

Foxs' Wuxia

Wuxia Fan Translation

SDXL Chapter 36



Chapter 36 – The Birthday Celebration

Translated by Foxs



The Ghosts released the fireworks one by one, and they formed a string of characters that read, “Wishing the Second Miss Guo prosperity and longevity!” Each character had its own color and they stayed afloat for quite some time. Everybody cheered.

The following day was the beginning of the Heroes’ Summit. Guo Xiang had decided not to join the feast, so Huang Rong had instructed their kitchen workers to prepare some food for her to have her own feast. Guo Fu had been musing for several days on the possibilities as to how her husband would win the Beggar Clan Chief position, so her sister’s special feast was very far from her mind.

The Heroes' Summit continued for the next several days. Among other things, they discussed plans on how to unite the valiant and patriotic men and women across the country; plans on how to disrupt the Mongolian troop's swift movements, and plans on how to reinforce Xiangyang's defenses. Everything was properly discussed. The attendees were itching to fight the enemy; they were impatient to slaughter the arriving enemy troops. Guo Jing was happy to see the group's boldness even though he was aware of the strength of the Mongolian army for a long time; definitely not the match for these several thousands Jianghu people. Hence he could not avoid feeling anxious.

The Summit was concluded on the twenty-fourth of the third month, with a very satisfactory result. Just before the closing ceremony, everybody agreed to have the Beggar Clan Chief's election around noon that very same day. And so it was, right after lunch, everybody headed toward the field used for military exercises on the west side. Upon arrival, they all saw a huge stage located right in the middle of the field. On and around the stage nothing was set, not a single chair. This was in accordance to the Beggar Clan rules and regulations, no matter how big or how small a meeting was, beggars could not lose their identity by sitting on chairs. Toward the south of the stage there were hundreds of chairs prepared for 'outsiders'.

Before one o'clock there were more than two thousand Clan members sitting around the stage. They were the higher level members of the clan. The lowest grade was the fourth. According to the Clan bylaws, these two thousand some members were under the direction of four elders.

There were originally four Elders of the Beggar Clan, namely Elder Lu, Elder Jian, Elder Liang and Elder Peng. Lu Youjiao was promoted to be the Clan Leader, but met a tragic end just recently. Elder Peng had become a traitor and was killed by the Monk Ci'en. Elder Jian had died due to his old age and ailments. Therefore, Elder Liang held the highest position in the Clan. He had three eighth grade disciples as the newly appointed Elders assisting him.

The beggars ushered thousands of valiant men and women from the Heroes' Summit to the chairs. Yelu Qi and his wife Guo Fu, Wu Dunru and his wife Yelu Yan, Wu Xiuwen and his wife Wanyan Ping and the other younger generation sat towards the back. They had trained hard for more than ten years and had achieved significant improvements; they secretly wondered if they would have any opportunity to show off their skills in front of the several thousands heroes that day.

Guo Polu was sitting next to his eldest sister, watching this magnificent setting with awe. He whispered, "Second Sister is so weird. Why doesn't she come and attend this

meeting?”

“What’s inside that ‘Little Eastern Heretic’s’ mind, nobody can guess,” Guo Fu snickered.

In not too long, an eighth grade disciple toward the east side stood up and blew a giant shell horn, “whooh ... whooh ... whooooo ...!” It was the signal that the appointed time had come (it was between one and three in the afternoon).

While the sound of the horn was fading away, Huang Rong leaped on stage and bowed in all directions. She then began her oration with a loud and clear voice. “Today is the big meeting day of our clan. On behalf of the Beggar Clan, I would like to extend our gratitude and respect to all Seniors and Heroes who have made the effort to join us here.” She then bowed one more time, and the guests reciprocated.

“Our beloved leader, the late Chief Lu, was a wise and patriotic man, who devoted his life to the clan and our nation,” Huang Rong continued. “Unfortunately, he was cowardly attacked and killed by that scoundrel Hou Du at the Yang Tai Fu Temple over the hill yonder. This is an un-avenged deep resentment, not mentioning great disgrace to our Clan ...”

These words created loud response from the Beggar Clan members. They remembered Lu Youjiao’s benevolent heart, his impartiality and his patriotism. They were very saddened by his death. Some were sobbing loudly, while the others cursed Hou Du uncontrollably.

After the commotion subsided, Huang Rong continued, “By keeping in mind that the Mongols might attack any moment, we have made the decision not to put our Clan’s need above that of our country. Therefore, we will hold the thought of revenge until a more appropriate time, and we will discuss this matter at length after we defeat the enemies.”

This statement was met by the unanimous approval of the beggars.

“With Chief Lu’s untimely death comes another more pressing matter,” Huang Rong said, “our Clan member’s number in the tens of thousands, scattered across the country. They cannot be left leaderless. Therefore, we have to elect a new Clan Chief, today. We need someone wise and benevolent, who knows martial arts as well as literature, and who will have the love and respect of our entire clan. As to how we are going to

elect such leader, Little sister will have to ask Elder Liang to give us further instructions.”

In another moment Elder Liang stood ready on stage. His hair was silvery-white, but his body still erect and his movements fluid. This Elder was welcomed with loud cheering and applause from the audience. In this gathering of about four or five thousands attendees, the applause resembled the rumble of thunder in the middle of the day.

Elder Liang cupped his fists to thank the people for the applause and after it subsided he said, “Former Chief Huang is exceptionally intelligent. What she just said would not be incorrect. She was just being modest by asking the four elders plus the eight eighth grade members to decide on how to elect the new chief. What ability do we, twelve smelly beggars, have in such an important matter?”

Elder Liang paused for a few seconds. The field was quiet. Everybody was straining their ears to hear what this Elder had to say.

After sending his penetrating gaze across the field, Elder Liang continued, “In our humble opinion, even though the beggars are good for nothing, we do have a great number of members scattered throughout the country. As Former Chief Huang has mentioned, we cannot afford to be without a leader. We need a leader who is wise, benevolent and highly skilled in martial arts and literature. We believe with all of our hearts, that leaders like Former Chief Hong Qigong and Former Chief Huang are one in a million. Leaders like the late Chief Lu, who was loved by all of us. These are not easy to duplicate. Therefore, after a long and careful deliberation, we came to conclusion that the best course to take is to ask Former Chief Huang to get her feet wet and again lead our Clan.” Speaking to this point he paused again because the audience burst out in cheers and applause, even louder than the previous one. The audience thought, “A talented person of Huang Rong’s caliber is not easy to find in the world, let alone within the Beggar Clan.”

Elder Liang waited for the applause to subside; then he continued “If she refuses, then we’ll have to ask again and again. Unfortunately for us, we have a bigger problem threatening our country. The Mongolian armies are attacking Xiangyang and, as a devoted wife as well as a patriot, Former Chief Huang has to stand by the side of Chivalrous Hero Guo (Guo Da Xia) to defeat the enemy and defend our country. This is a formidable task to bear. Thus, if we bother Former Chief Huang with all the nitty-gritty business of the Beggar Clan, wouldn’t the people across the nation curse us stinky beggars until our deaths? And so, after careful consideration, we have made our final decision: Elect a new Chief.”

Elder Liang's oration was received with nods across the field; the audience thought, "The Beggar Clan truly knows how to place important matters above their own; no wonder they've enjoyed the respect of the Jianghu people for hundreds of years."

"As of now, inside our clan, we do not have someone capable of bearing the burden, and Former Chief Huang herself can not divide her attention for us," Elder Liang resumed, "The only way we could think of was to invite someone outside our Clan to lead us. This special provision has happened before at the Mount Jun Summit, when we elected Former Chief Huang as our new Chief. As you are all aware, Former Chief Huang was not a member of our Clan. Needless to say, I was not alone in voicing our discontent and that resulted in a battle. What was the outcome? Ha-ha...! We were beaten and could not help but be subdued by her. Very fortunate for us, since once Former Chief Huang took the lead, our Beggar Clan has developed into a great Clan like the one you all see today. I remember...I can still see it clear as day...how at the Mount Jun Summit Former Chief Huang was still in her teens. By using a mere stick she beat us four Elders into submission. Ha! Now THAT was what I call a hero!" [the word 'hero' here is Ying Xiong – valiant person, not Xia of Da Xia]

Listening to him, everyone's eyes turned involuntarily to Huang Rong. There were a number among the beggars who had attended the Mount Jun Summit. Their hearts were beating faster, as they saw in their minds what happened there when they were still very young.

"At today's meeting we have the valiant people of the Jianghu world in attendance," Elder Liang continued, "Any one of these valiant people deserves to be our leader. However, with so many valiant people around, we do not know how to pick one. Therefore, again after careful consideration, we twelve smelly beggars, decided on an election method that's less than perfect. The method is this: We would like the heroes to show their skills on this stage. Who's strong and who's weak, will be evident to all."

His speech was received with a soft murmur from the audience in every direction. Elder Liang continued, "But I want to stress one very important point. In today's match, as soon as somebody is touched by an opponent, the match has to stop. If anybody is heavily injured or even dies here, we cannot bear the heavy responsibility. If any of you has any grudge against anybody else, we would ask that you do not try to solve the grudge on this stage. If you ignore this warning, then our Clan does not have any choice but to act accordingly."

Having said this, he again sent his piercing gaze across the field. Elder Liang thought it was necessary to issue this warning, because if blood were involved in the election

process, and valiant people fight violently with each other, then Guo Jing and Huang Rong's effort to unite the country would be in vain. Elder Liang implied that whoever took any advantage to commit murder would be attacked by all the Beggar Clan's members.

The valiant people in attendance today were aware that the Beggar Clan Chief election would be exciting; listening to Elder Liang's speech they began to assess their own abilities. The Seniors, like clan or sect leaders, and those who had a high reputations in the Jianghu world, obviously did not want to fight over the Chief position. They had too many things at stake; not only the shame of defeat, but their reputation as well. Only those forty years and younger were excited and wanted to try. But since there were so many other valiant people around, plus the fact they had to win over the hearts of tens of thousands of beggars, nobody was bold enough to step up. They thought that to compete early meant they had to defeat more people.

After waiting some time, there were still no takers, then Elder Liang shouted, "Except for some Seniors and Heroes who live in seclusion, I can safely say that all the valiant people under the sky are gathered here. Whoever is willing to honor our Clan is welcome to give us a lesson or two. Our own Beggar Clan disciples who think they have some ability are also welcome to step up."

After repeating his invitation several times there came a loud shout; "I am coming!" A shadow was seen jumping on to the stage. The audience was startled. This man was huge, like a giant, maybe over 300 jins; the stage swayed a little bit when he landed. Without showing any respect he put his hands on his hips and said with a loud voice, "I am the Thousand-Jin-Giant, Tong Dahai. I don't want to be Clan Chief, but who ever want to fight let them come."

Everybody laughed. They thought they would enjoy a funny show from this silly giant.

"Brother Tong," said Elder Liang, smiling, "This stage is not a sparring ring. If Brother does not wish to become our Chief, then I would ask that you leave."

Tong Dahai shook his big head, "This is obviously a sparring ring, who said it is not? If you don't want a fight, why did you invite people up here?" Before Elder Liang had a chance to respond, he quickly said, "All right. Why don't you fight me?" Having said this he immediately thrust his fist toward Elder Liang's face.

Elder Liang leaped back, still smiling, "Brother Tong, I am an old man. How could I face your huge fist?"

The giant laughed heartily. With a delighted look on his face he said, “You go away ...” but before he could finish his sentence, a shadow flashed by, and on that stage stood a beggar with ragged clothes.

That beggar was around thirty years of age and had six bags on his back. He was one of Elder Liang’s own grand martial disciples. He was also a rash man that could not contain himself upon seeing Tong Dahai being disrespectful toward his Grand Martial Master. “Brother Tong, you are not worthy to fight my Grand Martial Master,” he said, “Let me accompany you for three stances.”

“Nothing better than that!” the giant shouted, and without asking the beggar’s name, he thrust his fist toward the beggar’s chest, “Watch out!”

The beggar turned his back and “smack!” that fist hit the sack on his back.

Tong Dahai felt his fist was hitting something soft and slippery. “What’s inside your bag?” he asked.

The beggar snickered. “What’s a beggar’s usual catch?” he asked in response.

Tong Dahai was shocked. “Snake ...!” he cried.

“Yes, it’s a snake!” the beggar answered.

Tong Dahai was half disgusted and half furious. He sent another fist toward the beggar’s face. But the beggar was quick. In a flash he leaped high into the air and did a somersault and again turned his back toward the giant.

Tong Dahai was afraid the snake would bite him, or perhaps his fist would hit the snake’s fangs; his movements became awkward since he was trying to avoid hitting the beggar’s back. He delivered a right foot kick instead. The beggar knew the giant was afraid and he wanted to have some fun. While rolling himself on the stage, he quickly took his backpack and placed it on his calf. Actually the snake inside his bag was tame, and it had no venomous teeth, but Tong Dahai did not know this. He was getting anxious because his attacks gave him no desirable results. Suddenly the beggar’s right hand grabbed his chest. “Wu Zixu lifts high the Thousand-Jin-Giant [play of words: ‘wu zi’ means ‘five kids’],” he said, and lifted the giant’s body high in the air.

Because the ‘zi gong’ [purple palace] accupoint on his chest was sealed, Tong Dahai was helpless, and the audience burst into laughter.

“Let him go! Don’t be rude!” barked Elder Liang, but he could not help laughing too.

“All right,” the beggar complied. He let the giant go, and jumping down from the stage, he vanished amongst the crowd.

Tong Dahai’s face was purple with rage; he was embarrassed and angry at the same time. “Stinky beggar!” he cursed, “Come! Let’s fight again with weapons. What good is running away like that? Stinky Beggar! Sickly Beggar!” The beggars just laughed, and nobody paid him any attention.

Suddenly, another shadow leaped in, and when his left foot reached the stage, he staggered like he was going to fall down.

Tong Dahai was reckless, but not wicked. He shouted, “Watch out!” and immediately moved forward to hold the man. It turned out that the man was only pretending. He wanted to show off in front of all the valiant people. He quickly grabbed the giant’s hand, and pushed with the ‘The Heavenly King Falling Down’ move [dao die jin gang]. Tong Dahai’s body was thrown to the ground. The audience looked at that neatly dressed, long eye-browed handsome young man, who was none other than Wu Xiuwen, Guo Jing’s disciple.

Guo Jing – who sat on the front row, was irritated with Wu Xiuwen’s behavior; his countenance changed. And he was not alone. But before he could do anything, shouts were heard from east and west of the stage: “Good martial arts! Let me accept a lesson or two from you!” “What did you do?” “You repaid kindness with rudeness.” Three men had jumped on stage.

At that time, Wu Xiuwen could be regarded as a first class fighter among the younger generation. Not only had he received tutelage from Guo Jing and Huang Rong, but also the Solitary Yang Finger from his own father and martial uncles. Seeing three men on stage, he was delighted. “Let me beat them once and for all,” he thought.

He didn’t want those three to take turns fighting him, so without saying anything he attacked all three of them. Those three had just landed their feet on the stage, and were attacked before they could get a firm footing. No wonder they wavered and could not defend themselves. Xiuwen didn’t give them a chance. Quick as a flash his fists flew around so that those three felt like they were under a heavy rain of fists. They tried to retaliate, but ended up hitting each other. The audience was surprised and impressed. “Guo Da Xia is really a hero without peer,” they thought, “his disciple is so fierce.”

Those three counter-attacked again and again, but still could not get out from under Wu Xiuwen's fists.

Wanyan Ping saw her husband had the upper hand and could not help but feel so proud.

"Of course those three dummies are not Brother Xiuwen's match," said Guo Fu. "Why did he go on stage and waste his energy for nothing? When someone with a really high skill shows up later, wouldn't it be difficult for him to beat them?"

Wanyan Ping was gentle by nature; she only smiled and ignored Guo Fu. Yelu Yan, on the other hand, was more straightforward. She was the sister of Yelu Qi, thus the sister-in-law of Guo Fu. Hearing Guo Fu's remark –she understood very well what it meant– she could not hold her peace any longer. "This situation actually fits you very well," she snickered. "Young Wu beats several people, and when somebody beats him, Dunru will go next and beat some more. And finally my brother will go and beat the rest of the competitors. Then Sister-in-law can be Mrs. Clan Chief with little effort."

Guo Fu blushed. "There are so many valiant people here, and they all want to be Clan Chief," she said with embarrassment in her voice, "how could you say 'with little effort?'"

"Actually, my brother does not even have to go on stage," Yelu Yan continued.

"Why so?" Guo Fu was curious.

"Didn't you hear Elder Liang?" her sister-in-law asked. "When the Beggar Clan Mount Jun Summit was held, Mistress was only in her teens. Wielding only a bamboo stick she subdued everybody and became the Clan leader. They say 'the apple fell not far from the tree'; Sister-in-law, I think you'd better go on stage. I believe you have a better chance than my brother to be the Beggar Clan Chief."

"Such a sharp tongue! You dare to mock me! Good!" Guo Fu shouted, attacking her sister-in-law's armpit. Yelu Yan leaped backward. "Clan Chief! Help!" she called out, laughing hard. "Mrs. Clan Chief wants to kill me!"

By this time Guo Fu, Xiuwen and Dunru were already over thirty years of age, and Yelu Yan and Wanyan Ping had children. But they still liked to fool around like kids.

In the meantime, Huang Rong – who sat next to Guo Jing, was always alert. She kept looking around the field, to see if any strangers had sneaked in. She had instructed several Beggar Clan members to guard the area and report to her immediately if they saw anything out of ordinary. She was still worried that Shenyong Shitay, Han Wugou, Zhang Yimang and the others would show up and create a disruption. But till the end of eighth hour entering the ninth hour [i.e. around 3-4 o'clock in the afternoon] everything was still under control.

“Why would those weirdoes gather in Xiangyang?” she asked herself. “Something should have been happening by now. It's beyond me that they would come over just to wish Xiang'er a happy birthday.” She lowered her head and sighed. Her intelligence could not penetrate this mystery.

Another time she lifted her head and watched the match on the stage. Xiuwen had defeated two competitors, and looked like the third would not hold him much longer. “Today the valiant people of the world are competing for the Clan Chief position,” she thought, “I wonder who will hold this prestigious position?”

Of course the same question had been hovering in everybody's mind.

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Except ... in the Chinese peony pavilion [shao yao ting] behind the Guo's Family Mansion, there was somebody who did not show the slightest interest in what was happening on the field. She sat alone daydreaming, with many questions in her heart. “That day I gave him one golden needle and specifically asked him to see me today. Today is my sixteenth birthday. That day, he gave me his promise. Why doesn't he show up?”

She was sitting on a porch, leaning against a doorpost. The sun slowly crept to the west. “It's already afternoon. Even if he comes, we will meet for only half a day at most,” she said softly to herself.

She looked at the flowerbeds, while her little fingers held the last golden needle. She sighed and with an almost inaudible voice said again, “I can ask him one last favor ... ah...! I think he has already forgotten me. He doesn't even remember his promise for today. What other favor I could ask?” Another moment later she had another thought, “It's impossible. He wouldn't forget his promise. He is a chivalrous hero (Da Xia) of the world, and he must always keep his word. Just wait ... he'll be here.” With this thought,

her face turned pink and the fingers that hold the golden needle were shaking a little bit.

She sighed again. One thought kept coming back. “Even though he is a chivalrous hero, and he always keeps his word, I am only a young girl,” she thought, heart beating faster. “If he made a promise to Father, he would not fail to keep his word. But to me, I am only the ‘Young Eastern Heretic’ (Xiao Dong Xia) Guo Xiang. What am I worth in his eyes? Only a young girl! It’s very possible that when he remembered his promise, he would only laugh and said: Ah! Don’t bother!”

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While Guo Xiang was busy thinking in the Chinese peony pavilion, Huang Rong, on the field, could not keep her second daughter off her mind. “According to Brother Jing, there were only two persons in this whole wide world who had the internal energy high enough to help Fu’er and Xiang’er back at the Yang Tai Fu temple,” she thought. “If not the Benevolent Master Hong Qigong, then it must be Brother Jing himself. The fact is, the Benevolent Master had passed away, and Brother Jing didn’t do it. Who could it be that invited those strange characters to wish Xiang’er a happy birthday? Old Urchin Zhou Botong loves to fool around, but even he could not make this meticulous plan. Reverend Yideng? Not likely; he is a monk. Western Poison Ouyang Feng and Monk Ci’en Qiu Qianren both have passed away. Could it be ... Father?”

Huang Rong had not seen her father for more than ten years. Huang Yaoshi was like a wandering cloud or a wild crane, roaming Jianghu; nobody knew his whereabouts. She thought the peculiarity of this mystery went well with her father’s character. For a long time the name, Huang Yaoshi, had been well known in the Jianghu world, and people called him the ‘Eastern Heretic’. His peculiar way of thinking went very well with those weird people. So if the ‘Old Heretic Huang’ asked, they would certainly oblige.

Having this thought, Huang Rong’s heart beat faster and her countenance brightened. True, it was not appropriate for a grandfather to make jokes with his granddaughter. But Huang Yaoshi did not follow ‘appropriateness’, the custom and regulations of the day. He was like a heavenly dragon that was out of this world. Huang Rong was his daughter, but even she could not predict what he would do. Could it be that this grandfather had invited guests to congratulate his granddaughter? She held this train of thought and asked Guo Fu. “When she returned from those two days of being missing at Fenglingdu, did she mention Grandfather’s name?”

“No. Sister has never even seen Grandfather.”

“Think hard,” urged her mother. “She left Fenglingdu and went with Xishan Ghosts, did your sister ever mention anybody else?”

“No,” she answered, shaking her head.

Of course Guo Fu knew that her sister went to see Yang Guo. It was all right with her mother, but if her father ever heard that name, he would turn sour and wouldn't talk to her for two or three days. Therefore, while Guo Xiang herself didn't mention Yang Guo, Guo Fu certainly was not willing to look for trouble.

Huang Rong saw her daughter's countenance change and she knew Guo Fu was hiding something from her. “This is not a simple matter,” she said. “If you know anything, you'd better tell me.”

Guo Fu did not dare to hold back anymore. “That day we heard people were talking about the Eagle Hero, which is Yang ... Yang ... Yang Guo,” she said. “After listening to their stories, Sister insisted she wanted to see him.”

Huang Rong was startled. “Did Xiang'er meet him?” she asked.

“Of course not,” came the answer. “If she did, she wouldn't stop bragging about it.”

“Guo'er ... Guo'er ...” mumbled Huang Rong softly. “Is it him?” She turned to her daughter and continued, “Fu'er, what do you think? Was it him who killed Nimoxing at the Yang Tai Fu Temple?”

“How could it be him?” Guo Fu answered, “How could Yang ... Yang Da Ge [big brother Yang] have this kind of martial art?”

“What did you and your sister talk about in the Yang Tai Fu Temple? Tell me all, don't skip anything,” Huang Rong said.

“It was nothing important,” Guo Fu said, “Mei zi [little sister] loves to bicker with me.” And then she narrated how her little sister didn't want to attend the Heroes Summit, didn't want to see the Beggar Clan Chief election, and how she told her that a very handsome hero would visit her on her birthday. Finally, she laughed and said, “Her friends did indeed come to visit. But they are monks, priestesses, grandpas and grandmas. Where is that handsome hero?”

Now Huang Rong was convinced that the handsome hero could not be anybody else but Yang Guo. She thought Guo Xiang and Yang Guo had made an appointment to meet at the Yang Tai Fu Temple, but that plan was foiled by Guo Fu. Then, to vent his anger Yang Guo had invited several Jianghu characters to wish Guo Xiang a happy birthday. “But ... why would he spend so much time and energy just for a kid like Xiang’er?” she asked herself. Suddenly she remembered Guo Xiang’s extraordinary behavior. She remembered how Guo Xiang liked to daydream, talked to herself, and her countenance turned pink for no reason. Huang Rong shuddered involuntarily. Her heart pounding, she thought, “We are doomed! Yang Guo hates me because I caused his father’s death; he hates Fu’er who chopped off his arm, he hates Fu’er even more for striking Xiao Longnu with a poison needle. Xiao Longnu promised to meet him sixteen years later, and now it is sixteen years later. Aiyo! Yang Guo is coming to exact his revenge.”

Once the thought ‘Yang Guo is coming to exact his revenge’ came into her mind, cold sweat trickled down her spine. She knew Yang Guo’s behavior was completely unpredictable; his love for Xiao Longnu was very deep. If he had waited sorrowfully for sixteen years and Xiao Longnu did not show up, he might unleash his anger and frustrations at the Guo family. After sixteen years it would not be enough just to kill Guo Fu; he must have another evil scheme in his mind. “Could it be that Guo Xiang was his target? Making her fall in love with him, then crushing her heart so she would suffer for the rest of her life? Well, with Yang Guo’s personality, that was very possible.” Once she finished her train of thought, she came to a conclusion: Yang Guo killed Nimoxing to save Guo Xiang’s life, then he sent several strange characters to wish her a happy birthday; his intention was to win her heart.

“But ... something is not right!” her brain clicked again. “Today is Xiang’er’s sixteenth birthday. It was several months after Xiang’er was born that he parted with Xiao Longnu in the Passionless Valley. If he wanted to exact revenge, he would’ve waited for a full sixteen years, just like his wife had promised him ... Although this sixteen-year appointment is questionable, that message was obviously her own handwriting. Who can tell if the two of them, husband and wife, will or will not see each other again? But my father ... and the ‘Divine Nun of the South Sea’ [Nan Hai Shen Ni] ...” The longer she thought, the more muddled her mind became. “Ah! Whatever happens, Xiang’er should not be allowed to see him,” she thought. “Xiang’er is just a child, she is too naïve for man’s wickedness.”

Suddenly an “Aiyo!” was heard from the stage. Huang Rong turned her gaze there and she saw Xiuwen’s palm strength had sent a fat monk down from the stage. She approached her husband and whispered, “You wait here. I am going to see Xiang’er.”

“Isn’t Xiang’er here?” asked her husband.

“I will bring her here,” she answered. “That child is a little weird.”

Guo Jing looked at his wife with smile on his face. Wasn’t his wife also a weird child? He remembered the very first time they met, when Huang Rong was dressed like a beggar boy.

Seeing his smile, Huang Rong also smiled, and briskly walked back to her mansion. As upset as she was, seeing her husband’s smile and his broad shoulders – like he was strong enough to carry the burden of the whole world, Huang Rong suddenly felt better.

Arriving at Guo Xiang’s room, she did not find her daughter there; and was told by a maid that the Second Miss went out to the flower garden and said that she was not to be disturbed.

Huang Rong was shocked. “Xiang’er did not want to see the election, I am sure she’s made another appointment with Yang Guo,” she thought. She then turned her steps toward her own room, to get her own steel needle projectiles, slipped a dagger on her waist, and fetched her short stick. Only then did she go to the flower garden. She understood very well that Yang Guo now wouldn’t be the same as the Yang Guo of the past. He was already a formidable opponent then and she would not dare to be careless. She did not take the brick-covered path, but walked stealthily around the decorative stones and rocks scattered throughout the garden. Nearing the pavilion she could hear her daughter’s sigh.

She went closer still and hid herself behind a big rock. A moment later she heard her daughter’s voice, “Why isn’t he here yet?”

Huang Rong was relieved. “Turns out he is not here yet. I can still prevent them from meeting,” she thought.

“Every birthday Mother always tell me to make three wishes,” she heard Guo Xiang was talking to herself. “Good thing there is nobody around; I can talk to Heaven.”

Huang Rong was about to step out, but hearing her last sentence she stayed in her hiding place. “Even though I’m her mother, I can’t predict what is in her heart,” she thought, “let me hear what she has to say.”

A moment later Guo Xiang said, “God of Heaven, my first wish is that Father and Mother will be successful in leading the army and the multitude of valiant people to defeat the Mongolian invaders, so that the people of Xiangyang will live in peace and prosperity.”

Huang Rong exhaled softly. “Even though I call her weird, this child has a benevolent heart,” she praised her in her heart.

“My second wish is that Father and Mother are granted good health and longevity, that they may live to a hundred years,” the young miss continued. “I wish that everything will happen just like they have wanted.”

Guo Xiang was born to her parents when they were facing a great danger. Huang Rong’s heart pounded every time she recalled that incident. Thus, without her realizing it, her love toward Guo Xiang was not as strong as toward Guo Fu. But now, hearing the little girl’s wish, she was very touched and tears welled up in her eyes.

The young miss paused a moment before she continued, “My third wish is for the Eagle Hero Yang Guo ...”

Huang Rong was startled. She had thought that the third wish must’ve had something to do with Yang Guo, but hearing his name, she was still startled. “... that he might meet his wife, Xiao Longnu, a lot sooner, and let them live happily forever,” finished Guo Xiang.

This third wish floored Huang Rong. She originally thought Yang Guo had deceived her daughter with all kind of lies. Who would have known that her daughter knew everything about his marriage to Xiao Longnu and what had happened to them afterward. But a moment later another thought entered her mind and she became worried again. “Damn it, Yang Guo is so shrewd!” she moaned. “By showing her that he had never forgotten his wife, he earned Xiang’er’s highest respect. Right! If after meeting me Brother Jing had ignored Princess Hua Zheng, I would’ve looked down on him.”

And so, because Huang Rong regarded this matter from all possible directions; she became fearful of Yang Guo molesting her daughter. She started to breathe heavily; her own mind had driven her to distraction.

Suddenly an unusual noise was heard above the wall, followed by someone jumping down to the ground. His body was short and small, but his head was big. His figure, as well as his face looked ridiculously strange.

But Guo Xiang leaped with joy upon seeing this dwarf. “Uncle Big Head Ghost!” she greeted him with delight, “Is ... is he coming?”

That man indeed was the Big Head Ghost. He walked to the pavilion and made obeisance to Guo Xiang. “Aiyo!” cried the young Miss, “Uncle Big Head Ghost, don’t you honor me like that.”

“Miss, don’t call me ‘Uncle Big Head Ghost’,” he said, “just call me ‘Big Head Ghost’. The Eagle Hero has instructed me to let Miss know ...”

“He isn’t able to come?” cut in Guo Xiang, desperation in her voice, while tears welled up in her eyes, “He gave me his promise ...”

“No, not at all,” answered Big Head Ghost, repeatedly shaking his big head.

“Why not?” asked Guo Xiang. “Didn’t you know, he did give his promise to me?” Tears almost flowed down her cheeks.

“Miss, I did not say that the Eagle Hero did not give you his promise, or that he is not able to come,” explained the Ghost.

“Just look at you,” Guo Xiang sulked, “You are talking gibberish, not this, not that ...”

The Big Head Ghost showed a faint smile, “The Eagle Hero said that since he had to prepare three gifts for your birthday, he will be a little bit late.”

Guo Xiang was pouting, “Too many people bringing me birthday gifts; I have everything already. Please tell Big Brother not to bother me with any other gifts.”

The Big Head Ghost shook his head. “Among those three gifts, the first one is ready; while the second one has to be prepared by him personally, with some of our friends. It is very possible that it is ready as we speak.”

Guo Xiang sighed. “Actually, I prefer not to receive any gifts, as long as he comes quickly,” she said softly.

“About the third gift, the Eagle Hero said that Miss needs to go to the field where the election is being held. You need to receive the gift straight from his hand,” the Big Head Ghost continued. “Now that it’s almost that time, I think you’d better go.”

Guo Xiang sighed again, and then laughing she said, “I have told Big Sister I don’t want to see the Chief’s Election. But since Big Brother says to go, I have no choice. Very well, let’s go together.”

The Big Head Ghost nodded his big head and then he whistled. Suddenly a dark shadow jumped over the wall from outside, it was none other than the Divine Eagle itself. As soon as Guo Xiang saw it, she immediately went over and tried to hug its neck like they were a pair of long-lost friends. But the Eagle moved back two steps and stood straight arrogantly, turning its head and only looking at Guo Xiang with the corner of its eyes. The little Miss was amused, she laughed, “Brother Eagle is so proud. You are ignoring me, but I want to hug you.” She jumped forward and tried to hug it again. This time the Eagle did not avoid her and let its neck be hugged tightly; but its attitude was like a father’s resignation over a mischievous loveable daughter. “Brother Eagle,” Guo Xiang said, “Let us go together. I will give you some delicious food. Do you like to drink wine?”

The Big Head Ghost clapped his hands. “Good! The Divine Eagle loves to drink wine,” he said.

And so two people and one Eagle ran toward the field. Entering the area the gathered heroes expressed their admiration by clucking their tongues at seeing the eagle’s huge body and its strange appearance.

Guo Xiang invited the Big Head Ghost and the Eagle to sit on the ground not too far from the stage. The Beggar Clan disciples who acted as the hosts immediately came and asked the Big Head Ghost’s name.

“I don’t have a name and I know nothing! Miss Guo brought me here, I follow her!” he answered coldly.

Huang Rong followed not too far behind, she thought, “Yang Guo is going to appear on the field; that means he’s made a thorough plan; we might have a big fight later.”

At that time both Wu brothers, Dunru and Xiuwen, had been beaten. Zhu Ziliu’s martial nephew, as well as three of the Fisherman’s [Si Shui Yu Yin’s] disciples, four eighth grade and six seventh grade Beggar Clan’s disciples, had gone on stage, to defeat and be defeated by their opponents. Right now Yelu Qi was on the stage. He had defeated three opponents, using Zhou Botong’s 72-stance “Vacant Fist” technique, and now was fighting a forty something year old man.

This man's name was Lan Tianhe, a Miao [an ethnic group] from Guizhou. When he was young, Tianhe went gathering herbs in the mountainous area of Sichuan province. There he slipped and fell down a ravine, and was rescued by a skilled martial artist. He then learned from his rescuer the external type of martial arts [wai-gong, as opposed to nei-gong]; as a result, his fists created a loud noise. Yelu Qi's kungfu on the other hand did not create any noise at all; his hands and feet floating silently with fierce attacks interspersed in between. Their match was very impressive.

The opponents had exchanged stances for quite some time. The several hundred spectators who wanted to go on the stage were ashamed by their own inferiority and thought, "Luckily I wasn't rash enough to go on stage; otherwise I am just going to make a scene with my inadequacy. Even if I trained hard for ten more years I won't necessarily be able to defeat either of these two combatants."

Lan Tianhe's strong and forceful attacks required a lot of energy; he felt he was getting tired. Yelu Qi, on the other hand, kept his attacks steady, not getting too fierce, but also not slacking off. He knew there were more tough contenders out there. He wanted to conserve his energy.

After fighting for quite some time Lan Tianhe became impatient; he had roamed the southwest area for over twenty years and nobody was able to withstand more than thirty stances of his attacks. Unexpectedly that day, in front of thousands of heroes, he met his match. Gradually he increased his strength and very soon the two had exchanged twenty more stances.

Lan Tianhe saw an opening in his opponent's defense, "Got you!" he shouted. He used one of his trick stances, 'Nine Demons Seize a Star' [jiu gui zhai xing]. His fist went straight toward Yelu Qi's chest.

Yelu Qi's right palm made a sweeping motion, his hands intersecting, and parried the opponent's fist. They stood motionless for a few seconds. The fight turned into an inner strength contest. Then Lan Tianhe's expression changed; he staggered backward then cupped his fists to his opponent and said, "I concede!" He proceeded to the edge of the stage and loudly said, "Mr. Yelu has a benevolent heart; he didn't want to take my life, for which I am very grateful!" He took a deep breath, shook his head and leaped down from the stage.

Yelu Qi also cupped his hands and said, "I have the same admiration for Lan Xiong [Brother Lan]."

When Lan Tianhe's fist met with Yelu Qi's palm, immediately he sent his inner strength out he felt like his force was hitting water; it felt empty yet not empty, it felt solid yet not solid; and he felt his energy being sucked in. Then he felt his opponent's force entering his hand, flowing to his chest through his arm, and attacking his 'dan tian' like bowls of boiling water. Stunned and feeling like he was going to explode, he nervously tried to pull his fist back, but it was stuck as though glued to his opponent's palm, even after he pulled it back about half a foot. He then remembered his master's instructions that with his "Wind and Thunder" technique he could roam Jianghu, but he had to be very careful fighting against a nei-gong martial artist; as soon as the opponent's energy entered his 'dan tian' he would die violently. As soon as this thought entered his mind he closed his eyes, ready to die. But suddenly his fist was free; the heat in his 'dan tian' was also slowly dispersed. He circulated his 'qi' and did not feel any injury within; then he knew his opponent had shown mercy and spared his life. He felt ashamed and willingly admitted defeat to the public.

When the two fought the long fight on stage everybody could see Lan Tianhe's overwhelming palm strength; it was both swift and fierce. But Yelu Qi unexpectedly defeated him with an invisible force. Nobody knew what exactly happened, but after his victory nobody dared to challenge him on stage.

As Guo Jing and Huang Rong's son-in-law, Yelu Qi had close ties with the Beggar Clan. The four elders and twelve eighth grade disciples all agreed to elect him as the Clan Chief. Yelu Qi was Zhou Botong's disciple, hence all Quanzhen disciples present were his juniors. Because other people regarded Guo Jing, husband and wife, and the Quanzhen Sect with respect, nobody was really keen on challenging him. Several other people who did not realize their own lower skills had come onstage but he defeated them one by one.

Seeing her husband had gone this far, Guo Fu's delight was unspeakable. But then she saw the Eagle and the dwarf with a big head she met at Fenglingdu were sitting next to Guo Xiang; she was startled. When Guo Xiang made her entrance to the field along with the Big Head Ghost and the eagle Yelu Qi's fight with Lan Tianhe was very intense so that Guo Fu's attention was focused on the stage. Although the eagle was impressive, she completely missed their entrance.

Now that a strong opponent had been defeated she wondered, when did her little sister tell her about coming to the field? She was secretly startled, "Not good! Yang Guo's title is Divine Eagle Big Hero [shen diao da xia]; could it be that this big and ugly bird is his Divine Eagle [shen diao]? The bird is here, chances are that Yang Guo is close by. He is going to be the Clan Chief ... He is going to be the Clan Chief ...!"

From a mood of delight, this young mistress became upset. She recalled the incident when Yang Guo bent her sword just using his empty sleeve. She thought, “Brother Qi is good, but he is no match for this one-armed freak. It looks like he is my Black Star (opposing opposite) always appearing at critical moments like this ...!” She looked around in all directions, but not even his shadow could be seen.

The sky was getting darker; Yelu Qi had defeated seven opponents. After waiting for quite some time and since no one appeared to challenge, Elder Liang went up and announced loud and clear, “Master Yelu is intelligent and chivalrous. We all admire him; the whole Beggar Clan supports his election to the Clan Chief position ...”

Immediately the beggars around the stage applauded and cheered.

“I wonder if there is another valiant hero to challenge him?” Elder Liang continued. Three times he repeated himself, but got no takers.

Guo Fu was elated. She thought, “Yang Guo is not coming, he’s lost his chance. If he shows up, even by a moment after Brother Qi is inaugurated as the Clan Chief, he would be too late to mess things up.”

The thought had not even left her mind when suddenly they heard two horses galloping fast approaching the field. It seemed like it was a very urgent matter.

“Ah! He is coming after all!” Guo Fu was shocked.

Two horses dashed onto the field and their riders were two gray-robed spies Guo Jing had sent to scout the enemy’s movements. Even though Guo Jing was watching the election contest, his heart was never far from thinking about military matters. As soon as he saw these riders he thought, “Ah! They are coming after all!”

Guo Jing and Guo Fu, father and daughter thought the same ‘coming after all’ but the daughter meant Yang Guo, while her father meant the Mongolian troops, their enemy.

The two riders stopped their horses several ‘zhangs’ [several meters] from the stage, and immediately paid respects to Guo Jing.

Without waiting for them to open their mouths, Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at their faces, trying to guess what the news would be; but they did not see worried faces. They looked so calm, more on the happy side, like they were bearing unexpectedly good news.

“Please be informed Hero Guo,” said one of them, “the Mongolian troops’ left wing has arrived at Xinye. They are one thousand men strong.”

Guo Jing was shocked, secretly thought, “They are that quick!”

“Also the right wing has arrived at Dengzhou, another one thousand men strong,” the second spy reported.

Guo Jing uttered a ‘Hmm’ and silently thought, “The enemy from the north divided their troops into two flanks, and they moved very fast. Truly a sharp strategy.” Both Xinye and Dengzhou were only 100 li (50km / 31 miles) or so from Xiangyang. From those cities to Xiangyang, the terrain was flat, with no rivers or mountains on the way. They could reach Xiangyang in just one day.

“Something has happened there. Something strange but pleasant to us,” continued the second spy. “The troops at Dengzhou, all one thousand of them, have been killed, including all the officers ...”

“Is that so?” Guo Jing was more amazed.

“That was what I witnessed,” the first spy confirmed. “The one thousand strong troops at Xinye have become ghosts, everybody died. The most peculiar thing was they all lost their left ears!”

“The same thing happened at Dengzhou,” added the second spy, “they also lost their left ears.”

Guo Jing exchanged a look with his wife. They were both surprised and pleased. The enemy was tens of thousands strong, two thousand dead would not make a dent. But the way they died could crush their spirit. Only which troops or who had destroyed the enemy’s two flanking troops?

“What about the defense troops at Xinye and Dengzhou?” Guo Jing asked.

“They were still inside their cities,” came the answer, “We don’t think they were even aware that the enemy’s troops were decimated outside their cities.”

“Now go and give the report to General Lu,” commanded Huang Rong, “I am sure he will be pleased and will give you some reward.”

The two spies nodded and happily retreated.

Huang Rong immediately went on stage and made the announcement, which was received with loud cheering and applause by their entire army.

“The Beggar Clan has just elected a new chief, this is a very pleasing news,” said Huang Rong, “but this news is even more pleasing! Elder Liang, please prepare a feast, we will make a celebration!”

A feast had indeed been prepared; therefore, they were able to move swiftly. Everybody was high in spirits, even Dunru and the others who were defeated during their matches. The Beggar Clan party did not allow tables and chairs, so they just sat on bamboo mats laid out scattered across the field. Although humble, the food and wine were sumptuous.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were repeatedly congratulated. People thought it was their doing. No matter how they denied it, nobody believed them.

“Brother Jing, this is so strange,” said Huang Rong to her husband, “we’ll just ignore them and see what happens.”

Madam Guo then sent eight smart beggars to run to Xinye and Dengzhou to investigate further.

In the meantime, Guo Xiang was still sitting with the Big Head Ghost and the eagle. Nobody dared to come close to them.

“I wonder why Big Brother has not come yet?” Guo Xiang asked.

“He said he will come, he’ll come,” answered the Big Head Ghost. He was just finishing speaking when he suddenly said, “There! Did you hear that? What’s that noise?”

Guo Xiang strained her ears. From a distance she could hear animal noises, loud roars of lions and tigers, loud cries of big monkeys, and the heavy footsteps of elephants.

“The Shi Brothers are here!” Guo Xiang was delighted.

Not too long afterwards everybody could see the beasts. They were shocked and unsheathed their weapons. Panicked voices were heard everywhere, “Where did they come from? Ah! Lions! Tigers! Watch out! Wolves! Leopards...!”

Guo Jing stayed calm. “Go to the city and summon two thousand archers!” he commanded Xiuwen.

”Yes,” Xiuwen complied and was just about to move when suddenly a loud voice was heard, “The Shi Brothers from the Beastly Mountain Village are here to carry out the Eagle Hero’s instructions to wish Miss Guo Xiang a very happy birthday!”

That voice did not come out of one, but from five mouths. The Shi brothers did not have a high level of internal energy, but by combining their voices, they could be heard from afar.

Even though he heard them; Huang Rong still thought that being prepared wouldn’t hurt anything. She signaled Xiuwen to proceed. The Shi Brothers’ intent was not yet clear.

Xiuwen worked fast. In no time he arranged the archers to defend the field in a horse-shoe formation. These archers were under Guo Jing’s coaching. As we remember, Guo Jing himself was a Jebek (master archer – see LOCH). This was also one reason why Xiangyang could defend itself from the Mongolian troops for dozens of years. The archers were not inferior to the Mongolian archers who were well known throughout the world.

As soon as the archers were in formation, a big man appeared. He wore a tiger fur robe, and was accompanied by a hundred large tigers. It was the White Forehead Mountain Lord Shi Bowei. His tigers immediately sat around him in an orderly fashion.

Following him were Caring Eyesight Sage Shi Zhongmeng with his hundred leopards, Golden Claw Lion King Shi Shugang with his hundred male lions, Immortal of Giant Strength Shi Jiqiang with his hundred big elephants, and Eight Handed Monkey Immortal Shi Mengjie with his hundred big monkeys. These five groups of animals then sat around their masters in neat formations. As well-trained as they were, the animals could not be kept quiet. They kept making loud and frightening noises, which made the hearts of the people of Xiangyang tremble.

Each one of the Shi Brothers brought a leather pouch. They approached Guo Xiang and bowed, “We wish you a very happy birthday, good health and longevity!”

Guo Xiang stood up and reciprocated, “Thank you, Shi Uncles! Third Uncle Shi, is your injury healed? Fifth Uncle Shi, how about the sword wound on your chest?”

Shi Shugang and Shi Mengjie were touched, “Many thanks Miss for showing your concern, we are healed.”

Shi Bowei pointed to the five pouches. “These are the first presents from the Eagle Hero to Miss Guo,” he said.

“I really cannot accept it!” said Guo Xiang, giggling. “What are those? Oh, I know! Yours must be a tiger cub, and his is a leopard cub! Am I right? That would be fun!”

“No!” Shi Bowei smiled, “These are the fruits of the great effort of seven hundred Jianghu friends under the leadership of the Eagle Hero!” Then he opened his pouch.

Guo Xiang stretched her neck to see the content, she was startled, “Ears! Human ears...!”

“That’s right!” answered Shi Bowei, “These five pouches contain a total of two thousand Mongolian soldiers’ ears!”

Guo Xiang was dumbfounded, “This many ears, I ... What should I do with all these ears?” she asked.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong had heard everything; they stood up and came near Shi Bowei to see the ears. There in front of them was the proof of what their spies had told them. They were surprised and delighted at the same time.

“Brother Shi,” Huang Rong addressed Shi Bowei, “It turns out the Mongolian troops at Xinye and Dengzhou were destroyed by hero ... Eagle Hero’s troop. Is that right?”

Before answering the Shi Brothers quickly knelt down and paid their respects to Guo Jing and Huang Rong, which Guo Jing and Huang Rong quickly reciprocated. Shi Bowei explained, “The Eagle Hero said that Miss Guo Xiang is in Xiangyang, and today is her sixteenth birthday. The Mongolian barbarians are going to attack, endangering the Second Miss Guo; therefore, they have to be killed. He regrets the fact that the enemy numbers are so great that we cannot destroy them all. However, he has led a number of valiant people to destroy two thousand members of their front line companies.”

“Where is the Eagle Hero at this moment?” asked Guo Jing. “I want to see him and convey the gratitude of the entire Xiangyang population.”

Guo Jing had been so busy defending Xiangyang and training his troops for dozens of years that he had not roamed Jianghu. Therefore, he was not aware that the Eagle Hero was none other than his Yang Guo.

“We apologize on his behalf,” said Shi Bowei, “because the Eagle Hero has been busy preparing some presents for Miss Guo these past few days. He did not have a chance to pay a visit to Great Hero Guo and Madame.”

Shi Bowei had just finished when a whistle was heard from a distance; then a voice was heard, “The Xishan Ghosts have received the Eagle Hero’s instructions to wish Miss Guo a happy birthday, and to deliver this present ...!”

That voice was not loud, but sharp. It sounded like the voice came and went, but every word was clear.

“Guo Jing waits.” Guo Jing quickly answered. He knew that since the first present was so valuable, he did not dare to be inattentive. He used his internal energy, so his voice traveled far. He stood erect alongside his wife and waited.

“Can you guess who this Eagle Hero is?” Huang Rong whispered.

“I don’t know,” answered her husband.

“It’s Yang Guo!”

Guo Jing looked up in surprise; but in the end he was ecstatic. “Wonderful! Just wonderful!” he exclaimed. “He has rendered his country a great service; this is the merit of our great Song Dynasty.”

“Can you guess what this second present will be?” Huang Rong asked again.

Her husband only smiled. “Guo’er is so smart; you are the only one who is his match.” he answered, “Only you could guess.”

“But this time I really don’t have any idea,” said Huang Rong, shaking her head, but in her heart she said, “Yang Guo has done a great service to Xiangyang, but he keeps saying that all are for Xiang’er; his hatred toward us, husband and wife, and Fu’er, has not diminished.”

In a moment the Long Beard Ghost appeared on the field, leading the other eight ghosts. They immediately paid their respect to Guo Jing and his wife. Only then did they approach Guo Xiang and said, “Wishing you health and unbounded happiness! The Eagle Hero instructed us to deliver the second present!”

“Thank you, thank you!” said Guo Xiang. She saw the Xishan Ghosts all carried boxes, big boxes and small boxes.

Guo Jing was afraid the contents were some kind of ears or noses or other human parts, so quickly he said, “If the contents are not good to behold, I ask you not to open them.”

The Big Head Ghost laughed. “These are very good things to behold!” he said. Fan Yiweng then opened the lid and picked up what looked like a fireworks rocket. He lit that thing and it shot up, and exploded high in the air and amidst the colorful rain of light appeared a letter ‘Gong’ [respectful].

Guo Xiang was so happy that she jumped around and clapped her hands while saying: “Good...Very good!”

The Hangman Ghost [Diao Si Gui] also ignited a rocket and that made the letter ‘zhu’ [best wishes]. Then, one by one, the rest of the ghosts ignited their rockets, forming a string of characters which read, ‘gong zhu guo er gu niang duo fu duo shou’ [respectfully wishing the Second Miss Guo prosperity and longevity]; ten big characters. Each character had its own color and they stayed afloat for quite some time. The gathered heroes clapped and cheered. The fireworks were made by Hankou’s well known Huang Yipao, an unrivalled fireworks artist.

Guo Jing smiled, he was also very happy. He thought, “My daughter loves fireworks so much. Good thing Yang Guo could find a very skilled artist to make them.”

The fireworks were just about to disperse when a few li to the north another firework was shot, then another one much further to the north.

“These fireworks work like a beacon,” Huang Rong thought, “this way somebody could deliver a message a few hundred li in just a short moment. I wonder what Yang Guo prepared for the second present. I doubt it is just fireworks to make Xiang’er happy.”

Madam Guo immediately instructed the Beggar Clan to prepare some additional bamboo mats for the Shi Brothers and the Xishan Ghosts.

While the feast was still underway, thunderous noises came from way up north, one explosion after another. The noise was muffled because it was so far away.

Upon hearing that noise, the Shi Brothers and the Xishan Ghosts jumped up and down, ecstatically exclaimed, “Success...Success!” Nobody in Xiangyang knew what they were exclaiming about.

The Big Head Ghost pointed to the north and kept shouting, “Wonderful! Wonderful!”

Because it was already dark, everybody could see the light of fires showing in the north.

“The city of Nanyang is on fire!” Huang Rong suddenly exclaimed. Guo Jing realized what had happened, he slapped his thigh, “That’s right! It is Nanyang!”

“I beg your explanation,” said Huang Rong to Fan Yiweng.

“That is the second present from the Eagle Hero to Miss Guo;” came the answer. “We set the two-hundred-thousand strong Mongolian army’s logistics on fire.”

Huang Rong had guessed correctly, but still they were surprised and ecstatic. In their effort to destroy Xiangyang, the Mongolians had built the city of Nanyang as its logistics center. They had built barns and grown fields of grass for several years. Tons of rice, wheat, water and hay were gathered from all over the Mongolian territories and sent to Nanyang. There was a saying, ‘A great troop movement is always preceded by provisions and grass.’ Rice and wheat were the soldiers’ food while grass was for the horses. The Mongolians rely heavily on their cavalry; therefore, food and hay were indispensable to the army’s movements. Guo Jing had tried on several occasions to send specially trained teams to destroy it, but they never succeeded in doing so, since the city was heavily guarded. Unexpectedly Yang Guo had succeeded in putting that city to the flame!

Guo Jing gazed to the north looking at the fire, anxiety began creeping into his heart, “Will they be able to retreat without any harm? Shall we join them and render any help we can?” Guo Jing asked Fan Yiweng.

“Hero Guo did not ask about the results, but asked about the safety of the people, he has such a benevolent heart,” thought Yiweng. Then he explained, “Thank you for Hero’s concern. Everything was carefully planned by the Eagle Hero. The team consists of Shengyin Shitai, Ren Chuizi, Zhang Yimang, Bai Caoxian and the others; more than

300 people total. Even though the Mongolian troop is strong, there is no way they can harm us.”

Like he was just waking up from a deep sleep, Guo Jing said to Huang Rong, “You heard that? Guo’er has gathered so many valiant people to render this great service. If not for these highly skilled heroes, how could two thousand soldiers be decimated in such a short period of time?”

Fan Yiweng explained further, “Our spies reported that the Mongolians planned to attack Xiangyang with fire power; they have approximately ten thousand ‘jin’s [a ‘jin’ is approximately 0.5kg or 1lb] of gunpowder in store in Nanyang. We just followed their lead. We made thorough preparations. As soon as the team saw our fireworks signal, we moved together. According to our plan, first we destroy the explosives, and then set the supply of food and hay on fire. Let the Mongolian army and their horses die of hunger!”

Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at each other. They were very impressed and alarmed at the same time. They both had followed Genghis Khan’s invasion to the west [for those of you who have not read the novel, it happened toward the last chapters of LOCH See note 1], where the Mongolians destroyed city walls with cannon and explosives. It was like a volcano’s eruption. The reason the Mongolians had not used explosives at Xiangyang before was because of the scarcity of the explosives. But now that the Mongolian Khan, Mengke himself led the attack, they brought the cannons along. Good thing Yang Guo had made this pre-emptive attack; otherwise Xiangyang’s city walls would be destroyed very easily.

Both Guo Jing and Huang Rong were having the same thought, “The decimation of two thousand troops with their left ears missing could crush the enemy’s spirit, but the smashed Nanyang storage base could cause the enemy to retreat.” Therefore, the Guo couple heartily thanked the Shi Brothers and the Xishan Ghosts.

Shi Bowei and Fan Yiweng both said, “The Xiao ren [little/ lowly people] are only following the Eagle Hero’s instructions; our contribution is so minuscule, how can it be worth mentioning?”

During this time they could still hear the sporadic explosions from the north. But since Nanyang was quite a distance away, the noise was muffled. Then, a big and loud explosion was heard. The earth shook.

“There! That must be the main explosives warehouse!” said Fan Yiweng delightedly.

Guo Jing immediately summoned the two Wu Brothers. “Take two thousand men with you, and attack Nanyang,” he gave his command. “But don’t be reckless. If they are still intact, hold off, but if they are disorganized, attack with arrows!” The two brothers complied and immediately executed his command.

These two victories had followed one after another and the people on the field cheered and applauded, offering toasts to each other; everybody praised the Eagle Hero’s unmatched accomplishments. Everyone that is, except Guo Fu ...

She thought her husband was to be the focus of the festivities since he had defeated countless opponents and was elected Chief of the Beggar Clan. Who knew that Yang Guo – without even showing up, had stolen his and her thunder? Of course she was happy with the decimation of two thousand Mongolian front line companies and the annihilation of Nanyang’s provision and explosive storage facilities, but she didn’t get to be the center of attention. Didn’t the Shi Brothers and Fan Yiweng say that the victories were birthday presents for her little sister, Guo Xiang?

“I understand now!” she was fuming, “I chopped off his arm so he bears a grudge against me. So he purposely made me lose face!” From feeling discontent, she became enraged.

Elder Liang shared the same bamboo mat with Yelu Qi and Guo Fu. He saw everybody’s countenance was bright, except Guo Fu’s. After pondering a while, he figured out the reason. Then he laughed and said, “Ah, this old man is so absent-minded. Because of these joyful victories I have neglected the important business right in front of my eyes!” He jumped on stage and said with a loud voice, “Valiant people! Twice tonight the Mongolian troops have been beaten. We are all very happy; but right here, right now, we have another thing that should double our happiness. Master Yelu had shown his exquisite skills and we all admire him. Master Yelu had been elected our Chief. Now I want to confirm this: is there any of you who still want to challenge our decision? Is there any Beggar Clan disciple who is having a second thought?”

His question was repeated three times. Nobody said anything. Therefore, he continued, “Master Yelu, please come on stage!”

Yelu Qi accepted his bidding. He clasped his hands together in respect, and bowed to everybody. He was just going to open his mouth to make a ‘lack of character, lack of ability’ modest acceptance speech when suddenly a voice was heard from underneath the stage, “Wait a moment! Xiao Ren [lowly people] wants to ask a thing or two of Master Yelu!”

Yelu Qi looked up in surprise. He heard the voice came from the Beggar group. He said, “I don’t dare, Please! Speak up!”

That man stood up, and with a loud voice said, “Master Yelu, your respected father was the Prime Minister of Mongolia, your own brother was a high official in the Mongolian administration. It is true that they both have passed away, but we – the Beggar Clan, have always had enmities with the Mongolians. With your obscure background, I wonder if it would be proper for you to be our Chief?”

Hearing this, Yelu Qi was irritated. He said, “My benevolent father, the late Yelu Chucai was poisoned by the Queen Mother of Mongolia. My brother, the late Yelu Qin, was executed by the Mongolian Khan! Wouldn’t that make me the sworn enemy of the Mongolians?”

“Even so,” said the Beggar Clan disciple, “Your father’s death is still a mystery. Nobody knows for sure whether he was poisoned. Your brother committed a crime against the monarch, he deserved the capital punishment. You can place your vengeance on hold, that’s fine with me; but how about our own resentment ...?”

Listening to someone offending her husband, Guo Fu was enraged. “Who are you?” she asked harshly, “You dare to speak nonsense here! If you have any guts, come up here on stage!”

That beggar laughed mockingly. “Good! Good!” he repeatedly said, “The new Chief hasn’t been inaugurated yet, and the Mrs. Chief has shown her fearsomeness!”

As soon as he finished, he leaped to the stage. His movement was so swift that many missed seeing it. They were astonished and wondered in their hearts, “Who is this man? He is highly skilled.”

Several thousand pairs of eyes turned their gaze toward this beggar. He was wearing an oversized black raggedy robe. His right hand held an iron stick with a diameter as big as a wine cup. His hair was unkempt, his countenance yellow and dry. He had pockmarks all over his face. He bore five bags on his back; hence he was a fifth grade disciple of the Beggar Clan. There were not many good-looking men among the Beggar Clan disciples, but this man was very, very ugly. As soon as he appeared, people recognized him as He Shiwo. He was known as a quiet man, who did not like to socialize with his peers and used to follow the crowd without question. He had worked hard, was very loyal to the clan and in ten years he managed to attain the fifth grade. His martial skills were low and he did not demonstrate any other knowledge so that nobody had paid

any special attention to him. Everybody thought that fifth grade was too good for him and he would not be able to advance any higher. Who would have thought this ordinary beggar would dare to open his mouth, or even jump on stage to challenge Yelu Qi. “Where did he steal his skill from?” some people thought.

He Shiwo was nobody special, but because of his ugliness, whoever saw him would have a hard time forgetting that face. Thus Yelu Qi also recognized him. He bowed to the beggar and said, “I wonder what instruction Brother He would give to me?”

“Instruct you I do not dare,” answered He Shiwo coldly, “But there are two things that I do not understand. Therefore, I came on stage to beg your explanation.”

“What are those two things?” asked Yelu Qi.

“First,” said He Shiwo, “it is our custom that every Chief of the Beggar Clan will have the ‘Dog Beating Stick’ as the symbol of his authority. Today Master Yelu has been elected Chief. I wonder where that ‘Dog Beating Stick’ is? This lowly beggar would like to see it.”

His question stirred the hearts of the Beggar Clan disciples, “That was a very good question,” they thought.

Yelu Qi answered, “Chief Lu met his death at a criminal’s hands; the ‘Dog Beating Stick’ was also snatched away at that time. This is a disgrace to our Clan. Therefore, it is our collective responsibility to get the Stick back.”

“The second thing the Xiao Ren [little/ lowly people] do not understand,” continued He Shiwo, “is about Chief Lu’s death. Have we exacted our revenge yet?”

“Chief Lu was murdered by Hou Dou, everybody knows that,” answered Yelu Qi. “We are all enraged by his atrocity. Unfortunately, we have searched everywhere and so far have not found any trace of that scoundrel Hou Du. This is our collective task, we will keep looking for him, even to the ends of the earth, and exact our revenge on behalf of our beloved Chief Lu!”

He Shiwo coldly laughed and said, “First, the ‘Dog Beating Stick’ is still missing! Second, the assassin of the late Chief Lu has not been found! This business need to be taken care of. Yet someone is actually thinking of becoming the new Chief. Don’t you think that is a rash decision?”

Many people were shocked! Yelu Qi's face was flushed with anger; he was at a loss for words.

“Brother He, you have spoken reasonably,” Elder Liang intervened. “However, our disciples are numerous and scattered across the country. They cannot be left leaderless. Besides, the task of finding the Stick and the criminal is easier said than done. There must be someone who would spearhead the project. That was the reason why we worked hard to elect the new Chief.”

He Shiwo shook his head. “Elder Liang, I strongly disagree!” he said, “What you said was wrong! You put the cart before the horses!”

Elder Liang was the leading Elder of the Beggar Clan. With the death of Chief Lu, he was the highest-ranking officer in the Clan. The fact that a fifth grade disciple dared to talk like that to him made him furious.

“What’s wrong with what I just said?” he asked.

“In this disciple’s opinion,” He Shiwo said, still very bold, “whoever manages to take the Dog Beating Stick back, and whoever can kill Hou Dou to avenge our Chief, he should be the new Chief! Right now we elected a new Chief only based on his martial arts skills; but what happens if Hou Dou comes here and defeats Yelu Qi; will we elect him our new Chief?”

His words were so reasonable that the beggars were exchanging looks with each other. But Guo Fu was upset and shouted from below the stage, “Rubbish! How could Hou Dou defeat him?”

He Shiwo snickered, he said, “Master Yelu is indeed highly skilled, but that does not mean that he is invincible! This lowly beggar only has five bags on my back, but I doubt if he can defeat me.”

Guo Fu was fuming mad hearing his blatant challenge, she shouted, “Brother Qi! You’d better give this rascal disciple a lesson!”

He Shiwo coldly said, “The internal affair of the Beggar Clan are always taken care of by the Clan Chief and four Elders; Madame Clan Chief has never had any role in the decision making process. Not to mention Master Yelu has not been inaugurated yet; but even if he had, Madame Yelu still has no right to denounce a disciple in public like that. Am I right?”

Guo Fu's face was turning red. "You ... you ..." she stuttered.

He Shiwo ignored her; he looked at Elder Liang and asked, "Elder Liang, if this disciple can defeat Master Yelu, would I be the new Chief? Or do you think we should wait until after somebody gets the Stick back and kills the criminal?"

Elder Liang was getting angrier hearing him getting bolder than ever. "I don't care who it is, if he cannot defeat all contenders, he cannot be the Chief. Later on, if he cannot get the Stick back and cannot kill the enemy, he would regret being the Chief! Master Yelu is no exception. After he is inaugurated as the new Chief, he cannot shirk from these two responsibilities. If he cannot defeat you, Brother He, how could he become the new Chief?"

Hearing this, He Shiwo immediately said, "Elder Liang has spoken reasonably. Now this lowly beggar wants to take a lesson or two from Master Yelu. Only then can we talk about getting the Stick back and killing the criminal!"

From the tone of his voice, sounded like He Shiwo was 90% confident he would win.

Yelu Qi was a patient man, but upon hearing He Shiwo, he couldn't help but feel offended. But he still maintained his composure and said, "Younger Brother is indeed not worthy to accept this heavy responsibility. Therefore, if Older Brother He would like to teach me a thing or two, I will humbly accept."

"Good! Good!" said He Shiwo coldly. He planted his own stick on the stage floor, and thrust his fist at Yelu Qi. His attack did not seem to carry a lot of strength, but his fist created a gust of wind that Elder Liang – who was standing about two meters away, felt his face suddenly hot and hurting. This made him leap to the edge of the stage.

Yelu Qi did not hesitate, his left hand made a turn and neutralized the attack, while his right hand counter attacked with the 'Concealed Deep as if Empty' move[shen cang ruo xu], a stance from his 72-stance "Vacant Fist Technique". Two people moved their fists and feet, engaged in a fierce battle on the stage.

It was almost 'xu shi' [about 7-9pm]. It was a moonless and starless night. The audience could see everything clearly, because there were dozens of big torches lighting all sides of the stage.

Huang Rong kept her eyes open, but she was amazed that after more than ten stances Yelu Qi did not show any signs that he had gained the upper hand. Also, as hard as she

tried, she could not recognize which school He Shiwo belonged to. She could tell though, that He Shiwo had trained for at least forty years.

“For these last eleven or twelve years I have seen the list of the Beggar Clan disciples,” she thought, “and He Shiwo has steadily climbed up in rank. Funny thing is I’ve never heard anybody mentioning his martial arts. Who knew that in reality he possesses such high skills? I believe he did not accidentally learn this skill. Could it be that he has hidden his true skill just to wait for a time like this?”

The match was fierce. They had exchanged more than fifty stances, and Yelu Qi was starting to feel alarmed. No matter what stances he used against his opponent, He Shiwo could parry very well. It turned out this beggar is the toughest opponent he had fought so far. He Shiwo on the other hand, was not highly offensive, and seemed like he wanted to conserve his energy and waited for something to happen.

Yelu Qi had fought several opponents today, but with the exception of Lan Tianhe, the rest were ordinary martial artists. He did not have to use too much effort to defeat them. Thus he was very surprised to see He Shiwo’s agility. Seemed like He Shiwo was floating around indefinitely, and launching his sudden attacks that carried a strong gust of wind.

Yelu Qi was Zhou Botong’s head disciple. True, he had not mastered his Master’s “Dividing the Mind” skill, but he had mastered about 80 to 90% of the Quanzhen Sect’s martial arts. It could be said that he could be regarded as one of the top level martial artists. Under the bright fire light around the stage, both he and his opponent moved very fast and their match was rather enjoyable to watch.

“Brother Jing, can you guess He Shiwo’s school of martial arts?” Huang Rong finally asked her husband.

“Up to this very second he has not shown his true skill,” answered Guo Jing. “I think he is trying to hide his origin. Just wait another seventy or eighty stances. By then Qi’er will gain the upper hand. If he does not give up, he will be forced to show his true skill.”

The match was picking up speed. Both opponents attacked and counterattacked, both still showed their agility. In a short time they have exchanged forty or fifty stances. Very soon they would reach the seventieth stance, then the eightieth. Guo Jing’s prediction was accurate; Yelu Qi was beginning to control his opponent’s moves.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong kept their eyes open. If He Shiwo kept hiding his true skill and fighting with mixed-up techniques, he would certainly suffer a loss.

Yelu Qi could also see his opponent's predicament. Gradually but carefully he increased his strength. He stayed calm and did not want to make any reckless moves.

Suddenly He Shiwo changed his tactics; he swung his long sleeve out then immediately pulled it back. As a result, the dozens of torches around the stage were extinguished. The stage became pitch dark. While nobody could see anything, they heard both Yelu Qi and He Shiwo's surprised shouts, and then they heard somebody thrown down from the stage. All the while He Shiwo was heard laughing maniacally.

Nothing else was heard except He Shiwo's laugh. Everyone was shocked. A moment later Elder Liang came to his senses and barked a command, "Light up the torches!" Immediately several beggars complied.

When the light was back, it was seen that it was Yelu Qi who stood on the ground. He had a bleeding wound on his left cheek, the size of a wine cup; while He Shiwo stretched out his left arm and coldly said, "Good protective vest! Good protective vest!" His palm was bleeding.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong exchanged another glance. They realized that because Guo Fu loved her husband, she had loaned him her soft hedgehog armor [ruan wei jia]. Therefore, when He Shiwo hit Yelu Qi, he hit the vest instead and his palm was injured by the thorns. Still, nobody knew how Yelu Qi got injured and fell off the stage.

What had happened was, at a critical time, He Shiwo had used his 'big wind sleeve' [da feng xiu] technique to extinguish the torches. Yelu Qi was startled when the stage suddenly darkened, but he still remembered to protect himself by striking first. But again he was surprised because his hand touched something cold, a metal weapon. He realized now that He Shiwo had planned to use a dirty trick in the darkness. Yelu Qi knew he was in danger, but he was not afraid. He kept going with his 'Great Capturing' [da qin na shou] technique, trying to snatch his opponent's weapon with the intention of showing it off to the audience. With the 'Skilled Hand in all Directions' [qiao shou ba da] he managed to get within two feet of He Shiwo. His right hand grabbed the weapon while his left hand hit his opponent's face, forcing He Shiwo to let go of his weapon.

In the dark He Shiwo eluded the attack to his face by turning his head and had no choice but to let go of his weapon. While Yelu Qi was pulling the weapon, he felt a sting on his cheek and at the same time his chest was hit hard, which made him stagger and

fall from the stage. The weapon had a secret equipment inside. As soon as it was grabbed, it was separated into two parts. The first part stayed in Yelu Qi's hand, while the second part flew back and hit Yelu Qi on the cheek, making a half-inch deep wound so that his cheekbone was visible. Fortunately it did not hit any vital organs, and fortunately he was wearing the protective vest so that his opponent was also injured.

Guo Fu was shocked and enraged; she leaped to her husband, trying to protect him.

Elder Liang was facing a dilemma. On one hand he knew He Shiwo had used a dirty trick, on the other hand, nobody knew what exactly happened, hence nobody could prove it. Both parties were injured, but Yelu Qi was thrown from the stage, so he could be considered the loser.

Guo Fu could not accept it. "He used a dirty trick!" she angrily shouted, "Brother Qi, go up there and fight him!"

Yelu Qi shook his head. "Even so, he still won," he said. "Even if we used honest techniques, I am not confident enough of victory against him."

Huang Rong signaled her son-in-law to come close so she could see what was inside Yelu Qi's hand. It was a piece of steel, about five-inches long and looked like a fan's spine. She could not remember who in the Jianghu world used that kind of weapon.

While everybody was still quiet from shock, He Shiwo raised his yellow and swollen ugly face, and was heard saying, "Even though this lowly beggar has defeated Master Yelu, I still do not dare to accept the Chief's position. I want to wait until the stick is back and the enemy Hou Dou has been killed."

His speech was received with loud cheers by the Beggar Clan's disciples. Although his victory was questionable, he had demonstrated his high martial arts. After listening to his speech a lot of beggars lifted up their cups to toast him.

He Shiwo then stood on the edge of the stage and cupped his fists to the audience. "Is there any hero out there who would like to teach me a lesson or two?" he challenged.

He was just saying the word 'stage' when Shi Bowei loudly shouted, "Ah!" followed by his army of animals. Suddenly the beasts – which were sitting neatly in formation, leaped up and loudly roared. A single lion or tiger's roar is loud; imagine all five hundreds animals roaring at the same time. The earth shook, wine cups and rice bowl turned upside down, everybody was aghast.

Amidst the loud noise, the Xishan Ghosts and Shi Brothers, fifteen people, leaped toward the stage, unsheathed their weapons and surrounded the stage. Suddenly eight people, each holding high a torch, were seen entering the field and coming straight toward the stage. Somebody said loud and clear, “The Eagle Hero wishes the Second Miss Guo a happy birthday! We deliver the third present.”

They moved fast, like they were flying above the ground; a demonstration of a very high lightness kung fu. In no time they had come close to Guo Xiang. Four of them then stretched out their arms, presenting Guo Xiang with a big sack. It seemed the present was inside the sack.

Then these eight people cupped their fists to her and introduced themselves. Everybody who heard their names was surprised. They were not ordinary people. The first was an old Buddhist monk, none other than the Abbot of Mount Wutai’s Foguang Monastery, Reverend Tanhua. He was the peer of the Shaolin’s Abbot, Zen Master Tianming. The others were old Marquis Zhao and the Deaf and Mute Dhuta, Qingling Zi, the leader of the Kunlun School, etc. All of them were seniors of the martial arts realm.

Guo Xiang did not seem to care about the background of all these people. She returned their greeting and laughing sweetly she asked, “I have bothered you all, Uncles! Thank you! What kind of toy is that?”

The four people holding the sack gave a strong tug and the sack was ripped into four pieces. A bald headed monk rolled out of the sack.

