhaolu used the dust kicked up when the horse fell as cover as he jumped to his feet. As fast as a meteor he sprang into the forest, from the spot where the arrows had shot out from earlier.

The woman hid behind the horse as instructed, scared stiff, only able to curl up tight in a ball on the ground, her face pressed to the ground, her hands shaking uncontrollably. From the forest came a shout, then the sound of swords clashing, a scream of pain, a person cursing, and withered branch stepped on and broken... The woman could only press herself firmly to the ground, not able to tell which sounds came from Gu Zhaolu, not knowing when this horrible torture would be over.

Everything was suddenly deathly quiet.

From the forest came a light sound of footsteps heading

her way. The woman didn't dare raise her head to look, only cowered, her hands white-knuckled around the reins, shaking incessantly.

"Shit, that little constable almost killed all of us, all for that damn bitch!" The sound of the man cursing was coming from just above her. The "shing" of a weapon drawn from its scabbard filled the air with a sharp whistle, and without hesitating came down with a chop.

The woman felt giddy, and she unexpectedly felt the weight on her heart lift. Death! She was finally going to die! Blood thundered in her ears, a feeling like it was all unreal.

The light sound of a *matouqin*, as if it were coming from a long way away, desolate and helpless.

The woman let out a sharp breath, blowing up a puff of dust from the ground... Was it possible that...she was still alive? She opened her eyes and raised her head.

Old Wei sat beside the dead horse playing his *matouqin*. Several black-clothed corpses lay nearby. "The assassins are all dead, you can go." Old Wei nodded at the woman. "When you enter the pass, don't forget to tell the local authorities that the constable of Three Locust Town Gu Zhaolu died in the line of duty at Yanmen Pass... Also, Constable Wei Yang died in the line of duty as well...at Yanmen Pass." The woman was shocked when she saw Old Wei's chest—a long sword pierced through, the hilt sticking out of his chest.

Old Wei acted as if he were fine, tuning his *matouqin*. He pointed in the direction of Yanmen Pass and said mildly, "Go. The path home is that way."

She looked where he pointed. The view was deep and vast, and she heard the *matouqin*, accompanied by that familiar tune, "The rosy clouds of dawn high in the sky, that's my

hometown...”

Behind her was the sun setting over the vast expanse of the grasslands.

A lone wisp of smoke rising...

Master Guan

Qu Yehe

Among the rivers and lakes the news had already spread: "Ruthless Mad Demon" Situ Lang had challenged "Boundless Sky Swordsman" Guan Yuechen to a duel on the top of Mt. Hua on the seventh day of the seventh month.

The news spread like a plague throughout the rivers and lakes. It caused a huge stir, and people were already comparing it to the duel between Ximen Chuixue and Ye Gucheng at the Forbidden City.

When Guan Yuechen heard his friends make such comparisons, he only laughed. "Ximen Chuixue and Ye Gucheng are unique and unparalleled. I'm no Ximen Chuixue, and Situ Lang is no Ye Gucheng; he and I are just ordinary fighters. Duels such as the one between he and I happen all the time within the rivers and lakes. It's more common than eating." What a pity that out of all swordsmen, there may never be a matchup

as worthy as Situ Lang versus Guan Yuechen.

The five managers of the Silver Hook gambling house did the unthinkable and closed their doors, and discussed for three days and three nights before declaring the odds: 1:1. Really no one could guess which of the two would emerge the victor.

The Silver Hook gambling house had information on almost all famed fighters. For example, there was special mention of Situ Lang's weapon.

Of course Situ Lang would use a sword, but his was no ordinary sword—the blade was forged from iron carefully refined and smelted a hundred times, and was more narrow than ordinary blades, and three inches longer. But the most special feature was the hilt. Crafted from platinum, it was two times longer than usual. This kind of strange sword of course would be paired with unusual sword skills. So Situ Lang's unusual sword skill was rated as one of a kind among the rivers and lakes. At least three expert martial artists had been killed by his blade.

Yet, there was no information at the Silver Hook gambling house regarding Guan Yuechen's sword.

It's not that no one had ever seen his sword.

It's just that those who had caught sight of his sword were all dead—all killed by this unseen sword.

Guan Yuechen had begun his journey within the rivers and lakes when he was eighteen. He led the life of the swordsman for twenty years, from when he was "Little Xia" Guan until he became "Big Xia" Guan, and then from "Big Xia" Guan to Master Guan. Countless souls departed their bodies at the blade of his sword.

Famed fighters such as "Donting Nine Ghosts", whose death caused a great stir within the gallant fraternity. So much so that

people said that "Guan Yuechen Kills Dongting Nine Ghosts in One Day" and "The Evil Taoist Priest Attacks the Five Tigers of Black Horse Mountain by Night" were regarded as the biggest things to happen among the gallant fraternity in twenty years.

But no one knew what kind of sword Guan Yuechen used, how long, how wide, how heavy. Nobody knew.

Whenever anyone asked him, Guan Yuechen would only laugh and say, "My sword is for killing people, not for people to look at."

At last, the seventh day of the seventh month arrived. It was "Lover's Day", and it was not yet dusk, yet the foot of Mt. Hua was a mass of people. Gallant men from all over the country had come; no one wanted to miss these two famous swordsmen fight to the death. What a pity that no one could actually step foot on the mountain.

Since ancient times it had been this way: "Iron Constable" Sinan took a chair and sat at the foot of the mountain and said lightly, "When there is a duel, no more than two people are allowed on the mountain." Since then, no one had been brave enough to set foot on the mountain. Everyone knew that avoiding Iron Constable Sinan's spirit eye was more difficult than avoiding Guan Yuechen's sword. But everyone still crowded around the foot of the mountain; no one left. They were all waiting for Guan Yuechen to appear.

"Even if we can't see the fight, we can still get a glimpse of Guan Yuechen's sword if we wait here." For twenty years, Guan Yuechen's sword has already been a mystery among the rivers and lakes.

"Master Guan and Mad Demon Situ arrived on the mountain three days ago." Sinan laughed lightly. "In a true test of martial experts, one blade of grass, one rock can change the outcome

and decide the victor." So, Situ Lang and Guan Yuechen, before the duel, went over the area carefully, inspecting every inch of ground, until they understood the position of every blade of grass and the placement of every stone.

Going through such life and death experiences countless times let them know how they should handle it.

* * *

Night, already deep into the night.

Guan Yuechen and Situ Lang stood at the summit of Mt. Hua. The duel hadn't started, yet the mountain wind suddenly intensified. If they had been ordinary people, they would have been blown off the mountain by the force of the wind. Guan Yuechen and Situ Lang were both like black pines, however, firmly rooted to the ground, facing the wind.

They looked at each other and smiled, and almost at the same time said "Come!" Guan Yuechen carefully drew his sword.

When Situ Lang saw Guan Yuechen's sword, he was a bit shocked.

"Guan Yuechen, that looks like a wooden sword."

Guan Yuechen laughed. "It is a wooden sword."

"Almost everyone's had a guess at what kind of sword you use. But no one would have thought that Master Guan uses a sword made from wood. It's unbelievable that Dongting Nine Ghosts, famed throughout the land for thirty years, could have fallen to a wooden sword like that."

"You're wrong," Guan Yuechen said. "When I killed Dongting Nine Ghosts, it was with a Black Iron Watchtower sword. When I killed "Bad Man of the Rivers and Lakes" I used a Willow Brow

sword. When I killed "Black Phoenix" I used Ice Cold Blood Sword. Different opponents call for a different sword."

Situ Lang laughed wildly. "So you pick a wooden sword to fight me with. That means...you truly look down on me, huh?"

Guan Yuechen smiled faintly. "Why must we talk so much. Draw your sword."

Situ Lang carefully took his sword from its case and gripped it tightly in both hands, and slowly raised it above his head.

Guan Yuechen knew Situ Lang's stance well. It looked like a normal stance, but when he attacked from that position, even the strongest force would not be enough to ward off the blow. But it looked as if he weren't even looking at his opponent. His stance was not firm, his feet not set wide apart. He held his sword lightly down by his waist. He seemed to be leaving his guard completely open. Situ Lang knew, however, that no matter what angle he attacked from, he would still be within his opponent's range.

Although Guan Yuechen used only a wooden sword, Situ Lang still dared not be careless.

When two masters exchange blows, victory or defeat is often decided by some small, careless mistake.

They both maintained their stances on the summit of Mt. Hua.

The wind blew harder and harder, dark clouds gradually accumulating in the night sky.

Suddenly, a thunderclap rolled down from the heavens.

A flash of lightning passed through the blade, striking Situ Lang.

Situ Lang let out a muffled groan and was thrown three feet, his entire body blackened and charred by the lightning strike.

Guan Yuechen sheathed his sword and went over to Situ

Lang's corpse. He shook his head. "This kind of violent tempest at night, and you run to the top of Mt. Hua with an iron sword. You only have yourself to blame for drawing the lightning to you. You brought about your own end." He threw his wooden sword down a ravine and, hands clasped behind his back, left.

In the twinkling of an eye the downpour ceased.

* * *

The next day, dawn.

The crowd of people waiting at the foot of the mountain were no longer able to hold back their curiosity. One after another they made their way to the top of the mountain. Guan Yuechen was nowhere to be seen, only a scorched corpse. Someone identified the body as that of Situ Lang.

Consequently, everyone began to feel it was strange. It must have been some kind of sword to be able to turn Situ Lang into a corpse of charcoal.

From that day forward, people often asked Guan Yuechen, "Can your sword emit fire?" Guan Yuechen would only laugh. Before the duel, he already knew there would be a storm on the evening of the seventh day of the seventh month. So he purposefully selected a wooden sword. Situ Lang wielded a famous blade made from refined iron, with a hilt made of platinum, no different than if he had carried a needle. Both conduct electricity, exposing him at any time to a lightning strike.

When Situ Lang and Guan Yuechen were up their fighting, the deciding factor was already determined: not martial arts, but intelligence.

Guan Yuechen long ago understood this principle. So he still lived, and was happy.

But the rest of his life was filled with a legendary quality. The story of the "Raging Flame Spirit Sword" was already said to be bordering on the verge of myth.

Day In and Day Out

Wu Yongsheng

By the seventh cup of wine, Fang Zhu's vision was getting blurry. Yue'er, let's retire from the glint and flash of cold steel of these rivers and lakes, to some unknown place. Let's build a house close to the mountains, a natural building constructed stone by stone from the dark mountain rocks, and we won't paint it up or adorn it in any way. We'll let the stones keep their jagged edges, and even if the top becomes grown over with dark moss, we'll just let it stay there.

We'll reclaim a spot of land in front of the house and use most of it to grow wheat and rice, and with what's left over we'll grow beans and vegetables. During the day we'll work in the fields, the wheat seedlings at our side, undulating in the wind, the breeze lifting up the sweet fragrance to stir up our hearts. The insects all singing together in low voices, birds chirping, flitting from this branch to that branch, then back again. And

sometimes, one of them will fly over and rest a bit on the end of our hoe. Its little round black eyes checking us out, not afraid at all. They're our friendly neighbors, well disposed toward others. When it comes to harmony and virtuous principles, they understand it better than people!

In the courtyard we'll have a group of chickens leisurely clucking about, using their hard beaks to dig out insects, or pluck up grains of wheat. The cock will lead them, strutting about like a pompous general, possessing many wives and concubines, sons and daughters.

Under the eaves several cats, leaping up and jumping down. You can hear their voices from far away. One of them will be a tomcat, with black fur like satin, and he'll mate with a grey tabby, and all the other cats around will be their offspring. The grey cat will stick close to the ground, occasionally turning to nip at the black cat's neck fur...

The candlelight in the inn flickered, reflecting off the contours of Fang Zhu's face. Ling Yue'er held lightly Fang Zhu's hand, her eyes like cold night stars in the candlelight. Whenever Fang Zhu drinks, he always goes on like this. How many times was it? Because for one who leads a life under the sword, living a normal, common life is only a broken dream.

In the early morning we'll go outside, on all sides screened in by mountains, the sunlight reflecting off the dew, cutting in through the hazy dawn mist. In front, a field of newly turned earth, black and shiny. On the ridges between fields, dark green grass, and within, buckwheat blooming red as chicken blood. In the distance, a large grove of trees, mixed with eucalyptus and toona. A thin layer of fog will drift in in the evenings. In the courtyard we'll sit in bamboo chairs and use plantain or winter mulberry leaves to make a pot of tea, leaves we picked

ourselves. The evening breeze will glide through the wheat field, sending the essence of those green shoots straight into our hearts. The stars will fill the sky, resplendent as panther spots, spread out above us. Crickets and locusts in the thick grass chirping, accompanied by the croaking of frogs, and the wind coiling through the grove, rustling the leaves.

Then it's raining. We'll sit under the eaves and watch the raindrops fall in front of us like a curtain of glittering, translucent pearls, and just tune out the world, the distant mountains only a vague dark shadow. The courtyard will be saturated with water. The raindrops will fall and splash like shining white blooms, ripples continuously crashing into one another. Maybe we'll see a person in rain cape and bamboo hat coming this way from a small trail.

Fang Zhu leaned in and brushed the tip of his ice cold nose against Ling Yue'er's hair. Yue'er, we'll have a lot of kids, a whole mess of them. We'll teach them well.

Ling Yue'er asked in a low voice, "Will we teach them Greater and Lesser Dashing Wind?"

No. No. Absolutely, not. Since Master transmitted to us the Greater and Lesser Dashing Wind Sword skill, we've become more and more entrenched in the livelihood of the rivers and lakes. Everyone calls us "Day In and Day Out." Greater and Lesser Dashing Wind, we use those skills day in and day out. For ten years, in order to maintain Dashing Wind's reputation, we haven't been able to relax. I'm really tired of it. Yue'er, our two swords weigh forty or fifty catties, enough metal to make several hoes.

We'll teach our children to differentiate the seasons, when to plant crops and when to harvest them. Then we'll teach them to write poetry to please themselves, but we definitely won't make

them adhere to the dogmatic and rigid rules that produce that dogshit official writing. Our children won't seek official posts. A career as an official is more dangerous than a life among the rivers and lakes. Among the rivers and lakes, if you have revenge to take or gratitude to repay, you just do it. But in the realm of the officials, it's words and deceitful maneuvers that kill people. We can teach them to play the bamboo flute. That not only can mold their temperament, but it can also ease the soul. Resting at the edge of the field, accompanied by a little music—the weariness will just fly away without a trace...

From outside the window a shadow appeared, along with a faint sound. Fang Zhu stood and drew his sword, the light reflecting off the blade like an expanse of limpid autumn water. "Who's there?" A crash of the table overturning...

Ling Yue'er caught Fang Zhu's hand. "Brother, it's only a cat!"

Fang Zhu slumped his head. "It's only a cat...just a cat. I'm really drunk..."

When good and drunk, we can build our home...

A single tear from Ling Yue'er's cheek slid down, and quietly fell.

Turbulent Times

Cang Yue

The course of a person's life is like a spirit coming to earth, suffering, then dying. But because he works hard, because he suffers so much throughout his life, future generations won't have to...

Bloodcolored Twilight

The downpour started at twilight, the moment the walls were breached.

For six months the city withstood the seige, the Prince of Ning's forces suffering heavy casualties. After paying such a high price just to enter the city, they were again met with stiff resistance, fighting in the streets inch by inch, making headway street by street, the corpses piling up like a mountain, blood

everywhere mixed in with the rainwater.

The Prince Qin's commanding general Fu Yanjing braved death to resist the attacks, holding Taizhou for half a year, ultimately killing his own son for urging him to surrender, then leading his troops out into the streets to fight to the death. His men were also loyal, all of them fighting to the last man; not one of his men surrendered.

"What a good Fu Yanjing!" Seeing the piles of bodies, listening to his general report on the casualties sustained in fighting, the Prince of Ning on horseback, bedecked in his silvery-white armor, sneered. "So he thinks jade and stone should burn together? Bring me his corpse and have it publicly dismembered, and wipe out all those commoners who helped defend the city. Kill their entire families, no mercy!"

"Yes, Your Highness." The general beside him received his orders, hesitated a moment, and said, "This attack went on too long. Our soldiers are exhausted, and our provisions are almost gone. So..."

"Butcher the city for three days!" The Prince of Ning didn't hesitate to issue the order. "Allow the soldiers to enjoy themselves a little bit to boost their morale. Meanwhile, resupply the troops—I want to let everyone under heaven know the consequences for crossing me!"

Outside the downpour mixed with the sounds of fear and screams of panic.

A fourteen year old boy stood in the courtyard of an inn, watching as outside the gates people burst out everywhere, in the blink of an eye amassing into a stream of people fleeing from every street and alley.

The innkeeper had already packed up and fled for his life, no explanations even for his waiters. A chaotic group had formed

in the shop, guests coming and going, everywhere people crying and screaming, and looting.

He had long ago packed up his few belongings, but he hadn't left. He was watching a group of travelers from Yangzhou. The young lady amongst them was said to be the daughter of the richest family in Yangzhou, returning from Quanzhou from visiting her parents when they were caught up here after Prince Ning led his troops to Taizhou. Because of the fighting, they had been unable to leave the inn.

Prince Ning laid siege to the city for six months, so for six months she and her retainers had been holed up here. In those six months, he had formed a sibling-like relationship with her. The daughter of such a wealthy family, yet she had a gentle and soft temperament. She was very cordial to him, laughing and calling him Little Brother, not at all regarding him as a lowly waiter. A soft and gentle beautiful girl like her should not have to be exposed to such chaotic times. The moment he heard that Prince Ning was inside the city, he was determined to protect her, even if it meant his life.

His father had said to him once, before he died, that if he didn't want to get caught up in the ways of the world, then he should conduct himself in a quiet, restrained manner, and shouldn't rashly display his abilities; just focus on being a citizen—that's the way to keep oneself protected during turbulent times. So, as he matured, he kept hidden the military strategy and martial arts he had learned. For fourteen years he had kept it hidden.

But today it was a risky situation, and he aimed to protect them from those murderous soldiers.

"Little Brother, you still haven't left yet!" In the midst of the confusion, the young lady had still paid notice to the waiter in coarse clothes, and had stopped to speak with him. Her

retainers, once the chaos began, all took off and left. She carried herself a small cloth bundle as she hurried out herself, the only one accompanying her a servant girl named Yinghong.

"I'll lead you out of the city, Sister Shuyu!" He went to take up her things, but was blocked by Yinghong. The servant girl eyed him with disdain and suspicion.

"Miss, don't hand over your things to a stranger! That bundle is all we have." But the rich girl laughed good-naturedly and paid no attention to the servant girl's admonitions.

On the contrary, she handed over the cloth bundle to him and said in a soft voice, "Then, I'll trouble Little Brother to lead the way." The boy nodded and was getting ready to lead everyone out when the gates were kicked open with a bang.

"The Prince of Ning decrees: 'Massacre the inhabitants for three days! Burn all the houses to the ground, and take all their heads!'" A mass of unruly soldiers crowded in behind the proclaimer, all of them covered in blood, carrying swords and spears, their eyes gleaming murderously. The boy picked up a stick from the courtyard, and step by step, shielded the two girls as they backed into a corner.

"Brother, brother, don't fight with them!" Behind him, the rich girl in a low voice pleaded with him, fearfully tugging at his clothes, her fingers trembling. "You're no match for them...You're still a child, you're still a child."

"Miss, don't worry, he's a boy! Don't worry about him, just let him ward them off for a moment so we can escape out the back" Yinghong hurriedly came up and took the cloth bundle and pulled the rich girl back. "Let's escape quick! Don't worry about him."

"Haha, pretty girls, you can't run away!" Upon seeing such a beautiful girl, the brutish soldier couldn't hold back, and he

charged towards her. The boy blocked the way, his eyes red, and with one sweep of his stick knocked the soldier to the ground.

If he dies here, what's the difference? He was a child, but he couldn't just stand there and watch as Sister Shuyu was taken away by those beasts...Anyway, he had no parents or close relatives.

After seeing their comrade downed, the other brutal soliders were taken aback, and then all at once they rushed in from all sides surrounding the boy...

The seventh time he was knocked down, the boy's ribs cracked sharply and blood gushed out, mizing with the rain-soaked mud . He struggled, but couldn't get up. Damn. If only he knew, he would have practiced his martial arts more. He had thought to keep himself aloof from the world, that the skills had learned would be of no use, but today...

"How does it feel, little guy?' the captain of the troop said. You dare to resist us. Pull him up and take him out. Let the horses trample him!" He grabbed the boy by the hair and pulled him to his feet, and spit in his face. The boy struggled with all his might, but it wasn't enough. He was beaten by two tall and strong soldiers, and then they made to drag him out.

"Don't hit him! Don't hit him!" The beautiful girl suddenly charged out from the rear courtyard, pulled the captain's hand off the boy, and hugged the boy, guarding him with her body. "He's still small, just a child. I'll do what you want, just please don't hurt him..."

"Sister Shuyu!" He struggled again, feeling as if his strength were renewed, but his broken body wouldn't hold out, and blood still flowed from the corner of his mouth. "What did you come back for? Hurry and escape!"

Miss Shuyu lowered her head and smiled. "I can't just

abandon you here. Besides, where can I escape to? There are soldiers everywhere, and I'm just a woman. In such chaotic times as this, how could I survive?" Though she smiled, her eyes couldn't conceal her sorrowful fate. Her body gave off a light fragrance—something vaguely like the scent of jasmine.

When they saw that beautiful girl foolishly run back in, the soldiers laughed wantonly, and grabbed her. Shuyu clung tightly to the door frame, and lowered her head to look at the youth. "Little Brother, Little Brother! I'm not that important, and you're still young. You must survive! You're a boy now, but you'll grow to be a strong man...You mustn't die, you must do all you can to live..." She forced a smile, but her tears dropped like pearls onto the boy's face.

Suddenly, he felt a fire ignite in the bottom of his heart—the bloody, chaotic scene in front of him had stimulated his youthful blood, stirring up some brave and valiant energy that had been buried deep inside him.

"Enough! Let's go back to camp and join our brothers in celebration!" The girl's hands were roughly pulled away from the door frame. The captain and his men laughed uproariously and pushed the boy to the ground and began kicking him with all their strength.

"You little bastard. For her sake, we'll let you off this time."

"Captain, This time we should draw tallies to decide who gets her first. We can't let you take her all for yourself!"

"Haha...Don't worry, I won't keep these precious goods from you." The group of bandits took up Miss Shuyu and swaggered off.

The boy, with great effort, struggled to his feet. He looked down at his knees, the ghastly white bone already visible, blood from his collar dripping freely, the rain spreading it all over his

body.

"Miss! Miss!...Those evil thieves!" He spotted Yinghong emerging from her hiding spot, the cloth bundle gripped tight in her hands.

She put on an act, crying, "Little Brother, hurry and lead me out of the city! I have to go back and tell Master to come rescue Miss Shuyu." He snorted coldly, then suddenly turned and left, leaving the slave girl there by herself in that ransacked inn.

"You little brat! How can you just leave me here!" That voice originally choked with sobs had now turned to swears, caustic and angry. "You're a boy, shouldn't you protect me and help me escape? You cowardly, worthless beggar!" His child-like face suddenly twitched. Bitch.

"Hey soldiers!" Outside he ran into a group of soldiers. He thought a moment, then suddenly stopped, a furtive smile forming. He pointed behind him towards the inn courtyard. "There's still a pretty girl hiding in there; you guys don't want to miss your chance!" Then, he continued on heedlessly. In the distance he could faintly hear from the courtyard the sound of Yinghong's terrified screams.

He chuckled unexpectedly, in his eyes a darkness quietly brimming...starting from this day, would his hands be spoiled by blood? Was there anything he would be unable to do?

Everywhere flames, everywhere screaming, everywhere fresh blood. All the places he used to frequent were up in flames, the wooden planks cracking and burning. He could even hear the sound of bones breaking, and of women and children screaming...It felt like the end of the world.

His neighbors, aunts and uncles, just a day before were walking around, telling jokes. Now, in a flash they had all turned to sword-scarred corpses. And the others were celebrating,

laughing madly...on the horses women, their plunder, tied up, and from the saddle hung still-dripping severed heads, the men carrying in their hands more loot they had stolen...

—Is this what we call a world? Where people live?

And not only here. This city, the entire Central Plains had been embroiled in the chaos of war for almost five years now.

“Whoah!” A horse was suddenly pulled to a halt, its master pulling hard on the reins in surprise, the horse’s hooves coming up in the air, waving about, then landing on the ground, rainwater mixed with cold sweat from the master’s forehead dripping down onto his armor.

“Who are you? You have a lot of nerve to block my horse like that!” The Prince of Ning turned around and saw a boy covered in blood lying prone in the mud, trying hard to prop himself up to look at him.

That calm, meaningful expression was really not like that of a young boy. The Prince of Ning was surprised and found himself uttering the command for his guards to halt. He dismounted and went over to the boy, lowered his head and said, “Little guy, you care little about your life, don’t you?”

“You’re Ning, the Prince of Ning?” The boy, little more than ten year old, struggled to look at him, saw him nod his head yes, then said a sentence that the Prince of Ning would not forget as long as he lived. “Let’s make a deal. Help me rescue Sister and I’ll serve Your Highness for the rest of my life.”

Looking at this boy, splotted all over with blood, the Prince of Ning couldn’t help but laugh. “Oh? Really? What ability do you have? You’re just a child.” Clearly the boy’s leg had been broken when the horse trampled him, but contrary to his expectations, the boy calmly stood, his legs shaky and unsteady, and he raised his head.

“Does Your Highness not want to destroy all the other rulers? Does he not want to reign over everything under Heaven? Does he not want to found a new dynasty? If you do, I can help you!”

“You have that much skill? Then you can make yourself king, little guy!” The Prince of Ning laughed with great interest. Though on the battlefield he was fierce and brave and ruthless, he was gentle and cultivated towards others, due to his imperial upbringing.

“Although you might be right, if I want to make the world a stable, peaceful place, won’t I have to wait many years?” The prince couldn’t believe the boy took his ridicule seriously. The boy thought a moment, then added, “Your Highness, you have a strong force; in less than five years everything under Heaven will be yours, and that will be the end of these turbulent times. So, why wait until later?”

“My father once told me what it takes to be a powerful leader. Your Highness, you are heroic, courageous, enterprising, and you have the right blood and a military force...I think, it’s probably enough, isn’t it? If you have some deficiencies, let me make up for them. Even if I have to get my own hands dirty, it doesn’t matter.” When he heard those words, he was astounded. Curious, The Prince of Ning began to see the youth in a new light.

He said, “Your father is...”

“My father was Gao Tiancheng.”

The Prince of Ning was suddenly quiet. Gao Tiancheng, the late emperor’s right hand man, there when the dynasty was founded. During more stable times, he had disappeared without a trace, and the King, the Prince of Ning’s father, relied on him more than anyone, so much so that before his death, the King sighed and said to the Prince of Ning, “After I die, your four

brothers will certainly rebel. It looks like the world is again going to lapse into chaos....Ah, if only my beloved Gao were still here!" So it turns out that Gao Tiancheng had taken his wife and children to live in seclusion in the town? So, this youth is Gao Tiancheng's son? Then I must not look upon him with contempt.

"All right...no matter who blocked my horse's path, it takes a lot of guts to say that to me. To see someone so young have so much courage...I'll help you retrieve your Sister. Anyway, it will be an easy task." The Prince of Ning suddenly laughed and clapped the boy on the shoulder, discovering in the process just how thin and weak he was. "We have a deal!"

"Her name is Shuyu. Please, please give the order quickly to go find her. Otherwise, it will be too late..." Hearing the man's promise, the boy's expression quickly turned to one of exhaustion. His strength was gone, and he collapsed in the mud.

The drizzle gradually thinned, the war clouds covering the city like an unescapable net. The setting sun appeared from out of the dark clouds, spreading bloodcolored light over the land.

Wind Over the Wei River

"Little Brother...the Prince of Ning, he...he wants me to be his consort." The army was stationed in Chang'an. In one of the tents, Shuyu wrinkled her brow, her fingers lightly playing with her belt, gazing blankly off at the sky outside the tent. The wind was strong, the clouds roiling in the sky, magically changing quickly into all sorts of strange shapes. The setting sun spread its light over the clouds, making them seem as if the whole sky

were full of blood—red, like the cheeks of a beautiful girl.

The youth beside her said nothing. Ever since Taizhou had been taken, and he had went with the army as an aide to the Prince of Ning, he had grown more and more reticent. He looked through the mirror and saw Sister's beautiful profile, so innocent and helpless.

"Little Brother...Why don't you say something? After losing touch with Yinghong, luckily...luckily I was still able to see you again amidst these wild troops." The beautiful girl in white sighed softly and lowered her head. "I'm a woman, and I don't have my parents here to help me come to a decision about this big marriage situation..." The youth was still silent, looking the other way, ignoring her pleading expression.

Unable to elicit a response, Shuyu's fingers gripped the front of her garment, and as if talking to herself, said, "Oh...a marriage proposal. But under the current circumstances, do I have any room to refuse? However, I really hope to have someone who can protect us. My family already rejected the Prince of Qin and the Prince of Fu; I can't offend the Prince of Ning. Although the Yangzhou Jiang family is rich, in times like this, having money is becoming more and more perilous..." As she talked to herself, her snow-white face gradually took on a firm and tenacious radiance.

"Of course, the Prince of Ning is not fit to marry. I've heard it said that he is lustful and cruel. But, even so, he has should have the power to protect my entire family, right? As long as it means getting through these turbulent times peacefully, I don't care. Little Brother, what do you think?" As if she didn't need to hear the youth's answer, Shuyu's eyes suddenly welled up, and she nodded her head, as if if she she had resolved herself. "Then, I'll accept! I'll write to my family, then get married in

Chang'an. Little Brother, by doing this I can protect you..."

His head was still lowered, but when the youth heard Shuyu's final words, his eyes suddenly changed. Looking in the mirror, he suddenly said, "Sister, marry him!" That's right, marry him. Even though he only wants to marry you for your family's wealth, he's a person capable of protecting you and your family. He has the ability to seize everything under Heaven. He'll give you the highest position and honor. And me, I'll guard you always. One of these days, I'll see with my own eyes Sister wearing the crown of the empress dowager!

* * *

"Little Gao, don't over do it." Seeing the flushed face and sweat dripping from the youth, and all around the dead and wounded scattered, the Prince of Ning was overjoyed, but his manner of speaking remained solicitous. "You've practiced diligently, nonstop these past two months. Even though you've improved quickly, you've also worked yourself to exhaustion."

"Don't worry, Your Highness, I'll be careful." Little Gao sheathed his sword and took up a spear from the rack. "In the evening I'll read as a way to rest." He wanted himself to be strong as quickly as possible so that he could protect Sister and assist the Prince of Ning to quickly end these turbulent times, to quickly put an end to all this war and bloodshed. During the day he practiced martial arts, and at night he would study. He had nearly used all his potential to practice the skills his father had taught him.

"The Yangzhou Jiang family has already agreed to the mar-

riage. Next month your Sister and I will be wed." The Prince of Ning regarded the goldcolored tent outside. His expression suddenly took on a strange quality. "I want you to rest well. On that day everyone will be really busy." Little Gao said nothing, his head lowered, looking at his seven-foot spear.

Suddenly, in a low voice, he asked, "Your Highness, Wucheng hasn't yet fallen?"

The prince glanced at the youth in surprise, then, in an imposing manner, said, "Not yet...Fourth Brother has under him a fearless general, one Shi Zhaolong. Also, he's managed the city well for many years into a strategic position. They have plenty of provisions, and the troops are in good order and obedient. For the time being there's nothing we can do."

"Let me go," the youth said, a blank expression on his face. He put down his spear and took a precious sword from the rack, tested its sharpness. "Just let me take Wucheng and present it to Your Highness and Sister as a wedding gift." The prince had felt that the youth was something else; given some time, the youth would in the end be able to take charge of things himself. Seeing a boy, just thirteen years old, suddenly volunteer for such a big assignment, his tone of voice so determined, startled the prince.

"Little Gao, the army is no joke. Out of all the princes, Fourth Brother is something else. He doesn't lust after women, he doesn't drink to excess, he's not money-hungry. He just about has no weak point. And he has under him Shi Zhaolong, a famous general. More than a month with Wucheng under siege..."

"Naturally I have a way to deal with the Prince of Cheng—but, please don't tell Sister Shuyu. She would worry." The youth's stony black eyes dimmed, and he looked at the Prince of Ning.

"If on the day of Your Highness' wedding I haven't returned to Chang'an, then...then, please Your Highness take good care of Sister."

Sister, if one day I can no longer return to your side, then it's certainly because I was willing to sacrifice my life for my own ideals—if that happens, please don't feel sad. even if you're by yourself, you must live your life well...

It was already the 27th day without seeing Gao Qun. She read the letter he had left behind, sitting and waiting for her maidservant to comb her hair. Shuyu's eyes filled with worry and dread. She didn't know what was going, and she also didn't know much about Little Brother Gao either. But she know this much, at least: This child really treated her well; in these turbulent times, he was the only one who would give his life for her."

She read the letter in a trance, to the point that she didn't notice her maidservants draw back and retreat outside, and that her warm, translucent jade comb was already in another set of hands. "My dear, even Lady Wei of the Han dynasty didn't have as beautiful hair as you." Hearing this compliment, she became aware of a rustling in her hair; only then did Shuyu snap back to reality to see in the mirror the Prince of Ning standing beside her. In his hand he held the comb, gently combing her cloudlike black hair.

Her face suddenly flushed crimson, and she lowered her head, her manner showing her true rich and gentle, reserved upbringing. "Your Highness, the marriage ceremony hasn't yet taken place; we shouldn't be in contact with each other. Please go back." She didn't know why, but seeing her future

husband engaging in such an intimate activity, she still felt uncomfortable in a way she couldn't put her finger on—she didn't want to see his face in the mirror. After witnessing that horrible massacre, in her heart, how could she see him as anything but an evil murderer? The same man who once took the lives of tens of thousands as something of no importance, who led those beastly soldiers—what is his inner heart like? And he was soon to be her husband!?

“Don't pretend that you're so innocent...” Sensing her coldness, the voice behind her suddenly changed, now unspeakably cold and venomous. “Don't forget that when I took you from the soldiers' tent, you were stark naked, just like a camp prostitute. Don't act like you're an upright, respectable lady.” Not waiting for her to turn around and stand up in indignance, he gripped her hair tight and ruthlessly pulled her pack down onto the stool. “Little ***, be obedient! I can have any kind of woman I want! I selected you to be my consort only because of your family's wealth!”

“Don't think you can...” The blood had already drained from Shuyu's face, seeing those wild animal eyes through the mirror. She inched her head back to look at her fiancé, who controlled her completely, pulling hard on her hair. “I already died once, I don't mind to die again!”

“Ignorant woman. And your family? Your little brother? Can they escape? Or maybe they'll all die?” Holding her chin in his palm, the Prince of Ning sneered as he watched through the mirror the girl's face quickly turn deathly pale. He said triumphantly, “So, be a good little puppet and remember your place!” Along with his sneer, he gradually pressed down on the jade comb, digging it into her scalp and dragged it across. “Consider this my pre-marriage warning, my consort.” The

Prince of Ning stormed off in a huff, breaking the jade comb in his fingers and letting the pieces fall to the floor. Shuyu sat in silence, dark blood channeling down the strands of her hair and dripping onto the ground.

Only then did her maidservants dare re-enter the room. When they saw the aftermath, they were all silent as cold cicadas. It seemed this was not the first time they had seen the Prince of Ning's brutal actions. They all bent down, expressionless, and picked up the broken pieces of the comb, then quietly withdrew.

"Miss..." Before closing the door, the last maidservant suddenly stopped, turned to Shuyu, who was seated like a statue at her make-up table, and finally asked lightly, "Would you like to wash your hair?"

Pitch-black cloudlike hair lay dispersed in the silver basin, fresh blood from her wounds seeping out and staining the clear water scarlet. "Miss, does it hurt? Do you want me to call for a doctor?" The maid asked cautiously in a soft voice, touching Shuyu's hair lightly and looking at the bloodstained water, her eyes brimming with tears.

"There's no need," she replied indifferently. Shuyu wrung her hair dry herself, together with the blood. "Don't tell anyone—especially remember not to tell Little Gao." Shuyu piled up her hair and pinned it up with a purple jade hairpin. She turned suddenly and smiled at her attendant. "What is your name?"

The little maidservant, startled, lowered her head and answered, "My name is Yan'er."

"Yan'er, you're a good-hearted girl." Shuyu sighed faintly and raised her head to the sky and watched the fast-changing winds and clouds[1], her eyes filling with limpid teardrops. "I don't care...I don't care about any of it. As long as my family can get

through these turbulent times safely, it's all right. As long as Little Brother is okay, then it doesn't matter...But, you all, you all...take good care of yourselves!"

* * *

The ninth month, Autumn.

Chang'an. Joined In Peace Hall.

Golden cup. Good wine. Wedding candles.

Amidst the resplendent and magnificent atmosphere, her rouged face was nevertheless pale, pale as if she were about to take a step into unknown territory from which she could never return. On her head sat heavy and complicated jewelry and other finery, which pulled at her black hair, hurting all the way to the roots. Even so, she must wear a smile and speak softly.

With Yan'er supporting her, and with her refined training and manner she had cultivated since her youth, she was able to calmly deal with the guests and high officials who came and went. But, looking out from behind her red bridal veil, among the bustling activity of the guests she saw not the one face she was looking for.

"Little Brother...Little Brother, where are you?" Thinking of the Prince of Ning's cruel threat, in the bottom of her heart she felt a chill that struck her to the bone. Could it be, could it be that...She fidgeted nervously with the handkerchief in her hand, cold sweat beading up and dripping down from her temples. Her eyes scanned the attendants. Seeing her relatives from Yangzhou, smiling all safe and sound, gave her finally a bit of respite from her constant worry.

"Commandant of the Courageous Guards Gao Qun is here!" The announcement was suddenly proclaimed in a loud, clear voice. Her legs went weak, nearly paralyzed—Little Brother had returned after all!

"Your Highness, to celebrate your great marriage, your subordinate has brought you this gift!" She heard Little Brother's voice, the sound conveying a feeling she couldn't comprehend. Then, stifling her emotions, she heard the guests cry out in a low voice.

Then, she heard the Prince of Ning, overjoyed, say, "Ah! Excellent, excellent! Fourth Brother's head. This gift is too good!"

The thick smell of blood invaded her nostrils, and, her mind already keyed up, she couldn't take it any longer and fainted away...

"Sister, did I scare you that day?" Three days after the ceremony, Gao Qun came to see her. Separated by a heavy curtain, she could only see his still-not-matured form—he was still a child.

"Little Brother...Did you kill the Prince of Cheng?" she asked. She saw the youth on the other side of the curtain slowly nod his head. Her eyes suddenly welled up. "From now on, don't do such dangerous things. Promise me you absolutely won't." But the form outside the curtain didn't move. After a while, Gao Qun's voice slowly arrived.

"Sister, I don't want to agree and then lie to you, because I can't promise you that. I want to help the Prince of Ning conquer the world. I want to help Sister become empress"

"Only, I don't want to be empress..." The girl behind the curtain forced a smile and picked up her little mirror and looked at the pearls and jade adorning her head—who would have

thought these magnificent jewels were actually wrought from flesh and blood? "I don't want to live in such a big house. A small wooden house would be fine. With an open space in front, where I can grow many kinds of flowers and raise little chickens and ducklings. I'll have a bunch of cute children. I'll wait for them to return every day before the sun sets below the mountain, and we'll sit at the table and eat together food I prepared with my own hands..." In the deserted, magnificent and resplendent palace, the Prince of Ning's consort sat talking to herself in the mirror. But when she raised her head, there was no one on the other side of the curtain.

The cold autumn wind blew by, and a leaf from one of the withered and yellow *wutong* trees fell and landed on her snow-white lapels.

"Little Gao, recently your martial arts and military tactics have improved amazingly fast!" While taking a stroll around camp, the prince saw the youth remove his armor and enter the Wei River to bathe. The Prince of Ning dismissed his guards and went over by himself and sat on the riverbank and watched the boy. "If only you weren't really too young, I'd put you in charge of the cavalry. But, you're only fifteen. You need to at least reach eighteen and establish some military exploits; only then will I be completely justified in granting you the position." The youth was engrossed in his washing and didn't reply. Regarding military exploits and a noble rank, it seemed he was completely unconcerned.

"Right. Little Gao, I've always wanted to ask you: how did you ever get close enough to the Prince of Cheng to kill him?" Looking at the youth's handsome face and still underdeveloped shoulders, the Prince of Ning was unable to hold back his curiosity any longer, and thus asked the question he had been

holding inside for half a year.

Little Gao's hand paused a moment, then resumed rinsing himself off. His voice was nevertheless cold, "It's very simple, because my father once told me about a secret within the royal family. The Prince of Cheng had a fatal weakness—he was a homosexual."

"Eh! Then, you..." As soon as the Prince of Ning blurted it out, he understood how the boy could have gotten close enough to kill the man known for not being lustful, that invulnerable Fourth Brother. The youth had not hesitated to pay the price.

As he was quickly pondering these things, the youth remained unconcerned, and replied, "If you have to get your hands dirty, let me do it. Your Highness will be in the history books in the future; it's best to keep your hands clean. I'll handle that stuff in your place. But, Your Highness must conquer the world and quickly end these turbulent times. And my Sister, Your Highness must treat her well, and look at her as the supreme wife...these are my only requests." The autumn wind swirled coldly across the Wei River. The youth's eyes also were cold and detached, and steady as he looked at the Prince of Ning.

The Setting Sun

The autumn wind rustling the Wei River, fallen leaves covering Chang'an. Many springs had turned to autumn, and the Prince of Ning had almost achieved his goal of unifying the country. Gao Qun had campaigned endlessly these past few years and had repeatedly attained merit through his service. In the end, he was given the rank of Grand Marshal Under Heaven and

ordered to lead punitive expeditions against the only remaining Prince of Zheng.

That year, the twenty-five year old consort of the Prince of Ning Jiang Shuyu naturally was conferred the title of Empress, and she entered the Kunning Palace where she was master of the imperial harem and model mother for the nation. The next year, she gave birth to a son.

"Sister, today you summoned me to the palace, what is it?" Outside the hall, The sun was bloodcolored, making the inside of the palace even more cold. Inside Kunning Palace, Gao Qun, wearing the military garb of the highest ranking military commander, set down his tea cup and asked the person behind the screen, his manner all along conveying warmth and affection.

"Little Brother, it's been a long time since I've seen you. You've grown so much...You've matured, no longer a child. When will you take a wife?" Separated by the bead curtain, she could still see his tall figure. Shuyu laughed, pleased, the sound conveying a rare cheerfulness. But Gao Qun only smiled indifferently and didn't answer.

Instead, he changed the subject. "Sister, how old is your pride and joy?"

The empress held the infant and instructed the servant beside her, "Yan'er, take the baby and let Little Brother see—the baby can already talk; Little Brother you haven't seen him yet?"

"What a cute child. The crown prince!" Sister is the empress now!" The young marshal's blank face was now also in a rare smiling mood, playing with and making baby noises at the baby in his arms. Suddenly, his face changed. He lightly held up the baby's arm and drew back its sleeve, exposing the black and blue bruises splotching its arm. "How did this happen?"

Yan'er wanted to cover it up, but it was too late. From behind the curtain came a cry of alarm and Shuyu reached out and snatched the baby away, clutching it tightly to her chest, and without thinking explained, "Oh, I was careless. It was because I was careless that he was uninjured..."

But the youth's eyes were open and paid no attention to her explanation. He just waited until she had finished heaping up her hurried words, and then he quietly said, "Sister, your arm." She drew her arm back reflexively, but she couldn't cover the bruises on her wrist and forearm. The atmosphere suddenly solidified, and brother and sister regarded each other, weighing the many years they had not seen each other, in their eyes a deeply ingrained complexity of emotion.

"Was it the Prince of Ning...no, the emperor?" Gao Qun's voice suddenly went cold, his coal black eyes burning dimly. "Sister, I guarantee he won't do anything like that in the future."

"I don't want there to be a future!" The empress, who had tried so hard to maintain her composure, suddenly broke down, tears rolling down her garment to drop on the child's face. The child starting crying. "It would have been better if those barbaric soldiers had killed me...at least I wouldn't have to lead this kind of life. One day I won't be able to take it anymore! He never regards me as his consort, he never even looks at me as human. Every day he beats me, did you know that? The dirty swine! If it goes on like this, the baby will be killed. He dotes on that Consort Qi, and wants to make her son the heir apparent. He even wants to kill my son! Little Brother, help me!" The empress eagerly looked to the young marshal for help.

"Sister. What do you want me to do?" Gao Qun asked, his head lowered, emphasizing each word, his eyes filled with a perplexed light. He already had an idea what her response

would be.

“Kill him. I want my child to be emperor,” Shuyu said, her voice shaking.

His eyes suddenly took on a grieved look. The young marshal raised his head and answered firmly, “I can’t do that, Sister. On this point, no matter what, I can’t comply. Not for that guy, but for the people. He can’t die right now, Sister. If he dies, would his subordinates feel at ease offering up allegiance to a baby? There would be a power vacuum, and do you think all those princes, now quiet, wouldn’t try to take advantage of that and stage a rebellion? The world is just now stabilizing. Sister, do you want to relive all that carnage and terror?”

“Little Brother...” She seemed surprised. Looking at the boy grown into a man before her, seeing the suffering in his eyes and his determined expression, seeing that he could carry the whole world on his shoulders, in the end, the empress’ eyes grow blurry—where was the youth from five years ago? Who, though they hadn’t known each other long, had risked his life to protect her amongst those barbaric soldiers?

“If the child is still too young, then you just seize power—actually, it’s just to let you become emperor, so what’s the problem? As long as that beast is not emperor, as long as my child is safe!” Shuyu spoke, heedless of everything, and grabbed his sleeves, her eyes holding a fervent light. “Could it be that...could it be that you would watch as mother and son die?

“I’m here. Sister, you two won’t...”

He thought to placate her, but before he could finish his sentence, she interjected excitedly, “Little Brother, you could be emperor! Don’t you want to change the world? Don’t you want the people to lead peaceful, stable lives? If so, then use your abilities. Why should you be stuck underneath that dirty

swine's thumb?"

Hearing Sister talk so recklessly, hearing her speak this way, Gao Qun was silent for a long time. Then he sighed and and slowly removed her hands from his sleeves. "Sister, living in this palace these past five years has really changed you—the previous you would never talk like that." Seeing the empress' look go from disappointed to despair, the marshal's look was also gradually pained, but he spoke as calmly as before. "Sister, I absolutely can't do it. He must remain firmly on the throne. He must stabilize the world."

"You won't help me?" Shuyu's eyes grew cold, and her voice was frigid, without hope. She looked at her child in Yan'er's arms beside her, and said slowly and clearly, "Even if you don't help me, I also have my own scheme." She lightly stroked the infant, her facing changing, and finally she turned her head and said indifferently, "That tea you just drank, I've already poisoned it. If there's a coup, and you aren't by my side, then don't blame me...for not giving you the antidote." Such soft, measured words must have been calculated. The empress did her best to maintain her indifference, but her voice still quivered.

Gao Qun pondered for a moment, then suddenly raised his head, his eyes like lightning striking her body, the corners of his mouth twitching slightly as if he wanted to say something, but in the end no words came out. His eyes flashed desolate, his smile resigned as he raised the tea cup from the table and through back the remaining tea in one swallow. He smiled. "Thank you for the tea. Sister, I must go." Then he turned and left, never looking back.

The sun had already descended behind the mountains. Treading the fallen leaves covering the ground was like walking over

a field of fresh blood. Leaves floated down outside the palace, idly fluttering in the air. He felt a faint pain in his chest and he pressed his hand to his heart and reached out with his other to catch the falling *wutong* leaves—So fast. Was his life also about to wither like these leaves?

Little Brother, Little Brother! I'm not that important, and you're still young. You must survive! You're a boy now, but you'll grow to be a strong man...You mustn't die, you must do all you can to live... She had once pleaded with him in this way, once protected him, didn't hesitate to throw herself to the wolves. Her tears hitting his face made his blood boil. In the end, he had decided resolutely to entangle himself in the disputes of the world. He had wanted to be strong, strong so he could protect the people he wanted to protect, and raise her to a position of admiration throughout the world.

In his reverie, he remembered the indistinct scent of jasmine, her eyes brimming with tears even as she smiled at him. Sister, Sister...the poison gradually took effect and his vision blurred, his steps becoming heavier and heavier, and he staggered forward. When he pushed open the door to his Marshal Headquarters, his servants cried out in alarm, and he slumped to the floor.

Shattered Dawn

"Marshal, Marshal, wake up!" It was like he had spent ten million years in perpetual sleep, then was suddenly jolted awake. He opened his eyes and quickly scanned his surroundings. He was still at Headquarters—he was still alive?

"Marshal! Something happened last night in the Forbidden Palace..." The captain of the Imperial Guards stood off to the side anxiously, his brow beaded with sweat, clutching the marshal's combat uniform in his hands. "Last night, the emperor and the empress were drinking and admiring the moon at Longevity Palace long into the night. Maybe they drank too much, but they were leaning on the balustrade admiring the osmanthus blossoms, when suddenly they lost their footing and fell from the terrace!" By the time the captain was finished he was already dressed in his battle uniform, and the captain informed him, "Your tally is in the jade box."

"Dispatch this order immediately: gather all the troops inside the city and station them inside and outside the Forbidden Palace, in case of emergency." Though his face pale, his orders were firm and controlled. "Also, get a fast horse and dispatch this urgent order to all the garrisons: immediately institute a curfew, and if put down any indication of unrest."

"Yes, sir!" The captain received his orders and withdrew. The marshal threw on his uniform and hurried out of the office and mounted a fast horse prepared earlier and led the Imperial Guard in a mad dash for the Forbidden Palace.

Outside it was already daybreak, pale light shining hazily, the open country silent and still, the only sound that of horse hooves smashing against the pale dawn. The open country wind whistled past in the the dim early morning light, and it suddenly hit him.

It wasn't poison. She hadn't poisoned him from the beginning. The words she had spoken were words from a desperate individual making a last effort, but he hadn't yielded. She couldn't kill him so heartlessly, she had only used knockout drops to put him out temporarily so that he couldn't interfere

with her plan.

Your Sister is a really bad person, again requesting something you won't be able to refuse to bind you up, Little Brother. The child is so small, please keep him by your side and treat him and look after him as your own child until he is grown big enough to take care of himself. After he's grown, if he is tyrannical like his father, or if he is weak like his mother, please don't hesitate to dismiss him. Take this world in your hands and—please—do this for me. This life is just like that. But in the next life, I would rather not be rich, in such a high position, wielding power and influence over the rivers and mountains. As long as I can live peacefully and grow old together with my loved one, that's my wish...it's just a pity, Little Brother, that you never understood.

After he had finished reading the letter that Yan'er had secretly delivered, the young marshal smiled bitterly, but shed no tears. The dawn rays of the sun shone through, spreading bright scarlet light over the pale earth.

Officials of all rank and description heard the sad news and hurried over. On the bier lay the empress, splendidly attired, calmly sunk in sleep, her brow no longer wrinkled with worry and struggle, just forever sunk in sleep. Beside her stood her maidservant, holding the crown prince, just over a year old, crying quietly. The empress had treated people gently and kindly; all the palace servants attending her felt in their hearts that she was exceedingly friendly.

But, the youthful empress was dead, leaving the small crown prince an orphan.

Only, I don't want to be empress...A small wooden house would be fine. With an open space in front, where I can grow many kinds of flowers and raise little chickens and ducklings. I'll have a bunch of cute children. I'll wait for them to return every day before the sun sets below the mountain, and we'll sit at the table and eat together food I prepared with my own hands...

So that was Sister's wish? She didn't need the prince's help to realize her dream, which had nothing to do with attaining high rank. It was just the ordinary wish of an ordinary person, a wish that even that little inn servant could have fulfilled. All these fond dreams, shattered. He suddenly understood.

"I'm sorry, Sister. I'm truly sorry...I focused only on helping the Prince of Ning unify the country and put an end to those turbulent times so that everyone could live peacefully. I always thought the crown of the empress was the greatest gift I could give you. But I was wrong—that would never have made you happy, and it ultimately led you down a path from which there was no return. I'm the bad one. And I didn't really do it for your happiness, but for my own beliefs, pursuing worldly things, and using you to help me accomplish it—and I treated the Prince of Ning the same way. So, I'm the real sinner..." As the tears rolled down his cheeks, he paid no attention to the surprised looks of those around him. He took the crown prince from the servant and carefully embraced him and kissed his little forehead. The dawn rays gently enveloped the child's innocent face.

"I hope that in the future, this child won't have to suffer the pain you and I went through; and all his subjects, the officials and the common people, they also won't have to suffer such displacement..." In the gradually brightening dawn, the young

marshal who held military power over Heaven and Earth held the future sovereign as he mumbled to himself before the child's mother's funeral bier—"Child, do you know what life is?"

"The course of a person's life is like a spirit coming to earth, suffering, then dying. But because he works hard, because he suffers so much throughout his life, future generations won't have to..."

Little Soldier's Story

Yang Pan

I am a soldier, a soldier defending the city.

Xiangyang has tens of thousands of soldiers like me. Plenty of them are residents of Xiangyang, but some of them have come from very far away. We all have only one intention: don't let the Mongolians capture Xiangyang.

Xiangyang's most esteemed people are Hero Guo and Lady Guo. These past ten years or so, they have risked death to defend the city. If it were not for them, Xiangyang would have fallen long ago.

Hero Guo is a great man; he never mistreats us. And his wife? I'm not sure, but I feel she wants to hold the city mainly for Hero Guo. When she looks at people, you always feel that she can see through you, making me feel uncomfortable. Hero Guo and Lady Guo have a daughter who is nothing like her parents. She stirs up trouble all the time. One Lunar New Year, she even

let Hero Guo's two disciples throw firecrackers at me. I suspect that she is someone Hero Guo picked up from someplace else.

Everyone says that Lady Guo is the most beautiful woman in Xiangyang. I don't dare say it, but in my heart there is one still more beautiful than her, a girl who sells hot noodle soup on the east side, called Moli.

Moli is eighteen this year, three years my junior, but she's about the same height. When she laughs, her eyes are like two crescent moons. Moli is cordial to everyone, unlike Lady Guo, who always keeps a certain distance from us soldiers. Every morning I like to go to the east side to have a bowl of noodle soup. If I'm on duty, I go in the evening. I've gone so often that Moli knows me.

"Why do you come so far just for a bowl of my noodles? Do they not sell noodles on the west side?" She would ramble on and on, but I wouldn't answer, silently eating my noodles.

Little by little, she understood. She then gave me more noodles than others, even specially adding a bit of coriander powder. The bright green coriander contrasted with the red hot peppers was really something—just like Moli.

This year, the Mongolians attacked again. One of the princes led the army. I heard his surname was Hu. Nobody cared, though. All these years defending the city, and this Hu fellow thinks he can capture us?

But, when the battle started, it was very difficult. This Mongol army was different from before; it was like each and every one of them was fighting for his life. We fought from the top of the wall as wave after wave charged in, and wave after wave attacked. The bodies piled up by the city walls like a stack of firewood. Maybe one day I will also lie there like a stick of firewood. After the battle, I never went to Moli's stall to eat

noodles. Though in my heart I wanted to go, there was no way to do it; everyone just gritted their teeth and carried on the best they could. Like Second Brother Zhao, who hadn't slept for three or four days.

One day, I was looking down through the arrowslit when Captain Liu called to me from behind. He said there was someone here who had come to give me something. I looked back and saw that it was Moli! She had brought hot noodle soup all the way from the eastern side of the city to the western side of the city to see me. From the east side all the way to the west side, such a long distance!

I lowered my head, and bite by bite ate my noodles, my tears dripping down into the soup and blending with the green coriander powder and bright red hot peppers. Before Moli left, she said, "I don't care about the others, but you must survive so you can come back and eat my noodles." I nodded and promised I would.

Three days later, some people arrived in the city. One was a youth by the name of Yang, and the other was a girl dressed all in white.

When everyone saw the girl, they all said she was an immortal maiden. They were right, but Moli is the only immortal maiden for me.

As soon as that Yang fellow arrived, he performed an extraordinary service by saving Hero Guo on the top of the city walls. Everyone said he was unbelievably extraordinary. But, I felt there was something about him I couldn't put my finger on that made people sad to look at him. Every time he looked at the girl beside him, it was like he was looking at someone he would never see again—the same look Moli gave me that day on top of the city wall. I had a strange thought: his whole life was lived

for this girl, and he would end up dying for her.

And me and Moli? If we didn't have these hindrances, would we be able to live together until we're both white-haired and old? In the midst of the smoke and flames of war, I inwardly ask myself these questions. But I don't have a definite answer.

Several days later, Hero Guo's two stupid disciples were captured while trying to assassinate the Mongol commander. At first, it wasn't such a big loss; Xiangyang was now rid of two good-for-nothings, and we could go on defending as usual. But Hero Guo wanted to rescue them personally. No Hero Guo, no Xiangyang. And everyone knew it. But he still had to go. Such is the lot of the hero. And that young Yang fellow went with him.

I don't know why he went with him. Because he had saved Hero Guo once, everyone believed that he could save him again? I watched quietly as they left. When I saw the youth's eyes, I suddenly felt lighter. That look was not the look of someone who was going to his death. That look was instead brimming with hope. After that, I thought they would return.

And they did return, only wounded. I was the first to discover them, because at that time I was on guard duty, still watching the main road, scanning as far as I could see into the distance, because I still believed they would return safely.

The doctor said that if it had been fifteen minutes later, they would have been in serious danger.

For the first time in my life I felt proud. I had saved Hero Guo, which was tantamount to saving all of Xiangyang—tantamount to saving Moli. Lady Guo was also very grateful. She had me promoted and transferred down from the city wall. She said to wait until her husband's wounds had healed and then he would thank me personally. I thought, this time I should be able to

live and go eat Moli's noodles.

The next day, early in the morning, a fire alarm was raised within the city. The place that was on fire was none other than Hero Guo's residence. I grabbed a bucket and ran over to his house. Hero Guo's wounds had not yet healed, and if there should be some mishap then Xiangyang was done for—and also Moli.

The fire wasn't large, but the flames were intense; it was clear someone had intentionally started the fire. From within the dense smoke came the sound of swords clanging. The enemy was attacking. I was just thinking how I could go in there and rescue Hero Guo when my body suddenly went numb and I was being carried away on someone's shoulders, and a hat was placed on my head. It was that young guy, Yang! He had given me a hat to put on, Hero Guo's hat. I knew what he had in mind.

His plan was correct. Hero Guo was Xiangyang's savior, and me, I was just a plainclothes soldier of no importance. No one would care whether I lived or died—except Moli.

The enemy had really come. I heard the sound of their fighting. Suddenly, I heard a sound and something sharp cut across my back, followed by a burst of intense pain. He carried me on his back and ran a few steps, and then I heard someone say in a gloomy voice, "Surrender, boy!" Then, "Here is Guo Jing!" He handed me over to the enemy, and then his foot lashed out and kicked me and the enemy soldier off the wall.

The person still holding me said in a loud voice, "I've caught Guo Jing! I'm Mongolia's greatest warrior!" Then two people grabbed my hands and feet. The three people vigorously pulled.

In a daze, I faintly heard Moli's voice... "I don't care about the others, but you must survive so you can come back and eat my noodles."

Cheat

Wen Rui'an

Liang Jia leaned on his sword, guarding He Lihuo's coffin.

"Lowlife" martial arts expert "Hate-Transmitting Shooting Sword" He Lihuo and "Tranquility Gate" hitman "Meteor Butterfly Sabre" Liang Jia had a deep hatred for each other. They had fought fiercely for a long time already, and all along the two had been evenly matched, each with his own strengths and weaknesses. In forty years they had dueled fifty-three times with neither side emerging the victor. They fought until they both realized that neither would be able to defeat the other, that if they continued to fight, it would always end in a draw. So, they decided to make peace with each other and stop fighting.

Because they had been opponents for so long, they really understood each other. Once they stopped fighting, they changed from enemies to friends, and became close friends and really admired each other. They became aligned together,

and grew closer aligning themselves against a common enemy and helping each other out when needed. They became sworn brothers.

In fact, often enemies have a lot of strong points that you fear and respect, and you loathe your enemy's shortcomings. But once your enemy has become your friend, his strong points are a benefit, and his weaknesses become lovable characteristics.

Now, He Lihuo and Liang Jia were already too old, not as strong and able-bodied as they had once been, yet they had teamed up to resist an enemy; two fighting together is better than one.

"I really regret fighting with you for so many years. I went half my life without such a great friend!"

"If we had become friends sooner, then we wouldn't have been roused into practicing and improving our martial arts so we could defeat each other."

"My only regret is we never settled who was the better between us!"

"And that's why the martial fraternity is in turmoil, and there is more bloodshed in the rivers and lakes."

"It's also why we fought in vain for forty years."

"So, I never want to know the answer!"

After saying this they both roared with laughter and drank and sang boisterously until late in the night.

Soon after, "Hate-Transmitting Shooting Star Sword" He Lihuo received a challenge from the three brothers "Hatchet Clan" Yu Zhong, Yu Yong, and Yu Mei. In the letter they demanded that He Lihuo hand over his "Shooting Star Sword Skill Manual" or else he would be killed without mercy. He Lihuo immediately informed Liang Jia, only then learning that Liang Jia had been injured while fighting the "Divine Spear"

Sun Family's "Heaven-Sustaining Spear" Sun Taida, and he had not yet recovered from his serious injury, so He Lihuo was left to take on the "Yu Family Three Heroes, Ten Tails and Nine Fiends" by himself.

The outcome was violent beyond comparison.

The Yu brothers were fierce and cruel, their martial arts outstanding. He Lihuo managed to wound all three and force a retreat, but he was bloodied all over in the process, and by the time Liang Jia and his other disciples and close friends arrived, he was already on the verge of death. Just before he died, he told Liang Jia:

"Promise me one thing."

"Go ahead."

"After I die, the Yu family will certainly come to desecrate my corpse in order to get the sword skill manual. If you can protect my body until it's buried, I already told my son Bo'er to give you the 'Shooting Star Sword Skill Manual.'"

After saying this, He Lihuo died.

Liang Jia didn't wait for He Lihuo's body to be buried—he only waited for He Lihuo to be put in a coffin, and the He family and friends had dispersed, and then he began questioning He Lihuo's son He Bo'er, "Where is the 'Shooting Star Sword Skill Manual' hidden?"

Of course, He Bo'er didn't answer.

But, he was no match for his father's mortal enemy.

So, he was beaten until he was hovering between life and death.

"I'll talk...the sword skill manual is hidden in the coffin...under father's body..."

Liang Jia, too impatient to wait, hurried to go open the coffin.

But the three Yu brothers chose that same time to launch an

attack.

Liang Jia fought back. He used his sword to defend the coffin, never retreating, never yielding, fighting to the death.

Yu Zhong, Yu Yong, and Yu Mei still had their wounds from before, and they were not Liang Jia's enemy, so seeing that the situation was bad, they promptly retreated.

But, Liang Jia was also wounded; his injuries were not light.

Gasping for breath and dripping blood, he hurriedly opened the coffin, and with one hand searched around underneath the body looking for the sword skill manual. Suddenly, the dead man opened his eyes and smiled at him.

Then, a sword stabbed him between the eyes.

Of course, a dead man can't smile.

And can't draw a sword.

And really can't open his mouth and say words like this:

"I'm not dead. I was just waiting for you to open the coffin to receive my sword. Since we've already fought for forty years, how can we say 'stop fighting' and then stop fighting? Today, I'm the winner."

He didn't know if Liang Jia heard his words before he died.

But, the three Yu brothers who had pretended to leave, but were actually hiding, waiting for an opportunity to strike, heard it loud and clear.

Brother, Lend Me Your Head

Wen Rui'an

When he woke, the water in the stream beside him was still red, his lips pale white like the belly of a dead fish.

This was already the seventh time.

He wanted to kill that great evil of the martial fraternity, that evil person among the rivers and lakes, "Evil Consumes the World" Jin Jiu Jian, but there had been many barriers to get past: "The Unstoppable" (Jin Jiu Jian's treasured only daughter Jin Pozhu, whose martial arts was excellent, and who charged into battle like an irresistible force), "Two Startled Stones" (Jin Jiu Jian's two sworn younger brothers, who were masters of "Stone Startling Magic"), "Three Possessed Demons" (Jin Jiu Jian's three personal guards, nicknamed "The Three Demon-Possessed Monsters"), "Four Spirits" (Jin Jiu Jian's four disciples, each skilled in the four strange skills: "Spirits Can't Guard Their Minds", "Divine Light Separates and Returns", "Spirits

Appear and Ghosts Vanish", and "Spirit and Soul Lost Their Way"). There's no way a person can get past them.

In order to kill the degenerate head of the "Hidden Sect" Jin Jiu-jian, he first had to get through, one by one, "The Unstoppable", "Two Startled Stones", the "Three Possessed Demons", and the "Four Spirits". Only then could he get revenge on the supreme master who killed his father and exterminated his clan.

Song Xiaoqian had already tried seven times.

Seven times without success.

He had also been wounded seven times—seven times on the brink of death; but he hadn't died, purely by luck.

This time he had survived, but it made Song Xiaoqian come to a revelation: Since he couldn't kill his archenemy, it would be better to convert an enemy into a friend.

Song Xiaoqian had this change of heart, but his older brother Song Hushan was unaware of it.

Song Hushan still wanted to kill Jin Jiu-jian in order to avenge his father.

Song Hushan and Song Xiaoqian arranged to kill Jin Jiu-jian, but Song Hushan's martial arts was better, and he first wounded "Four Spirits", and attacked "Three Demon-Possessed Monsters", and was locked in combat with the "Two Startled Stones" when Song Xiaoqian approached him from behind and with one stroke of his sabre cut off his older brother's head, muttering something all the while.

Jin Jiu-jian was surprised, and when he asked the reason, learned that Song Xiaoqian had joined them, killing his brother to show where his allegiance lay. Jin Jiu-jian felt he was sincere, and so admitted him to the sect, though with caution. In the next five years, Song Xiaoqian performed many feats and

achieved much distinction for Jin Jiujian's "Hidden Sect", and he won the heart of Jin Pozhu, and he also earned Jin Jiujian's trust. After he and Jin Pozhu married, Jin Jiujian gradually entrusted most of the important work in the "Hidden Sect" to Song Xiaoqian. Meanwhile, everyone asked him what he had said when he had "put righteousness before family" and killed his elder brother. Song Xiaoqian just smiled and said nothing.

Later, Song Xiaoqian sent the "Four Spirits" on ahead on some errand and had them ambushed and killed. Then, he set up a plan to force the "Three Demon-Possessed Monsters" to leave, and then planted seeds of distrust toward the "Two Startled Stones" in Jin Jiujian's head, making him think they were going to mutiny, and used that as a pretext to have them killed. Finally, he drove Jin Pozhu mad and had her secretly imprisoned. Then, he arranged an appropriate night and exchanged the sword Jin Jiujian always wore at his waist. Then, when he and Jin Jiujian were drinking one day, he drew his sword.

Because of the anesthetic placed in the wine, Jin Jiujian was incapable of dodging, and Song Xiaoqian with one stroke chopped off his arm. Jin Jiujian went to draw his sword, but was surprised to find it wasn't his sword, and Song Xiaoqian again brandished his sword and cut off the other arm.

"You...!" Jin Jiujian gasped. "How can you do this to me?"

"For justice, for revenge, I wouldn't hesitate to do anything to get rid of a great villain! Do you know what I said that day when I cut off my brother's head?" Song Xiaoqian, hatred filling his chest, said, "I told him: 'Brother, lend me your head! Without your head I won't be able to hack off that dog head of Jin Jiujian!'"

"Oh, so it's all for justice! You say I am a villain. I trusted you, and you treat me like this! I've done evil all my life, but it's all

nothing compared to your diabolical tricks!" Jin Jiu Jian smiled bitterly. "In the end, who is the evil one? Aren't you afraid that someone will avenge me?"

Crescent Moon Sabre

Chen Zhiyu

It was pouring down rain.

The blue-cloth bundle was very old, faded to its original white in places from repeated washings, but still immaculate. A pair of hands slowly opened the bundle and took out the sabre inside.

“Marvelous! It really is a marvelous sabre. Wonderful shape, sharp edge. A cold draft when drawn from the scabbard, but upon closer inspection there is yet a trace of a deadly aura. I wonder what it’s like to wield it?”

“Brother, why don’t you try it?”

“Try it?”

“Of course, try it.”

Pallid light gleamed, along with an oppressive deadly aura and then he was off.

“Really a marvelous sabre! When I began swinging it I felt a faintly uncontrollable feeling come over me. I think even

'Vanishing Blade' Huang Qiujiang's 'Bright Spirit Sabre' is no match for this."

"Brother, have you ever seen Vanishing Blade Huang Qiujiang?"

"Not yet. This time I'm scheduled to duel him three days from now."

"Have you seen his precious 'Bright Spirit?'"

"Huang Qiujiang's Bright Spirit is known as 'Divine Vanishing Blade'. Once drawn it will taste blood. Everyone who's seen it has died under it. So I've had no chance to see it as of yet."

"I see."

"Brother, this sabre is certainly a divine weapon as well!"

"Brother, do you know its origin?"

"It's shaped like a crescent moon so it must not be from the Central Plains."

"Brother, you have good eyes. This sabre is from Persia. Because of its shape it's called Crescent Moon. I'm the fourth generation to possess it. The family elders have all regarded it as a rare treasure. Heaven has blessed me, for today I have finally found a worthy owner."

"Brother, what do you mean?"

"Haven't you heard that a fine colt must be given to a famous scholar, and rouge and powder must be presented to a beautiful lady? Just now I noticed your dignified bearing; I presume you are no ordinary man and can tell you are a man of great talent and bold vision. You will do great things in the future. So I shall present this to you, sir. I do have the seven sabreplay forms passed down to me, but I have not mastered them. It was fate that we met today, and it is a cause for celebration for this sabre to obtain a worthy owner. We should drink to it."

"How can that be? Brother, don't joke around."

"Who's joking? I mean it from the bottom of my heart. I, Yu Shizhi, am an unaccomplished scholar and an inadequate martial artist. What good is it to have such a precious sabre?"

"Brother, you're still a man of the wulin."

"How can you tell? By the callouses on my fingers?"

"Not only that. Just now I saw your gait is steady, your eyes keen and bright, and your voice is clear and full of energy. Of course you possess consummate skill."

"No, no, it's an insult to call it 'consummate skill'. I had thought after decades of diligent training I would have some skill, but I duelled with my fellow disciples and lost all three times. I don't dare call myself a man of the wulin any longer."

"Brother, that's where you're wrong! Who has never tasted defeat? That one time, when Great Xia Chu Heng first appeared, he lost thirty-seven times straight. Until he was fifty-five and defeated Battle Tiger Feng Lingling on Mt. Muyang. Didn't he go down in history? Brother, you're only forty, the prime of life. No need to worry that you won't have a chance to make a name for yourself!"

"How can I compare to Great Xia Chu? Ah, I have no talent. Tomorrow I will retire to the mountains. There's only one thing I couldn't rest easy about, and that's this sabre. Giving it to you today, brother, will free me of this worry."

"How can I accept such a precious sabre?"

"Don't be so polite. If I'm not mistaken, you are the number-one bladesman, Luoyang's Sunchaser Leng Hongjun?"

"I'm nothing special. I can't accept the designation of number one."

"Brother, why so modest? At the Battle of Broken Eye Lake your 'Sunchaser' defeated Sabre God He Lihuo. I've been in awe of you a long time. To meet you by chance today is my

good fortune. If I don't give Crescent Moon to you, then even if I scour the world, who could I find more worthy of it?"

"How can this be? The number one under Heaven is 'Vanishing Blade' Huang Qiujiang. Besides, this sabre is your family heirloom. You will need it to make a name for yourself later on!"

"Are you refusing because you look down on me?"

"I would never."

"You look down on the sabre?"

"Brother, what kind of talk is that?"

"If it's not this and it's not that, then what is it? In that case, I might as well have not met you in the first place."

"Brother, hold on. Brother, wait. Brother, what are you so upset for? I accept, I accept."

"So you do hold me in some esteem? Alright. Now this sabre belongs to you. I hope you use Crescent Moon when you square off against Huang Qiujiang and become famous with one stroke. But, Brother, this Crescent Moon does have a slight flaw. Can you tell what it is?"

"Oh? A rare treasure such as this has a flaw?"

"This sabre is two feet, three inches long, three inches wide. The spine is three-tenths of an inch, the hilt seven inches long, the crossguard one and a half inches thick and five inches wide. Studded with small diamonds. Weighs eight catties, seven ounces."

"Where's the flaw?"

"On the blade edge. Brother, take a look."

Leng Hongjun lowered his head and craned his neck to inspect it closely. "Yu Shizhi" turned his wrist and a pallid light flashed up violently from his hand. Blood spurted and Leng Hongjun's head came off light and quick, no blood staining the

edge of the blade.

“With your skill with a sabre, how could I take your life so easily except by luring you with a famous sabre? Blame yourself for not being able to ignore formalities and for being moved by covetous thoughts.” Huang Qiujiang spoke these words matter-of-factly, then returned ‘Bright Spirit’ to its scabbard and turned and walked out of the ship cabin and hopped in a skiff and shuttled away swiftly.

The rain had not yet ceased.

Sand's End

Author Unknown

There is a place called jianghu.

When my woman said this to me her eyes twinkled, like a circling eagle high over the vast desert. She said she'd come from the jianghu. She passed by my tent on her horse and stopped and became my woman.

Follow the seven stars that form the dipper and leave the vast desert and you will return to the place she'd come from, a place called jianghu.

I followed those seven stars that form the dipper, carrying my woman's sword. There were several very fine scars on the sword, like her face. She said the scars were from the wind-blown sand off the desert. She said the outer world was totally different from here. When I was little I told myself the same thing. Back then I was shouldering a travel bag and leading a camel. But every time I tried to leave the result was the same,

just more and more desert. Later, my woman came. She said beyond the desert was a place called jianghu. So, I resolved to leave.

On my third day out I met someone. Every once in a while he would hunt a wolf and come see me. He had thin arms and legs, not like someone from around here. He said he was waiting for an eagle with a peach blossom in its mouth to alight on his shoulder. He said if he could wait til then, that girl from his hometown would never leave again. One time I asked him is your hometown the jianghu? He was taken aback for a second, then laughed. My woman came over and tousled my hair, her manner soft and gentle.

That night, he stood watch by the bonfire, looking up into the sky, refusing to sleep. In the dark I heard my woman ask him, "How much longer can you wait?"

He said, "Until the day the miracle happens. Even if it's a thousand or ten thousand years."

My woman said, "Don't fool yourself. Who can wait a thousand years?" Then, I heard him laugh. His laugh was bold and unrestrained, like a local.

"Where are you headed?" he called to me.

"I'm leaving here. My woman told me her hometown is the jianghu. I'm going back with her to take a look." I smiled as I told him this.

"Her?" He looked at me and confirmed she was not hiding behind me.

"Here." I drew my woman's sword for him to see. He took one look and laughed.

He said, "That's a good woman."

Then we sat together in silence for a while. He took out a dagger he carried with him and handed it to me. He wanted

me to help him shave his beard. He looked good clean-shaven. Then he asked me, "I'm going to hunt wolves."

I never saw him again after that. I didn't think anything of it. Every day in the desert sheep, horses, and wolves go missing. Of course, people too. We're used to it. I think he knew it too. Because he never asked me to wait for him.

Later, I found a dagger half-buried in the sand. It looked familiar. I had once used it to shave the beard of a man who was waiting for a miracle. But now it was abandoned, alone in the yellow desert sand.

I believe people sometimes have premonitions. Like perhaps he had expected that to be his final departure. But he couldn't not go out wolf hunting and let himself starve to death, just like I couldn't race back from another clan in one night to be with my woman and take her away from here. I know that's what is called "not of one's own volition".

Two days later I came upon two people fighting. From their dress, one was a bandit, the other an outsider. I soon heard the outsider begging for mercy in a lowly manner. I turned to look at him. But as soon as I turned the bandit collapsed, a sabre stuck in his back, run right through the other side of his chest.

The outsider asked me how to get out of the desert. I said I wasn't sure of that myself. He said, "Then's let's go together." His face was stained with the bandit's blood. His smile was filthy. He asked me why I was leaving and I said I was going to a place called jianghu. Again he flashed me that dirty grin, then told me he was the head of a gang. He said he was quite renowned, and he also said he was very honest and brave. I smiled too. Because from start to finish he never said he was from the jianghu. Whether he had forgotten or he really was not from there, either way I was happy.

We had no food that evening so we had to sleep on empty stomachs. I heard the faint tinkle of camel bells, then felt someone strangling me. It was that starving-mad outsider. I held my woman's sword tightly, resisting uselessly...

When I woke it was already light and I was on the back of a camel, sword still in my hand. The outsider was gone, but someone was leading the camel out in front. Those bells I had heard had not been a dream after all, but had really been close by.

I moved. He heard me but didn't turn back. He asked me, "Awake?" I grunted yes. Then he took me back to my home, naturally still in the desert. He gave me some food. He looked really old, but his voice didn't sound old at all.

The "old man" asked me why I had clutched my sword so tightly but didn't draw it, nearly dying under that outsider's hands. I said because my woman was there. He laughed. When he laughed the look in his eyes was like my woman.

That evening back then, in my arms, my woman's soul entered her sword...

"You're not from the desert?" I asked him. He nodded and drank a bowl of wine. "Why did you come here?" I drank, thinking I'd asked too much.

He thought for a moment, then smiled wryly. "Because I'm lonely."

I had nothing to say to that. After a while he suddenly said, "I've learned it's even more lonely here. But I can't go back..."

Then, he began drinking more. Talking more. He said, "I used to always think that no sound in the world could escape my ears. But I could not hear my wife's heart breaking. She took our daughter who was not yet a month old and left me. There was a huge sandstorm that day. As soon as she opened the

door the wind and sand blew in and scraped my daughter's face, leaving bloody scratches. My daughter didn't cry. I listened to her young, tender laughter recede into the distance.

"Later, I went to look for my wife. I gave my daughter a sword as a present for her first birthday. My wife threw the sword into the lake without so much as a second glance. She passed away fifteen years ago. I heard she was submerged in the lake for three days and suffered a lot of hardship. Later on, a swordswoman appeared in the jianghu. Her face and sword were both faintly scratched. She had many suitors, but she said if one day an eagle with a peach blossom in its mouth alighted on the shoulder of a man, she would go with him. Her tone was just like her mother's. But she disappeared before that miracle took place. Some said she went into the desert..."

The "old man" talked on and on, becoming more and more incoherent until I could no longer make out what he was saying. He drank as he talked, pouring cup after cup into his belly. I think he was drunk.

That evening I recalled clearly the first time I met my woman. It was outside my tent during a big sandstorm. The peach blossom in her hair was blown off and my eagle swept down and picked it up in its mouth and returned to my shoulder. She stayed from then on...

The next morning the old man's body was already cold. The smell of alcohol on him had not dispersed. I recalled a phrase my woman had taught me: "living as if drunk, dying as if dreaming". She smiled as she said those words. So I felt living as if drunk and dying as if dreaming was happiness. I asked the "old man" are you happy? He didn't answer, but I saw the corners of his mouth were frozen in a smile.

I continue on my way. Following the seven stars that form

the dipper. Today is the ninth day. The yellow sand before me extends endlessly. My woman once told me, "Leave this desert—there's a place called jianghu..."



About the Author

Guan Zhong is a writer, translator and editor living in Taiwan. You can read his other translations at volare novels or visit his personal blog at the links below:

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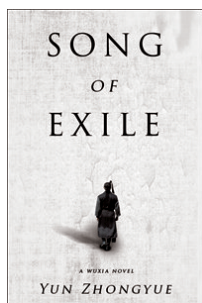
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Song of Exile

<https://volarenovels.com/song-of-exile/>

Born under a bad sign, little Cai Wenchang is blamed for an epidemic that killed his parents and over a hundred of his kinsmen in Cai Family Village.

Bullied, beaten, under-clothed and underfed, forced to work hard day in and day out, he ekes out a living the best he can.

A chance encounter with an old freak sets off a chain of events that will change his fate.

Having taken all the torment he can take, Wenchang decides to enter the jianghu and join the ranks of society's seedy underbelly. He will walk his own path and show them that he is not a helpless lamb, that the years of abuse he received have been carved into his bones and engraved in his heart.

But once you enter the jianghu, it is not so easy to get out...



The Sketch Artist

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A battle of skill between police and criminal suspects, the only weapon a pencil! See how these young Chinese investigators use intelligence and conviction to restore truth to the world.

One Portrait. Twenty-four sketches. Over ten thousand drafts. More than thirty brutal murders. A single trace of evidence, dozens of tests, over a thousand inferences, six cunning suspects and unique situations...In *The Sketch Artist*, police sketch artist Zhang Chi and trace specialist Gu Shi walk hand in hand down a dangerous road, confronting a diabolical, hidden villain. Close comrades-in-arms or intimate lovers, when facing life or death it's all instantly insignificant.

But can these ardent young officers win the respect they deserve? When deadly peril strikes will they have the courage to respond? Can these closely-joined lovers rely on their remarkable special skills to defeat the hidden murderer? Wait and see...